

PRESTWOOD NATURE ANNUAL REPORT 2005

Progress on the Local Biodiversity Action Plan: The First Two Years

Sections follow the order of topics in the published Action Plan. Major achievements and needs are highlighted.

A. GENERAL ACTIONS

1. Working with children & schools

Achievements

- **A local WATCH group for children formed**
- Two members trained and cleared as leaders
- X meetings held
- Advice on creating a wildlife area at one school

Needs

- **Recruit a third WATCH leader**
- Recruit another person to help with schools liaison & extend this beyond Prestwood village

Assessment

Good progress initially, but two leaders is insufficient to keep the momentum, when people become busy with other work, fall ill, etc.

2. Wildlife surveying

Achievements

- Hedge surveyors trained and working in the field (half our area now surveyed)
- Records from members regularly received
- We have inputted many significant new records from systematic surveys
- **Several species of national conservation importance found**
- **Ten new sites surveyed**
- **Whole farm survey for Environmental Stewardship carried out**

Needs

- One or more specialists who could help out the coordinator with surveys
- **Train a group of members to survey old trees**
- **Extend the survey of ponds completed for the centre of our area only**
- Find specialists in under-studied groups like mosses, lichens and spiders

Assessment

Good progress, but two major surveys (especially the farm, which had tight deadlines) have dominated the coordinator's time and taken away from other tasks. We are unlikely to have such a large single task in future years.

3. Liaison with landowners

Achievements

- Continuing consultation on management of Holy Trinity churchyard
- Survey of Hay Pole field and draft management plan for Peter Brandon
- Survey of field beside Link Road car park and draft management plan in consultation with Chiltern District Council & Chilterns Conservation Board

- **Survey of 53 fields at Hampden Bottom Farm in support of Higher Level Environmental Stewardship application by farmer Ian Waller**
- Advice on horse paddock management to protect rare plant in one field

Needs

- **Advertise our services to all local landowners**
- Trace non-local owners of key sites (eg Widmere Field, Crooks Field)
- Promotion of good horse paddock management
- Work with Peter Brandon to enhance the biodiversity of Hay Pole and return it to its former state as a traditional winter-grazed hay meadow

Assessment

This has taken up more of our time than planned, but the pay-offs are high, and it is now apparent that this is a major means by which we can protect our environment. This area of work should be given a higher priority than it was originally. The main problems have been absentee landlords difficult to trace or to work with (some live in Asia!), and lack of interest of some resident owners of key sites that are becoming degraded.

4. Public awareness-raising

Achievements

- Popular newsletter to members 3-4 times a year
- Twice yearly newsletter in Prestwood parish magazine, delivered to all households in parish
- **Publication of our Action Plan in an attractive format**
- Notices of some of our field-trips in local press
- Publicity (mostly Bucks Examiner) for several of our projects
- Leaflets left in several key locations at different times

Needs

- Publicity drive to increase membership, especially in areas away from Prestwood
- **Recruit a member to take the lead in publicity matters**
- **Carry out garden wildlife survey to involve more local people**
- Funding for leaflets, posters and notice-boards
- Short articles in other local newsletters (eg other parishes) and the press
- **Develop the Link Road site as an educational project**

Assessment

Other pressing requirements have meant that this area of work has been relatively neglected. Fortunately we have a sufficiently large and willing membership not to have had to spend much effort on recruitment. These tasks, however, cannot be neglected for too much longer, as we lack members in many parts of our area.

5. Monitoring our local environment

Achievements

- **We are sufficiently well-known to receive information from members and non-members, alerting us to threats and opportunities**
- Extensive survey work continually increases our knowledge of the local area

Needs

None, other than continuing our current effort

Assessment

Without any proactive effort we have already become a local resource for people concerned about aspects of their environment, and we seem to be made aware of all important developments.

6. Liaison with local authorities

Achievements

- Regular contact with Chiltern District Council (Angling Spring Wood, Link Road field, tree officer)
- Regular contact with Wycombe District Council (Picnic Site, tree officer, official on our Council in personal capacity)
- Regular contact with County Council (records centre, tree warden scheme, roadside verge nature reserves, rights of way matters)
- Participation in consultation by Colne Catchment Area Management Strategy to try to safeguard the Misbourne flow
- We send copies of our newsletters to all the local district, county and parish councils to keep them in touch with what we are doing

Needs

None, except to maintain our current effort

Assessment

There is some awareness of our existence in each local authority, and we hope the quality and extent of our work is making a favourable impression. Officials are invariably helpful but constrained by work conditions, so that there is usually a mismatch between the urgency of various matters and the timing of a response.

