

Oxford Urban Wildlife Group (OUWG) Chair's Report September 2021

This is a one year report following last year's Sept AGM on line. I am delighted we are in Boundary Brook Nature Reserve for our AGM today and part of Oxford Open Doors weekend. Being here you can enjoy the atmosphere, the smells and sounds of nature and relax in this beautiful wildlife space in the heart of the city. All this conveys, more than words, our achievements here in our 32nd year maintaining Boundary Brook's habitats for the benefit of wildlife and local people.

This year OUWG has flourished, during Covid 19 guidelines we have been able to respond locally to ensure improved public access to nature on the doorstep at a time when its been vital. Visitors have been keen to tell us how much they've valued and enjoyed visits to Boundary Brook. We have secured funding to improve habitats and offered safe volunteering and training opportunities in conservation work and surveying which have increased public involvement in this valuable wildlife site. Our core group has grown to include fundraising and comms expertise, and membership has more than doubled from 120 to 260 active memberships. More volunteers came to help with work on site and more local groups and partners have visited. We've continued work with Wild Oxford and other wildlife groups responding to the need to create wildlife corridors in the city and strengthen the network of urban wildlife habitats, Oxford's natural heritage, so access to nature can continue to have far reaching public benefit.

I'll outline 9 key areas of OUWG growth in governance, public engagement, partner and operational work last year, some future challenges and say some thankyou's.

1 Lease OUWG have worked with Oxford City Council, stakeholders and local councillors and secured a new 10 year lease of BB. This will help secure the long term future of BB and connecting guardianship of nature with local people and visitors.

2 OUWG's 5 year management plan 2021 – 26 is published, detailing our vision for BB, OUWG governance, policies and procedures and public engagement offer. We intend to ensure long term establishment of the widest possible range of habitats for wildlife to flourish on this 3 acre site and for local community to be at the heart of work here and learn new conservation skills, so intimate connection with local land can help people flourish and find sustainable balance with nature in the city, offering hope for future generations.

3 Delivery of 2020/2021 Work Plan

This covers BB's 'mosaic' of three basic habitats expected on marshland such as this.

- One third rough grassland, characteristic of the early days, cut on rotation every 1 – 3 years with emphasis on increasing meadow wildflower biodiversity.
- one third coppice woodland, and scrub, including hawthorn, blackthorn and bramble, balancing use of hazel and ash poles with wildlife habitat creation.
- A third mature woodland and enhancing biodiversity of woodland ground flora.

BB also has freshwater habitats, three ponds a marsh and 2 reed bed scrapes and buffer zones between the nature reserve and the neighbouring allotments, being maintained and improved. Work is undertaken by volunteers on our regular Thursday morning and weekend work parties and training course opportunities.

This years work plan, the first year of the 5 year Management Plan, has been supported by Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment TOE who have funded our Ponds, Glades and Woodlands Project to increase much-needed grassland habitat, enrich woodland, improve freshwater marginal habitats and increase site safety and security. Work done includes:

- Sowing significant new grass and wildflower areas, creating larger rides and grassland corridor, benefiting insects, birds, slowworms and other wildlife .
- Planting trees and native hedges and introducing a diversity of woodland ground flora and nursing woodland plugs.
- Reprofilling the kidney pond, removing the old unstable bridge, to create new marginal wetland plant slopes and a living willow fence.
- Adding pond dipping steps and increased access for pond dipping and nature study in the large water table pond.
- Removing rubbish and laying down a fully accessible weather proof path.
- Upgrading our tools and equipment on site, sheds and visitor centre.
- improved access to Boundary Brook with a new key pad lock.

