

Gardens and Urban Wildspace

Our objective for this habitat is:

To manage land for biodiversity, while creating opportunities for communities to learn about and be involved with local wildlife.



Frog (E Moss)

Introduction

Urban and village greenspace covers a large area of land, including residential gardens, school grounds, allotments, parks, cemeteries, golf courses, hospital grounds and play areas. This is a significant habitat resource that provides a range of benefits for wildlife in both towns and villages, providing the opportunity to manage it with biodiversity in mind. Urban wildspace provides a home and food source to a wide range of species, including some declining ones that are UKBAP priorities, for example Songthrush, Starling, House sparrow and Bullfinch.

Urban wild-space ranges from habitats closely resembling long established semi-natural habitats, including elements of grassland, woodland and wetland, to more obviously artificial ones. The attractiveness of its towns and villages, their green spaces and gardens and the wildlife which they support contribute significantly to the quality of life of the residents of and visitors to Harrogate district

Urban greenspace provides a network of patches and corridors through urban areas, which link together fragments of habitat. This is collectively termed 'green infrastructure' and forms a significant habitat resource for species that live in or close to our towns and villages. Important examples of river and disused railway corridors in Harrogate include Oak Beck corridor and the Bilton cycleways.

Residential gardens - and gardeners play an important role in caring for the wildlife of Harrogate district. This action plan indicates some of the ways in which we can all contribute to enriching biodiversity (see 'opportunities' below) and perhaps also avoid unwittingly destroying valuable habitat or species. With a little careful thought, the value of these important spaces to wildlife can be enhanced without detracting from enjoyment of our gardens - indeed we may derive considerable pleasure from watching the wildlife thrive.

Gardens vary in size from window boxes and containers to large suburban gardens with mature trees and they range in character from carefully manicured lawns, borders and shrubberies to unkempt or neglected areas. All gardens have the capacity to support wildlife and whatever the style, there are things that you can do to improve the value of your garden for wildlife. For example, selecting nectar-bearing plants with long growing season will encourage insects and birds further up the food chain. The provision of plants and shrubs that are a good source of food, structural diversity and a range of micro-habitats will all benefit biodiversity.

Although each individual plot may be relatively small, the aggregate impact of gardens may be significant for biodiversity across a neighbourhood. Villages and suburbs are often richer in wildlife than the surrounding intensively farmed countryside.

Allotments - Offer many opportunities for wildlife, especially using organic or minimal chemical practices. Examples include use of companion planting and compost heaps, which form valuable wildlife habitats. A leaflet on 'Allotments and Wildlife' is available for download from the Natural England website (www.naturalengland.org.uk/leisure/wildlifegardening/default.htm).

Parks and public open space - Can be managed to benefit wildlife, as well as for public amenity. For example, provision of bird and batboxes and leaving some 'wilderness' areas to complement closely mown amenity grassland increases the amount and variety of wildlife utilising parks.

Schoolgrounds - Wildlife areas in school grounds provide ideal opportunities for environmental education that link in with science and citizenship aspects of the National Curriculum. Wildflower meadows, tree-planting and wildlife ponds all enhance school grounds for children and for wildlife. Further information is available on the Learning Through Landscapes website: www.ltl.org.uk

Churchyards - In some parishes the only flower and invertebrate-rich grassland is within churchyards. Walls and gravestones can support rich lichen and fern floras. There are opportunities to incorporate some wildlife friendly management in most churchyards. Yorkshire Wildlife Trust runs a Living Churchyards project. See www.ywt.org.uk/living_churchyards.php

Man-made structures such as bridges are important for some species such as bats (which have their own Species



Bumble bee on garden flower (E Moss)

Action Plan) Some stonework and brickwork is important for flowering plants, ferns, mosses and lichens, as well as insects and spiders. The rare fern Lobed maidenhair spleenwort occurs on the walls of Knaresborough Castle, which also feature cave spiders.

National status

There are around 20 million gardens in the UK, covering an estimated 4,000 square kilometres. An estimated 300,000 allotments cover around 12,000ha.

Regional status

Widespread throughout towns and villages.

Local status

Harrogate district is well renowned for its parks and gardens which are widespread throughout its towns and villages. Important parks include Valley Gardens, Ripon Spa Park and RHS Harlow Carr. Scriven Park has many valuable veteran trees.

Rossett Nature Reserve and Hookstone Wood are urban Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) in Harrogate. Three Other LNRs at Birk Crag, and Hell Wath and Quarry Moor are on the urban fringe. Nidd Gorge encompasses a range of valuable wildlife habitats on the urban fringe between Bilton and Knaresborough, which are managed with enthusiastic input from several active conservation volunteer groups. Brownfield land is relatively scarce in the district.

Local priority species:

- House sparrow
- Starling
- Swallow
- Swift
- Song thrush
- Bullfinch
- Common frog
- Common toad
- Bumble bees
- Lobed maidenhair spleenwort

Status of priority species

Song thrush - a UK BAP species, the national decline of over 50 per cent appears to be reflected in the district. Benefits from dense cover for nesting, poison-free snails and planting of fruit trees and berry producing bushes.

Bullfinch - a UK BAP species, thinly distributed throughout the district. Benefits from dense cover and planting of fruit trees and berry producing bushes.

Starling and House sparrow - though still widespread have declined by more than 60 per cent nationally over 25 years.

Swift - Although common throughout the district's towns and villages, populations may be declining, possibly because of lack of potential nest sites in new buildings. Nest sites could be incorporated into suitable new buildings through planning conditions.