7. Liaison with other conservation organisations

Achievements

- We are members of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- We are members of Wycombe Wildlife Group
- Regular contact with Chilterns Conservation Board (especially farming matters), Chiltern Society, Chiltern Woodlands Project, Prestwood Society, Great Missenden Society, National Trust (Hughenden) and Woodland Trust
- Involvement with Bucks Invertebrates Group, Bucks Fungus Group, and the national Conchological and Botanical Societies

Needs

None, other than maintaining our current level of contact

Assessment

We have good relations with relevant bodies and can obtain their support when needed.

8. Programme of activities

Achievements

- Meetings at least monthly, including a busy work programme through the winter
- **Good attendance at work parties**

Needs

- Invite outside experts in different subjects to lead field events

Assessment

We now have a Council member who coordinates our activities programme. There is much practical conservation work to carry out and it is gratifying that so many members turn out for what can be arduous tasks. Feedback on events is good.

9. Finance

Achievements

- We received funding from Great Missenden Parish Council, Chiltern District Council and Bucks County Council (through local councillors Mike Colston and Richard Pushman) to publish our Action Plan

- Member Fiona Grant obtained a grant from Three Valleys Water for pond-clearance equipment
- Survey of Hampden Bottom Farm for a fee

Needs

- **Recruit a member to take lead in fund-raising**
- **Register as a charity to access further funding opportunities**
- **Council should develop a systematic fund-raising plan**

Assessment

We are basically a low-cost operation, but certain activities cannot be progressed without funding, especially major restoration work.

10. Building expertise in PN

Achievements

- A variety of guides on conservation management of different habitats have been purchased or received
- Work with Hampden Bottom Farm has familiarised us with the complexities of the Environmental Stewardship scheme
- A member has taken training in woodland archaeology
- Two WATCH leaders have taken training in activities with children
- Three road verge wardens have been trained in risk assessment
- Four members have been trained in hedge surveying
- Participation in county tree warden scheme has increased the knowledge of several members

Needs

- Recruit members interested in being trained in various types of surveying
- Produce simple guides to certain species groups where more people could report observations
- Invite outside experts to help us in areas where we lack expertise
- Obtain more information on the legal and governmental aspects of conservation

Assessment

Our resources are too limited for any major training courses, but adequate progress has been made.

B. PONDS, RIVERS & WETLANDS

Achievements

- Restoration work carried out at four ponds in winter of 2004-5
- **Restoration of publicly visible ponds, often with dramatic improvements, has been appreciated by the public and helps give us a good image**
- Grant from Three Valleys Water for pond-clearance equipment

Needs

- **A systematic prioritised plan for pond restoration needs to be produced**
- **Funding for major pond restoration work needs to be sought**
- Continue pond restoration programme each winter
- Survey ponds not yet covered (outside Prestwood parish)
- Recruit members interested in being trained to survey ponds
- Provide public information about management of garden ponds
- Involvement in Bucks action plan for great crested newts
- Seek to establish Cockpit Hole as a Local Wildlife Site
- Support other bodies such as the Chiltern Society in reducing water abstraction from the Misbourne

Assessment

Pond restoration is a task where quick visible returns can be achieved, and it is important to continue with the good start made, but a systematic plan is needed to make effective use of a keen group of volunteers.

C. HEDGEROWS

Achievements

- **Hedges Action Group formed and carried out two field surveys of areas where high-scoring hedges are situated**
- Volunteers trained to survey hedges beyond previous survey of Prestwood parish, with the result that a half of our area has now been assessed

Needs

- Send report on surveyed hedges to the local District Councils and Records Centre in order to raise the issue of protection for ancient hedgerows
- Develop a plan, in due course, for connecting isolated hedgerows and habitats

Assessment

Good progress has been made. The Action Group is trying to involve owners of hedges that need better maintenance.

D. ORCHARDS

Achievements

- Survey of flora and wildlife carried out at Collings Hanger Farm orchard

Needs

- Find a site for a community orchard
- **Survey established orchards and find an owner interested in restoration**

Assessment

We have failed to find a site for a community orchard so far. Meanwhile time should be found if possible to conduct a survey of all existing orchards in the area.

