newsletter

HERTS LOCAL WILDLIFE SITES

The Hertfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Partnership March 2015

Welcome...

...to the 2015 Local Wildlife Sites newsletter. This time we are focussing on Wildlife Sites in and around towns and cities, their management issues, case studies, ideas and opportunities.

What are Wildlife Sites?

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are sites of substantive nature conservation value and although they do not have any statutory status, many are equal in quality to statutory Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). There are more than 40,000 Local Wildlife Sites in England overseen by 65 Local Sites systems, covering contrasting landscapes in coastal, rural and urban situations. Hertfordshire currently has 1,575 habitat LWS. Together with SSSIs, LWS support locally and nationally threatened species and habitats. They play a critical role in forming the building blocks of ecological networks and Living Landscapes.

We want to hear from you!

Comments or suggestions for future articles are welcome. If you would prefer to receive your newsletter via email please contact Judith Cox: judith.cox@hmwt.org

photo: Ann Favell

Stevenage road verge with wildflowers

What's special about Local Wildlife Sites in towns and cities?

As towns and cities expand and regenerate, wildlife continues to try to find a home there too. Nest boxes, ponds, compost heaps and high ledges provide valuable homes and roosts, but not all wildlife is adaptable and connectivity between habitats is also vital. Local Wildlife Sites provide areas of refuge and corridors of high quality habitat between buildings, towns, and amenity areas and allow wildlife to forage and move safely between built up areas.

Urban green spaces are of great benefit to people too. Time spent in, or viewing nature helps us to relax and feel happier. Local Wildlife Sites can include golf courses, church-yards, village greens and road verges. Large publicly accessible Local Wildlife Sites within our towns include Monks & Whomerley Woods in Stevenage, Cassiobury Park in Watford and Boxmoor Common in Hemel Hempstead.

Some urban Local Wildlife Sites – including river banks, grassland sites and woodlands – are on private land. However, despite their lack of public access these areas still provide us with the benefit of 'breathing space' between built up areas, natural flood barriers, noise/pollution reduction and a more picturesque landscape scene.

Owning a metropolitan Local Wildlife Site when pressures on urban space are growing is not always easy. Litter and fly tipping, development and unauthorised access to land are just some of the associated problems, but Local Wildlife Sites are critical to our local wildlife. In this issue we celebrate their importance and provide case studies and ideas for your own Local Wildlife Site. You can also read more about Local Wildlife Sites in our Secret Spaces report. Find it at: www.wildlifetrusts.org/localwildlifesites

photo: Margaret Holland

Waxwings

Horsepower – Furzefield Wood

Coppiced faggot bundles

All photos: CMS

Horses and hurdles – traditional management for sustainable urban woodland

Furzefield Wood Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is a small remnant of ancient woodland on the outskirts of Potters Bar, known to have been wooded since the early 1600s. Its ancient woodland flora and fauna make Furzefield Wood of county importance for its wildlife, reflecting its designation as an LNR and Local Wildlife Site (LWS). The Countryside Management Service (CMS), in partnership with site owners Hertsmere Borough Council (HBC), manage the woodland for both wildlife and people.

With a canopy of mainly coppiced hazel bushes and large oak trees, the woodland is a world away from the surrounding town; alive with wildlife. In spring it is carpeted with wildflowers including bluebells, delicate white wood anemones and the yellows of lesser celandine and primroses. It supports a wide variety of birds, insects and mammals, including bats. Speckled wood and striking yellow brimstone butterflies can be seen in the dappled shade of the woodland paths and edges in spring and great spotted woodpeckers heard drumming throughout the day.

Prior to 1935, when it was purchased by the Urban District Council of Potters Bar, Furzefield Wood was managed traditionally with records of hazel coppicing going back several centuries. This ancient practice involves cutting trees on a cycle, for example every seven years, with subsequent re-growth used to make products such as thatching spars and sheep hurdles, bean poles and pea sticks. Nothing would be wasted, with larger timbers made into charcoal and smaller twiggy pieces bound up into faggot bundles and burned on domestic fires.