The very wonderful care from local people is what helps our peaceful wildlife oasis to flourish here. We cannot do this without you. Thankyou to everyone who has helped this year planting trees and woodland plugs, raking, sowing or rolling grass meadows, protecting coppice stools, digging out bramble roots, clearing blackthorn or reprofilling freshwater margins. And a big thankyou to the Good Gym, a regular group on site this year, who combine exercise with outdoor practical work. This autumn we will offer scything training for volunteers who'd like to help with our grassland maintenance. We are keen to encourage more local people and groups to join us so do join us, learn new skills and become intimately involved in the seasonal maintenance of the wildlife habitats here at BB.

4 Slow worm translocation project

BSG Ecology who oversee this at Boundary Brook have ensured significant work on the buffer zones with East Ward Allotments, this year clearing bramble to establish a tussock grass mix of benefit to the slow worms. We have followed up this work with hedgelaying of the boundary hedge leaving just a few remaining areas of boundary hedge to be laid next year as part of traditional hedgelaying training for volunteers.

5 Species surveys

Species surveys are a key detail of the Management plan and vital in monitoring the impact of our ongoing habitat work. Dragonflies have been in abundance this year with Common Darters, Emperors, Southern Hawkers, Full bodied chasers and emerald damselflies enjoying the improvements on the ponds which we hope is just the beginning of a future flourishing that will inspire generations of visitors. We invited county species surveyors to contribute to our seasonal species surveys this year. They have written features for our seasonal newsletters and run species ID training on site which have been very popular with members and local groups. We are extremely grateful to Camilla Lambrick of ANHSO, Sam Faggatter, a Bat Society member, Ellie Mayhew from Freshwater Habitats, Stephen Burch the county dragonfly recorder, BSG Ecology as mentioned previously for slow worms, Butterfly conservation, Pat Mansfield and Clemency Bathurst, Steve Woolliams for Brown hairstreak butterfly egg counts, Oxford Brookes MSc students for small mammal surveys and Phil Dines and Nick Boyd for their bird species expertise. Next year Oxford Natural History Museum hope to help with insect surveys and Larkrise Primary school will build a bug hotel and nurse new meadow wildflowers. Eager responses from enthusiastic members offering future regular survey help eg bats, ensure we can understand the long term impact of establishing a dynamic habitat balance.

6 Key Partnerships

For OUWG partnership work is essential, for exchanging knowledge, skills and resources for the future of human connection to the place and cooperation for wildlife interest. We have

been working with a range of groups and organisations which include:

- BBOWT we hope to develop some volunteer leadership training with.
- Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham who share OUWG's vision for the recovery of nature in community spaces.
- BSG Ecology who run the BB slow worm project
- EWAA and Childrens Allotment, our site neighbours with whom we share wild life, habitat, site safety and security, and supply with pea sticks and bean poles.
- Larkrise Primary School who use our Forest School site daily. We have a vital opportunity to enrich their nature study curriculum for the benefit of children, staff and families, and include them in work on site and a wildlife corridor.
- Freshwater Habitats Trust with whom BB is a nursery site for the Ex Situ Saving Rare Wetland Plants Project.
- Oxford Brookes whose Environmental Consultancy MSC students offer a Consultancy Module at BB, this year 'Creation of wildlife safe havens' for protecting wildlife space from the increased human footfall on site as numbers of members increase. Next year will be a 'Wet woodland creation scheme'.
- Oxford Hub Young Trustees Scheme offer a young trustee placement with us.
- Our funders Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment.
- Earthwatch Naturehood Programme.
- Local councillors help us ensure we are connecting with current needs of local communities for wildlife awareness, outdoor and green spaces.
- Friends of Lye Valley and their local expert wetland expertise.
- Butterfly Conservation advise on surveying and grassland maintenance.
- OCC who lease BB to OUWG.
- Nature Escape. Community Action Group and the Collaborate Trees Group.
- Wild Oxford and Wild Oxfordshire
- Ecotherapy Oxford offer mindfulness, art in nature and ecotherapy provision.

