

Marley Hall Farm

Marley Hall Farm lies on the South side of the Aire Valley between Keighley and Bingley off the A650. The 135 acres (55ha) is approximately 1 mile long and rises from 250 to 650 feet above sea level from the railway line up towards Druid's Altar.

Negotiations for the land started 5 years ago and in July 2004 we bought the land and a traditional stone built barn.

Since the early 1930s, the land has been extensively grazed, only by cattle, with a late cut hay crop at least with very little fertiliser or chemicals used. The range of habitats include: moorland edge; inby; upland hay meadow and pasture; woods; dry banks; scrub; bogs; lowland water meadows; ponds; hedges and old oak trees. These habitats will be managed to reach their potential for wildlife, using mainly cattle and some sheep as a management resource to create and maintain the various habitats. Hay meadows will be cut in a traditional way when wild flowers have seeded.

We are asking B.O.G. members to help in any way they can with the various projects. You may have ideas of your own, if so we will be pleased to incorporate them if at all feasible. Volunteers will be required for: dry stone walling; fencing; hedge planting and maintenance; tree planting and thinning; bracken and scrub control; pond restoration and maintenance; creating tracks and parking areas; stock tasks and wardening; surveys and monitoring of birds, animals and plants; bird and bat box making and installation.

The cattle are native, traditional breeds, mainly Aberdeen Angus and Hereford crosses. These will be put to a Beef Shorthorn, rare breed bull to produce top quality conservation grazed beef, fed only on herb rich grass. The whole farm is managed on organic principles using no artificial fertiliser, pesticides or herbicides.

There is a herd of semi-wild fallow deer on the farm and these will be kept wild and farm managed so that the deer herd, people love to see, becomes self supporting and sustainable and pays for the grass they eat and the damage they do. Revenue from sales of beef and venison and eventually mutton and lamb will go to fund the conservation on the farm.

This is the most exciting thing to happen for conservation in our area. Please do all you can to support this exciting venture.

Nest box scheme – Marley Hall Farm

On Thursday 6th and Sunday 9th January members of B.O.G. put up assorted nest boxes at Marley Hall Farm, Bingley. A big thank you to all who helped, it is not easy to get a team of people together at a certain time on a certain day. With this kind of operation at this time of year the weather is all important and we had to work with the weather rather than against it. We were lucky on the Thursday and because the weather was so good on the Sunday a team was hastily gathered to complete the task.

Funding came in the form of £300.00 Community Chest grant from Keighley area panel and a £50.00 grant from Action Earth an Environment Agency conservation fund.

Peter Riley made three superb, triangular barn owl boxes and I made an assortment of other boxes for tawny owl, pied flycatcher, redstart and tree sparrow. Although, I suppose blue and great tits will take up residence in most of them, it would be good to get a coal tit or nuthatch in one or two boxes.

A pallet was lashed to the forks of the front-end loader to lift the boxes up the trees. The boxes and assorted tools were loaded onto the tractor and trailer and filled it. The weather had been very wet and the ground was absolutely waterlogged, so I suspected the tractor would get bogged down eventually but as the barn owl boxes are fairly heavy and awkward to carry I felt that every metre we went in the tractor would be one less to carry the equipment. We set off through the field gate and travelled about ten metres before the tractor was stuck. It wouldn't go forward even in four-wheel drive and began sliding down the hill.

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The barn owl boxes were placed in solitary old oak trees spread across the full length of the farm, which is about one mile. There are three woods on the farm: Marley Brow Wood; Small Tail Wood and Round Hill Wood. The other boxes were put in these woods or in small copses at the woodland edge.

The four large Barn owl boxes have been built to a design approved by the Hawk and Owl Trust. Marley Hall Farm held the last breeding pair of Barn owls that are known to have been in this area but they stopped breeding there nearly twenty years ago. The owl boxes are part of a Barn owl box scheme ranging from Nidderdale to Harewood, where nearly fifty large boxes have been erected. Breeding success happened in the grounds of Harewood House, where the young were ringed and details sent to the British Trust for Ornithology.

Forty boxes went nowhere and I estimate we will need at least another forty to gain even the minimum of coverage. They will probably have to wait until next year.

After trudging up and down hill in muddy, slippery conditions, carrying boxes, ladders and other equipment, not to mention hoisting large boxes up trees with rope and clambering about on branches, by mid-afternoon we had had enough, although it was an enjoyable experience and we had done a little more for the birds in the Aire valley.

Thanks again to those who helped on the days; I am sure there will be other occasions to help for those who missed out.

Martin Stone

B.O.G. Conservation Officer