# THE VERGE REPORT

*Field news from the Kestrel Valley Land Trust*

Volume 9 · Number 2 · Spring

LEAD REPORT

## Beaver on the creek, and the argument about what to do

*Two lodges, four hundred metres of new wet ground, and a footbridge that is now an island. The trust's stewardship committee has been arguing about this since November.*

By Rafaela Idowu, Stewardship Officer



*The lower creek in February, from the old footbridge.*

The first sign was a chewed alder on the north bank, about sixty metres upstream of the footbridge, and for three weeks nobody said anything about it because nobody wanted to be the person who was wrong. By the second week of November there were four more, then a dam, then a second dam, then the path flooded and the argument started properly.

Beaver have been back in the Kestrel catchment for six years. They arrived on their own, or were helped, depending on whom you ask and how late in the evening you ask them. What is not in dispute is that there are now two occupied lodges on the trust's land, that the pair on the lower creek produced kits last summer, and that the wet ground behind their dams has gone from nothing to about four hundred metres of shallow braided water in a single season.

That water is doing several things at once. It is holding back the flashy winter run-off that used to arrive at the Ordell Bank culvert in a single brown surge and

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*Members receive The Verge Report twice a year. Back numbers are held at the field station.*

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now arrives slowly and mostly clear. It is drowning about a hectare of rough grazing that the trust had been mowing for eleven years without much conviction. It has raised the water table enough that the willow carr at the top of the field, which we have been trying to establish since 2019, has stopped needing anything from us at all.

It has also made the lower path impassable from November to March, cut off the interpretation board, and turned the footbridge into an island with water on both approaches and dry ground under the middle of it. Two members have written to say that the trust has abandoned public access. Two others have written to say that the trust should stop mowing everything in sight and let the animals do the work. All four letters were reasonable and all four were published in the winter bulletin.

The stewardship committee met three times about this. The first meeting produced nothing except a request for figures. The second produced figures that nobody trusted, because the flow gauge at the culvert had been reading low since a lorry hit the housing in 2023. The third meeting, in February, produced a decision, which is that the trust will do nothing to the dams and will move the path.

Moving the path is not a small thing. The new line runs along the top of the field, seventy metres further from the water, and it needs about ninety metres of boardwalk where it crosses the spring line. The estimate is eleven thousand pounds and the working party will take three weekends. The interpretation board is being rewritten, which is the part the education group is enjoying most, because the old board explained the meadow and the new board will have to explain what happened to it.

*We were slower than the animal.*

"We spent a decade managing that field toward a target condition," says Halvard Nystrom, who chairs the committee and who was, until about eighteen months ago, the most sceptical person in the room. "Then something moved in and hit the target in one winter without asking us. The honest position is that we were slower than the animal."

Not everyone accepts this. The objection that carries the most weight is about the alder. The north bank carries a stand of alder that predates the trust's ownership and probably predates the ownership before that, and beaver take alder readily. We have lost eleven stems since November, three of them large. Alder coppices vigorously and will almost certainly come back, but "almost certainly" is doing some work in that sentence, and the stand is one of the reasons the site was notified in the first place.

The committee's answer is to wrap the eight largest stems in wire mesh, which works, looks terrible, and

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The upper dam, built in nine days in November and extended twice since.



Wire mesh on one of the eight largest alders. It works and it looks terrible.



ACQUISITIONS

# The Ordell Bank easement, eleven years in the making

*A conservation easement over thirty-one hectares of bank and hanging wood was signed in February. It took eleven years, four solicitors and one extremely patient family.*

By Kestrel Valley Land Trust staff



*The hanging wood at Ordell Bank, which the easement closes to felling in perpetuity.*

The Ordell Bank easement covers thirty-one hectares of steep bank, hanging oak wood and about nine hundred metres of the eastern shore. It was signed on the twelfth of February in the kitchen of the farmhouse, by four members of the Dunleary family, three of whom had to be persuaded and one of whom had been in favour since 2015 and had spent the intervening decade saying so.

An easement is not a purchase. The land stays with the family, who go on farming the top ground exactly as they have. What the trust buys, and what the family sells at well below its market value, is the permanent removal of certain rights: to build, to plough the bank, to fell the hanging wood, to drain, and to sell any of those rights on to anyone else. The document runs to forty-one pages and the schedule of permitted operations runs to nine.

