

Noakes Grove AGM 2016

Nature reserve report

A fair amount of drama has characterised these last 12 months, but actually, everything has turned out rather well.

At the last AGM we had a few worries: How will we pay for the essential tree surgery? How do we create the new signboards? What do we do about the problems with the Soil Association? Can we cope with any more lambing? Will we manage without Vyvyan and Gay?

Woodland and tree surgery

Well, Jan solved the first problem by obtaining a grant from the Stansted Airport fund for community projects, which paid for the lot. Although I suspect that the brilliant tree surgeons, Mercers, might not have charged top whack. They said that they enjoyed themselves so much by coming to such a beautiful place that they were happy with their low estimate. They kept coming back, so they must have been telling the truth. Anyway we were very grateful for their tacit and practical support. We now should be fully covered by our insurance.

Signboards

The second worry was solved by Emma. The design of the signboards was done by her friend Jelena Mone, and Emma project-managed the whole affair. We had grants from Uttlesford Community fund and NFU insurance. Lots of people donated photographs – thanks are due to Peter Riding, Tony Morton and David Owen for lovely photos. Meanwhile Ben Boatman made the frames and fixed them up about two days before the open day. This meant that our celebratory day on 30 April to unveil the signs went ahead on time. The whole day was a great success blessed also by the weather. Howard Rolfe, who had donated so much in the form of a grant, did the unveiling with great aplomb. Lots of people came, and it was lovely to chat to a number of Swards End residents who were visiting the reserve for the first time.

Soil Association

The Soil Association had proved too expensive and too intractable, so we decided to take our leave and go our own way along organic principles but without the certification. It seemed to make no difference to the sale of the lamb, although we were sad that the evangelical factor could no longer be maintained in quite the same way. The good news is that we will be saving more than £400 a year. We have so far decided to keep our company name Organic Countryside but to use the name Noakes Grove on all food labels.

Lambs and pasture

We had 12 lambs, all very good ones, and we sold 8 as meat, which made a good price. Four ewe lambs were sold to some friends in Wimbish to start a new flock. These four lambs are flourishing and we have come to a mutually advantageous arrangement with their new owners, Hedi and Rich. I have always been very nervous about the lambing time, in case anything goes wrong, but Rich is a qualified livestock farmer and knows all about it. They also possess 10 acres of luscious grassland and a

top-class ram. The plan is for our ewes to have a few months' holiday eating their grass and meeting Ron the ram, staying there while they lamb under the skilled and watchful eye of the expert and to come back to Noakes Grove in March or April. By that time our new-mown pastures should have recovered well.

It was not without a twinge of sadness that Emma and I realised that we would not have out 7 friendly sheep to feed for 5 months, but we know it is for their own good. Anyway, that solved another worry – lambing.

Other produce that we hope to make this year is apple juice. David is amassing apples from our garden and the orchard in Wimbish, so bottled juice might soon be on the market.

The pastures yielded a huge crop of bee orchids and lots of other flowers. Now they have been mown by Keith and the vegetation baled up, leaving the grassland in a good condition to encourage the wild flowers next year. The hay, though, is fairly useless for livestock fodder because of the likely presence of ragwort and the fact that it was cut so late in the year that it has very little nutritional value. We now have two sizable haystacks, but what we do with it all is another question.

We plan to ask Keith to mow the rides in the scrub soon.

Thorn scrub, work parties and research

Vyvyan ran the usual monthly work parties and cleared an astonishing amount of the scrub next to the pasture so that the pyramidal orchids flourished. The volunteers worked wonderfully well and had great fun the while. We are now into the work party season again, but luckily David has risen to the occasion and has taken on their organisation.

Vyvyan also ran three Woodmanship courses at the start of the year. These proved even more popular than the first courses he ran in 2015. When he returns, we hope he will have a few more such ideas.

In December we had the Christmas party, which is always popular. The Christmas bonfire with lots of good things to eat, some of which were cooked on the fire, was a heart-warming feast.

Then in April, we had another party to say bye bye to Gay and Vyvyan, wish them good health and god speed on their epic journey around the world. We all thought they were incredibly brave (or absolutely mad) and hoped fervently that they would return safely.

The flowers in the rides in the thorn scrub were just emerging when Gay and Vyvyan left, and they grew as spectacular as ever, although occasionally we wonder whether the wild liquorice is just a bit too successful. Particularly beautiful this year were the bluebells in the wood, luckily fully blooming when we had the signboard unveiling event.

A second open day in May was dedicated to researching how many different species of bumble bee we could find. The event attracted very few visitors, but David managed to identify four species of bumble bee. We intend to find a few more throughout the year next year. However, also at this event, we were delighted that Sylvie Gummery spotted and photographed a grass snake.

David has run his moth trap overnight on three occasions and now has the beginnings of a species list.