

Fairfield Association
Flora, Fauna and Orchard Management Group [FFOG]
Minutes of the Meeting held on Thursday 11th February 2016 7.00 pm
at Whitegates, Sunnyside Close

SPECIAL MEETING
Habitat Review:
progress, possibilities, issues, threats and actions

Present: Graham Brandwood, Glenys Ferguson (Mins), Oliver Fulton, Sue Nieduszynska (Chair), Ian Procter, Hilary Short, Mick Short, Chris Workman

1. **Apologies:** Tony Finn, Ian Fraser, Helen Hicks

Introduction: Discussion was prompted by a number of papers written by FFOG Members each focusing on a particular habitat. These papers (available) give an assessment of principal areas of the reserve at the mid-point of the Natural England Agreement. Sue, as Chair, thanked the authors for their valuable, succinct and thoughtful appraisals. Outside the meeting, these papers will provide the basis for a report to Ben Hibbins (NE Adviser) (**Sue**) and contribute to the documentation associated with Local Nature Reserve Designation (**Oliver**). The Minutes below draw on the papers, with comments from the meeting identified in *red*.

2. **Meadow areas:**

2.1. Oliver's paper covered a) grazing pasture (Big Meadow, Lower Sowerholme, West Field) and b) hay meadows (Hay Meadow, Carr House Meadow).

2.2. Highlights are that snipe have increased dramatically (even if this winter is a little disappointing). Grey partridge seem to like West Field. The herb (wild flower) cover is steadily diversifying in the Hay Meadow, with Carr House Meadow following in line with its slightly later treatment. 'Semi-improved grassland' status has been achieved, although progress towards 'lowland meadow' is slow. The hay is providing a useful supply for the cattle graziers.

2.3. Sward height and poaching have been acceptable. However, the soft rush and other marsh vegetation is extending and becoming more dense, and the variety of heights and mix of clumps and open patches attractive to snipe is not emerging:

- the White Park cattle are not managing to control it alone. *Mick pointed out that on average over the year cattle numbers do not exceed the prescription.*
- the ponies have not made any noticeable impact to date. *Oliver will investigate further how much they can be expected to achieve and whether Exmoors could be appreciably more effective than Fell ponies.*
- *mowing and weed-wiping are the other option. (Mick has information on a contractor.) This would have to be done before March, so not feasible this year.*

- with careful pre-planning it might be possible to trial ponies again at the start of the next winter, but then bring in mowing/weed-wiping if this fails or for other parts of the reserve.

Regime for next winter to be discussed at a future FFOG meeting (**Glenys** for Arrangements Calendar).

- 2.4. Targets for the levels of ‘undesirables’ are being achieved, but this requires consistent and considerable effort. Ragwort, particularly in Big Meadow, remains the principal concern. Its control is dependent on a high level of volunteer commitment both to dig out and spot spray with herbicide. **Ian** is worried that he may not have enough volunteers both willing and qualified to undertake this year’s spraying. He will investigate the availability of paid help. The experimental plot where citronella was sprayed in the Paddock will be reviewed in the spring.
- 2.5. Although smelly algae is persisting in Alder Pond in particular, the barley straw is having an effect. Graham has noted that beneficial plants are starting to colonise too. He also feels that foxes are not a problem although cats are frequently seen.
- 2.6. To help increase diversity, plugs of acid tolerant wildflowers (such as marsh marigold and ragged-robin) will be planted in the wetter south end of the Hay Meadow by Anna’s Pool in April/May (for next FFOG meeting).
- 2.7. Oliver raised the issue of the future of the reserve after the expiry of the Natural England Agreement in 2021:
 - Finance – we should make ourselves aware of how much the meadow areas would be costing without the relevant HLS payments.
 - Management – are the present aims and targets (across the whole reserve) ones we would want to carry on after 2021? It would be possible, for example, to convert the marshy area of Big Meadow to reedbed, to split it into parts with different management regimes (e.g. more hay meadow) and so on.

It was agreed that such long-term planning considerations would be deferred for consideration at a later review meeting (**Glenys**). Meanwhile Oliver has given **Meeting Members** something to ponder.

3. Wetlands:

- 3.1. Graham’s paper focused on the development of a reedbed area in Upper Sowerholme. Unfortunately, there were problems with the bund in Anna’s Pool leaking for a considerable period of time with the result that Upper Sowerholme remained relatively dry. The bund has now been repaired and the area is much wetter, with water depths consistent with Natural England’s specifications. In consequence, progress toward the creation of a reedbed is a little behind schedule.
- 3.2. There is a natural patch of phragmites growing strongly in the north western corner and extending into the body of Upper Sowerholme. **Graham** will monitor its expansion.

