CONSERVATION ADVISER REPORT – Thurston Wildlife Area

Advisor's Name: Cathy Smith, Conservation Adviser
Tel. 01473 890089
Date of meeting: 23/06/2023

Name of Project leader: Antonia King, deputy clerk

Attendees: Brian and Barbara

Owner: Thurston Parish Council

Location: The Green, Sandpit Lane, Thurston, IP31 3SD

Grid Reference: TL921652

Enquiry
Thurston Parish Council have a fairly neglected area of land that about 30 years ago was dug out and planted up to create a wildlife garden in an open space in Thurston. The pond liner is now leaking, and the plan is to dig out the pond and create a natural meadow area.

Contents

Summary of the site

Soilscape 11: Freely draining sandy Breckland soils

Approximate area: 0.2ha, pond 12m diameter

Habitat Connectivity: The wildlife area and larger play area are valuable green spaces. Gardens and other community spaces offer additional habitat for wildlife such as dunnock and hedgehogs. Beyond is a largely arable landscape but approximately 400m southwest is wood meadow or wood pasture (Habitat of Principal Importance NERC Act 2006, otherwise known as Priority Habitat).

District Council: Babergh Mid Suffolk District Council

Public Access: Part of a playing field

Heritage assets: none indicated on Suffolk Heritage explorer.

Species

Note a full ecological appraisal has not undertaken.

A quick look at the National Biological Atlas records reveals the following within 1km.

Protected species: Bat spp.

Species of Principal Importance NERC Act Section 41 - also known as Priority Species: Hedgehog, house sparrow, dunnock, bullfinch, startling, song thrush, white admiral butterfly, small heath butterfly.

Birds of Conservation Concern, red listed – those species not included above
Swift, Greenfinch, house martin, fieldfare, mistle thrush.

Tree preservation orders: No tree preservation orders are shown on the playing field.

Management proposals

The wildlife area has become well established and for years was a focus of community effort and connection to nature. The hedge and trees together with open grassland together form a habitat mosaic, even with the loss of the pond, this is valuable habitat for a number of species.

The possibility of reinstating the pond was discussed but the Parish Council felt this was not something they wished to do.

There is potential to retain the liner and to create a bog garden but there is some uncertainty as to how sustainable this would be given the free draining soils and that only a small number of bog plants have survived from the original pond.

We were told that no great crested newts had been seen, and at the time of the visit the pond held very little water and freshwater invertebrate abundance appeared to be poor. To limit impact to any remaining freshwater life, carry out work when the pond is dry or from November -February. In the unlikely event that great crested newts are discovered during the works, you will need to seek Natural England's advice.

To restore natural processes and achieve the best outcome, ideally the pond liner would be removed. By hand this could be a big task but if a digger is available, could be achievable. Whilst removing the liner could be disruptive, it may also negate the need for topsoil.

Alternatively, the remaining liner could be pierced and covered with suitable topsoil.

Suitable soil would be locally sourced and free draining low fertility soils. Although it is worth bearing in mind that playing field soils are likely to have been modified from those indicated by Soilscapes. Soil texture, pH, and nutrient status are good predictors of plant communities likely to successfully establish. As this is a small area, you may not wish to pay for a soil testing, plants already established in the wildlife area will give you a clue, perhaps combined with a simple soil testing kit available for gardeners.

Incorporating the existing shallow depression, will create a more diverse and interesting topography likely to support a greater range of invertebrates such as solitary bees and solitary wasps which are dependent on small microclimates.

Natural colonisation of the soil from wildflowers established in the wildlife area could be allowed to occur. However, the creation of a meadow area, presents itself with an opportunity to engage with young people and by creating a sense of ownership potentially negate some of the nuisance which has occurred recently.

Choose a grass and wildflower mix suitable for your soils, see the seed supplier factsheet. Perennial seed mixes establish best from autumn sowing into 50-75% bare ground. Meadows can take a while to establish and drought tolerant plants, which are likely to be most suitable can be small, so manage expectations carefully.

