

PRESTWOOD NATURE ANNUAL REPORT November 2008

Community Orchard

One of the great moments of the past year was when we finally got agreement to site a new community orchard at Greenlands Lane allotments, thanks to Great Missenden Parish Council and the Stoke Mandeville and Other Parishes Charity. We obtained funding from the National Lottery "Awards For All" programme. The BBC filmed the warden George Lewis planting an inaugural tree donated by Bernwode Plants in the summer. The main planting was due to occur on 1st November. This will fulfil one of our long-term ambitions and one of members' top priorities at our first AGM in 2003. There will be open access at all times to the orchard, which will be used to ensure the preservation of endangered old varieties and increase public understanding of their importance. The project will be run by a sub-committee of local residents. Sponsorship of individual trees is being sought as a means of making the project self-sustaining.

Sheepwash

Restoration of the Sheepwash pond took up the largest amount of our efforts in the past year. We were successful in obtaining funding from the Chilterns Conservation Board, Great Missenden Parish Council, county council (Councillor Michael Colston's community budget), and private donations. Trees and scrub were cut down by GB Garden Services in December and Ian Waller excavated the 2-metre-deep mud in January. Large-scale planting in March led to good flower displays over the summer and use of the water by breeding frogs, newts and dragonflies. A fence and hedge were planted between the pond and the road. A notice-board made by Mark Pickard was erected to give public information about the project. John and Ann Priest kept a photographic record of progress. PN is monitoring the flora and fauna on a long-term basis. We are indebted to the many members and local residents who helped in many ways.

Great Missenden and Prestwood Revitalisation Group raised funds for a dipping platform which will be installed in the autumn with the help of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. Subsequent to this the access path will be laid down.

Other pond restoration

We did planting at Green Lane and took out excessive growth from Moat Lane Pond. In September we are due to work with the Chiltern Society Volunteers on Brickpits Pond.

Boug's Meadow

Further clearance of elder in the copse was undertaken. The planted trees are mostly surviving very well, but tall nettles with all the rain are a problem. While the nettles and cow parsley in the meadow area were got under some degree of control, docks have flourished with the rain. Knapweed is well established from earlier seeding, but further planting of catsear and birdsfoot trefoil was virtually wiped out by rabbits. Money is being sought for further management work and the re-establishment of hedgerows. The river ran for several months following the wet winter, with several water-plants returning after a long absence, but an obstruction on the north side is preventing a better flow and this will have to be excavated in a drier season.

Sprinters Wildlife Garden

Sue Devlin took the lead on this project. A plot was cleared, rotovated and volunteers started planting. Unfortunately, nettles came back too strongly and rabbits completed the devastation. Back to the drawing-board, we took professional advice and prepared a new plan that will take a more radical approach to the preparation of the area. If we can get funding for this in time, we should be able to start planting again next spring. As in Boug's Meadow, it is very difficult when working with a habitat already severely

degraded, so we learned there are no short cuts or easy options in such cases, and substantial resources are needed before we even begin restoration (as at Sheepwash).

Sue Devlin also wrote peat information sheets that are being stocked by local garden centres, stimulating the provision of more non-peat-based compost.

Angling Spring Wood

Taking out larch started with the oldest of the plantations to allow broad-leaved trees to get away. Chippings from the trees were used to surface paths that tend to get muddy. The main ride was widened in places to create a lighter and more varied structure. Volunteers completed the removal of one of the redundant rabbit-proof fences and started on the second, as well as taking out laurel. The main operations are managed by Chiltern Woodland Project and Chiltern District Council, so that this project does not take up a major part of our time. The national auditory trail through the wood has been well used. The above work will continue for several years. A bat survey proved a little disappointing and it is evident that we need to provide more opportunities for bats to roost and breed here, because of the lack of hollow or fissured trees.

Prestwood Picnic Site

Little work was done here this year and we are waiting for a new management plan from a newly-appointed officer with Wycombe Rangers. There is a need to provide a means of controlling scrub which does not depend entirely on volunteers, who are otherwise fighting a losing battle, and we must not lose what is probably our major wildlife site - where we just have discovered one of Britain's rarest flies to add to an already impressive list of plants and insects.

