



e-Newsletter

March 2023, Issue 10



Despite the rare Arctic conditions over the winter months, regulars and new volunteers have been out and about braving the temperatures to help conserve the local environment. There has been much planting of hedgerows and care of local orchards as well as surveying local species. As ever we are very grateful for those who have joined us to dig, prune, saw, plant, photograph and survey. Here's to the spring bulbs appearing and the upcoming summer activities planned!



Winter Migrant Birds

Blackbirds are a familiar sight in our gardens, especially in winter, when our UK population is increased by birds migrating from mainland Europe in search of milder weather and berries to eat. This winter has also seen large numbers of other thrush species, and three of these are easy to spot around the village at the moment.

Fieldfares and redwings can be seen flying together in mixed flocks. Fieldfares are a brown and grey colour, and a bit smaller than blackbirds. They are most easily identified when they're flying, when the light grey patch of feathers on their backs are clearly visible. Redwings are smaller and more brightly coloured. As their name suggests, they have a red patch on their sides, by their wings. Mixed flocks can be seen searching for food along hedgerows, and even occasionally in gardens.

Mistle thrushes are big pale coloured thrushes, and the easiest way to identify them is by their very "upright" looking posture. They tend not to form flocks, but they can be seen on their own or in small groups in fields, looking for worms and insects to feed on.

As soon as the warmer weather of Spring arrives, nearly all the redwings and fieldfares will migrate north and east. Most of the mistle thrushes also move away, but some remain all year round to breed in hedgerows, thickets and along woodland edges.



A fieldfare resting before flight (above)
The mistle thrush feeding on the ground before flight (above)
A flock of redwings gathering at The Recreation Ground (below)



Hedgerow Conservation

Despite the sometimes, miserable weather conditions, the SSWCG Committee along with various, brave volunteers, have been out planting new hedges over two weekends in January.

The first section of planting was done on land farmed by Martin Bullock (with his kind permission) on the boundary between his northern fields and Catherine Ducker's Little Stoke estate. Both are now within the South Stoke parish, but previously this ancient

earthwork boundary marked a division between South Stoke and Checkendon parishes. So far this season, we have planted 300m of new hedge, alongside the 60m we planted in early 2022, and it is our aim to restore the entire length of this patchy hedge-line over the next few seasons, which stands at over 2km.

The second section of planting was done along the Bier Path, between The Village Hall and St Andrew's Church. These plants were provided by The Conservation Volunteers under their "I Dig Trees" scheme. Just over 40m of hedging has been planted along this stretch to infill a number of small and larger gaps between the existing shrubs and small trees. The plants used have been locally sourced and are a mixture of hawthorn, blackthorn, field maple, common dogwood, hazel, purging buckthorn and dog rose.

A huge thanks go to all the volunteers who showed up to help with planting in some pretty grim conditions. We would also like to thank Martin Bullock and the Parish Council who gave us permission to plant. Another big thank you to our local District Councillor, Maggie Filipova-Rivers who arranged project funding through the Councillor Community Grants Scheme, and who came along on one of the wettest and windiest days to help dig holes for the whips.

We are hoping that the weather will be more favourable for us this year than last summer's severe drought, and that this allows the whips to fully establish themselves to create thriving and biodiverse new hedges.

Volunteers gather for a warming tea break at the top of Martin Bullocks land (below)

Finishing up some planting on the Bier Path by The Village Hall (right)



Apples and Pears

If you have visited the Recreation Ground during the last few weeks you may well have noticed that the orchard has received some TLC! In conjunction with the Amenities Charity and South Stoke Shop, South Stoke Wildlife and Conservation Group held a fruit tree pruning demonstration followed by some orchard maintenance. There was a good turnout of volunteers managed with the help of Chris Bertrand. During the morning's works, all of the fruit trees were pruned, they were mulched with compost and cardboard was laid around their bases (as a weed-blocking layer). Some of the trees are also sporting rather smart new labels! Simon Booker kindly came to document the occasion and the shop stayed open to serve tea and cakes, ensuring that the workers had a lovely morning in the sunshine.

There are 15 trees in the orchard, which were planted about ten years ago as part of the Recreation Ground improvement project. The varieties selected are both traditional and modern, mostly of the dessert (eating) apple variety, with one dual eater/cooker, one pear and one cider apple.

The varieties are:

Dabinett- one of the few cider apples that can be used to make a single variety cider (most have to be blended with other varieties). It is a late bittersweet and was found in a Somerset hedge in the early 1900's by William Dabinett.

