



Rewilding Roborough Fields Newsletter

Since our last newsletter in July, the main news regarding the fields has been the introduction to the front field of Shetland sheep followed by Tamworth pigs. This field had been improved sheep pasture for a long time before we bought the fields and as such has very little floral diversity. We need to break up the very tough, tall grass sward but before the livestock could go in to do this, we needed to fence off the hedgerow banks, ponds and scrapes from the animals. Sheep and pigs would make short work of our young trees and the pigs in particular, demolish banks and would seriously muddy the water in the ponds.

The new fences have been put up (see plan drawing) leaving about two acres of long grass for the animals to work on and the long term plan is to fill this central area with native plants and flower.

The Shetland sheep were brought in by Lenice and Chris in early October, for which we are very grateful, and they spent four weeks grazing down the tall non-native grasses that had formed the previous pasture.



All went well and once the sheep came out, 9 Tamworth pigs went in on New Year's Eve, for which many thanks to Neil Thompson of Ten Oaks Cross. They very quickly settled into a vigorous investigation of the field and are now in the process of rooting about to find anything edible. This includes, grass, plant roots, earthworms, grubs - more or less anything in fact.



They need damp ground to be able to get their snouts into but Roborough in the winter cannot be described as dry, so that is not proving to be a problem.



Once they have opened up the ground, it will be sown with a local provenance seed mix of 38 species including knapweed, hawkbit, common spotted orchid, rough hawkbit, birdsfoot trefoil, vetches, lady's bedstraw, cowslip and cranesbill. The meadow will need grazing at certain times but we can organise this once we see how it develops. It may be that we have very small numbers of resident animals or possibly get mobs of grazers in for short periods.



Neil built a hut for his pigs if they need to take shelter



← Jo and Paul getting to know the pigs →

The only other management that has happened is some clearing of competing plants round our planted hedgerow trees plus sowing 4kg of yellow rattle. This was sown in early November into the turf stripped areas and the base of the hedgerow banks. The rattle will suppress grass growth and leave more room for other species.

Meanwhile, more and more species are moving into the two fields. Jo and Paul have recorded 51 bird, 11 mammal, 3 amphibian, 121 invertebrate and 111 plant species so far and the list is growing all the time. We now have three species of owl—barn, tawny and little owls.



An owl pellet, with the remnants of dinner - a vole.

The main problem with the owls appears to be competition for nest boxes so we will put up a couple more to deal with this. (Jackdaws have installed themselves in the barn owl box.)

Other notable birds that have been caught on Jo and Paul's trail cameras are snipe, woodcock, kestrel and sparrowhawk.

One other slightly surprising find is just how acid the soil is—the pH is 5.1. I am not sure if this is a result of a history of spreading slurry as a fertiliser or is a natural pH. In any case, it will make the soil less fertile, which is a good thing as it will make increasing the floral diversity easier.



Stephen's Pond - with new fencing giving access for the animals to drink

I am really looking forward to the development of the flora and fauna in the fields in 2022. So far the project has been a tremendous success. The numbers of plants and animals and the diversity are rising rapidly, drainage runoff from the fields will be much reduced and the soils and vegetation will be trapping carbon instead of releasing it. All we need now is another 10 acres!

Best wishes to you all for 2022!

Nick and Annie



Photos courtesy of:
Paul Hopkinson
Nicola Vaughan

The new fences in the front-field.