Holy Trinity Churchyard

We helped again with cutting back laurel scrub here. This remains one of our best local sites, with some plants and fungi that grow nowhere else in the area, as well as a colonies of slow-worms and bats. With recent changes in the defining criteria for Local Wildlife Sites we expect the churchyard to receive this county-level designation. The only problem was the loss of one of our unique plants, destroyed by an unknown person tending a grave, but a few outlying seedlings have been collected and we hope to reintroduce them in a safer place.

Longdown Bank

We started taking out colonising ash saplings from this isolated site which has the potential to become a major chalk grassland and scrub slope.

Deep Mill Ponds

This former BBOWT nature reserve belongs to the County Council. We are seeking to survey it in order to advise on future management, although the present policy of leaving it to develop as a wild area is probably right. We found all three newt species here in the spring.

Local Wildlife Site liaison

Tony Marshall has kept in close touch with the county's Wildlife Sites Officer and helped her survey several areas. One, Nanfan Wood, has now been made a LWS.

Road verges

The county council's proposed scheme for roadside verge nature reserves did not come to fruition, despite several of our members being trained as wardens. This is one of the few counties that lacks such a scheme. Thought will be given to developing our own local scheme in then coming year.

Heathland restoration

No possible site has yet been found for this project to restore a habitat which has just about become extinct in this area, despite it once being dominant all over the old commons. The closest approximation we have is Holy Trinity churchyard, which makes positive management of that area even more vital.

Butterfly transect

Chris Bartlett now runs this project with the same crew of volunteers. This has been probably an even worse year than last year - dispiriting for the butterfly-watchers but showing how important it is for us to monitor populations over the years.

Special butterfly surveys

Chris Bartlett and Tony Marshall have started a focussed search at likely sites for national Biodiversity Action Plan species in this area. While we did not find a breeding site for Purple Emperor, we did find previously unknown ones for White-letter Hairstreak and Small Blue, while Dingy Skipper was found at a new site. To protect the hairstreak we are trying to find the owners of the hedge in which it breeds.

Glow-worm survey

This continued, with Ian Taylor carrying out intensive experimental surveys at the Picnic Site to discover more about the nature of the population there. David and Lorna Clark have taken over the transect at Hampden Bottom Farm. Two new sites for glow-worms were found, but they are not easy to monitor.

Ladybird survey

A new initiative for 2008 - probably the worst year for ladybirds ever recorded! Nevertheless 3 volunteers were trained and given a free colour guide (printed by Jenny Smith). We shall hope this year's figures will provide a base-line for increases in future years: if not, we are in serious trouble. The only ladybird found this year with any frequency has been the recent invader, the Harlequin, but even that has lower numbers than last year. This may have been (as with the butterflies) a result of a wet summer after a poor breeding year in 2007 because of a similarly wet summer.

Bird surveys

So far John Obee is our only volunteer carrying out systematic surveys of selected woodlands - site-based surveys tend to be unusual for birders. The work has already revealed a population of one rarity, the marsh tit.

Garden wildlife survey

This survey was supplemented by a study of three allotments last year. The report on this was sent to Great Missenden Parish Council and Tony Marshall talked to them about it at one of their meetings. The survey was particularly important for finding that some endangered arable annual plants, now rare in farmland, survive at the allotments. It was planned to set up measures to help protect these plants, but there has not been time to take these forward since getting agreement, so this should be done next year. An article based on both surveys has been prepared for the magazine *British Wildlife*.

Pond monitoring

Systematic monitoring of local ponds was started with specially designed forms and the help of volunteer Mary Campling. Several new sites were found for great crested newt, palmate newt and common toad. This monitoring will provide a sound basis for selecting future ponds for management.

Old tree recording

A number of trees were added to our records by George Lewis and Tony Marshall, especially covering those in Abbey Park, Great Missenden. It is intended to put more effort into this again in future years. Ian Taylor has been working with the Special Trees Project at the Chilterns Conservation Board.

Hedge surveys

No further hedges were surveyed this year, although we have completed three-quarters of our area. This is another project that needs a further injection of effort and resources in the coming year.