Coppicing restarted in 1979, but the cut wood was under-utilised due to limited demand for the products and the work was undertaken solely by volunteers. More recently, the CMS has been working with HBC to improve the woodland management and a more commercial approach has been taken. The management is now more sustainable, maximising the value of the timber whilst continuing the vital coppice management under which the woodland wildlife thrives. Volunteers are still engaged in different aspects of the wood's conservation. Following the production of a woodland management plan and, with further advice from the CMS, Iain Loasby of Rivenwood Coppice is now employed to coppice an area of the wood each year, bringing it back into a regular coppice cycle. Iain processes the cut trees into useful products which he markets and sells, offsetting some of the cost of the work. Grant monies secured from the Forestry Commission have further reduced the cost of the woodland management. Temporary fencing round the coppice areas now limits the impact of muntjac deer and additional hazel trees have been planted too. This work will improve the quality and productivity of the coppice, so in time the woodland management work will pay for itself or may even provide a small income.

Over winter, there has been a new addition to the work force in the form of Roy, a Suffolk Punch horse. Roy and his handler, Matt Waller from Hawthorn Heavy Horses, have been brought in to help Iain extract timber and coppice products from the wood to the roadside. This traditional approach is more ecologically sensitive, causing minimal ground disturbance when compared to the use of modern mechanised forestry equipment.

■ The Countryside Management Service works with communities in Hertfordshire to help them care for and enjoy the environment. For more information visit the CMS website: *www.hertslink.org/cms* email: *northeast.cms@hertfordshire.gov.uk* or tel: 01992 588433.

Bluebells under hazel coppice

photo: Ann Favell

Six Hills Way, Stevenage

photo: Bruce Shortland

Great green bush cricket

photo: Tim Hill

Early purple orchid

Wildlife Site Success in Stevenage

Great green bush crickets, ancient woodlands full of spring flowers and uncommon plants like adder's tongue fern and early purple orchids, are all found in the heart of Stevenage. As part of its local Biodiversity Action Plan, Stevenage Borough Council (Stevenage BC) has been hard at work maintaining, recording and improving Local Wildlife Sites for nature conservation. With 80 percent of threatened vascular plants residing in Local Wildlife Sites and with ever increasing pressure from development, this work is vitally important. While most of Stevenage is urban, its green space is a haven for wildlife. Three successful projects in particular illustrate how good conservation management can go a long way.

Shackledell Grassland

Shackledell Grassland in Stevenage is very special. It is the only grassland in Hertfordshire where the great green bush cricket is recorded and is part of the 4 percent (19.1 ha) of remaining unimproved grassland in the borough. Unimproved grassland makes up only a small proportion (4.3 percent) of Hertfordshire's grassland. Traditionally managed with little nutrient input, unimproved sites typically include few agricultural weeds and a high diversity of flora characteristic of their soil type which supports many invertebrates, birds and other fauna.

Local volunteers took part in practical tasks at Shackledell Grassland for the Wild Stevenage Project delivered by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust in partnership with Stevenage BC. Volunteers planted a new native hedgerow to provide shelter, and helped to clear scrub and saplings. Two of Stevenage BC's Green Space volunteers now act as wardens. The site is managed for its grassland and its crickets so scrub density is maintained within controlled areas, and removed in others to increase the grassland area. A meadow mowing regime has been incorporated in rotation leaving some vegetation each winter for invertebrates.

photo: Ann Favell

Volunteers with the Wild Stevenage Project

Monks & Whomerley Woods

Monks and Whomerley Woods make up some of the 41 percent of 'ancient' woodland in Stevenage, as indicated by their presence on the Ancient Woodland Inventory and their indicative flora like the beautiful native bluebell. Many ancient woodland indicators grow very slowly and do not compete well with other plants, so once they have gone from a site they may never return. Woodland flowers also provide some of the first nectar of the year for insects emerging in spring. Despite growing in a shady environment much woodland flora requires at least dappled light to grow. Management has included opening up rides and glades allowing more light to reach the woodland floor. As a result there has been a large increase in ground flora including early purple orchid, adder's tongue fern, yellow archangel, bugle and early dog violet. Clear pathways and guided routes through the wood encourage walkers to use paths to avoid trampling the flora, and Green Space volunteers coppice an acre of the woods each winter to support the ongoing development of good vertical structure.

Chalk banks and road verges

Martins Way running along the A1072 in Stevenage was a bare chalk bank with a sunny aspect. It was seeded with native wildflowers by Stevenage Zoological Society and now the site is a buzzing insect metropolis with many calcareous wildflowers such as kidney vetch, bee orchid and burnet saxifrage, some of which are believed to have colonised the site naturally.