The negotiation took eleven years because the family is large, the title was complicated by a nineteenth-century right of turbary that nobody could definitively extinguish, and because for four of those years the trust could not raise the money. The turbary right was eventually dealt with by leaving it in place and buying a covenant not to exercise it, which is the kind of solution that lawyers find elegant and everyone else finds baffling.

What the easement protects is the least dramatic and most valuable habitat the trust has any interest in: a continuous wooded bank with no gap in it. Fragmentation is the quiet problem in this valley. There is a great deal of good wood and it is in about forty pieces.

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### THE FIGURES

31 hectares

900 metres of shore

41 pages

9 permitted operations

11 years

4 solicitors

1 patient family

MONITORING

# Winter counts, and what they miss

*Six years of volunteer transects have produced a dataset good enough to argue with. Anneke Vos on what the numbers show and what they cannot.*

The winter bird transect has been walked by volunteers on the same six routes, in the same fortnight, since 2019. That consistency is worth more than any single year's total, and it is entirely the achievement of about twenty people who get up early in January for no reward beyond a flask and a tick sheet.

This year's totals are below. The headline is that wetland species are up sharply on the lower creek, which will surprise nobody who has read the lead report, and that farmland species across the top ground are flat to slightly down, which surprises nobody either.

What the transect cannot tell us is whether the birds on the creek are new birds or the same birds redistributed from somewhere else in the valley. A count is not a census. Six routes walked once a fortnight in midwinter will reliably detect a large change and will reliably miss a small one, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.

We are adding a seventh route this autumn, along the new path line, partly for coverage and partly because the old route will shortly be under water.

## WINTER TRANSECT TOTALS

| ROUTE | BIRDS RECORDED ON ONE MIDWINTER WALK | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ROUTE | 2019 | 2021 | 2023 | 2025 | TREND |
| Lower creek | 118 | 141 | 206 | 338 | Up |
| Ordell Bank shore | 96 | 92 | 101 | 110 | Stable |
| Hanging wood | 64 | 71 | 66 | 69 | Stable |
| Top ground, west | 212 | 198 | 176 | 161 | Down |
| Top ground, east | 188 | 181 | 170 | 166 | Down |
| Mill leat | 77 | 84 | 88 | 97 | Up |

Totals are birds recorded on a single midwinter walk of each route, not population estimates. Trend is assessed over the full six-year series.



*Transect four, top ground west, on the second morning of the count.*

VOLUNTEERING

# Volunteer season opens on the fourth

The working party calendar for the season is settled and it is a heavy one. Three weekends on the creek path boardwalk, four on the hanging wood thinning, two on the reed bed, and the usual six scattered sessions of fencing, gate-hanging and the removal of things that people have left in hedges.

Nobody needs experience. About a third of the people who come to a first session have never used a bow saw, and the trust has a standing rule that no volunteer is handed anything sharper than a pair of loppers until somebody has watched them use the loppers.

What the trust does ask is that people say in advance whether they are coming, because the tea is calculated and the boards are heavy. The sign-up sheet is on the website, at the field station, and, for the third year running, taped to the inside of the barn door where it has proved more effective than either.

Two changes this season. The Wednesday midweek group now starts at nine rather than ten, at the request of everyone who has ever been in it. And the reed bed sessions have moved to September, because cutting reed in July was a decision made once, in 2022, by people who have since apologised.

## CALENDAR

| | |
|---|---|
| 4, 11, 18 April | Creek path boardwalk, working party. Meet at the field station, 9.00. Boots essential. |
| 26 April | Members' walk, Ordell Bank shore. Two hours, easy, one stile. Booking required. |
| 9 May | Annual general meeting, Wickner Row village hall, 19.00. Accounts and two board vacancies. |
| 17 May | Dawn chorus walk, hanging wood. Meet 4.45. Yes, really. |
| 6-7 June | Hay meadow survey training. Two days, no charge to members. |
| 12 September | Reed bed working party, first of four. Waders provided, in three sizes, none of them yours. |

