

Nature Reserve report 2025

It would be difficult to think of two consecutive years being so different. Last year we had plentiful rain and the wildflowers were spectacular, this year all the plentiful rain occurred in February; after then, it pretty much stopped, so the wildflowers have definitely suffered. Meanwhile the low butterfly count last year has turned to a bumper crop of butterflies this year – not sure why.

Conservation

There are three nature reserves: Noakes Grove at Swards End, which is owned by Organic Countryside CIC (that's us), King's Field at Steeple Bumpstead, which is rented by the company and the privately owned Scotch Patch in Wimbish, which Organic Countryside helps to manage. All three of these reserves have features that are of immense value to conservation.

Noakes Grove

In terms of habitat, this is the most diverse and is therefore home to more species of animal and plant than the others. Monthly work parties, run and masterminded by Andrew, have maintained a good quality of environment in the scrub and in the hedges. The main aim this year was to coppice some areas of the scrub to allow light to reach the ground for the benefit of vegetation and insects. This was also part of the great reptile project whereby a cosy snake hibernaculum (winter quarters) was created last year and this year, even more exciting, an enticing winter home for lizards. I say exciting, because Noakes Grove has been selected as a very suitable place to receive refugee common (not actually so common) lizards that were rescued from the relentless march of new building that is spreading up from Saffron Walden covering field after field of countryside. We have released nearly 60 lizards, many of them juveniles and we hope that they will flourish in the safety of their new home.

We shall be monitoring the reptiles although they are not easy to spot. We have put down some reptile mats, which are simply felt mats that reptiles like to creep under. When the survey people check beneath them, they might find a reptile. It is a time-honoured method rather prone to inaccuracies because all the reptiles might be lurking under other things. But it is worth a try. We know we have grass snakes, now we know we have common lizards, but we have never seen any slow worms – yet.

The wildflower meadow area of the sheep pasture was a disappointment this year. Although we had quite a few bee orchids, the dog daisies, pyramidal orchids and the yellow wort were fewer in number and a bit stunted, along with all the other flowers that made the field so wonderful last year. This was probably because it has been so very dry.

Another new project, this time dreamt up by David, has been the 'wheat field'. A section of the field next to the road was roughly ploughed and sown with heritage wheat with a smattering of cornfield flowers that have not been seen in wheat fields for a hundred years. This was to imitate the methods of growing wheat that have existed throughout history until the end of the 19th century, to see if it still worked. The harvest will be later than modern crops – nearer to the Church's harvest festival – but we will have a harvest as it is growing well. And it is sprinkled with the loveliest colours of cornflower, corn marigold, chamomile, corn cockle and others.

King's Field

The pond here has not dried out. Instead, it has played host to frogs and newts, dragonflies, water beetles and mayflies. Where the amphibians came from, we do not know, but we are very pleased to have them. The river has not fared very well from the drought, becoming almost stagnant and no fish have been seen for a while. Mammals however have enjoyed the wood and the meadow: foxes, deer and badger were caught on a camera trap set by the Wild Child group.

The meadows on both sides of the river have been kept in good shape by the munching of the sheep and the occasional mowing by the King's Field team. Many thanks to the team.

Early in the year, the Essex Amphibian and Reptile Group placed some mats down in strategic places around the reserve on both sides of the river to see if they could record some lizards or snakes. One grass snake was spotted – not under a mat, but under a piece of corrugated iron – but as yet no other reptiles.

Among the birds recorded have been goldfinch, nuthatch, greenfinch, long-tailed tit, and whitethroat along with more frequently seen species such as the usual garden birds and the ubiquitous red kites.

Scotch Patch

This is an orchard of traditional varieties of cider apple, cherry and plum. In the winter we planted some replacement trees, which are doing well. The vegetation is left to grow a bit wild to encourage wildlife and we hope to have a good supply of apple juice this autumn.

Sheep

At the moment, we have 23 sheep: 11 lambs, 1 ram and 11 ewes. I am very happy to say that we have not lost any lambs this year. There is one with a dodgy knee but heaps better after a lot of careful treatment, and one weedy one who has responded very well to treatment and is now almost normal size and has regained a lot of his bounce.

The dry weather has caused the usual problem with grass. So I am hoping that we can have some extra grazing from a friend in Wimbish. I shall know more in August and will update these notes then.

I really do need to reiterate my eternal praise and thanks to the sheep teams. They are incredibly good at their job of feeding, watering, caring and at alerting me, David B and Emma of any problems. Thank you all so, so much.

Children's activities

These are going from strength to strength. The Wild Child Club has increased in numbers and now has some senior members who started when they were little but are now very helpful young people doing management tasks as well as playing with the younger ones. We hope that these youngsters will be the conservationists of the future.

A very important addition to the Wild Child Club this year has been a new leader, Lorraine, who is skilled in natural history and teaching and has lots of fun ideas. Since joining us, she has made life so much easier as we now have her to cover for David

when he is unwell (or on crutches) and for me who is less confident at such things and anyway I can't run as fast as the kids.

Scouts, Guides, Cubs, Brownies, Beavers, Squirrels (is that the lot?) are also enthusiastic visitors.

Meanwhile, Nikki's mindfulness sessions are helping troubled youngsters cope better with the world, helped by being out in the countryside surrounded by nature.

Events

Our annual open day had to be a bit late this year as we were all busy in May, so 1 June was the best date for us. Sadly, it clearly wasn't the best date for the public as very few visitors came, although those that did thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Lizzie brought her donkeys and left them to the tender mercies of several carers and groomers, and the very popular Bumpstead Bojangles entertained everyone again. One of highlights was the performance by The Exploding Pieces, a band of three schoolkids who played and sang with great enthusiasm. The leader of this band was one of our Duke of Edinburgh volunteers who had done a wonderful job at the work parties.

Specific events, well advertised, can often be the best way of getting people to come and visit when many of them might not have been aware of our reserves before. We could try holding one next year. If anyone has ideas about what might be popular (NOT a pop festival!), let us know: maybe a natural history day, a concert, a children's games day?