



Rewilding Roborough Fields Newsletter

Late January/early February visit to the fields

Four of us were down working in the fields from January 25th until February 2nd. Two 8T diggers allowed



us to dig 13 new ponds, and strip areas of turf in the front field. These cleared areas will be left over the spring and summer to see what grows. If it is a bit underwhelming we may seed with green hay from the Devon Wildlife Trust in the autumn. The turf we stripped was used to create long curved banks. This loose turf will be a great substrate for invertebrates and mammals to burrow into and we have started planting willows, hawthorn and holly onto the banks, plus lots more native shrubs will be planted here in March. We also deliberately created areas of clay on the bank surfaces. These will take a long time to vegetate and create open basking patches for insects and perhaps reptiles.

We also put up a barn owl box, a kestrel box, a “swallow hut” and numerous open-fronted and tit boxes. The barn owl box was inspected by a barn owl within a day or so of going up and since we left, a kestrel has been seen inspecting the kestrel box.





During our work with the diggers we resisted the temptation to “tidy up” after the machines. We left the soil surface rutted and broken up. This is because very small differences in ground height give differences in the plant communities that develop. We also created as much diversity in the ponds we dug as we could. Some of them are shallow, some deeper, some have steep banks and some gently sloping ones. Deadwood and brash was put into some of the ponds to change the water quality and act as a substrate for different invertebrate species and we also created brash piles in the front fields. These provide hibernating places for amphibians and refuges for voles and mice.



When we dug the ponds we made sure that the overflows all spill water out onto the ground surface to make it wetter and slow down water release from the fields. Any field drains we came across we blocked on the downhill side to force the water out onto the ground. Almost all of the land in Britain is criss-crossed below ground by drains and these are one of the reasons we experience so much flooding as they feed rainfall rapidly off the land and into our rivers. We need to rewet our land.

Apart from seeing the barn owl on two occasions, we also saw snipe and woodcock in the back field, masses of voles (hence the hunting barn owl), ravens and evidence of otters. Another discovery was the presence (which Derek Gow had flagged up in his survey) of huge numbers of Lady's Smock (*Cardamine pratensis*) in the grass in the front field. This is the food plant for the orange tip butterfly and has a beautiful lilac flower. Anywhere we found large numbers of these plants, we made sure we left the turf alone. In the spring, these areas will be covered in a haze of lilac flowers.

It was great to be able to start work on the ground but one thing we rapidly discovered was that large areas of the ground already have significant value for wildlife. The soft rush in the back field is full of voles and, as already mentioned, there is all the Lady's Smock in the front field. Because of this we left large areas of the fields (probably around 65%) alone. You have to be careful when managing land for wildlife not to unwittingly destroy things that are already really valuable.





We also rapidly discovered (due to what might be called persistent precipitation) that our turf banks acted as small dams and enabled us to create lots of ponds that we hadn't planned for.



These will be particularly valuable for lots of reasons: they help catch surface run-off from the areas we have stripped of turf and so prevent silt being washed into ditches; they are likely to be ephemeral to varying degrees (i.e. the shallower ones will dry up in the summer and the deeper ones retain water for much longer) and because we cut more fields drains when we dug them, they will bring water onto the surface again. We discovered when working that a lot of land management in Devon is actually about water management. Judging by the terrible state of the Devon rivers in the winter, and indeed all over the UK, we aren't doing a very good job of water management currently. With any luck, from now on changes will occur naturally or be the result of manual work that can be done with spades, planting and seeding. Our baseline survey will enable us to have comparisons done as the project progresses and see what changes there are in the flora and fauna.

At this point, I would like to thank the three members of the Roborough Group who worked so hard and with such enthusiasm on the ground: Stuart Booth, Kevin McKie and Stephen MacDonald. Also, big thanks to Andrew Mounstephen for constructing all the wonderful bird boxes and to my wife, Annie, for putting these newsletters together. Lastly, I am overjoyed that two Roborough residents, Jo and Paul, have agreed to be "Wardens of the Fields" in order to watch over them and report what is happening.



We have a wonderful group of people involved now and as a result, have made a great start to the project.

Best regards,

Nick