E. HEATHLAND & ACID GRASSLAND

Achievements

- Survey of flora and wildlife of Widmere Field carried out

Needs

- Obtain cooperation of owners of land that needs positive management

Assessment

All sites where this now rare habitat more or less survives, or could be restored, are either in the hands of unknown or uninterested landowners. We have been unable to take any action. Two sites have been suggested for "open access", but this is still subject to consultation.

F. FARMLAND

Achievements

- **With the Prestwood Forum for Farming & the Countryside (PFFC) we have carried out a survey of conservation on local farms, to be published soon**
- The PFFC has proved to be a suitable group through which to forward PN's aims
- Public visits have been arranged, jointly with PFFC, to five local farms
- **The farm visits have attracted large numbers of people (30-50) and helped to advance understanding of farming among non-farming residents**
- **Environmental survey of 53 fields at Hampden Bottom Farm**
- Four local farmers are members of PN

Needs

- Seek to increase conservation measures on local farms in the light of the survey
- Continue the programme of farm visits
- **Monitor the changes resulting from Environmental Stewardship at Hampden Bottom Farm, if the application is successful**
- **Seek a grant to help with this monitoring**

Assessment

The existence of the PFFC has greatly facilitated our work by providing a ready channel of communication with farmers sympathetic to our aims. The new Environmental Stewardship scheme should provide major benefits.

G. MATURE TREES

Achievements

- **Five members have enrolled as Tree Wardens for the County Council scheme**
- We met with the Chiltern District tree officer to discuss mutual interests
- Further to the survey of all the larger trees in Prestwood parish, those on Hampden Bottom farm have now been measured (extending to Honor End)

Needs

- Liaise with landowners with ancient trees on their land to ensure their protection
- Inform Records Centre of the location of all ancient trees so that they are considered when there are planning applications
- **Occasional meetings of the tree wardens to coordinate efforts**
- Write to Tree Council, and other national bodies, about the limited effectiveness of TPOs and whether the scheme could be strengthened
- **Recruit another tree warden or two**
- Introduce a hedgerow tree tagging scheme

Assessment

The tree warden scheme appears to achieve little of itself and local tree officers' powers are very circumscribed, while TPOs are ineffective. At least we are receiving regular information on matters arboreal, and we have a core group with this knowledge to develop effective local policies in due course. Although consulted by members of the

public about a number of threatened trees, we have not been able to prevent any being felled. With insurance fears about falling trees and branches, and the difficulty in establishing whether or not a particular tree is "safe" or not, we may have to accept that trees near habitations will necessarily have a limited life and that veteran trees can only be preserved in the countryside.

H. WOODLAND

Achievements

- **Woodlands Action Group set up and held field meetings in ASW (with council officials) and Lodge Wood (with the three owners)**
- **Prevented proposed destruction of 100 mature trees in Angling Spring Wood**
- Formed a Friends of Angling Spring Wood group by contacting local residents and regular users of the wood
- Surveyed all users of ASW on a particular day
- **Surveyed the flora, wildlife and archaeology of ASW intensively over 2004 and put forward proposals for a conservation-based management plan to the Chiltern DC (owners of the wood)**
- Support given to owner of part of Lodge Wood to restore a pond
- Application submitted to Chiltern DC for a TPO to be placed on Peterley Wood to protect it in the event of its sale
- One member trained in woodland archaeology

Needs

- **Continue negotiations with CDC over management of ASW**
- Contact owners of Longfield Wood over protection of rare orchids etc
- Action Group to consider conservation needs of other woods
- Recruit another member to train in woodland archaeology and help with surveys
- Find a site for an experiment in the reintroduction of coppicing
- Seek involvement in county action plans for wood barley and wild service tree
- Produce an advice sheet for landowners on suitable native trees for planting and where to obtain them
- Enquire about the criteria for the Chilterns Woodland Award to see if it may be relevant in our area

Assessment

Because of immediate threats to the wood, ASW has taken up the great majority of our time in relation to woodlands, but it is a large wood with great wildlife potential and some rare species, so that it is worth the effort. Establishing the ownership of some of our key woodlands is proving difficult and limits what we can do. With the loss of financial profitability of many woods, one of the main uses now is for rearing game-birds, which causes serious degradation, but there seems little we can do to counteract this.

