

Ledbury Naturalists Field Club

Field Survey 2000

Ballard Land and Colwall Land



February 2001

Acknowledgements

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Document, Data Collation

And Photography: Janet Parry

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Malvern Hills Conservators have expressed their appreciation of the work done by members of the Ledbury Naturalists Field Club in recording all the related species found during the year 2000 on the two areas of Conservators land.

Introduction

Following the successful 1999 survey of the Ledbury riverside and cycle track, the club decided to tackle another area in 2000. The club was invited by the Malvern Hills Conservators (MHC) to survey two of their more recently acquired pieces of land, adjacent to other MHC land on the Western slopes of the Malvern Hills. The information about the natural history of these areas would be useful in contributing to their future management. No previous recording of these fields had been carried out and reported.

Background

The Malvern Hills Conservators manage over 3,000 acres of unique conservation land consisting of the Malvern Hills and commons in which a large proportion consists of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (S.S.S.I.). The Conservators were constituted by The Malvern Hills Act of Parliament in 1884 and charged with preventing encroachments such as quarrying, also protecting commoners' rights, keeping the hills open for the enjoyment and recreation of the public and at the same time, keeping the area as near as possible in its natural state.

To carry out these duties, a board of 29 members, consisting of 11 locally elected and the rest nominated by county and district councils, employs a Director, a Conservation officer and a full time field staff of 6 skilled men under a foreman. There is also a Finance officer, 3 Administrative assistants and 2 Wardens. Some years ago, the board invited a number of naturalists with expertise in special areas of natural history, to form an advisory panel whose help can be enlisted whenever needed.

Increasing numbers of visitors to the hills, currently over one million a year, has resulted in management problems, particularly the encroachment of scrub and trees up the slopes which 100 years ago were practically bare. This is as a result of commoners and grazing licencees finding it less profitable to graze the hills and fewer people living in houses with commons rights attached, being interested in keeping grazing animals on the hills. Measures are currently being taken by the Conservators to deal with this situation by running their own flock of sheep and, possibly later, cattle, and employing a full time shepherd to care for them.

Conducting the Survey

Volunteers from Ledbury Naturalists Field Club met on the third Monday of every month from March to October. It had been initially intended to walk round each field at every meeting, but this proved impractical so the fields were visited in turn, Ballard's land in March, May, July and September and the Colwall land in April, June, August and October. Records were made of all flowering plants, grasses, trees, fungi, mosses, ferns, lichens, birds, insects, spiders, slugs, snails, other invertebrates and vertebrates that were found.

The group was fortunate to have the assistance of several well-known experts in their field, and great trouble was taken to verify each record to ensure the reliability of the survey as far as possible.

This report has its limitations in the number of times that each site was visited and that the survey only covered 8 months of the year. The earlier visits also suffered from very bad weather. Records of birds, insects and other invertebrates, in particular, are likely to under represent species in the area.

The Ballard Land (G.R. 765423)

MHC are empowered by the Malvern Hills Act of Parliament to purchase land of conservation value within 9 miles of Malvern Priory Church. This land was judged to be of great value primarily because of the large patch of heath spotted orchids at the north end. It also has an overall incidence of pignut and a scatter of several species of old trees.



Figure 1 - Ballard Land looking West

The area was purchased by MHC in 1989 for £11,250 with the help of a generous donation of £3,750 by Mrs. M. Ballard of Colwall. It is located on the fairly steep, west facing slopes of the Malvern Hills below Chase Road and North of “The Kettle Sings” tea shop. It includes the land as far down the slope as Linden Manor (see map 1).

Originally, it was a series of small, hedged fields along the hillside, one of which was possibly an old orchard. The hedges are overgrown and the fruit trees have mainly disappeared. The whole area is sheltered by woodland to the west and north. A spring produces a trickle of water down to a small pond at the bottom, which is overhung with trees. Much of the land near the road is choked with bracken, which is slowly taking over. There are many large, old ant-hills in the upper section.