An alternative to sowing wildflower seeds is to use green hay. Enhancing meadows through the use of green hay is preferrable to seeding as the plants will be of local provenance which increases the chance of colonisation, and a greater number of flower species are contained. The SWT Green Hay register aims to help link donor and recipient sites, my colleague Graham Harts leads on the green hay register.

If soils are confirmed as light and free draining, grassland can be self-sustaining. If grass growth is vigorous then a late summer cut and removal of cuttings will help wildflowers compete with grasses and gradually reduce soil fertility.

We also discussed managing some of the blackthorn scrub and potentially coppicing (cutting to ground level then letting the trees regrow as multi-stemmed bushes) a small group of trees at the southern exit of the wildlife area. This would make the area more visible and inviting, and help to reduce the likelihood of nuisance. It will have the added benefit of allowing more light into the area which is generally beneficial to wildflower meadows.

Community Engagement and monitoring

In addition to biodiversity benefits, a green space can play an important role in providing access to nature and associated well-being benefits.

Recent research into well-being demonstrates the value of species rich areas beyond those more impoverished green spaces. The paper goes on to suggest that 'rather than de-vegetating to make places safer through the elimination of hiding places, it would be better to "re-people" spaces through the creation of social events in those spaces.' The Parish Council's proposals to make this green space more inviting sit well with this premise.

- Due to steep declines hedgehogs are a priority species for conservation in Suffolk and there are many records of hedgehogs in Thurston. The habitats in the wildlife area are likely to support hedgehogs within the wider landscape. There is the potential to use the restoration of this area as a springboard to encourage residents to garden in a hedgehog friendly way. Together with the SWT website, Hedgehog Street is a good resource.
- Wildlife recording can take but can be more widely beneficial if lodged with Suffolk Biological Records either directly or through i-Record. The i-record platform allows for groups to set up their own space for collective records and has a process for verification.
- Parish Councils and community groups can plot their action for wildlife on our Team Wilder map with information about their project.
- This year we are offering training for Parish Councils and Community Groups managing green spaces for wildlife at a discounted rate, this includes 'Understanding your habitat' which will include balancing habitats within a habitat mosaic. Further information and bookings are through our website.

We look forward to hearing how you get on.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Smith
Conservation Adviser

Resources:

National Library of Scotland
Home | National Library of Scotland (nls.uk)

MAGIC Maps DEFRA
Magic Map Application (defra.gov.uk)

Soilscapes
Soilscapes soil types viewer - National Soil Resources Institute. Cranfield University (landis.org.uk)

Babergh Mid Suffolk Interactive Mapping Service
Interactive Mapping Service » Babergh Mid Suffolk

Suffolk Heritage Explorer
Map - Suffolk Heritage Explorer

The MENE survey - trend data for how people experience the natural environment in England.
Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Survey: developing a method to measure nature connection across the English population (adults and children) - NECR233 (naturalengland.org.uk)

Restorative benefits of biological diversity in green spaces
Frontiers | Not All Green Space Is Created Equal: Biodiversity Predicts Psychological Restorative Benefits from Urban Green Space | Psychology (frontiersin.org)

Hedgehogs
Hedgehogs | Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Home - Hedgehog Street

Wildlife recording
Suffolk Biological Recording Online | Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service (suffolkbis.org.uk)

iRecord | Manage and share your wildlife records (brc.ac.uk)

Setting up an iRecord activities for local groups - YouTube

iNaturalist
A Community for Naturalists · iNaturalist United Kingdom

Community Wildlife Surveying booklet
https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/communitygreenspaces

SWT TeamWilder
Team Wilder | Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Courses for Parish Councils and Community Groups managing land for wildlife
Courses | Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Further information on our website
Habitat & species advice | Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Green hay register
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Factsheet accompanying this report:
Wildflower seed suppliers