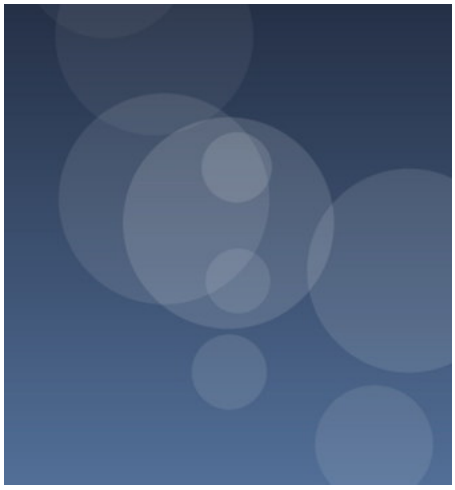
FIELD NOTES

# Six days in the reed bed

*Two hundred metres of reed cut in six days, by eleven people, in weather that held for one of them.*



The cut face, first morning. Two hundred metres to do and a forecast that held for exactly one day.



Brash stacked on the dry margin, where it will stay until the ground freezes and we can get the trailer in.



The eastern channel, reopened after four years. It silted up faster than anyone predicted and will need doing again.



Lunch. The trust's position on lunch is that it is not optional and not negotiable.



Water rail tracks in the cut, found on the fourth morning about a metre from where somebody had been standing.



The last afternoon, looking back along the cut face toward the field station.

*Photographs by volunteers of the Kestrel Valley Land Trust. Reed bed work is funded by members' subscriptions.*

## BEAVER ON THE CREEK

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will be reviewed in three years. Wrapping was agreed unanimously, which is the only thing at any of the three meetings that was.

There is a second question, which the committee has deferred rather than answered, and it is about the culvert. If the lower dam continues to hold and the pond continues to deepen, the water will eventually reach the road embankment. The highway authority is aware. The trust's position is that this is at least four years away, that the dam may well be abandoned before then, and that the authority's own modelling now treats upstream storage as a benefit rather than a hazard.

"Four years is a long time to be right about," Nystrom says. "But it is also a long time to spend removing something that is working."

The working party for the new path meets on the first three Saturdays of April. Boots, gloves, and a willingness to carry boards are the entire list of requirements. The trust will provide tea, and, in a departure from tradition, a second flask.

## THE ORDELL BANK EASEMENT

*Continued from page 3*

The Ordell Bank wood joins two of the larger pieces and takes the continuous run from one and a half kilometres to just over four.

The family have asked that the easement be recorded in the name of Sorcha Dunleary, who farmed the ground from 1961 until 2004 and who, according to her granddaughter, "would have signed it in about an hour and then told everyone she had been against it." The trust has agreed.

Funding came from the members' appeal, which raised fifty-eight thousand, from a grant we are not yet permitted to name, and from the reserve, which is now lower than the board would like. The appeal for the boardwalk on the creek path is therefore arriving at an awkward moment, and the board would like members to know that it is aware of this.

Access under the easement is unchanged: the permissive path along the shore stays open, the hanging wood stays closed except on guided walks, and the top ground remains a working farm where the gates matter.



*The new path line, staked in February, seventy metres up the field from the old one.*

### CONTACT

Kestrel Valley Land Trust
Ordell Bank Field Station
Wickner Row
Office hours Tuesday to Thursday, 9.00 to 16.00
Working party queries to the stewardship office
Membership and legacies to the office manager

The Verge Report is published twice a year for members of the Kestrel Valley Land Trust. Edited by Anneke Vos. Set in Georgia and Trebuchet. Printed on recycled stock by The Ordell Press. Everything in this publication is invented.

## SPRING APPEAL

Ninety metres of boardwalk, eleven thousand pounds, and three weekends of carrying. The creek path appeal is open until the end of June. Any amount is useful and small regular amounts are the most useful of all.

*Give at the field station, by standing order, or by leaving the trust something in your will. The legacy leaflet is free and the office will post it without being asked twice.*

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*The Verge Report is printed twice a year and posted to every member. If you would rather have it by e-mail, say so and we will save the stamp.*

Ordell Bank Field Station is open to members on Tuesdays and Thursdays, whatever the weather is doing.

FOLD


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