Results and Comment

The species found were recorded. Complete details can be found in Appendix 1 of this report. In summary the following numbers of species were noted:

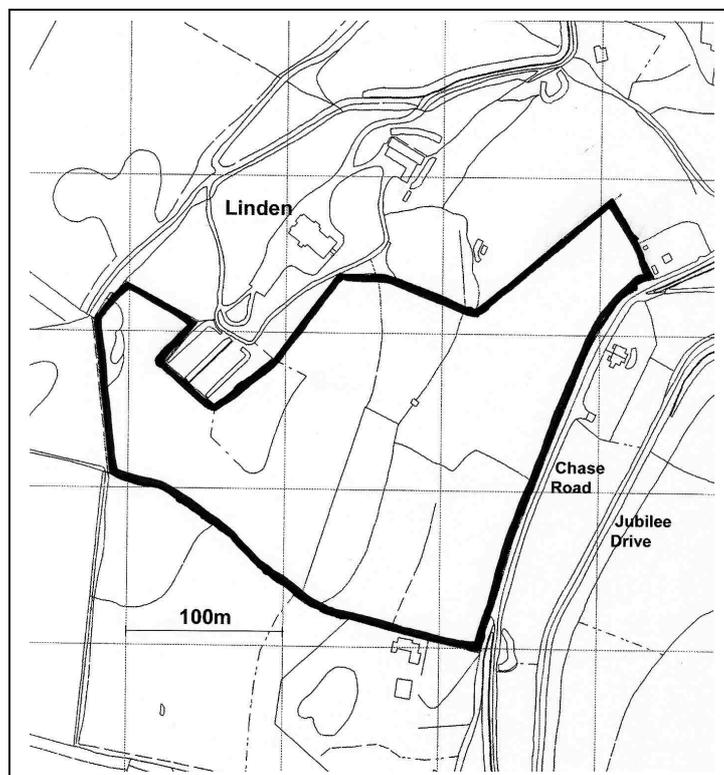
	Flowers	Grasses	Trees	Fungi, Lichens, Mosses, Ferns	Birds	Butterflies and Moths	Other Insects, Invertebrates, Vertebrates
Ballard Land	95	22	28	62	27	21	43

There was a good range of flowering plants including some less common ones such as sneezewort, lousewort, marsh orchid and common centaury. More common varieties included three species each of buttercup, speedwell, clover and dock as well as cowslip, primrose, violet, bluebell, foxglove and tormentil. There were 22 species of grass including sweet vernal grass, quaking grass and crested dogstail as well as 3 species of rush by the pond. Trees included spindle and guelder rose, both elm and wyche elm, a Douglas fir and old apple trees. There was a pleasing variety of fungi in the autumn, with many waxcaps including parrot waxcap, *Hygrocybe psittacina*, and the very rare *Hygrocybe calyptraeformis*. The insect list included 7 butterflies and a good range of other insects as well as spiders, millipedes, woodlice, slugs and snails. The vertebrates included the common frog and toad, a great crested newt and a grass snake. There were sightings of 27 birds in the limited time spent here and these included both green and greater spotted woodpeckers, siskin, nuthatch, goldcrest, blackbird and both mistle and song thrushes.

This year, the MHC allowed sheep to graze the land in an attempt to reduce the bracken. Unfortunately, there seems to have been little impact on this problem, but many of the rarer species have been nibbled away. For the first time in some years, the display of Heath Spotted Orchid flowers did not appear. Also the butterfly list could have been limited by the premature removal of flowers, though the weather on survey days was another factor.

Recommendations for future management and improvement

It is suggested that, if the policy of grazing is continued, it would be better to graze heavily in late summer and into the winter months to attempt to reduce the bracken, but withdraw the sheep in March to allow the orchids and other less dominant species to grow and flower.



Map 1 - Ballard Land

The Colwall Land (G.R. 762442)

The field surveyed is at the junction of the Purlieu and Brockhill Road (see map 2). It faces west towards Mathon and is gently sloping. It is bounded at the top by private woodland and to the north by Park Wood. A public footpath goes down the field at the northern end in an east, west direction. Beyond the northern edge, is a house and garden and an area of wild land bounded by a wire fence. The field was cropped for hay this year and cut in July. After this sheep were allowed to graze it.



Figure 2 - Colwall Land – looking South

Results and Comment

The total species recorded were as follows. The details can be found in Appendix 2.

