

## How can we make our sites as wildlife-friendly as possible?

### A brief survey of the Kennel Lodge 2 Site



An allotment plot is always going to be ‘wildlife-friendly’, especially if it has a diverse range of flora and is free of pesticides. But are there simple things that individual tenants and HwDAA can do to make our sites even more ‘wildlife-friendly’, whilst still being cultivated and well-managed?

This is the fourth Association site we have surveyed in 2021 in the Bower Ashton area. Our findings and suggestions are similar to the other sites, but each site has its own characteristics, both in terms of the ‘infrastructure’ [boundary hedges etc] and the approach of different plot holders, such as

the creation of ponds, for example. We walked the boundary, looked at plots and spoke with the Site Rep Terry Hoskins. Our intention was to look for the things that encourage fauna, be they birds, invertebrates or reptiles.

The perimeter of the site [including the gates] is approximately 387m [424 yards]. Its area is approximately 0.9 hectares [2.3 acres].

### **Ponds**

Ponds, by offering a different habitat, are one of the easiest ways of increasing the diversity of wildlife. We counted six ponds, mostly one to two metres. There were also two ponds specifically used for fish [these were netted over, and so were not primarily for general wildlife].

### **Trees, shrubs and climbers alongside the boundary walls & fences**

Before we set out on the surveys, we thought that the perimeter of a site might offer unused potential for further wildlife habitats – perhaps in those quieter, slightly scruffy ends of a plot, behind the shed or bean pole collection. The Kennel Lodge 2 site is the old Ashton Court walled garden. Two sides of the site retain this tall brick wall, and the other two sides are hedged. A small number of plots along the wall have fruit trees [mostly in pots] and grape vines, but the majority of the wall is free of growth. This is probably necessary for the maintenance of this historic feature, and for that reason we concluded that it would not be wise to encourage tenants to plant further climbers along the wall.

The road-side of the perimeter [bottom in the aerial photo] is a mixed hedge of hawthorn, brambles, sycamore etc. On the fourth side [left, in the photo] the boundary is well-maintained yew, with bramble and ivy.

Thus, about half the perimeter [around 193 metres] is undoubtedly providing nesting shelter, flowers for pollinators and food for birds, whilst the remaining half is not suitable for this for practical reasons.

There were no 'substantial' trees inside the site [the tenancy rules forbid large trees on plots]. However just beyond the boundary wall on the north side [top in the photo] is the 'wild area', with full-sized ash, sycamore and ground cover that will provide excellent shelter and food for mammals and birds.

### **Bird & bat boxes and 'insect hotels'**

These are easy & cheap to make and install. We saw a couple of insect hotels [arrangements of decaying or hollow wood], and five bird boxes, but by their nature we may have missed some. More uncommon, there is a bat box high up in one of the trees in the 'wild area', overlooking the site.

### **The unexpected finds**

We were pleased to see a collection of beehives [an apiary] on one plot.

Whilst not strictly concerning wildlife, we were also shown a small 'comfrey farm', which is harvested to provide a very effective liquid manure available to any plot-holder. This was a reminder of some of the informal cooperation between tenants that we have also observed on other sites.

Reports heard of badgers, rats, foxes and moles, but this was not a scientific survey, and it is likely that plot-holders have seen other mammals; perhaps a tenant might like to use a trail-camera to investigate their presence further.

### **What is the potential for further improvement of the site's 'wildlife-friendliness'?**

Small scale improvements add up, and the small additions that could help with wildlife are often ones that can be taken by individual tenants. As with our earlier site surveys, these actions by tenants could include:

1. Ponds, even modest in size
2. Nesting boxes
3. Insect hotels, whether they be bought, constructed or just a square foot or so of intentionally untidy roof tiles & small logs etc

As to the Association's role with tenants, one of the easiest but most influential actions could be to *actively* encourage the improvements listed above, through, for example:

1. Publicising with tenants that these wildlife-friendly measures are encouraged, not forbidden.
2. Site Rep conversations with new tenants, as well as written advice
3. A well-researched & easy to use page on the website
4. Regular reports and 'what I have done/wildlife seen' stories in the newsletter
5. One or two volunteers on each site being available for practical tips

6. Advising tenants about best practice in managing the vertical green spaces at the end of their plot
7. An information board on each site about wildlife to look out for e.g. 'butterflies this month', perhaps with a place to log sightings
8. The writers of this report had never visited this site before – small guided tours of other sites might be very informative, looking at features such as ponds.

Many of the above could first be trialled at one or two sites, to see how they work.

In all of our site surveys we have become aware of the need for the Association to be alert to the intentions of the property owners that bound the site, particularly around tree-felling and herbicides. The creatures that use wildlife corridors do not, as we know, understand who owns them. For KL2, perhaps the most significant boundary is the one alongside the road to Ashton Court. This is 91 metres of mixed hedgerow. Because it borders what can be a very busy pavement, the Association's responsibilities for the hedge's maintenance need to take a fine line between safety/inconvenience to pedestrians and the needs of wildlife [generally, we understand it is likely to be an offence if hedges are cut or trimmed between March 1st and July 31<sup>st</sup>, and DEFRA guidelines extend this to the end of August].

In conversation on our visit, we were reminded of the need to find a balance in interpreting what exactly is a 'well-maintained

and productive' plot, whilst knowing that our crops depend on the diversity of our wildlife. For example, whilst a few tenants will be deliberately growing nettles/comfrey etc to attract pollinators, these can also cause difficulties to others, and of course can be invasive if not managed. This difficult balance – which will never disappear - is one that is held by the Site Reps to comply with the required percentage of land for crop growing as dictated by the association's lease.

Martin Howard & Paul Finch

September 2021