

Organic Countryside AGM 2020 Nature Reserve Report

Conservation work Noakes Grove

During 2019, we realized that Vyvyan's health was not going to allow him to run the work parties in the winter and we were all very worried about him. Characteristically he appeared completely blasé about his health but he was concerned that if he were to even visit a work party he would not be able to stop himself from joining in, which would be very bad for him. Wisely, he stayed away. We hope that we will see him again soon. Luckily there was enough support for the work parties to surge ahead, which only goes to show how popular they are. Andrew Urquhart took a lot of the initiative, which was great, because he is a very knowledgeable woodsman. During the course of the winter we cleared the far ride and (Andrew's idea) instead of burning the brushwood, we created a 'dead hedge', that is, we stacked it in a sort of wood-pile fence along the side of the ride bordering on the neighbour's field, taking care not to block the animal paths. This created a habitat for all sorts of creatures and made better use of the brushwood.

Later work parties tackled the corner of the far ride leading round to the bottom ride and made some 'exploration' paths through the big hedge area between the bottom ride and the boundary ditch. This has been hugely successful, as it is clear from the well-trodden paths that children have found great delight in exploring them.

It is in spring and summer that we begin to see the benefits of the conservation work. As I write in June, the area that had been cleared the previous year, at the far end of the scrub and at the bottom of the meadow, is alive with flowers. A big patch of melilot, new (and very determined) wild liquorice, bee orchids and several other wild flowers that would not otherwise have flourished are covering the ground.

Other flowers that are particularly noteworthy are yellow-wort in one of the rides and grass vetch in the meadow (I was quite excited about that one) as well as the three sorts of orchid: pyramidal, common spotted and bee. I have not spotted the twayblades this year.

In spring, the bluebells put on a wonderful show and it was so sad that we could not hold our spring open day because of lockdown, as those bluebells would have been a really good feature.

The pond has survived, which was touch and go in last year's drought when it actually dried up completely. This year, it looked stunning in April, being full of water and with flourishing waterweed and hundreds of tadpoles. It has a good lot of other creatures as well, including newts, diving beetles, pond skaters, dragonfly nymphs and others. But now, in June, the water has gone down rather dramatically although there is still a pool right in the middle.

Conservation at King's Field

Because of lockdown, we have not been able to do anything about the bridge across the river or the information boards, but with the help of the sheep we have managed to make the field into a good meadow. More flowers are colonizing the grazed grass and the idea of having the sheep graze the track that goes round the outside of the stock fencing is going to bring dividends of wild flowers – we hope.

The stream that runs between the fields has a good crop of little fish this year, and something that David and I were hoping might be a water vole, but we never got a close enough view of it. David has uncovered several invertebrates from under the shelters he provided for them and two grass snakes that were lurking beneath an old piece of corrugated iron – we were very pleased about that.

New building at Noakes Grove

We now have a wonderful new hay barn. We lost so much hay last year because it went mouldy underneath the leaky and sweaty tarpaulin, that I was determined to make things better this year. Tom Walker drew up a plan that was quite brilliant and one hot day in April, he and his son and nephew came and put the whole thing up, with help from Ed Barrett. The shed has a roof and two slatted sides. Two donors paid for it all, so we now have a shelter for the hay – hooray!

The other major work that has been done at Noakes Grove is the improvement to the car park. John Bagley has managed to get hold of huge quantities of hard core and ‘hoggin’, and, sometimes accompanied by volunteers, he has resolutely created an attractive but drivable surface that will stay drivable even through the winter. We are immensely grateful to John for all the work, which was very heavy work indeed.

Farm

We are now in the enviable position of having four venues for the sheep. Gilly and Fred Bamber, just down Redgates Lane are playing very willing hosts, and at the moment we have two elderly ewes and two yearlings there, amid vast flowery meadows. They are extremely well and now, in June, looking just a little tubby.

Suzanne and Robert Walker have given us the use of a medium-sized field in Radwinter, and we had four more sheep there over the winter. We took them off in February so that the grass could grow for hay. Suzanne and Robert have said they will donate this hay to us (to put in the hay barn!) That is an extremely generous donation, so very many thanks to them.

We borrowed another ram from Chris Eastcott. This one was called Gaul, and he was a lovely, gentle soul, genteel with humans and managed to win the affections of all six breeding ewes. He broke his raddle crayon on the journey over to Noakes Grove and it never really worked, so we had absolutely no idea when he covered which ewe. I had to guess according to the date he arrived and the size of each ewe’s udder. Over the last week in April and the first week in May, five of the ewes had given birth to seven lambs: two ewe lambs and five ram lambs. Now, in June, I think that Amy might also be pregnant – she must have played *very* hard to get – if she is, then good old Gaul really did his stuff.

There is, though, some bad news. All the sheep other than those at the Bammers’ have had a very nasty dose of pneumonia. The four at King’s Field are suffering the worst and despite a lot of treatment they are still wheezing and coughing, although they are sprightly enough and eating well. The ones at Noakes Grove also had the illness but I hope that we caught it early enough with treatment as now they seem clear of it. This presents the problem that we cannot put the flock together again until we know what the cause is. We are still waiting to hear the results of blood tests. Luckily, according to Chris, Gaul is perfectly healthy, but we will test the breeding stock again before inviting a ram into the flock in November. We do not know where this illness came from.

Events

In September, we had a stall at the Eco Fair in the Friends Meeting House in Saffron Walden. There were a lot of interesting and like-minded people to talk to and we had quite a lot of interest shown in our nature reserve.

We have held two more children's parties at Noakes Grove and they have both been hugely successful and not a bad source of income, although fairly hard work, especially for Emma who so far has done all the entertainment and games. They are, of course, dependent upon the weather and one little boy had to have his party postponed, but he was very good about it.

In October the Forest Church held a service in the wood, and in December we had our own Christmas party, which was fantastic: loads of lovely food and the Walden Buskers to entertain us in what was probably their first performance in a field. They were booked to perform at the spring open day as well, but before then the curtains came down over Britain and nothing could take place at all.

Nothing? Well, nothing formal, but after Britain declared lockdown, we suddenly found that our nature reserve became an extremely popular place for families to come and explore and take the air for their hour or so of freedom. The wood was a magnet for children to come and make dens and clamber about, while their parents wondered why they had never heard of this place before. Once the lambs began to arrive, there were always people coming to watch and ask countless questions. In a sense, lockdown has had some benefit, because we have become better known. What we need to do now is keep that interest going.

Elaine