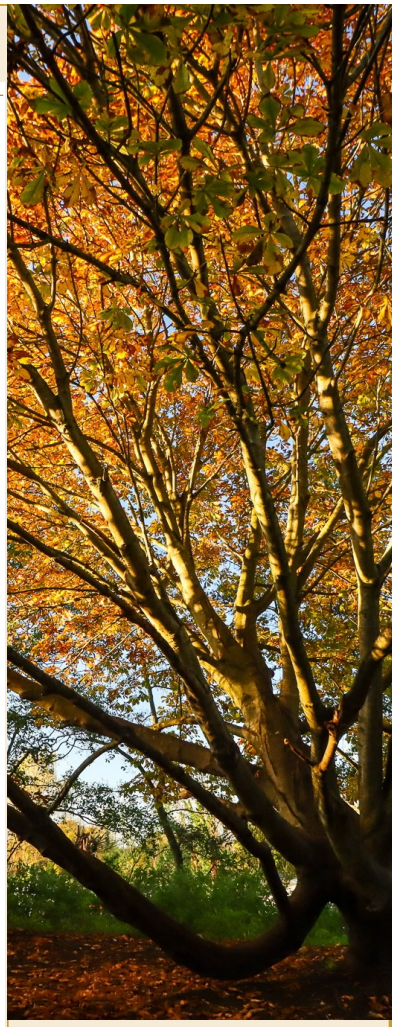
FRIENDS OF ASTON'S EYOT

Summer/ Autumn 2023 Newsletter



It's been a very different summer to the one we had last year—fewer fires and a lot more rain! We've been watching how that has impacted the nature reserve; we've got water in the pond for a start, the trees are looking healthier and we've seen the cinnabar moth caterpillars back on the ragwort.

You may also have noticed quite a bit of activity going on around the Eyot too. Ruth has been busy getting us grants and along with the art auction earlier this spring we've been able to kick off several projects that needed a little more investment. You'll find details of all those projects and activities in this newsletter.

We hope this newsletter gives you a good picture of what is going on in the Eyot, both centre stage and behind the scenes!

If there is anything you'd like to hear about or read in future newsletters then please let us know and we'll do our best to include!

Charlie Ellis

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Grant News
- Art Auction Updates
- Pond Projects
- Get Involved
- Badger Vaccinations
- Calendar 2024 Competition

Compiled and edited by Charlotte Ellis with contributions from Anthony Cheke, Ruth Ashcroft, Charlotte Ellis, Sarah McFadden

Above—Autumn Chestnut—Matt Brown

Photo Credit: Right—Blackberries—Troth Wells

GRANTS AND FUNDING

Grants
We have received two grants this summer – details below! Grant income is really useful for getting specific projects funded and for buying tools, kit, and any larger items needed. It's important to note however that grants do not fund routine and ongoing costs, so unrestricted funding from memberships and donations is always very important too.

Rivers and Wetlands Community Days grant

We are delighted to report that we have received a grant of £4995 from this grant programme, received via the Wild Trout Trust and funded by Thames Water.

This will fund the tools and materials for a series of volunteering days to:

1) help the Shire Lake Ditch recover from the recent sewage pollution incidents by cutting back overgrowth this autumn to let more light into the ditch – a process started last autumn by the Jackdaw Lane bridge. We think no more sewage is entering the ditch since Thames Water corrected the misconnected properties causing the problem, but water quality remains very poor. Sunlight and shallow water helps to promote recovery.

2) construct two larger clean water ponds and associated habitats – see separate piece for more details on this project!

National Lottery Community Fund grant

Happily we have also been awarded £7345 from their Awards for All programme. This will fund:

a) a second shed to go next to the original one – regular volunteers will know that the original shed is bursting at the seams making it hard to get at the tools and kit.
b) materials for a third pond and bog creation materials, including mini digger hire
c) materials to create bee banks for ground nesting bees
d) materials for further path improvements and tree safety work needed near paths
e) plants, seeds, protective fencing, tools, and noticeboards renewals.

Ruth Ashcroft

AN INAUGURAL ART AUCTION

At the end of April we held the very first Friends of Aston's Eyot Art Auction, very generously hosted by the James Street Tavern.

We were completely blown away by the generosity and talent of the fourteen local artists who contributed their work for us to auction off. We had an amazing range of pieces in a wonderful variety of styles, mediums and formats but all linked by nature and inspired by Aston's Eyot.

The evening of the auction was great fun and we want to extend a huge thank you to all of you who came, supported and bid on the art.

We raised a total of £1517, which is incredible! The timing couldn't have been better because, almost immediately, a good chunk of that went to dealing with a fallen tree that was blocking the Cherwell. Having a healthy bank account allows us manage the day-to-day issues that crop up within the nature reserve and allows us to keep it safe and accessible.

We're hoping to repeat the success of the art auction next year, having learnt a lot from this initial go. If you've got any ideas or would like to contribute then get in touch!

Thank you again to all those who contributed!

Charlie Ellis

Some examples of the beautiful art on offer. Contributions from (L-R): Wren Hughes, Amy Glees, Sally Anne Stewart

PONDS, PONDS, PONDS!!!!!!!!!

Ponds project phase 2 – would you like to be involved?

