

Abbey Road Conservation Volunteers.

Progress Report for April- June 2023

General

We continue to gently manage the site with the intent of maintaining and improving the various habitats, guided by a Management Plan and our Advisory Group.

Cetti's Warblers were heard and seen near the stream throughout this period. They are small migrant birds with an explosive, distinct song, They like dense scrub near water. Colin, our bird recorder, happened to throw out a comment that "of course the habitat is also suitable for Nightingales too, so keep your fingers crossed"

Then just a few days later at the end of April we heard a male **Nightingale** singing in the scrub. These little migrant birds are in serious decline and are now only found in low numbers in the South East. It was still singing in early June. So hopefully it has stayed to breed. Several residents told us that they had heard it too, being especially loud into the evening when the other birds stop singing.

This really is a significant bird to have on our patch. Let's hope it becomes a regular visitor.

Other wildlife spotted were good numbers of Tortoiseshell and Peacock butterflies, 4 species of Bat, a Lizard and many Demoiselle Damselflies near the stream.

Pond.

At the end of March, the pond was still 90% full. But the prolonged dry spell in April and May meant that it was completely dry by the end of May. Last year the pond was dry by the end of April. So, it gave an extra few weeks for the frog tadpoles to develop. But regular visits by Mallard Ducks, Grey Heron and Little Egret probably reduced the numbers considerably. We had a thunderstorm a few weeks ago with torrential rain. This filled the pond up again overnight.

As suggested by our Advisory Group (and with up to £250 funding agreed by the SPC Comms Cttee) we hope to level out the banks of clay removed in Sept 2021, to allow the pond to spread further when full, and to take out another 6" depth in the middle of the pond this September. The aim is to turn the "Winter Pond" into an Autumn/Winter/Spring Pond, with it only drying out during the summer months. This will give the maximum possible chance for the aquatic life to complete their life cycles.

Trees

So far, we have planted 6 Silver Birch, 5 Alder, and 6 Black Poplar trees.

We have also added 10 Alder Buckthorn and 30 Hawthorn to provide nectar and shelter for insects/butterflies. We have been watering the newly planted trees during the recent dry spell. With one casualty, (see Grass Cutting later), they are all thriving.

Meadow

After consulting with the Advisory Group, it was decided to only 'cut and remove' the meadow grass once a year in early Spring, rather than twice a year with a second cut in the Autumn. But because of the exceptionally wet Spring this year, we had to cancel this first cut, and hope to now cut in the Autumn.

This has led to a much thicker grass growth than we had planned, with the result that only very vigorous plants such as Meadow Sweet and Hoary Ragwort can compete with it.

So, we will now concentrate on introducing plants that can cope with competition from grasses. Purple Loosestrife, Meadowsweet, Water Mint, Yellow Iris and Water Mint already grow on this and other parts of site, and try to introduce more of these and other plants to the grass meadow.

Richard Black (Wilder Horsham Landscape Advisor) has suggested these as possible further additions:- Marsh Marigold, Common (Black) Knapweed, Hemp Agrimony Marsh Marigold, Marsh Woundwort, Sneezewort, Square-stalked St. John's Wort, Water Avens and Wild Angelica.

Orchard

Steyning Community Orchard has planted 6 fruit trees here over the last 2 years, located on the southern part of the site, adjacent to Gatewick House grounds. They are all sponsored by local people.

Grass Cutting

We have had many issues this year with the grass cutting in this area.

1. The first cut in the Orchard area happened much later than we'd hoped, but was accompanied by strimming around all the new trees. This damaged many of the tree guards, strimmed off the wildflowers we had planted around the trees and caused minor damage to the trees themselves

2. The second cut repeated exactly the same damage as before. We have asked for compensation to replace the 6 damaged tree guards. (These were paid for by Steyning Community Orchard)

3. On 22nd June further damage was caused to 9 of the tree guards on the 'wild' side of Abbey Rd. One plant was ring-barked, so will now die. We have asked for further compensation for this damage.

We are now considering putting additional protection around all of our trees, as we cannot guarantee that similar damage will not be repeated in future.

We have planted a new wildlife hedge/scrub area with Hawthorn along the boundary with Gatewick, underplanted with wild flowers. This is behind an obvious cane and string demarcation line, so is hopefully safe from strimmers!

Roadside Hedge

The hedging plants that Steyning For Trees planted a few years ago continue to struggle to establish. A combination of the Covid restrictions, extreme weather and the vigorous growth of the adjoining meadow (as described earlier) has seriously affected the establishment of many of the plants.

We reviewed the hedge with the Clerk earlier this Spring (when the plants could still be seen).

A proposal is that during the Autumn we look at opening up view points across the meadow where the hedge is at its thinnest, using those plants that can be transplanted, but also adding many more Hawthorn to the mix. Hawthorn has been shown to be very resilient to drought and can be clipped and trimmed to a dense hedge in just a few years, (Our experience is from the west boundary of Rublees Allotments, bordering the track. We planted it in 2017, and it is now a thick healthy hedge comprised mostly of Hawthorn).

This proposal would also address concerns expressed to us by some residents, who have stopped to chat to us during our monthly work parties, about the hedge closing off the view across the meadow.

Working Parties/Volunteers

We held 3 working parties in this period with 12 volunteers actively involved.

We currently have over 20 people on our volunteers' list with a further 3 helping with botany and bird surveys.

Some of our recently recruited volunteers live very close to the site, in Abbey Rd, Church Mead, Cannons Way and Mimmack Close. This is very useful for us as they talk to neighbours and help to explain what we are doing on site. They also feedback residents' comments and suggestions. So far, their reaction is overwhelmingly positive.

Roger Brown.

Abbey Rd Conservation Volunteer Coordinator. June 27th 2023.