

Friends of Aston's Eyot 1st Annual Report 2010-2011

Summary

We have had a busy and useful year since our formal establishment on 27 September 2010, with a brief (in our constitution) to:

- To protect, care for, and manage or assist in the management of Aston's Eyot for wildlife and as a wild area.
- To promote continuing open access to the public for quiet enjoyment of the area.
- To maintain and where necessary restore the variety of wildlife habitats including woodland, scrub, grassland, orchards, river banks and aquatic habitats.
- To survey and record species of fauna and flora present, reporting on the results of surveys where appropriate.
- To involve the wider public in activities such as working parties, wildlife events and other appropriate events.

In brief during the year we have:

- Created an attractive and informative website: <http://77.104.149.212/~frien444>
- Planted about 150 trees, mostly species poorly represented or missing
- Started controlling the invasive knotweed, testing repeated cutting against weedkiller (Roundup)
- Mown and sown an area near Jackdaw Lane to bring back some flower-rich grassland
- Held a dawn chorus morning, public ditch-dipping day, and a moth & bat night for education and discovering what's there, in addition to regular wildlife recording
- Organised a massive clear-up of the rubbish left by years of rough sleepers
- Kept the minor paths open, especially along the river (the main paths are mown by the City Council)
- By liaising with Christ Church and the police, and maintaining an active profile on the site, greatly reduced the numbers of, and nuisance from, rough sleepers

These activities have been based on the provisional management outline drafted by Ruth Ashcroft and Anthony Cheke in 2010 (available on request & on the website). A more formal management plan will be drawn up when we have got more details of the wildlife present from ongoing and future surveys – at present many invertebrate groups are under-represented.

Full Report

Grants & funding:

November was the deadline for putting in an application to the Big Lottery Fund's Community Wildlife fund. We didn't get this, but they put the 'best losers' into their Awards for All category, which gave us £7975 for mowing machinery & hand tools, tree thinning in the plantation, seeds, bulbs & saplings to plant, tree guards etc – the money came through in May. Separately we applied for an OPAL1 grant worth £1091, also funded by the Lottery, for doing a public ditch dipping day and a moth & bat night, together with equipment to help identify the animals found – microscopes, bat detector, moth traps. The City Council's East Area Parliament, now regrettably abolished, gave us £600 for weedkiller and a strimmer to attack the knotweed. It should be noted that all these grants are for specific projects that have

to be accounted for, and cannot be used for recurrent running expenses (insurance, petrol for machines, incidental expenses) – these we have to fund ourselves through subscriptions and fund-raising.

Website:

Over the year Tim Lee has built a very useful and informative website including historical information from various members and residents with long memories, local photographers, and wildlife information from a variety of sources (current members, TVERC2, Iffley Fields Community Nature Plan and local experts in various fields). It has facilities for public comment and recording sightings and a regularly updated events calendar. Well worth a look if you haven't: <http://77.104.149.212/~frien444>

General activities:

Consultation Day / Nestboxes

Following the initial meeting we held an exhibition and information day at Isis school, Meadow Lane jointly with the Iffley Fields Community Nature Plan on 16 October, during which people could make suggestions about the Eyot, and children could make nestboxes to take home. Surplus wood was then used to make 5 nestboxes which we put up on the site. A sixth was added later, and at least 4 were occupied by Great and Blue Tits in summer 2011.

Knotweed & Himalayan Balsam

In November we held two big knotweed bashes, in which large groups of volunteers cut down and pulled up the dead stems of invasive Japanese Knotweed and piled them up for later burning. By mid-April the newly emergent knotweed needed a first cut, which we did by hand. By mid-May the first Lottery grant money had come through, and we blitzed the resurgent knotweed with scythes and strimmer. The policy for most of the knotweed was to cut 2 or 3 times then allow it to grow prior to treatment with weedkiller (glyphosate = 'Roundup') in August or September, the recommended time for maximum effect. One patch was hand-cut regularly throughout (but no weedkiller) to compare effectiveness. We'll have to wait until next year to assess the results.

The other invasive alien weed on the site is Himalayan Balsam, which grows on the river's edge shading out native waterside vegetation. Unlike the knotweed it is an annual and easy to remove, although there are hundreds of seedlings – one member made this her special project, and we think very little balsam managed to set seed this year.

Rubbish clearance

In January we started a series of big rubbish clear-ups, in which we collected literally tons of refuse accumulated from several years of rough sleepers in at least 6 former camp-sites. Christ Church agreed to send a tractor and trailer to collect the piles. Since then the general state of the area has been much better than before, and some previously careless visitors (night parties etc) have taken to removing their litter after their event.

Tree planting

The existing mix on the Eyot was unbalanced: very few oaks and birch, only one each of hazel, lime, spindle and rowan, no holly, yew, guelder-rose etc. Early in 2011 the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers offered voluntary groups free tree seedlings to plant, and sent us 20 each of oak, birch, rowan, cherry & ash. We had planting days on 20 February and 20 March to get these into the ground, together with donated hazel, lime and holly plants; we didn't plant the ash as there's already plenty there – does anyone want ash seedlings? In the dry spring we had to devote some effort to watering our new trees which were suffering from

the prolonged period without rain; almost all have in fact survived. We bought some proper tree-guards which were put up in June and July round the young trees most vulnerable to deer-browsing.

Opening paths

In an area like Aston's Eyot there is a question as to how many paths are needed and which areas should be left impenetrable. We decided to keep open a few traditional paths – the riverside walk, the way into the plantation from 'Laurie's Pond', one leading to the ditch opposite Long Meadow and other bits here and there. The 'Triangle', the area to the left as you come in from the Kidneys, we left until the breeding season was over, apart from some edge clearance for the ditch dipping day (see below). These smaller paths were scythed at intervals throughout the summer.