7 Local Community Groups who have visited this year include

- EMBS college – groups overseas students, refugees, learning English
- Alloyed Engineering Company- held their team away day here, their whole staff team met in person for the first time in 18 months, and generously donated £350.
- 2nd Oxford Scouts and Woodcraft Folk.
- Florence Park Players Sleeping Beauty production was filmed here last year.
- Pegasus Theatre, local herbalists, art therapists and others have met here.
- The Appletree group of members meet for mindfulness with young toddlers in nature and appreciate the gentle wildness of the site.

We appreciate donations made by groups and uptake of membership following their visits.

8 Public Engagement

Another thread of our public engagement is our creativity in nature offer. This has a focus on looking at nature with new eyes, bringing people closer to flora and fauna, sharing different cultural perspectives and language in learning about nature, ecology and wellbeing. The popular Art in Nature sessions, ran for their second summer, the art outcome is the art in nature trail you can enjoy today. We would like to offer wild words poetry sessions for young people, do let us know if you'd be interested. Mindfulness in Nature sessions began this year. Participants have noticed the smells and colours of flowers, the stillness of the rock garden and pond, the sounds of birds in the wildlife garden here, a place you are welcome to sit any time. Through enjoying the peace of a secret wild garden right in the midst of the city

perhaps you will be inspired to plant your own gardens for wildlife.

9 Membership

Having more than doubled our numbers to 260 we've been opening up more dialogue with membership, in order to share developments, consult for ideas and keep members up to date with opportunities. We value including members in decision making and try to respond to suggestions. Our communications include seasonal newsletters, website, regular notices to members and our social media accounts. We try to keep these up to date, informative and inspiring with features about Boundary Brook wildlife habitats, and other nature interest pieces, such as planting a wildflower meadow or a native hedge. Members have become more involved, sharing stories and photos with us. Membership is open to all and we strive to reach everyone regardless of age, race, class, culture, background and ability so they may feel there is something here for them, to enrich peoples lives and build nature awareness. The last couple of years have shown this to be vital through times of lockdown and isolation.

With increased membership and footfall we are looking at ways of bringing wildlife focus to visitors on site. As well as the Art in Nature Trail we are developing other wildlife trails, activities sheets, information booklets, and new habitat signage to inspire and help visitors understand the needs and secrets of wildlife in the city.

The group's future challenges are:

- Delivery of Year 2 of our 5year Management Plan
- Deepening partnership projects
- Further increase public access, ensuring safety for wildlife and people.
- Expand the group's community reach and diversity.
- Publish the Management Plan on our website-
- Apply for Green Flag Community Award now we have a 10 year lease.
- Develop our fundraising strategy
- Change governance structure to Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO).
- Consider changing the name to Boundary Brook Nature Reserve
- 'Being in Nature' nurture project for families/ YP with Donnington Doorstep.
- 'Ecology of Trees' art project with Cheney School and 2ndry age children.
- Present our surveying activities at the TVERC conference
- Build our corporate offer bringing green awareness to staff team away days.
- Build a city nature recovery network with other Reserves and groups to grow support and expertise in wildlife concern in local and regional green spaces.

In Summary This has been a busy, productive year for OUWG and we hope you will continue to help us flourish in our commitment to maintain the wildlife interest of Boundary Brook and our urban green spaces for enjoyment by all.

None of this would have been possible without the support of many people, including: □ East Ward Allotments □ Oxford City Council □ Lubna Arshad Portfolio holder for Parks and Green Spaces ● BBOWT● Lucy Pegg Green Party Councillor □ Larkrise Primary School ● Our trustees and members, Jon for work as Treasurer, D'Aundre as secretary, many thanks to Pete and Pat for hard work and expertise, Phil for work on the website and newsletters, Sharon for a skill audit and help with the Management Plan, Karen for mowing the paths and managing our membership system, James for including Naturehood, Jo for fundraising expertise and Nadia for artistic vision. All volunteers and members this year especially Richard Newton and Chris Cowley, and the hard work and vision of previous members, especially Janet Keene who co-founded the group and BBNP 32 years ago.