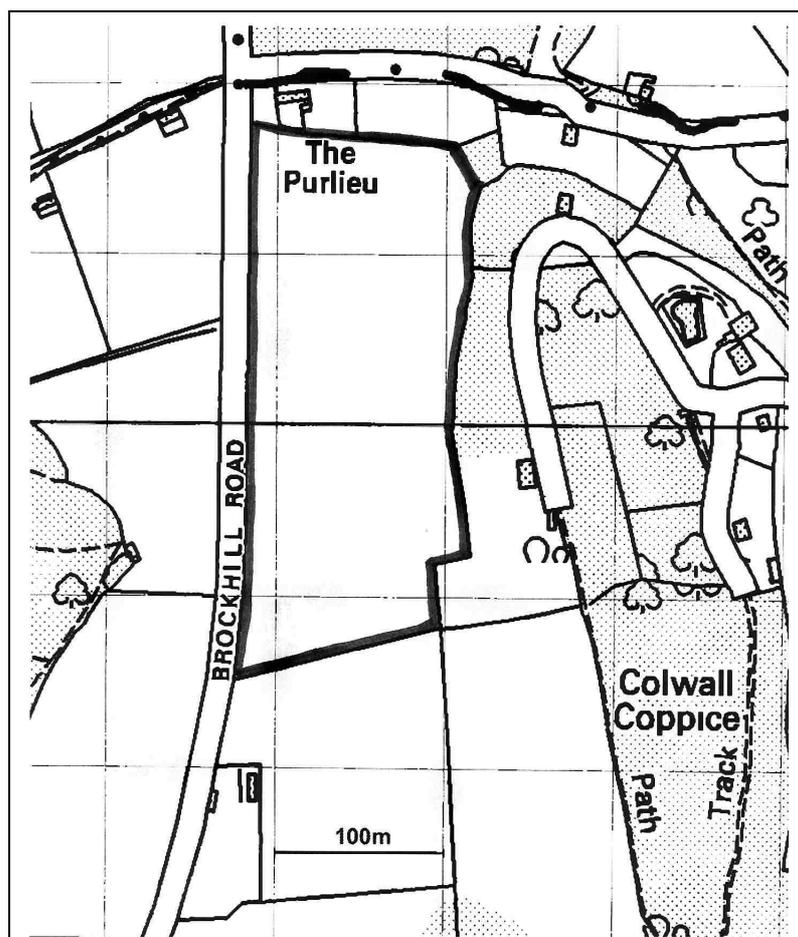
	Flowers	Grasses	Trees	Fungi, Lichens, Mosses, Ferns	Birds	Butterflies and Moths	Other Insects, Invertebrates, Vertebrates
Colwall Land	100	21	11	46	29	26	57

The 100 species of flowers noted were mainly on the strip of field by the footpath at the northern edge of the field. This was very rich with lime loving species and attendant insect life. The rarer species noted included common spotted orchid, fairy flax, common centaury, common rock rose and dyers greenweed. More common plants included 4 species of thistle, 3 clovers, 6 speedwells and 3 docks as well as a big range of other plants. The grasses included sweet vernal grass, 3 bromes, crested dogs tail, Yorkshire fog and quaking grass. The rest of the field was less interesting especially after the hay had been cut, though there was a good range of fungi, including the parrot waxcap again in the autumn. There were only 11 species of tree on the field edge but they included both pedunculate and sessile oak.

Thirteen butterflies were seen including a clouded yellow recorded in the adjacent garden, a fairly rare event, though the year 2000 seems to have been an especially good one for the species. Other species seen were painted lady, common blue, small copper and small skipper. Park Wood, on the northern edge of the field, is still a refuge for the dingy skipper butterfly, *Erynnis tages*, recorded again this year by Dr. Harper on a very restricted site at the edge of the wood. This is one of the last sites for this rapidly declining species in Herefordshire. It is now restricted to 2 or 3 very small colonies in the county, having been much more widespread and locally common only 20 to 30 years ago. This site is surrounded by bracken but rabbit grazing has allowed the butterfly's plant food, *Lotus corniculatus*, to flourish in this small area of about half an acre. There was a good range of other insects and 6 species of spider. A common toad was seen and a badger latrine located at the western edge of the field. The birds seen included both mistle and song thrush, green and greater spotted woodpecker, bullfinch, treecreeper, dunnock and blackbird.

Recommendations for future management and improvement

Considering that the species rich strip at the northern edge of the field is quite a small area and contains the footpath, it would be beneficial to fence it off from the rest of the hay meadow, to widen the scope for species to increase. The wild area over the fence, though not recorded, was seen to be very rich in flowering plants and insects which would be likely to spread, increasing the range in the recorded area. It may need a different management plan from the rest of the field, with later cutting.



Map 2 - Colwall Land

Conclusions

The records from both pieces of land show an important range of species including some less common ones. The wildlife of these areas contributes to the overall biodiversity of the MHC lands and is worth considering within the scope of the management plan.



Figure 3 – Survey team at work on Colwall Land

Distribution

1. Ledbury Naturalists Field Club.
2. Malvern Hills Conservators
3. Herefordshire Nature Trust.
4. English Nature.
5. British Trust for Ornithology.
6. Herefordshire Ornithological Club.
7. Holme Lacy College Local Records Centre
8. Colwall Parish Council

Appendix 1

The Ballard Land

Appendix 2

The Colwall Land