

Noakes Grove AGM 2018

Nature Reserve report

Lots of thank yous this year... we are very lucky to have been helped out in various ways by lots of lovely people!

Sheep, lambs and pasture

There has been lots of positive change in the last year, with the addition of an extra piece of pasture – Kings Field on the Hempstead/Steeple Bumpstead border. This grassy meadow, crossed by a small stream, is generously rented to us (for a nominal sum) by Walden Countryside supporters Robert and Suzanne Walker – very many thanks to them. The field provides valuable extra grazing and we hope to be able to increase wildflower populations too. And the extra acreage secures us more funding from Defra.

Another innovation this year has been the expansion of the shepherding teams to look after sheep at both sites. We now have a designated person to check, feed and water the sheep each day at each site. This has really had a big impact on the viability of the flock and it has been brilliant to welcome so many interested volunteers to the teams – huge thanks to them for their continuing hard work.

Three ewes went to visit Ron the ram this year, and in due course two of them produced three lambs, including one ewe lamb. The third ewe had, we thought, not been impregnated, so we were all surprised when one of the Kings Field volunteers tentatively suggested that Phoebe might be pregnant after all. A late ewe lamb, Serendipity, was born in July, rather weedy at first but now looking strong and healthy and holding her own among the older lambs at Noakes Grove. This brings the total number of sheep to seventeen: the seven original ewes, four ewes born in 2017, two 2017-vintage males, and the four lambs born this spring.

Our handsome pedigree ram, Noakes Comma, is looking for a new home, along with a companion half-ram – we can't use Comma because he has the same dad as lots of our ewes. While we seek a buyer, they have been staying in a very nice field kindly provided by Swards End neighbours Fred and Gill Bamber, who deserve a special thank you for that and for the donation to the reserve of an excellent outbuilding, which we hope to erect this autumn/winter.

On the down side, a number of thefts has meant we need to increase security, locking equipment up in the shed and keeping the top gate locked. Public access for pedestrians and for vehicles via the lower gate will continue.

Hedges, ponds, woodland

This year's work-party focus was the transformation of the roadside hedge, which there is

now considerably less of. A lot of the undergrowth has been thinned and the trees cut back, so that light can reach the wildflower verge. A number of native tree species (bird cherry, spindle, wayfaring tree) were planted along the hedge line too. The two Davids are reducing the trunks to manageable firewood, which we intend to sell in future, and work parties are gearing up to continue this job.

Professional work on the trees around the pond let in much more light, resulting in a blanket-weed explosion in the early months of the year. Subsequently it has become a popular hang-out for dragon- and damselflies, and a couple of newts were introduced. The introduced tadpoles became froglings but we have also found some larger frogs, which must be genuine Noakes Grove natives. Now, in autumn, the pond level is quite low. There are lots of diving beetles and water boatman to watch, but pond-dippers beware, the big ones bite.

Our bird boxes were very well used this year by blue tits, great tits and robins but the owl and kestrel boxes have yet to find tenants apart from some squirrels. The butterfly and moth list continues to grow: we now have silver-washed fritillaries which only recolonised Essex about ten years ago. The full list of our butterflies and moths is on our website.

The reserve continues to be visited by the local home-schooling group and has also been the site for successful mindfulness and Forest School sessions.

Events (and apples)

Twelfth Night saw a bunch of wassailers visit the Scotch Patch orchard, to persuade (with song and cider-soaked toast!) the tree spirits to produce a good harvest – this year's apple crop looks good and the new vintage apple juice should be available in a couple of months. Disaster struck with the new apple saplings we planted: they were not well enough protected and rabbits killed the lot. We'll try again this winter and use proper tree-protectors. Entreating the wassail gods was clearly not effective against rabbits.

In early May we ran another popular Lambs and Bluebells Day, with pond-dipping, insect-hunting, sheep feeding, puppet shows, Forest School activities, a toddler play area and glorious nettle-based food. The weather was kind and everyone enjoyed the event.