Three existing road verges were experimentally managed to benefit flora conservation allowing them to grow long, cutting the verge only once the flowers had set seed in late summer. This increases the wildflower population. If cuttings are removed nutrients are kept low, and competition from 'weed' species such as common ragwort is reduced. Wildlife Trust volunteers surveyed the sites before and after the revised management. All three sites increased their flora, diversity, and numbers of indicator plant species. Further areas of grassland are now also receiving meadow management to increase biodiversity within the town.

■ Judith Cox
Wildlife Sites Programme Manager, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust

Herts habitat heroes – golf courses can be havens for wildlife as the Wildlife Trust's **Judith Cox** explains

Heather at Mid Herts Golf Course

photo: Mid Herts Golf Club

Golf courses are a mosaic of habitats that include rough grass, open water, wooded areas and short open grassland, each providing ideal conditions for different species if managed sympathetically. As golf courses are large areas of green space, often close to urban sprawl, they give members and wildlife an escape from the bustle of town. Several of Hertfordshire's golf courses are Local Wildlife Sites, selected for their rich floral diversity, and have been working on improving their courses not just for their players but for wildlife too.

One such example is Mid Herts Golf Course which includes areas of heath and acid grassland. Together with adjoining Gustard Wood Common, it forms a Local Wildlife Site. This supports heather, heath bedstraw, harebell, and juniper, which is a rare species in Hertfordshire. Heath is a very scarce habitat within the county, the UK and within Europe. Much of it has been lost to woodland or development, or has been fragmented by roads. What remains in the UK represents 20 percent of the total European heath habitat, with only 13 hectares of heath remaining in the whole of Hertfordshire. This makes it an important conservation concern not only for the rarity of the habitat itself but for the flora and fauna it supports.

Mid Herts Golf Club has made use of the diversity of flora on its site to help increase the difficulty of the course for the benefit of the club, and increase the wildlife value of the site for the benefit of nature conservation. The golf club, with ecological advice from Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, has been working to improve and restore the area. I met Jody Wilson, Course Manager at Mid Herts Golf Club to hear about the challenges and advantages of managing a heath golf course for the benefit of people and wildlife.

How do you manage the site?

We manage the site for heather regeneration and its acid grassland. The roughs are left long and have the cuttings removed when they are mown. Organic matter has to be constantly cleared and leaf litter removed from the heather (heather and good acid grassland needs to be nutrient poor). We have also stripped four initial areas of their vegetation and top soil to make way for new heather growth using heather brashing brought in from Hankley Common Golf Course in Surrey, and our own heather seed.

Why manage the site for heather?

The course was originally a heathland site and 50 years ago was covered in heather. However, without targeted management, scrub, bramble and trees took over. The heather was greatly reduced and trees were growing amongst heather stands. So, within the last ten years we have gradually been starting to restore it.

What are the challenges of managing heath?

Finding the old seed banks and heather areas and getting new areas of heather established is difficult. It can take up to five years for heather to start to really take off and until then the area doesn't look so good. Removing grasses without damaging the heather isn't easy and picking the leaf litter out of the heather and managing tree and sapling growth also take a lot of effort.

photo: Mid Herts Golf Club

Stripping topsoil for new heather

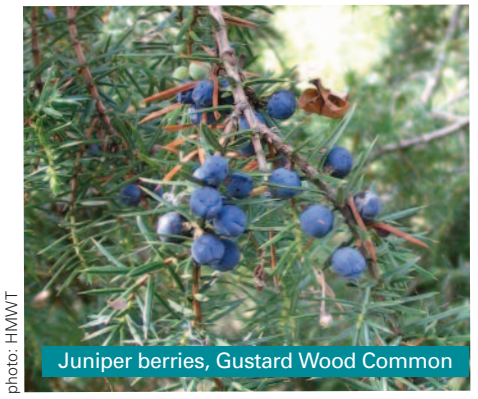

photo: HMWT

Juniper berries, Gustard Wood Common

And the benefits?

Managing the course this way creates a lot of work but we would say it is worth it. The heather looks great when it's flowering and the roughs have greatly improved – the fescue grasses don't clump at the base like the coarser grasses they've replaced, so golf balls are more easily found. We are one of only a few heath golf courses in Hertfordshire; it's a more challenging course for golfers, and heath golf courses can charge more per round.

