

Noakes Grove AGM 2021 - Nature Reserve Report

Conservation work

Work parties continued until March 2020, ably organized by Andrew Urquhart, but after then they had to stop until the restrictions eased in 2021 allowing 30 people to gather outside. However, what we saw in June this year (2021) in the open parts of the scrub was the magnificent result of the conservation work done by work parties led by Vyvyan Veal up to 2019 then by Andrew in 2019 and the early part of 2020: a huge amount and variety of flowers with dizzying numbers of pyramidal orchids. In 2020 we noticed a large number of butterflies and thanks to the big pond, we have dragonflies, damselflies, water beetles, and many other creepy-crawlies in the water, on the land and in the trees and bushes. It is all working really rather well.

We were very pleased to see that the kestrel box was used this year (2021) by a pair of kestrels who nested successfully. Vyvyan's bird walk identified a number of birds that I had not recognized before: whitethroat, blackcap, chiff-chaff, among others. Kites and buzzards are now regular visitors, and I think I saw a peregrine.

As for mammals, the camera trap has caught fallow and muntjac deer, foxes and badgers; we often count the rabbits playing when we first walk into the field in the morning, and hares bounce around as well. David Corke frequently disturbs the voles that lurk underneath a piece of wood on the ground – he delights to show these to children – and his small mammal catch-alive traps have revealed wood mice, yellow-necked mice, shrews, field voles and bank voles.

A new pond, smaller than the existing one, was dug in the scrub. This was a trial pond, paid for by Natural England, to see if it held water well enough to justify digging a much larger pond for the benefit of great crested newts. It didn't, but the small pond is beginning to settle down and be colonised by pond life. At the moment it is unlined and we hope it will retain the present level of water without the need to line it. We shall see.

Construction work

In the autumn of 2020, we began work on the half of the stable that has become the 'schoolroom'. John Bagley mended the roof and put in a good supply of electric power points and generally did a great job. He was helped in this task by our very enthusiastic Duke of Edinburgh Award candidate Ryan Hudson and his family. So now we have a fully functioning 'schoolroom' with shelves, books, equipment, tables and chairs. Ideal for wet-day mindfulness sessions and the enquiring minds in the Wild Child Club.

Ryan has been an important help in many of the tasks this year, able to turn his hand to almost anything from raking moss in the field, helping to mend the loo roof, cutting back overhanging branches in the scrub and manhandling hoggins in the car park.

Throughout the wet winter of 2020 (gosh it was wet!) the car park suffered a morbid decline. Cars venturing in and straying off the small and only bit of hard standing were doomed to get stuck, so John Bagley (with help from Ryan and his dad and little brother) took the whole project on and with hard core and hoggins and a great deal of elbow grease, they created a larger, firmer space that can now accommodate at least five cars, sometimes six. Many thanks to John for sourcing all the materials and organizing everything. It was a terrific achievement.

Education

When full lockdown was announced in March 2020, so many children were not allowed to go to school that parents sometimes struggled to keep up the interest in the home-schooling techniques when the children were effectively confined indoors. In June 2020, David Corke had one of his better ideas. He asked on the website whether any parents of children aged 6–9 would like them to come to a Wild Child Club where, for two hours each week, they could learn about wildlife, run around in the open, build dens in the wood, climb trees and so on. Within hours his Wild Child Club was

oversubscribed. He had to limit it to five children because of the lockdown laws, so there was a long waiting list. The club was a great success and now (thanks to vaccinations and a slight easing of restrictions) he has extended the club to include two other groups on different days each for up to 10 children per day. The club has managed three outdoor camp nights: two in 2020 and one in June of this year.

Mindfulness

Nikki Phillips's Mindfulness sessions have increased a lot in frequency and importance. Possibly the Covid crisis prompted more need for coping strategies and Nikki has helped many families to understand and use mindfulness. Being outside in the nature reserve she shows people the value of using the power of nature to cope with the worries our lives produce. We are very proud that Noakes Grove is so valuable to the families Nikki helps.

Sheep

All credit to the vigilant sheep teams, the flock is thriving. Gaul visited again this last winter and seemed to enjoy himself with our girls, so much so, that lambs began to arrive only the requisite five months after his arrival. Seven ewes produced 14 lambs: two sets of triplets, three sets of twins and two singles. Only three of them are ewe lambs. By June we realized that there were too many sheep at Noakes Grove, so we had to move some of them to Kings Field. That was a great fun morning, as we had to round them up, ear tag the lambs and make sure the right lambs were with the right mothers before they were shipped to Steeple Bumpstead.

The drought over the early part of spring had us really worried, as the grass was not growing at all. Then the April showers arrived six weeks late and the grass went mad, so the sheep have plenty to eat after all.

We still have eight sheep down the road with Gilly and Fred Bamber, two of them will be old enough to join the main breeding flock in the autumn, the remaining six are old ladies who are the original members of the Noakes flock. They are retired and slightly creaky but looking in absolute tip-top condition. They are all very good old friends and luckily Gilly and Fred are very fond of them – so am I.

Peter Savic's scheme of 'adopt-a-sheep' has been very successful and he has been tireless in promoting it to prospective adopters. Thanks to his amazing talents, we now have adopters for all our breeding flock.

Events

We dared to have a mini event in May. As 30 people were allowed to gather outdoors, Peter Savic and David Buckley put on a brilliant concert. Peter's Walden Buskers and David's Bumpstead Bojangles entertained a delighted audience of work-party members, friends and visitors for a glorious couple of hours one very sunny May afternoon. It was wonderful. Let's hope they can do it again.

King's Field

At the moment we have several ewes and lambs happily managing the field, which is already becoming a good wildflower meadow thanks to them. We are hoping to get the smaller space the other side of the stream fenced and able to accommodate sheep sometime soon. King's Field is now open to the public as a nature reserve.

Apple orchard

In 2020, we had a bumper crop of apples from the traditional orchard at Ellis Green. Some of the Wild Child Club members had great fun picking apples, so we managed a good supply of apple juice.

Elaine Corke