Old plant records

Tony Marshall has started working through sites where rare plants were recorded in the 1980s to see how many have survived and ensure we know the sites that need protection. David and Lorna Clark and Val Marshall have helped with this work, which has already produced a lot of good new records.

Monitoring of corky-fruited water-dropwort

In conjunction with the Bucks Rare Plant Group, regular monitoring of our colony of this plant (the only one in the county) was begun this year, with a report on the history and present characteristics of the plant.

Japanese knotweed monitoring

No volunteers offered themselves for this project (which several members have pressed for). We have a list of known sites and need volunteers to see whether or not they are expanding from year to year.

General species recording

Tony Marshall continues to receive regular sightings from members, which are very useful for increasing our knowledge of the ecology of our area, supplemented by the results of special surveys that are undertaken. 12,300 records have now been computerised into a database that makes searching easy and there are still many more to enter. There is also a database of the 3,400 different species recorded in the area and their distributions.

WATCH events

Events for families with young children have become more regular in the last year, thanks to major efforts by Lesley Stoner and Gaye Pickard. These are very popular and are an important way of reaching people (adults as well as children) who might not otherwise recognise the interesting environment in which we live and the importance of preserving it. This aspect of our work should perhaps receive a higher profile in future.

Events for members

We have gradually reduced the number of pre-planned events, such as walks and visits, as attendances have often been disappointing. We now concentrate on a smaller number of such events that are more popular.

Conservation work-parties

On the other hand, the work-parties continue to get decent support and this programme continues to expand. We are seeking other helpers outside our membership as the number of projects increases - for instance, this year we had the help of our first Duke of Edinburgh Award candidate for his community-service component and we have made use of a number of college students and recent graduates from ecology courses.

Woodland archaeology

Recent weather has not been kind! Ian Taylor has continued to carry out some work.

Publicity/community links

The start of a community-run local newspaper *The Source* for the HP16 district, supported by PN, has provided an excellent way of getting environmental messages through to (potentially) the whole population in most of our area, with a regular environment page in each issue. This led to the discovery of a second site for stag-beetles and of the last-known surviving example of a Nimble Dick cherry. Deliveries by PN volunteers in Prestwood also earn money for PN. This newspaper has solved one of the main problems we had in communicating to the general public. Although notice of our events appears in some of the local commercial papers, we found it difficult to get longer articles of the kind we sought.

Hampden Bottom Farm

We keep in regular touch with developments in this farm which is under Environmental Stewardship (Higher Level) and a flagship for LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) - not difficult when the farmer Ian Waller is a member of PN Council. We help out with his Open Days - this year Peter Daltry volunteered to sit in a field all day and show visitors interesting creatures.

Wren Davis Farm

We also have regular liaison with this farm, whose manager Virginia Deradour is a PN member (and butterfly transect walker), so that we are able to keep up with wildlife developments here as well as at Hampden Bottom (between the two the farms cover a large proportion of our area). Virginia also supplies a delicious annual organic turkey from her farm for our Annual Meetings, a gift that is enthusiastically welcomed by those attending! One of their fields (Meadsgarden) is developing an increasingly valuable flora under management connected to Countryside Stewardship, and the farm includes 3 Local Wildlife Sites and other important habitats, not least the old orchard.

Haypole

This botanically-rich old hay meadow is being kept under review. Winter grazing was reintroduced at our advice. There is no further scope for intervention at the moment.

Longfield Wood

This is another site that we keep under review. George Lewis and Peter Daltry, who live by the wood, regularly add to our knowledge of its flora and fauna. It is one of the best ancient woods in our area, but future ownership is uncertain.

Churchyards

Apart from the parish church of Prestwood (above) we also keep other churchyards in the area under review. Those at Great Hampden and Great Missenden may also be potential LWSs. This year George Lewis and I assisted with monitoring orchids on the cemetery in Great Missenden (unusually owned by the District Council) and are advising on their conservation.

Membership

We now have 85 memberships for 149 adults and 22 children. This compares favourably with last year (75 memberships for 128 adults and 23 children). 3 of these memberships have come from an advert placed in *The Source*, and a large number from our presence at the Spirit of Prestwood fête. Members have also joined in response to PN's work in the community. PN Council has met seven times since the last AGM.