The trial ponds we made last year have done well and are gradually becoming vegetated and attracting birds, dragonflies, and other wildlife. We are now calling these South Ponds, to distinguish them from a new group of 3 larger ponds (North Ponds) to go to the right of the cinder track near the Jackdaw Lane entrance. The idea is again that they should be rain-fed for clean water, as mitigation for the rather more polluted water in the ditch. These ponds will be just across the ditch from the swampier habitats of Long Meadow and will complement the large seasonal pond there which dries up each year too soon for newts, frogs and toads to complete their breeding cycles.

Now that we have the funds in place for the liners, we are making a start by having a mini digger in (and a volunteer to operate it!) for the first week of September to do some initial levelling and shaping. We'll then need to finish them by hand over a number of sessions – the experience gained from the initial ponds have allowed us to fine-tune the design, and all input is welcome.

If you would like to be involved in any way, do get in touch – there's lots to do! if you are a smartphone user send us your number as we have set up a WhatsApp group (see right!) to help organise sessions, but this is not essential. We can still communicate by email.

Ruth Ashcroft

Volunteers always needed for practical work!

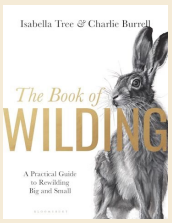
As well as the last-Sunday-of-the-month work parties, we often have additional sessions to get particular jobs done, and there's also lots of possibilities for solo projects (such as the wild flower patch champions). In particular we could do with one or two extra people to learn to use the powerscythe to help get mowing jobs done.

To help communications, we have set up **WhatsApp groups** for the pond project, the scything team, and for general practical work (the QR Code below!). As well as helping people agree times to meet up and do something, it allows quick sharing of photos both for interest and to get help with identification. If this is of interest do give us your phone number. Of course we know that not everyone is a smartphone user – but it is still helpful to know who's interested in extra sessions or in doing something particular.

Scan the below to join the general volunteers group!

Autumn Reading List

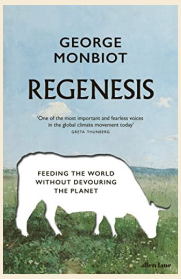
What's travelled round with us over the summer! Please try and support local bookshops or libraries when seeking these out!



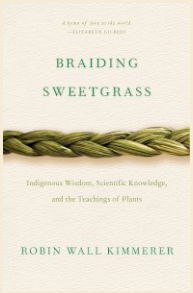
The Book of Wilding, A practical guide to rewilding, Big and small, Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell

A handbook for how we can all help restore nature. It is ambitious, visionary and pragmatic.

Regenesis: Feeding the World without Devouring the Planet, George Monbiot



Published in 2022, Regenesis focuses on the environmental impact of agriculture and sustainable approaches.



Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, Robin Wall Kimmerer

Robin Wall Kimmerer brings together these two lenses of being a botanist and member of the Citizen Potowatomi Nation.

BADGER VACCINATIONS

In May, Oxfordshire Badger Group came for the third consecutive year to vaccinate the Aston's Eyot badgers against TB.

The first step is two weeks of putting out cages and bait with the bait slowly moving deeper into the cages. Once the badgers are used to entering the cages and getting a free meal, the traps are set and stage two begins: the vaccinations. This involves setting the live cages up just before sunset, and then vaccinating, temporarily marking and releasing the badgers just after sunrise for two mornings in a row. This year, we vaccinated 8 badgers in total, 5 adults and 3 cubs. As proof that everything possible is done to make the experience as pain-free as possible for the badgers, this year 2 badgers vaccinated on the first morning, were recaptured the second night as well. Free peanuts are worth a night having to nap in a cage!

Next year will be the fourth and final year of this programme on the Eyot and hopefully all our badgers will then have resilience against TB and also be safe from those who want to cull them. Thank you to Debbie White from Oxford Badger Group and her team of volunteers!

Sarah McFadden

Here is a Badger being released from the cage after being vaccinated.

NEW POLLINATOR PATCHES FOR THE KIDNEYS

You may have noticed that a few new patches where the turf has been scraped off have appeared on the Kidneys meadow. These will be sown shortly with a suitable mix of meadow flower species that should do well – the aim being to continue diversifying the meadow flora here. The original flower patches are 8-10 years old and still doing well, attracting 4 extra butterfly species – but despite gathering and spreading the seed, they have not managed to spread. We think this is due to difficulties establishing in the grass – hence the new scrapes.

Ruth Ashcroft

CALENDAR COMPETITION 2024

You are invited to submit photos for our annual colour calendar

As usual we will select a range of photos of wildlife, flowers, views and activities – all must be taken on Aston's Eyot or the Kidneys

- We want photos from all seasons as we try to have photos that match the month they represent. Horizontal/'landscape' format only.
- The calendar is A4, so photos need to be at least 2mb in size, so they enlarge without looking fuzzy or pixellated.
- If your photo is on the front cover or on a month page you will get a free calendar; we can use extra photos on the back cover and inside back pages. All photos will be credited to the photographer
- Our deadline for submissions is 30 September; please email photos to: anthony.cheke@virginmedia.com

Anthony Cheke

FRIENDS OF ASTON'S EYOT

Help us protect and maintain the wildness and diversity of Aston's Eyot—pick up litter when you see it and remember it's a no-fire zone!

We love to hear from Friends of Aston's Eyot—please reach out to us and send us your photos, sightings and musings to info@friendsofastonseyot.org or find us on Facebook.com/friendsofastonseyot