

Oxford Urban Wildlife Group (OUWG) Chair's Report 8th June 2024

This is the end of my 4th year as Chair and it's been a busy and engaging year. Each year I discover more history and dedication of this amazing group which was formed by local nature enthusiasts 35 years ago, and this year is no exception. Our founder member Janet Keene and her husband both sadly passed away this last year, but thanks to their dedication and that of their family we have a rich archive of newsletters and details of their work especially Janet over the years. We are delighted the family are making a memorial bench which will fit beautifully by the pond in the wildlife garden and sorry for their loss.

Alongside this year's losses, there have been many gains. We have over 340 members, our highest ever, with many visitors and families enjoying the site, OUWG membership is open to all. A high proportion of our membership are families with young children which fits very much with our aim to connect the next generation, especially as young people, with nature. I love coming into the site and seeing tiny babies, toddlers and children of all ages with parents and caregivers enjoying the incredible regulation that nature gives us. There are many local groups of people all ages and backgrounds benefiting from visiting, helping us with work on site, having vital access to nature and making new friends. This year these include The Good Gym Oxford, BSG Ecology, Oxford International College, OUNCS, Forest School Leaders training, Oxford Brookes University Environmental Consultancy Students, Ruskin College Wildlife Gardening Group, Woodcraft Folk Groups, Name IT Asian Young Womens Project, Donnington Doorstep Family Centre, Flos Nursery and The Childrens Allotment, Greyfriars School and of course Larkrise Primary School, our neighbours who are here daily for Forest School with Jane Millin their Forest School lead, but also come as nurture groups and helps us with conservation work on site. This group were some of the stars of our recent appearance on National TV on BBC Countryfile's Wild Britain where I was asked to build a pond in a tub with some of the children and talk about the vital importance of ponds and clean water for wildlife. Nick Boyd our bird surveyor also featured talking about the ecological significance of the site for butterflies and birds. This was seen by thousands of people and all the feedback we had seems to show this gave a vital message about the importance and value of small locally managed wild spaces where wildlife can thrive in the city, these are the projects that last.

Our surveys show increasing diversity in flora and fauna, new species of damselfly to the site last year, the green emerald and more sightings of the brown hairstreak butterfly and well as increasing numbers of slow worms, alongside redwings, siskins, greenfinches, bullfinches and black caps in the bird world. Our bird walks are a legend whether daytime or dusk Nick takes people into the world of birds, and this year we have been delighted to have Vicky lead invertebrate walks taking us into an

equally fantastic world of insects, with sounds barely audible to humans and so many species. We have also surveyed and run events to study slow worms, bats, butterflies and dragonflies, small mammal, moths, flowers, grasses, mosses, trees and freshwater species on site. Guided walks on site help members connect with habitats or enjoy feeling immersed in wildness even in the midst of the city. We hope the public begin to recognise how the reserve differs from a city park or garden and our different approach placing wildlife at the centre of human endeavour rather than taking from or using nature. Something we need to understand for the future.

All our survey data goes to TVERC and the gathering of significant species records. We have been involved in recent consultations for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy Plans being drawn up and contributed to Oxford City Council's work on ecological plans. I spoke on a panel discussions with local MP Anneliese Dodds for Hope for the Future and their public consultation document The Peoples Plan for Nature, and we several other community events, linking with other environmental groups. CAG Oxfordshire funded our Case Study written with Clare Ferguson in order to share our ecological practice.

We are an entirely volunteer led local community group, we have no one in a paid role and are committed to created new systems of exchange. All our events are free to OUWG members. We hope to stay in balance of letting nature inform us of its needs rather than taking from nature. Regular thursday mornings and some weekend day work parties offer local people chances to learn conservation skills and contribute to caring for the site. (Bramble/ invasive perennial removal Building woodpiles and hibernaculum, Coppicing, grassland and meadow maintenance, wildlife gardening) This year we offered another scything course with Nicole Clough and hedgelaying training with Clive Leeke. Jon Willis offers bird box building courses with his group of Men in Sheds and I ran a willow weaving course with Stig, Hamish offered coppicing training and hazel hurdle weaving.

Volunteer hours

Volunteering Hours 1320 volunteer hours in conservation work

120 volunteer hours in OUWG meetings, committee/ site

658 volunteer hours in training in conservation work

367 volunteer hours in species surveying and species ID

246 participant hours in wellbeing in nature activities,

Young peoples groups

Placement Hours 56 Duke of Edinburgh volunteering hours 45 Conservation student placement hours

Work place volunteering, Young People's and Education Groups Forest School visits by Larkrise Primary School all day, term time,

Now in year 3 of our 5 year management plan we have made significant changes habitats continuing to aim to balance the mosaic of one third grassland, one third woodland and one third brash. We have enhanced woodland ground flora, thinned the tree canopy, established hazel coppice management, improved areas of brash, reduced encroachment on the grassland of self set willow and invasive perennials. This has enhanced light conditions not only on the grassland but also the quality of our wildlife garden and the freshwater habitats on site, 3 ponds and marsh. Our focus is now on improving the diversity of the grassland, sowing and planting grassland plugs and extending the rides across the site. Increasing the range and diversity of nectar sources and food plants for invertebrates and other species is behind our vision for our new Grassland Enhancement and Living Libraries Programme which will help people identify and connect with grassland flora in raised beds and then feel able to identify them in situ around the site. We are delighted to be working again with Trust for Oxfordshires Environment who are funders for this project this year.

Public Engagement programme includes engaging with local communities and groups in new ways. As well as art and singing in nature and mindfulness, we now offer nature connection through movement in our range of wellbeing events. We are working with the Oxfordshire Social Prescribing Research Network to help with understanding wellbeing effects of nature, and help other groups in developing educational and wellbeing resources for all communities. I spent a day in Museum of Natural History creating a pond for families to learn about freshwater species.

Thankyou to everyone I have mentioned and everyone who has helped at BB this year, visiting the site, sending in wildlife photos, running sessions, helping with conservation work, surveys, training and on the committee. We cannot do this without you, the heart of our success lies in the very wonderful care from local people that helps the peaceful wildlife oasis to flourish here. Thankyou to our regular volunteers Nettie, Julian, Timothy, Thomas, Richard and Chris. Thanks to our comms team for newsletters, website and email updates, especially Karen Salter, Megan Harcourt, Megan Warren and Elaine Townson. Social media posts have inspired and encouraged people to find us and share with us. Thankyou to EWAA and Larkrise School both our neighbours who we continue to have good collaborative relationships, OCC our landlords and the ODS team. Thankyou to Jon Willis for his steady keen work as treasurer, Kat Burjstedt for her help and ideas, Hannah Bironzo our secretary. Founder member Pat Mansfield for her wonderful sightings, Jane Millin for all her Forest School work, Pete Byfield for his work in the woodland who has resigned from the group this year and we wish him well. Thankyou to Janet Keene who founded the group 33 years ago, without whom the site would not exist as it does now.
