Restoring the pond at Norley Bank Farm
by Neil Holding

As a lad, I spent most of my summer holidays on a farm in Lancashire and whiled away the days fishing the many farm ponds that were abundant in the sixties. These were generally irrigation ponds fed by boreholes and wind pumps and teemed with wildlife and fish but sadly however, they have been decreasing in alarming numbers with 75% of ponds disappearing in the last 50 years. In fact, about a million ponds have been lost between 1900 and 2000.

Wind the clock on some fifty years and my wife and I achieved an ambition to buy an old farm that was in need of total restoration and down in a low lying part of one of the fields was the tangled mess of an old silted up pond. Completely overgrown with crack willows, alders, shrubs and what seemed like miles of rusting barbed wire, this was going to be some project but what a challenge. The pond was in the main silted up to a point where in the summer months it was possible to walk across it with just one corner having a shallow area that was a good breeding ground for midges and horse flies. However, looking at old ordnance maps of the area and in particular, the old tithe maps which go back to 1836, the pond is clearly shown so at least we knew it had been around for well over 150 years and held water.
We had our hands full with the restoration of the house and the pond had to wait but during a storm in 2012, two enormous crack willows came crashing down and within a short time, where the branches of these fallen trees impaled the ground, new saplings were emerging. This really heralded the start of the clearing work and due to the size of these massive trees it took two of us three weekends to cut and remove them and together with one or two other trees we removed, one thing was for certain, we were not going to be short of logs for some years to come. The following summer, we removed the old barbed wire fencing and armed with chainsaws and the tractor, set to cutting and pulling down the remaining trees and bushes which turned into a real social affair with family and friends all lending a hand.

We now had a large silted up area full of roots and very large tree trunks which must have blown down decades ago and were fully embedded in the mud. Now time for some serious digging work to begin. Luckily, we could call on the considerable experience of local groundwork contractor Ian Barclay and with Ian's considerable knowledge in digging out ponds with his 13 ton tracked digger, we started the excavation work. Out came the old roots and tree trunks and few trial holes discovered there was a clay base to the pond. I don't know how many tonnes of silt, mud and clay we removed, probably thousands, but over a three week period we reformed the shape of the pond and got down to about fifteen feet deep in some areas.
By now it was late autumn and the start of a very wet period which turned the area into a quagmire. The spoil heaps from the excavations turned to liquid mud and we abandoned the project until the following spring.

Ian returned the following May tidying up the banks and spreading and leveling the spoil heaps over the field which was then rotovated re-seeded. There are no springs or natural water feeding the pond and it simply fills up with water during the winter and loses about a metre in the summer by evaporation and seepage and with the amount of rain we had that winter, the pond had filled completely.

We formed the pond in three depths. The first is a deep end with places maybe 14 to 15 feet deep and this was due to striking very soft clay which we dug out to get to a firmer base. This then shelves up to the middle section which is in the region of 5 to 6 feet which then again shelves down to the opposite end of the pond which is about 10 feet deep. Notwithstanding encountering the soft clay, the deep section was also formed so that there would be limited sunlight to the bottom of the pond in that area which would minimise the amount of pondweed and leave a clear span of water. In contrast, water weed could easily grow in the shallower middle section. The sides were formed to a fairly steep angle and go down in a series of shelves enabling plans to establish themselves on the shelving at the varying depths they could tolerate. This seems to have worked but I notice this summer that the 10ft area is becoming increasingly covered with weeds. Time will tell.
The heavy work was now complete and we left the pond undisturbed for twelve
months to settle down. It’s remarkable how quickly wildlife starts to inhabit an
area once you achieve the right conditions with various types of pond weeds,
rushes and water iris started to grow very quickly. In the last few years, the pond
has become well established with breeding pairs of resident moorhens and various
species of ducks including the odd short visits from a pair of Mandarin
ducks. Greylag and Canada geese are often visitors early in the year as are oyster
catchers and the odd swan. Frogs, toads and newts are abundant and spring sees
the margins turn black with a moving mass of tadpoles.

A friend offered us a few bags of Canada pond weed and whilst this is fairly
invasive, it does help to oxygenate the water and hopefully, the pond has sufficient
depth of water for it not to be a nuisance. What I didn't realise however was the
weed was full of Goldfish roe which hatched out and the pond is now full of
goldfish. There were thousands of them which had grown to a good size until the
Heron and the Cormorants which are now daily visitors, discovered there are rich
pickings for them!

One of this year’s joys have been the number of dragon
and damsel flies that have
established themselves and
whilst I find it difficult to
identify them, we have I
think Common darters,
Emperors, Four spotted
chasers, Broad bodied
chasers and Common
hawkers (or maybe they
were Southern hawkers),
Common blue damselflies
and large red damselflies and
there were others that I
couldn't name.
Restoring the pond has been an extremely rewarding and fascinating experience and with some hard work and by introducing the right environment, what was a flea ridden silted up swamp that was virtually dead has been transformed into a healthy pond with a diverse range of wildlife that improves as the pond matures.