- 3.3. The FA-planted areas of phragmites in Upper Sowerholme are beginning to establish, with some stems now over 100cms. It was agreed to supplement them by re-homing plants from other parts of the reserve (such as the Long Pads path, the Hay Meadow side of Anna's Pool and along Lucy Brook) (Ian). Mick will ask the arable farmer whether he has any surplus reeds.
- 3.4. Graham has cleared vegetation from the channel and ponds in Upper Sowerholme, but anticipates that this will not last for long. Couch grass was particularly prevalent at the Lucy's Pool end of the channel and proved quite difficult to remove - to be monitored (Graham).
- 3.5. At the southern end of Upper Sowerholme there is a dense thicket of brambles, which has been left alone since Fauna was created. The brambles do not appear to be encroaching into the wetland area to date. This will continue to be monitored (Graham).
- 3.6. Mare's tail is widespread in Upper Sowerholme. It is also now encroaching on the wetter parts of the Hay Meadow. As with the water figwort that has colonised the marshes, the meeting recognised there is little that can be done to curb this less desirable species other than hope it will achieve a natural balance over time.
- 3.7. There is a strip of quite wet ground around the ponds in Flora Field. This might provide appropriate conditions for another reedbed. Graham will undertake some experimental planting.
- 3.8. There was some discussion of the scrape in West Field. Graham has inspected during the very wet weather and found no evidence of a land drain into Lucy Brook. The water-holding problem may therefore be due to damage to the clay base when the scrape was created. Rushes are starting to colonise, and the design is for it to dry out in summer to create muddy edges. Therefore no further work will be done for the time being.

4. Woodland:

- 4.1. In his paper, Ian Nieduszynski noted that clearly it will take some years for the new trees to be established in Pony Wood and for a full woodland vertical structure to develop, but the wild flower diversity is increasing and the great majority of saplings are doing well. The addition of oak and birch trees to the woodland will, in the future, greatly enhance invertebrate and bird life. Ian P. added that the weather conditions (no drought or really cold weather) have aided the establishment of the new plantings.
- 4.2. Ian N. identified deer browsing of young saplings as a potential threat. About a dozen have been affected to date, but these have been the larger oak saplings and most have rejuvenated lower down from the damaged bark. Metal tree guards could be added if this became an issue.
- 4.3. Grey squirrels may also be stripping bark. It is unclear whether these are visitors or nesting. (What was originally thought to be a squirrel nest in one of the Pony Wood boxes is more likely to have been a stock dove.) Ian N. and Graham will keep an eye out.

- 4.4. Through the spring/summer there have been several instances of illegal access to Pony Wood, including camping and campfires (estimated as 8, plus at least 2 prevented in 2015) that burn brash. Together with the intrinsic danger of a fire, the latter might impact upon bird and invertebrate life. (This has been discussed at previous FFOG meetings.) Once the Flora Path is in place it is anticipated that illegal activities will fall considerably because of the proximity of people and gated access more clearly signalling the private nature of the wood. It is also hoped that this year's efforts at challenging and intercepting offenders will have sent out a message and there will be fewer problems in 2016.
- 4.5. It was agreed to leave the campfire circle *in situ*. The meeting considered any damage from illegal fires would be minimised if they are confined to this designated area. The tree surgeon's work will be generating more logs suitable for seating. These can either be added to the campfire circle or used to create a seating area in the end of the wood used for school visits.
- 4.6. Graham is unable to offer campfire/Forest School activities this year, so the only authorised use of Pony Wood envisaged for 2016 is for School visits run by **Tony**.
- 4.7. At the Flora public consultation a commitment was made to open up Little Wood for public access. The meeting decided that it was more appropriate to defer discussion of how this is to be achieved until planning permission has been granted for the Flora path.
- 4.8. Ian N. also suggested that the future footpath may provide an opportunity to establish a bird feeding station in an area where there are fewer houses and no garden feeding stations. This was considered a good idea in principle. There are practical matters to resolve, such as the expense of the seed and attracting enough volunteers willing to make a regular commitment, but these were not considered insurmountable. However, taking this idea further was judged to be premature. It will be revisited once the footpath is in place.

5. Arable:

- 5.1. Flora Field, previously intensively grazed by sheep for many years, has been used for an arable crop since its acquisition in 2013. In their paper, Sue and Mick reported that the no-cost basis, annual contract with a local farmer with experience of Natural England's HLS scheme has worked well. He sows a crop (a wheat-oat hybrid) in spring, following spreading of manure and sometimes lime; there is a minimal application of pesticide and herbicide and it is harvested such that it leaves residual seeds for birds during the winter. It is hoped to extend the contract with the farmer, possibly to cover the length of the present Natural England Agreement. Should the current farmer choose to end his arrangement with the FA the meeting recognised that – given the paucity of arable farmers locally – a contractor may have to be hired.
- 5.2. Some lynchets are left uncultivated as "beetle banks" and strips around Flora Field have been planted with wildflower seeds. The Wild Bird Seed Margins and stubble have produced ample seeds for overwintering birds and are used by redwing, fieldfare and linnets, but not target species grey partridge or tree sparrow. Brown hare (sometimes a group of 3) have been seen regularly in the arable field. Lapwing and oyster catcher and possibly grey partridge bred in 2014, oyster catcher in 2015.

