

Abbey Road Conservation Volunteers.

Progress Report for July 2023 to October 2023.

General

We continue to gently manage the site with the intent of maintaining and improving the various habitats and improving biodiversity, guided by a Management Plan and our Advisory Group. A key member of this group, Dr Tony Whitbread, visited the site in August and gave us lots of helpful advice.

Pond.

For various reasons it has not been possible to schedule the pond work due this September. We will hope to try again next year.

The pond has been completely dry from the end of May until very recently. This is the longest dry period that we have recorded in the last 3 years. But following recent heavy rains, the pond is now completely full again. We have been trying to determine where the huge volumes of water come from to flood the site so quickly.

Trees

All the trees we have planted in recent years are doing well. These comprise 6 Silver Birch, 5 Alder, and 6 Black Poplar trees. The shrubs we added this year are also thriving; 10 Alder Buckthorn and 30 Hawthorn, to provide nectar and shelter for insects/butterflies. One of our recent new local volunteers, Dylan Lewis, is a recently retired Arboriculturist. He is currently writing a Tree and Scrub Management plan for the site. We will present this for the Communities Committee review soon.

Meadow

The proposed early Spring 'cut and remove' didn't happen because the ground was too wet for the tractor and cutter to access the field. By the time it had dried out, it was too late to cut due to the damage it would have caused to the vegetation.

The Autumn cut was carried out on September 7th, to half the meadow rather than all of it, as suggested by Tony Whitbread. This didn't quite go to plan, as a lot of the grass was flattened and not uncut, and much of the cut grass was left on the ground. Apparently, the machine malfunctioned! The point of cut and collect is to remove growth to gradually reduce the soil fertility to weaken the dominant grasses and allow other flowering plants to establish. Another new volunteer, Simon Knowles, spent many hours raking this loose grass off the meadow.

Pathways

Over the last 2 years we have noted where visitors like to walk across the site and we have reflected this use by adding a couple of new paths that we now keep cut; one to provide access across the meadow from the bench and another at the eastern end of the pond. We then closed off a path between the pond and a large block of scrub to provide wildlife a chance to move between these habitats uninterrupted. This path also became very muddy and waterlogged every winter, so there was a safety issue here too. After a few issues with people scattering the brash we put across the path to close it off, this has now stopped, and the path is growing over.

Wildlife

As well as the Cetti's Warblers and Nightingale that we heard in the last quarter, there have now been 42 bird species recorded here.

Good numbers of butterflies were recorded again during the summer, and lots of grasshoppers and spiders in the long grass. A large population of Wasp Spiders was found during Tony's visit. We'd not recorded this here before, and learnt that its main food is grasshoppers. It typically occurs in unmanaged rough grassland, often where damp or wet in winter. Cutting grassland, even during the autumn, winter or spring, will adversely affect the survival of the spider. This was one of the reasons we chose to cut only half the meadow this year.

Although we didn't carry out any Botany surveys this year, we did add a couple of new wildflower species to our list. We now have 96 species on that list plus another 31 tree and shrub species. That is a remarkable number given the size of the site.

The [UK Biodiversity Action Plan \(UKBAP\)](#) lists species that have been designated to be of "principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity" and are those that are 'most threatened, in greatest decline, or where the UK holds a significant proportion of the world's total population'

From this list, we have seen the following 11 animal species at Abbey Rd in the last 2 years.

- Small tortoiseshell butterfly (*Aglais urticaria*)
- Common nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*)
- House sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)
- Common starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
- Song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)
- European herring gull (*Larus argentatus*)
- Slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*)
- Noctule bat. (*Nyctalus noctula*)
- Soprano pipstrelle bat. (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*)
- Common lizard. (*Zootoca vivipara*)
- Common toad. (*Bufo bufo*)

Other UKBAP species that we might one day hope to see here include;-

Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) Several strong populations around Steyning. Lots of slugs and snails for them eat here, but much of the site may be too wet for them.

Brown Trout (*Salmo trutta*) Seen in the Tanyard stream upstream, but not within the Abbey Rd stretch as yet.

Stag Beetle. (*Lucanus cervus*) Locally common in Steyning, so might expect to see them here.

Brown Hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*) The Steyning Downland Scheme is a stronghold for this rare butterfly, where an area of blackthorn is managed specifically for it. We have lots of blackthorn -so we might see it one day.

Working Parties/Volunteers.

We held 4 working parties in this period on the third Saturday each month, plus several ad hoc sessions to deal with particular jobs. with 11 volunteers actively involved. We currently have over 20 people on our volunteers' list.

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 can talk to neighbours and help to explain what we are doing on site.

We are now asking our volunteers to log and report all comments that they receive from residents/users of the site. This will help flag up any issues that might need a response, or a change to our management plan..

So far, their reaction to our management of the site is overwhelmingly positive.

Roger Brown.

Abbey Rd Conservation Volunteer Coordinator. 31st Oct 2023.