

Seventh Annual Report – 2016-17

We have had a seventh busy year of conservation work and wildlife recording on Aston's Eyot and the Kidneys. The two sites have had their status as a SLINC (Site of Local Interest for Nature Conservation) reconfirmed by Oxford City Council, for which the activities of the Friends were in part responsible by way of promoting access, enabling public contact with nature, and promoting biodiversity. The sites are zoned for biodiversity in the Council's draft Local Plan 2016-2036.

Membership at 108 last year remains steady, and both sites continue to be very well used by a wide range of local residents and visitors from further afield.

Many thanks to all those who come to the **conservation work parties** on the last Sunday of every month – we've managed to get a lot done. We have cleared paths, mowed meadows, pulled nettles, weeded new plantings, mended fences, cut back bramble and overhanging branches, and moved trees fallen over paths, all happily fuelled by Thelma Martin's excellent cakes.

With such a big site, there is always more to do, so this year we were very happy to have two groups from local companies giving us a day's work each:

Anthesis came in June and built a hibernaculum for reptiles and amphibia on top of the bank near Muntjac Point. We were pleased to see later in the year a young grass-snake and the freshly shed skin of a mature grass snake in this area.

Elsevier helped us clear a large patch where the Japanese Knotweed we cleared in 2010-11 had unfortunately returned, and successfully sowed a rough grass and flower mixture in September. This will make it easier for us keep on top of any subsequent re-growth of knotweed.

We have also planned 4 days of work over the coming year (one a quarter) with the **Oxford Conservation Volunteers**. The first took place on October 1st, and their enthusiastic team combined with a good turn-out of Friends, achieved miracles clearing the ditch at Muntjac Point which had become completely choked with reeds and sedges. The vegetation and mud removed were carried up the bank by human chain to make 3 large and carefully constructed heaps near the hibernaculum to make further refuges and reptile egg-laying sites.

In partnership with Oxford Friends of the Earth's bee project and Oxford City Council, five more wildflower plots were made on the **Kidneys meadow**. Many thanks to the countryside rangers Steve and Gary who stripped the turf from the plots so that they could then be seeded with a selection of species aimed at boosting the range of native flowers here for all types of pollinators such as honey bees, wild bees and butterflies. OxFOE and FoAE commissioned bee expert Ivan Wright to **survey the bees** on the Kidneys and Aston's Eyot. On the Kidneys there were 29 species of wild bee found. During timed observations, 93% of the individual bumblebees seen were visiting the well established flower plots compared with only 7% visiting similar sized patches in other parts of the meadow. The results for the solitary bees were less clear-cut; we have yet to get the flower species right for many of them. On Aston's Eyot 38 species of bee and 15 of wasps were found, adding 21 species for the site

since the 2011 survey, and increasing the recorded total species over both surveys to 65. Three of the wasp species found this year are nationally scarce.

Management otherwise this year has been mainly to consolidate past achievements:

Trees. We have been able to remove the tree-guards of many of the trees we planted in the early years. Some of the shrubbier species have been given larger wire-netting guards to promote low bushy growth valuable to birds and many invertebrates. Our plantings have had very high rates of survival despite the nettles, and no further planting is currently required. We do however lose mature trees from time to time: Storm Doris blew down several along the Cherwell in February.

Meadows and paths. Steve O'Farrell from the City Council countryside team mowed the main paths and main meadow in mid May and October. Other meadow areas and the smaller paths were mowed with the powerscythe, trimmers and manual scythes. The wet weather after mid July resulted in vigorous and continuing nettle and thistle growth, making it hard to keep paths fully open, and requiring repeated weeding on key bits of meadow. Many thanks to the **patch champions** who keep their patches nettle free to allow the other flowers to flourish.

Wildlife surveys. We continue to monitor plants, birds, and butterflies routinely, and record other wildlife as we can. A reptile survey with the help of the Oxfordshire Reptile and Amphibia Group using reptile mats and tin sheets had disappointing results, but we had 5 sightings of grass snakes. A great crested newt egg was found in long Meadow Pond, but breeding here will be unsuccessful as this pond dries out by late spring. The sparrowhawks bred successfully again raising 3 chicks. A paper was published on herring gull behaviour on the school playing field. Mammal highlights include an **otter** seen in April on Kingfisher Point, and 2 **weasels** seen fighting on the cinder track in May. As far as we know no mink have been seen here this year. 114 active **badger** sett entrances were counted in February with the help of the Badger Group, up from 78 counted in 2015. A programme of trail camera trapping has been started to learn more about the numbers, structure and behaviour of this population. Dr Paul Jepson surveyed the local residents about the presence of badgers in local streets and gardens.

Events this year included a dawn chorus walk in May which was very well attended considering the heavy rain, though rain cancelled the subsequent dusk chorus walk, a guided evening walk in early May for the Oxford Civic Society, a plant walk in July, and a moth and bat evening at the beginning of September.

The photographic competition this year produced another batch of excellent pictures for the 2018 **calendar**, which each year helps raise money for the work of the Friends. Many thanks to the photographers involved.

Managing anti-social behaviour has involved 2 winter litter-picks and on-going picking up, clearing up after rough sleeper camps, and liaising with homelessness outreach teams and Christ Church as necessary. Rough sleeper camping continues to be a problem. Illegal mooring, ill-advised bonfires, dog-fouling, and occasional complaints about dog behaviour also continue, but not all to the same extent as in previous years. On the up side, the water in the ditch by the school is somewhat cleaner since Thames Water repaired the rainwater drainage systems in Meadow Lane and dealt with some properties which had “foul water” feeding into this.

The **committee** have continued to meet once a month to discuss plans, review progress and organise work. **Members** for this year were Ruth Ashcroft (co-chair), Anthony Cheke (co-chair), Laurie Burrell (Treasurer), Claire Malone-Lee (membership secretary), Thelma Martin (minutes secretary), Penny Bassett, James Martin, Greg Webster, Sue Rowe and Iona Argyle. Tim Lee who was a founder member and the FoAE webmaster among other key roles, sadly died in January and is very much missed. Many thanks to all for a lot of work, and to Iona for picking up the website work.

Ruth Ashcroft & Anthony Cheke, November 2017.