

The member magazine for Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust



**Birmingham &
Black Country**
Wildlife Trust

Wildlife

Issue 157, Spring 2025

The Secret Lives of Orchids

A walk through nature's
hidden treasures

**NATURAL RIVERS,
GREEN CORRIDORS 2**

AN UPDATE ON OUR RIVER
RESTORATION WORK

**THE POWER
OF PONDS**

THE BEST WAY
TO BOOST
WILDLIFE IN
YOUR GARDEN



Welcome

A note from our Chief Executive



Welcome to the spring edition of your magazine, and as I write this, spring has well and truly sprung! Whilst it is always a pleasure to see the return of flowers such as the sunshine yellow Lesser Celandine or the white stars of Wood Anemones, it is the buzzing of bees and the appearance of butterflies which have been most welcome this year. Both species experienced a difficult year in 2024, with the number of butterflies recorded in the annual Big Butterfly Count being the lowest total in the count's 14-year history. One piece of recent good news for our pollinators, however, has been the Government's ban on the use of bee-killing neonicotinoid pesticides for the first time in five years. Thank you to all those of you who have helped us campaign to achieve this result, and now we want to see the Government halve all pesticide use by the year 2030.

There are plenty of actions you can take at home to help our pollinators, and we have a series of free, downloadable guides to wildlife gardening which you can find on our website at bbcwildlife.org.uk/WildlifeGardening. Turn to page 17 of this magazine to learn about all the benefits of a garden pond, which is simply brilliant for all manner of

wildlife! And as ever, we would love to see your photographs of the wildlife in your garden, as well as in parks, nature reserves and other green spaces. Turn to page 25 to discover what you can win for any photos you send us which are featured in the next edition of our magazine!

I hope you'll enjoy reading about some of the updates of our wild work across the region, and I am delighted that we are currently recruiting to expand our conservation team with 2 new Conservation Officers. When in place, these new officers will allow us to expand our work for nature's recovery, and I look forward to bringing you further updates and details of new projects in due course.

I am pleased to say that this year's Annual General Meeting will take place online on Saturday 18th October. You will find all the details on how you can join us at the event in the next edition of your magazine, and I do hope you'll be able to be with us on the day.

Delia Garratt

Chief Executive

Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust

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Wherever you are in the UK, your Wildlife Trust is standing up for wildlife and wild places in your area and bringing people closer to nature.

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Contents

3 What to Spot

Discover the tremendous trees around you

5 Wild News

Updates on our wild work across the region and more

7 The Secret Lives of Orchids

A walk through nature's hidden treasures

11 The City Nature Challenge Returns

Turn your phone into a wildlife wonder and take on a global wildlife challenge

13 Natural Rivers, Green Corridors 2

Learn about our ongoing river restoration work

17 Wildlife Gardening

Embrace the power of a garden pond

19 The Art of Nature

We meet people whose art is inspired by nature.

21 Nature Notebook

How small observations can have a big impact on wildlife

23 A Natural health Service

Nature could save the NHS millions

25 Members Pages

A letter from our Individual Giving Manager

3 ways to help

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What to Spot:

Tremendous Trees

by Rachele Poli

Biodiversity Data and Evidence Officer

It can be easy to overlook the things we see every day. And with around 3 billion trees in the UK (that's around 43 for every Briton!), they may not always receive the attention they deserve. But with more than fifty species of native trees and shrubs, and many more species of introduced non-native trees, there is so much variety and beauty to be discovered amongst them. And of course, trees are so vitally important for a whole host of reasons - their role in supporting biodiversity, enhancing wellbeing, mitigating climate change, protecting our soils, lowering surface temperatures in urban areas and reducing the impacts of flooding. Here we take a look at six species of tree for you to learn about, and hopefully inspire you to take a closer look at all the tremendous trees around you!



White Willow (*Salix alba*)

The enchanting White Willow is usually found near river banks, around lakes and in wet woodlands. This native tree's name refers to the very fine, silky white hairs that coat the underside of its narrow leaves and give the tree its characteristic pale, silvery sheen. The bark of the White Willow has traditionally been used to treat various ailments and alleviate pain. Importantly, a number of rare moth caterpillars rely on the leaves as their food source, and its flowers (called catkins) are a valuable source of early pollen and nectar for bees. In early spring, look out for the fluffy, white catkins that decorate the tree's branches. Since the White Willow is dioecious, the male and female flowers grow on separate trees, with the male flowers being more yellow, and slightly longer. See if you can spot the difference between the male and female catkins.