I. ROAD VERGES

Achievements

- **Six members enrolled as volunteer wardens for the county's new Roadside Verges Nature Reserve scheme (monitoring seven verges in our area)**
- Suggested additions to the scheme made to the County Council
- 6 out of the 7 verges have had a preliminary survey and all have been risk-assessed

Needs

- Systematic survey of verges in our area

Assessment

This had not been a priority area for action, but the opportunity of the new county scheme was not to be missed. A council-run scheme may, however, have its limitations and we should think also about other ways to protect verges that are often the last refuge of threatened plants and wildlife.

J. CHALK GRASSLAND

Achievements

- Regular volunteer work parties to help Wycombe Rangers manage the Picnic Site
- Survey of chalk slope on Denner Hill
- **New sites discovered at Hampden Bottom**

Needs

- **Work with farmer to protect and enhance the new sites at Hampden Bottom**
- Continue help with scrub clearance at Picnic Site
- Produce illustrated booklet on the history and natural history of the Picnic Site
- Keep an eye on developments on Denner Hill, where major changes in land ownership are occurring

Assessment

Once a characteristic habitat of the area, chalk grassland is rapidly disappearing. Several good sites are becoming severely degraded with scrub encroachment, but owners are not always willing to conserve them, despite offers of help.

K. PARKLAND

Achievements

- Advice on tree-planting at Prestwood Park to renew the ageing stock

Needs

- Survey other parklands in the area

Assessment

There are no current known threats to parkland in our area and our main task is to keep a background watch on these areas.

L. GEOLOGICAL SITES

Achievements

- The survey at Hampden Bottom Farm has revealed the importance for plants of the thin and elusive band of chalk-rock that runs through our area

Needs

- Carry out further research on chalk-rock sites
- Restore the exposure of chalk-rock at Stony Green with the cooperation of the owners

Assessment

This was not a priority area for action, but the restoration at Stony Green might provide a useful educational resource. There would be national scientific interest in research on the effects of the chalk-rock, which seems to have been overlooked.

M. URBAN HABITATS

Achievements

None

Needs

- **Survey of wildlife in gardens in 2006, involving local residents**

- Recruit a member to lead a community allotment project
- Develop Link Road field at centre of Great Missenden as an educational project
- **Obtain funding for the restoration of Link Road field**

Assessment

This was not a priority area for action, but the time seems to be ripe to start an initiative on wildlife gardening, as this could publicise our work, enable us to raise awareness of environmental issues, and recruit more members, quite apart from the benefits of having more wildlife-orientated gardens.

Conclusions

Satisfactory progress has been made in almost sections of the Action Plan, and in some much more has been achieved than had been anticipated. A few areas need more attention in 2006, especially in relation to ponds and funding. The main frustrations are not being able to interest owners of some important sites becoming degraded (although that has to be balanced against major achievements possible in cases where owners are working with us) and the slowness with which local authorities respond, compared to the speed with which threats to our environment are occurring. Even so, liaison with other landowners and public bodies is vital to our way of working and must continue.

Much land in the area is currently changing hands and this raises potential threats in the form of land-use changes that may be deleterious to the environment. We need to keep an eye on this. A period of change like this may also provide positive opportunities for intervention.

PN has been fortunate in having had a membership above the critical size from its inception. Membership has gradually increased, even without having to make any major publicity efforts, which would have taken time away from other vital work, although at some stage we should aim to double our membership by a concerted effort at recruitment. The membership is enthusiastic and participatory, so that we get good turn-outs for what might be seen as unattractive jobs like pond clearance. Members are quick to let us know if anything unusual is seen, whether a plant, a threat to a particular site, or an opportunity for positive action. This is an essential function in keeping the society vital. On top of this is a hard-working Council, most of whose members also take forward our main activities, beyond the running of the organisation.

While we have so far been able to achieve a lot without having to obtain funding, it is inevitable that we shall have to do so in the near future if certain projects are to be taken forward - eg the clearance of some of our larger ponds, and the restoration of the degraded land at Link Road.

While the point of having an Action Plan was to make us proactive and systematic in our work, it may be noticed from the above that much of our time has been devoted to unanticipated threats or opportunities. An eye needs to be kept on the balance between proactive and reactive tasks. We should not become entirely ruled by the outside weather, but unexpected opportunities are often the best way of realising action aims that have already been formulated. Certainly, some of the opportunities that have come along, more or less incidentally, have led to our greatest achievements in meeting our aims. What we do in response to these outside events must always be referred back to our action plan and its priorities to ensure that we do not lose our way, but we obviously have to be prepared to use opportunities when they arise and not be hide-bound by plans (which, after all, are prepared in ignorance of the future).

Tony Marshall

30/9/05