We have installed 90 bird boxes around the site and we have someone who helps us with owls on site. There is more heather now, and the acid grassland has increased in flora such as harebell and fescue grasses. So wildlife has benefited too.

Future plans?

A management plan is being written by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust to help us continue to manage the site sensitively for nature and our vision is to become the biggest heath site in Hertfordshire.

Herts Environmental Records Centre

Herts Environmental Records Centre collates records of species and habitats in Hertfordshire which can be used for monitoring, consideration in planning developments and research. You can contribute to the knowledge of your area by submitting records of the wildlife that you have observed.

A record should consist of:

- The full name of the person who made the observation
- The species observed
- Grid reference where the species was observed – *see this handy webpage to find your grid reference: www.bnhs.co.uk/focuson/grabagridref/html/index.htm*
- The Local Wildlife Site name or file code if you are recording on a site you know to be a LWS
- The date when the species was seen (or a month and year if you are unsure of the date)
- How many of the species you saw e.g. 3 individuals or 5 males
- Any other comments of interest relating to the species, the individuals seen or the location

photo: HMWT

Chalkhill blue

Please be aware that all these details associated with records submitted may then be collated and disseminated manually or electronically, for environmental decision-making, education, research and other public benefit uses, and in the commercial operation of the record centre. The data may be uploaded to the National Biodiversity Network.

- Records may be sent to: *enquiries@hercinfo.org.uk* and we are happy to assist you with any enquiries about recording.

photo: Judith Cox

Chalk rivers in urban landscape

Singlers Marsh

Few people realise the global significance of Hertfordshire's chalk rivers. Estimates vary but there are fewer than 200 chalk rivers in the world and Hertfordshire is home to a significant proportion of these – the Mimram, Beane, Ash, Ver, Chess and Gade, to name a few. Our chalk rivers are beautiful and iconic ecosystems, supporting a wide range of native wildlife. Chalk river water is pure, mineral rich and relatively alkaline. The temperature is relatively constant throughout the year at around 10°C and these stable conditions are perfect for wildlife, especially a rich invertebrate life, to flourish.

Chalk rivers are a feature of a number of urban or suburban Local Wildlife Sites – such as Singlers Marsh on the River Mimram, and Beane Marsh (River Beane). While this can provide opportunities for public engagement and education, it also presents challenges for a river's ecology. Urban diffuse pollution can come from a number of sources, including misconnections from domestic water pipes, sewer outflows, run-off from roads and illegal dumping of waste down roadside drains (many of which lead directly to rivers without treatment). Fertiliser run-off, ornamental weirs, and non-native and invasive plants, all have a detrimental impact on our local rivers.

How you can help

Rivers interconnect with each other and with the land (or 'catchment') which they drain. What happens upstream will have impacts downstream, and what happens in land bordering the river will affect the river itself. To improve and protect our rivers it's important to look at the bigger picture. Focussing on a landscape scale makes perfect sense and working with local landowners and land managers is crucial to this approach. If you own some river, whether a long stretch within a Local Wildlife Site, or a few metres in your back garden, you can play a huge role in improving the health of our chalk rivers.

The Wildlife Trust is 'hosting' catchment management plans for all of the rivers of the Upper Lea: The Lea itself, Mimram, Beane, Ash, Rib and Quin, and Stort. Planning the management of a catchment is a huge task; no one person or group can do it alone. So by hosting the partnerships we can bring together interested people and organisations and focus on taking a 'bottom up' approach to improving our rivers; driven by local people. If you are a riparian landowner, or a local person with an interest in one of these rivers, you may be interested in joining your local Catchment Partnership. Our vision is for a management plan developed and implemented by a partnership of interested people, including farmers, local community groups, fishing clubs, landowners, charities and statutory bodies.

The Catchment Partnerships meet every few months to discuss projects for the river and update members on developments and progress. To find out more and to get involved, visit *www.riverleacatchment.org.uk* and click on your local river!

■ Charlie Bell
Hertfordshire Living Rivers Officer, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust

The partnership

This newsletter has been produced by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust on behalf of the Local Wildlife Sites Partnership, supported by funding from the Environment Agency, Herts County Council and North Herts District Council.

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Herts and Middlesex

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