Swallow - occurs in barns and out-buildings, it would

benefit from opportunities to retain nest sites in barn conversion schemes.

Common frog - common and widespread, but reported to be declining, possibly due to loss of breeding ponds and use of slug pellets. Garden ponds are an important resource as many small ponds have been lost in the wider countryside due to agricultural intensification. Frogs benefit from dense ground cover, fish free ponds and gardeners not using slug pellets.

Common toad - common and widespread, but reported to be declining, possibly due to loss of breeding ponds and use of slug pellets. Vulnerable to cars at points where spring migration routes to breeding ponds cross roads. Benefits from dense cover, large ponds or lakes, unpoisoned snails and toad crossing awareness.

Bumble bees - all species declining nationally, with a number of local extinctions. Benefit from rough grassland with tussocks and compost heaps for nest sites and continuous nectar availability throughout the summer.

Lobed maidenhair spleenwort - A very rare fern that occurs on the walls of Knaresborough Castle which requires that care is taken in the course of maintenance and restoration works.

Requirements

Gardens, parks and urban wild space benefit from the following:

- Maintaining a variety of habitats and subsidiary habitats, including ponds, old trees, flower-rich lawns, tussocks, decaying timber, scrub, bare ground, damp hollows, etc.
- Habitat corridor links between patches and into surrounding habitat (green infrastructure).
- Areas of minimal disturbance - especially needed by breeding birds.
- Wildlife friendly management of road verges, parks and watercourses.
- A continuous nectar source for bumble bees and other insects, throughout the summer.



Threats

- Loss of urban greenspace to development (including gardens).
- Inappropriate management or timing of operations e.g. hedge-cutting during the birds nesting season. (nesting birds are legally protected).
- loss of garden ponds and urban trees sometimes due to over-estimation of risk and poor consideration of alternatives to removal.
- Use of slug pellets that introduce toxins into the food chain.
- Cats, which kill large numbers of wild animals and birds. Keeping them in at night and fitting a bell reduces the danger.
- Competition from invasive, non-native species of plant and animal.
- Unsympathetic development of hard-surfacing, gravel and decking.
- Highly bred plants with showy double flowers which produce little or no pollen or nectar and are of little benefit to bumble bees or other insects.
- Introduction through dumping of garden plant material (tubers, roots, seeds), including pond plants into the wild.
- Unsustainable use of peat as compost, leading to destruction of peat bogs.
- Illegal destruction of limestone pavement for rockery stone, often sold under the name 'water worn' or 'Cumbrian limestone'.

Current local action

- Partnership Working between HBC and 'Friends' groups such as Pinewoods Conservation Group and Rossett Nature Reserve Group.
- Nidd Gorge Advisory Partnership works to conserve the urban fringe between north Harrogate and Knaresborough.
- Harrogate Borough Council Parks department which operates Environmental Management System ISO 14001.
- Nest and bat box schemes such as Spa Gardens in Ripon and Pinewoods in Harrogate.
- Harrogate and Villages in Bloom, which awards points for natural greenspace.
- Tree Preservation Orders on trees of local value (which may include amenity value of wildlife).
- Gardening and wildlife initiatives and demonstrations of best practice, such as guided walks, talks and activities run regularly by RHS Harlow Carr Gardens.

Opportunities

There are many ways in which existing gardens can be made more attractive for wildlife. In many cases a slight

change in how gardens are managed can make a big difference to its wildlife value:

- Setting aside a small part of a park or garden to become 'wild' with less intensive management. Allow an area of lawn to develop into a wildflower meadow for plants and insects.
- Using varieties and mixes of flowers, shrubs and trees (native ones where possible) that provide a continuous supply of nectar, fruit and berries, throughout the spring, summer and autumn.
- Planting of fruit trees, berry bushes and soft fruit. Avoid cutting fruit and berry bearing hedges and shrubs too early in the season, allowing the fruit and berries to provide autumn and winter food for birds.
- Provision of native climbers such as ivy as shelter, food and nest-sites for birds and insects.
- Leaving seed bearing flower heads to mature and provide food for birds before winter pruning and leaving windfall fruit for foraging birds and insects.
- Leaving fallen timber to decay and building of log piles for hibernating toads, frogs and newts in damp corners of your garden.
- Avoid cutting hedges during the bird-nesting season from March to August. The best time to undertake such work is in early spring before the birds have begun nesting or wait until after the young birds have fledged.
- Creation of wildlife ponds with shallow gently sloping edges and without Goldfish. Advice on the design of wildlife ponds is readily available, e.g. www.naturalengland.org.uk/leisure/wildlifegardening/leaflets.htm
- Reduction in the use of pesticides, including slug pellets, to a minimum and use of alternative methods of pest control.
- Utilisation of compost heaps and purchase of only peat-free compost.
- Feeding the birds and provision of fresh water. Further information is available at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/wildlifegarden/
- Provision of nest boxes for birds (including House martins), hedgehogs, bumble bees and bats or perhaps create a nesting site for the Mason bee using special bee bricks. See for example www.bbc.co.uk/nature/animals/wildbritain/gardenwildlife/
- Leaving openings in sheds and outhouses to allow entry to nesting birds eg. swallows.
- Use of Sustainable Urban Drainage Schemes (SuDS) within development.

LINKS WITH OTHER HDBAP PLANS:

This is not a UK BAP priority habitat.

(The UK BAP Review 2007 has identified 'Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land' as a new UK Priority Habitat.)