Wild Cherry (*Prunus avium*)

Fast-growing, resilient and adorned with pretty white blossoms in the spring, this native species is a favourite for planting and can be spotted across Birmingham and the Black Country, thriving in woodland edges, hedgerows, along canals, roads, railways, and even on waste ground. But wild cherry isn't just a pretty plant, the tree also supports a range of wildlife year-round. Its spring flowers offer bees an essential early supply of nectar and pollen, and, in the summer, the blossoms transform into deep red cherries, feeding birds and mammals. While providing a valuable food source to wildlife, the tree benefits from natural seed dispersal, as animals digest the fruit and scatter the seeds across the landscape in their droppings.



Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*)

Lacking bold flowers or showy foliage, it can be easy to overlook this unassuming shrub. However, this native species holds important value in conservation and boasts a diverse range of uses, from medicines, pigments, dyes and even gunpowder! Despite its significance, the alder buckthorn has been driven to the edge of its range, facing threats from drainage, habitat fragmentation, and the loss of peatlands. In Birmingham and the Black Country, it typically survives as a few isolated individuals in more ancient, broadleaf wet woodlands (which is why our conservation team are planting this species at a variety of new locations throughout the region). If you do happen to come across the inconspicuous shrub this spring, keep an eye out for the Brimstone butterfly, which relies on alder and alder buckthorn as its sole larval foodplants.



Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*)

Boasting bright, lustrous leaves and clusters of delicate, sweet-smelling flowers that bloom in early April, it is easy to see why this shrub has remained a popular ornamental plant. However, this non-native neophyte frequently escapes the gardens and parks where it is planted, spreading rapidly and outcompeting native flora. Its tolerance for challenging conditions - including shade and drought - rapid growth and evergreen nature allows Cherry Laurel to form dense bushes that overshadow and suppress the growth of other species. Thanks to these invasive tendencies, you can find cherry laurel in a range of habitats close to plantings. So, spare our native wildlife and maybe think twice before adding this troublesome shrub to your garden collection.



Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*)

Another popular ornamental plant, this native shrub is almost ubiquitous in Birmingham and the Black Country. From May to June, dog rose is easy to spot as its scented flowers brighten up hedgerows, scrubland and woodland margins, ranging from a pale blush to deep, striking pink. These flowers serve as an important pollen and nectar resource for insects and, once they mature into fruit, feed various birds, such as blackbirds. The name "dog rose" is believed to originate from the outdated notion that the plant's roots could cure rabies in dogs. Other sources suggest it maybe due to the plant's hooked prickles, which resemble canine teeth, or a reference to its perceived inferiority compared to cultivated garden roses.



Copper Beech (*Fagus sylvatica f. purpurea*)

Despite being less common than its wild ancestor (common beech), the striking, cultivated copper beech certainly stands out, characterised by vibrant, purple leaves in the spring which take on a rich, reddish-copper hue by autumn. In Birmingham and the Black Country, this striking mutant is usually grown as an ornamental tree, although, it does sometimes occur naturally. The copper beech was first noted in 1690 in the Possenwald forest near the town of Sondershausen in Thuringia, Germany.

WILD NEWS

Hingley Playing Fields

We have begun undertaking a piece of nature-based solutions work on behalf of the Birmingham Football Association. The work includes wetland enhancement and hedge planting on Hingley Playing Fields in Cradley Heath to enhance the site for biodiversity, as well as to help prevent the football fields becoming boggy which resulted in the cancellation of over 80 games last year!



WORK UNDERWAY AT HINGLEY PLAYING FIELDS

2000 Trees in Dudley

Throughout December, our staff were out planting around 2000 trees as part of our Dudley's Path to Nature Recovery project's woodland enhancement works. Sites where planting was undertaken included Castle Hill Woods, Sedgley Beacon, Dudley Golf Course and Warrens Hall Riding School. The work will increase biodiversity in wooded areas by introducing species such as Wild Service Tree and Black Poplar, one of our rarest native trees.