- 5.3. The floristically enhanced grass margin continues to cause some concern. In parts, targets for broadleaved species such as ox-eye daisy and plantain are being met but grasses such as red fescue are below target and the east (wetter) side is still refusing to establish. Natural England continues to advocate patience, so it was decided to give it another couple of years. If this margin is still doing badly, then a request will be made to Natural England to sow a different mix of seeds more appropriate to the conditions.
- 5.4. The bee-friendly wildflowers sown in the corner of Flora Field adjacent to the bee hives have failed to re-generate. This is a pity. However they cannot be re-sown because it was not sanctioned by Natural England. Moreover, creating the ground conditions for the seeds to establish effectively would require the considerable expense of hiring a digger. (Glenys to inform the owner of the bee hives.)
- 5.5. There is a rank, nettle-covered area under the trees on the eastern edge of Pony Wood. How best to deal with this will be considered when the Flora path is constructed.

6. Bird records:

- 6.1. Sue felt that bird records had yet to be analysed sufficiently and so wrote a paper to address this omission.
- 6.2. It is still too soon to determine trends or form an evaluation given year-on-year variation, climatic factors and the move from Fauna to Fauna plus Flora. However, success in attracting NE target species and in the diversity of the bird-life can be monitored. In terms of:
 - a) *providing sites for declining and localised farm birds in particular grey partridge, lapwing and tree sparrow*: evidence of partridge and lapwing, but not tree sparrow
 - b) *wet areas to be used by wintering waders, especially snipe, lapwing, and ducks*: heron, snipe, woodcock, teal, mallard and shelduck observed
 - c) *diversity*: an encouraging range of red and amber-listed birds such as song and mistle thrush and stock dove. But warbler species appear to have declined and few of the Pony Wood nest boxes were used.
- 6.3. Information is being collected through the breeding bird survey, flush counts, reports on the FA's wildlife blog and nest box surveys. The wildlife blog is a not a very effective source. Sightings are not consistently reported and information on vulnerable species is withheld. It was agreed that a more formal and regular monitoring system is required for the feature species at least. Sue and Ian N. will regularly record species and send out an appeal for extra help. Known birders will also be contacted and asked to contribute to the FA's blog.
- 6.4. It is suspected that lapwing nests in Flora Field have been interfered with. Meeting Members were urged to be alert for suspicious activity, which should be discouraged in future by the proximity of the Flora path.
- 6.5. There is approximately 4.5 km of hedgerows within the nature reserve. Ian reported that laying of the hedge on the eastern side of the Long Pads path is taking longer than

anticipated. It will be completed during the winter of 2016/17 along with the first laying of the LGGs hedge along the Fauna footpath. Once this laying is complete, the hedges will thicken up and provide good cover. The focus of hedge maintenance will then switch to trimming. Some hedges are already being trimmed by Associate Volunteers, but Ian advised that the task may also require the use of a contractor. (It has already been decided to ask the neighbouring farmer to flail the inaccessible north hedge in West Field. It may also be appropriate to ask him to tackle the west hedge here too – **Glenys** to add to Arrangements Calendar.)

6.6. Sue noted that a system for monitoring butterflies would be set up following an upcoming talk on the subject at the Storey Institute.

7. AOB:

7.1. Additions to Fields Access List: It was agreed to add Ann Woodfine and Shirley Rawsthorne to the list (**Glenys**).

7.2. Replacement monitor: Graham will be taking a sabbatical from his monitoring and volunteering tasks, starting in May. His contribution will be sorely missed and arrangements need to be made for the monthly maintenance and habitat monitoring at least to continue in his absence. **Graham** was asked to identify – and then train – a temporary replacement (for March FFOG).

7.3. Replacement/additional photographer: Chris reported that the photographer who has been taking pictures at regular times from a specified set of points feels he may be unable to carry on. The continuity of the photographic record of the reserve needs to be maintained and the next photographic session is due in March. **Chris** will discuss whether help or replacement is the best way forward, and approach other FA photographers as necessary.

7.4. Barn owl pellets: A barn owl has been attracting interest on the reserve since October. Graham suggested that its pellets be collected for educational use (e.g. survey of eating habits). **Graham** to liaise with Tony.

8. Date/place of next meeting: It was agreed that this meeting had provided a useful opportunity to reflect on progress and discuss key issues in greater depth than usual. The exercise will be repeated on an annual basis, and as and when a matter arises that would benefit from such an approach. The next FFOG meeting, with a standard agenda, will be on Thursday 10th March 7pm, Whitegates Sunnyside Close.