Conference is currently our only pear. It was bred in Hertfordshire and in 1885 won first prize in the National British Pear Conference - which is where its name came from. It is a very popular pear with good flavour, and keeps until January if stored in the cold.

Red Windsor is a German cross between Cox's Orange Pippin and Duchess of Oldenburg, developed between 1900 and 1949. It's a good eating apple.

Fiesta is a modern cultivar from East Malling Research Station, in Kent, It is a tasty eater which keeps well, and is easier to grow than Cox's Orange Pippin, which is one of its parents. We have two of these trees here.

Scrumptious is another modern British cultivar. It's a fairly early eating apple, but with better flavour than some other earlies. It doesn't keep.

Lord Lambourne is a good mid-season eating apple, bred in 1907 in Bedfordshire. It is sweet and tasty and keeps until November.

Queen Cox is a 1950's clone of Cox's Orange Pippin, and has a similar flavour. It is supposed to be a more regular cropper, but ours hasn't cropped much yet!

Egremont Russet was bred in Petworth, Sussex in 1872, and has remained popular since Victorian times. It's one of many eating apples that develop full flavour a month or so after picking.

Herefordshire Russet is a modern variety bred in Herefordshire and another with Cox's Orange Pippin as a parent. It has a really good flavour and keeps well.

Discovery produces good early crops which taste best eaten straight from the tree. It doesn't keep but does make good juice.

Blenheim Orange is a beautiful, large apple which can be used as a cooker if picked early, or as an eater if left to fully ripen. It also makes great juice. It was found near Woodstock, Oxfordshire in about 1740. It is a very vigorous tree and is already outgrowing all of the others here.

Sunset is a good mid-season eating apple, raised in Kent in 1907. It is good for juice and cider, but doesn't keep very well.

Elstar was bred in Elst, Holland, in the 1950's. Golden Delicious is one of its parents. It is sweet and makes good juice,

Sunrise is another early apple with Golden Delicious in its parentage. It was bred in Canada in the 1990's. The fruit ripens over a long period so needs to be picked in stages. It doesn't keep well.

The trees are now well established, and we hope that the improvements we are making to the soil in which they grow will help them to produce better crops in the coming years.



Volunteers gather after spreading compost around the tree trunks (above)



Paul Jenkins giving a pruning master class (above)



Fruit tree donning a new identification label (left)



Red Listed Species found on our Doorstep!

As part of its survey work SSWCG has been looking into the life on the fen/marshland along the river here.

Desmoulin's Whorl Snail (*Vertigo moulinsiana*) is a rare Red-List species and achieved some fame when it delayed the construction of the Newbury by-pass. It was last recorded on South Stoke's Lower Meadow in 1995.

A group of us went out to look for it. After some very careful, close inspection (the snails are only 2.5mm long!) we found some likely candidates.

Some rather poor photographs were sent off to experts and after some confusion as to whether the spirals were left or right-handed it was confirmed that the (dextral) snails we found were the right ones! - We are delighted to report that Desmoulin's Whorl Snail is alive and well and living in South Stoke!



A very small snail: *Vertigo moulinsiana* at South Stoke Lower Meadow, November 2022 (left).



Grow-Along

We are looking for volunteers to grow wildflower plugs for planting out in verges around the village, to improve the biodiversity and help our pollinators - and also because they look good!

It's fun, and simple to do. We will provide the seeds and seed and plug trays in March, together with full instructions and ongoing advice.

We did this before in 2021 and it was a great success! We had about 12 growers, some of them complete novices and we produced more than 1600 plants, which volunteers planted out in October 2021. Many of these are now becoming established around the village.

We have an interesting list of species to grow this year; the trays are about 30 x 54 cm and contain 84 plugs.

Please could anyone who wishes to take part in 2023 let us know at contact@southstokewildlife.org as soon as possible. It would be helpful if you could let us know whether you have any experience and how many trays you could accommodate (we will allocate the easier species to those with less experience, unless you want a challenge!)



Upcoming Events and Dates

As ever we have many plans in the pipeline. We love to see new and also familiar faces joining in and welcome everyone no matter your level of experience.

Sunday 5th March, 10am - Hedge planting. Please email if you can come and help!

Thursday 15th June- SSWCG Quiz night. Details to follow.

We also have wildflower walks, dragonfly walks, bat walks and flower surveys planned for the summer months. It's an opportunity for everybody in the parish to be part of the conservation effort- with lots of fun and learning along the way!

Visit the SSWCG website <https://www.southstokewildlife.org/> or find us on social media.



Hedgerow planting volunteers at White Hill Quarry enjoying sunnier days (above)