Black Country UNESCO Geopark

We have worked with the Black Country UNESCO Geopark as part of our Dudley's Path for Nature's Recovery project to create better access into the Geosite (a site which showcases unique geological features) at Sedgley Beacon. Contractors were used to dig out a circular walking route through the quarry to allow people to better see and visit the geological exposure there which dates back approximately 420 million years! We will be following this up with a new interpretation panel and some protective work of the exposure itself.



CONSERVATION STAFF ON SITE IN DUDLEY



MARMALADE HOVERFLY

Colmore Square Garden

From the end of March we will be starting monthly sessions helping to create Colmore Square Garden, a public space between offices at the Snow Hill side of Colmore Row. We will be following the designs of a landscape gardener to create a wildlife-friendly green space in Birmingham City Centre and will support the surrounding businesses in both maintenance of the space and learning about the wildlife that it attracts.

Smestow Valley Pond Restoration

Following meadow creation work undertaken in the summer, Conservation Officers David and Sarah have been out at Aldersley Leisure Village with volunteers from Wildside Activity Centre to undertake a pond restoration. An unmaintained pond had been lost to the outside world, becoming overgrown and of little value to wildlife. Initial work undertaken was to clear an area around the pond, allowing light to reach it once more. Arisings from the work were used to create a dead hedge barrier around the pond, preventing unwanted access as well as providing shelter for insects, small mammals and birds. This work will be followed with further digging out of the pond to allow it to hold more water, as well as some planting of related plant species

Wild about Gardens campaign asks us all to become hoverfly heroes

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and The Wildlife Trusts are calling on gardeners across the country to help save hoverflies.

This fly family is the second most significant pollinator after bees – some species of hoverfly are known to visit more flowers than bees.

These insects are unsung heroes of many of our ecosystems. Hoverflies visit 52% of crops globally which they either pollinate or protect by eating sap-sucking aphids. Additionally, they pollinate wildflowers, are food for birds and even help break down organic matter in gardens.

Yet, intensive agriculture, harmful pesticides, urban development and climate change have all taken their toll. Hoverfly distribution has seen a 44% decline between 1980 to 2020 and in 2022 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature added hoverflies to its Red List of threatened species.

Hoverflies are masters of disguise. These stingless insects are often mistaken for wasps, bees or even hornets and the different types go by various common names such as Batman, Footballer and Marmalade, thanks to their distinctive markings and colours.

To identify which hoverflies are visiting your garden and to find out more about how you can help save this species, please visit www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk and download our free guide!

Pyramidal orchid
Anacamptis pyramidalis

Early purple orchid
Orchis mascula

THE SECRET LIVES OF

Orchids

A walk through nature's
hidden treasures

Lady's slipper orchid
Cypripedium calceolus

**Mark Dinning**

is head of conservation with Durham Wildlife Trust. Working in nature conservation for over 20 years, Mark is passionate about plants and securing a future thriving with nature.

When I started my career in conservation, the 'Vacancy – warden required to guard rare orchid' advertisement grabbed my attention. Yes, the job was to guard the only known population of the UK's rarest orchids in Yorkshire: the lady's slipper orchid. Yorkshire Wildlife Trust is now raising money to grow it and secure its survival.

Years later I found myself researching the lady's slipper orchid at Durham Wildlife Trust, when I stumbled across an article describing this orchid in the Trust's Hawthorn Dene nature reserve. With sadness I read that in 1926 the last of this stunning plant had been picked and given as a gift to a woman by her admirer. UK law now protects wild plants from being picked in this way, but this story is a stark reminder of the fragility of our natural heritage.

Orchids are one of the most diverse groups of plants on the planet. Over 1,000 genera. More than 25,000 species. They are the largest and most highly evolved family of flowering plants.

There are around 57 native orchid species found in Britain (the number varying depending on your source). The number of species is fairly consistent depending on where you live in the country.



Frog orchid
Dactylorhiza viridis

© KIERON HUSTON

Hampshire has 30 plus species, Kent and Sussex about 27-28 species each, the same number as the whole of Scotland! Wales has 32. My native Durham and Northumberland have 27 species. Some are common and others really quite rare.