Grassland restoration

Those who remember the area before the 1980s bottle digging can recall large grassy areas and loads of wild flowers and rabbits. The now prevalent nettles and creeping thistle took hold after this massive disturbance, and the diversity of plants has declined as a result. One of our projects is to try to restore some flower-rich grassland. In mid-June we acquired our power-scythe, which we used to mow an area of nettles near the Jackdaw Lane entrance to begin a process of restoring some grassland, using a variety of approaches. In September we prepared the grassland restoration area for seeding with a native meadow seed-mix, though part has been left unseeded to see what comes up. Frequent mowing will be needed next year to prevent the nettle and thistle from taking over again. We also began to create grassy bays along the main paths to increase short grass habitat. These areas being managed are only a tiny proportion of the site, and most of it will be left untouched apart from increasing the variety of trees.

Holiday !

August was taken as a holiday from formal activity, though a number of volunteers carried on with the grassland restoration project, and the usual regular bird and butterfly counts and some trial moth trapping

Bulb planting / nestbox making

During the current month, October, we have planned a planting day on 16th for native spring bulbs (bluebells etc.), as these were almost entirely lacking on the Eyot, and on the 30th a day building more nestboxes and some bat-boxes to put up on the site.

Survey work:

Dead wood survey

On 3 April the volunteers split into three groups to record the types of dead wood present in different parts of the site. Dead wood is an important habitat for invertebrates, especially beetles, and an indicator of habitat quality. Aston's is rich in dead wood ranging from fresh to rotten – excellent beetle living space.

Bird-song

In early May we held two bird-song events – an evening one mapping territories on the 5th, and on the 8th a dawn chorus walk, well-attended despite starting at 4.30am.

Aquatic wildlife

On July 9th using OPAL grant funding we invited local experts Rod D'Ayala and Robert Aquilina to help us survey aquatic wildlife in the Shire Lake Ditch, which proved that the

ditch isn't as dead as it looks ! The event was very well attended and popular with children. Amongst more common animals we also found 10-spined sticklebacks, a water scorpion, newt tadpoles and lots of smaller beasts.

We discussed with Rod and Robert what management would benefit life in the ditch, and concluded the simplest and most effective thing to do would be to open it up to more light – which we intend to do by pruning vegetation, especially between the Kidneys gate and the Thames.

Moths & bats

On September 1 we had our second big OPAL grant event, inviting the local moth enthusiasts and the Oxfordshire Bat Group to help us see what was around after dark; lots of people turned up to see the moths and see bat detector devices in action. We had two generators running 5 high-powered UV lamps, and also 4 battery-powered traps for moths, and stayed till midnight catching, identifying and releasing moths. At the same time the bat people scoured the site with ultrasonic bat detectors, and added two species (Noctule, Daubenton's) we hadn't previously detected.

General wildlife recording

Throughout the year wildlife recording has been kept up by members of the committee, with others coming in from outside to record bees (Ivan Wright), mosses (Jacqueline Wright), small mammals (Tim Healing), ladybirds (Richard Comont). The Friends have been scoring plants (Claire Malone-Lee), large mammals, birds & butterflies (co-ordinated by Laurie Burrell & Anthony Cheke), and moths (Ruth Ashcroft). Please contact these committee members if you have any queries or interesting observations. Anthony & Ruth also measured the 'veteran willows' which are important wildlife habitat (roosting bats, nesting Tree-creepers, lots of insects) – many of these date back to when the Eyot was water-meadow, but are now over-mature and will collapse and die unless regularly pollarded; they are the oldest trees on the site. Finally, breeding bird data has been fed into the national bird atlas being compiled by the British Trust for Ornithology. Wildlife data can be found on the website.

Social issues:

We have also monitored rough sleepers and illegally moored boats, encouraging them to move on and enlisting police assistance where appropriate, and liaised with Christ Church on these matters. We also try to remove signs of camping as soon as any tent has gone so as not to make it look as if the area is a habitual camping ground – this appears to be having some beneficial effect. We have helped promote a dog-walking group for people who prefer not to be alone on darkening evenings.

Committee meetings

The committee met more or less regularly; the minutes are posted on the website.

In the pipeline

We are preparing a colourful permanent display board with information about Aston's Eyot; a draft version should be available at the AGM. The plantation is long overdue for thinning. We have funds in the Lottery budget to do some of this, which has to be done in winter when birds are not nesting etc. We want to create openings to plant understorey shrubs such as hazel and holly, and also ring-bark some trees to provide standing dead wood for beetles, woodpeckers etc. There used to be one standing dead trunk out in the open where Green Woodpeckers nested, but it fell down in a gale early in 2011.

We hope also to begin a programme of pollarding the old willows in a rotation (so not all are done at once), but we will need a new grant to see that through.

Acknowledgements:

We would like thank Christ Church college for permission to operate on their land and for collecting rubbish, the City Council for mowing the main paths, and Metal Salvage (the scrapyard) for providing sheets of corrugated iron for reptile refuges and a rubbish skip. A special thanks to member Julian Dourado for designing our logo, Graeme Salmon for historical information, Laurie Burrell for drawing a detailed new map, Stuart Jenkins for providing a generator and traps for the moth night, and to Mari Girling for organising the consultation/exhibition day at the Meadow Lane school. Also of course all the volunteers who have joined the committee on activity days on the Eyot, those who have given their time to help with wildlife monitoring and identification, and all you members who through your subscriptions have enabled us to pay for the public liability insurance that was a requirement for us to work on the site at all.

Anthony Cheke, Chairman

– on behalf of the Friends of Aston's Eyot Committee for 2010-11