My children say, 'You're not allowed favourites!' This rule applies to orchids and orchid sites as much as anything else in my life. I can't place one above another, all are special. Allowances are made, with an annual pilgrimage to 'check in on old friends'. Of orchids, some are work friends and we check how they are doing. A reward for past hard endeavours. Like the early purple orchids that greeted me on a walk through an ancient semi-natural woodland on the Durham coast. In past years, Wildlife Trust volunteers removed non-native trees to allow light to reach the woodland floor to restore the ancient woodland native plant community. Imagine my pleasure on a hot May day as the cool shaded woodland trail led me to the exact spot. A small flush of early purple orchids bathed in sunlight, accompanied by a chorus of bird song and the trickle of the nearby stream.

This walk, I and many Wildlife Trust supporters and colleagues enjoy through spring and summer. Ten orchid species to spot, if you get your timing right.



Southern marsh orchid
Dactylorhiza praetermissa

© VAUGHN MATTHEWS



Bee orchid
Ophrys apifera

Frog orchid (their flowers look like frogs, their hind legs jiggling a dance!) rounds off the walk.

Every year the same fear fills my head, 'Where have they all gone?', sense prevails, I remember I just need to look a little harder. Down on my hands and knees, I focus on a spot and like a magic-eye picture the hidden forest of frog orchids is revealed.

The Plant Atlas 2020 described this species as potentially the UK's fastest declining orchid. The decline linked to agricultural improvement, undergrazing and more recently drought.

Climate and weather are important.

For the pyramidal orchid, the plant's basal leaves appear in late autumn and die down the following summer. This growth strategy can leave this orchid vulnerable to climatic differences with hard cold winters leading to frost damage that jeopardises a plant's success in the coming spring. The county flower of the Isle

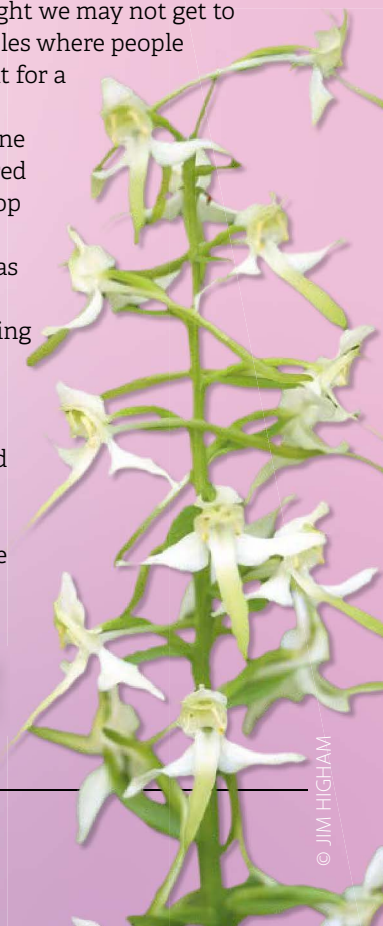
of Wight, the pyramidal orchid prefers soils rich in calcium. Like those of the island, the majority of UK orchids prefer calcium rich soils. Orchids can produce thousands

of very tiny seeds, the greater butterfly orchid producing up to 25,000 seeds per capsule. The fact this sheer number of ultra light seed can be carried by the wind, ensures orchids are able to spread their progeny far and wide. Their success is determined by the environmental conditions they find. If we are to truly restore nature, orchids have many lessons they can teach us. Protecting 30 per cent of land for nature – a commitment made by our government – will mean, in time, some orchid species will find new areas suitable for their growth.

Watching nature reclaim its place in the landscape will be a privilege I thought we may not get to see. But there are examples where people have been doing just that for a number of years.

The dark-red helleborine orchid has been monitored for over 30 years at Bishop Middleham Quarry in County Durham. 2024 was a record year with 3,380 flowering spikes. Surveying at Bishop Middleham is a pleasant late summers evening event with longstanding friends and new enthusiasts. Spare a thought for the orchid surveyors of The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire,

Greater butterfly orchid
Platanthera chlorantha



Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire. This intrepid group spend three days counting three orchid species, the man (the flower, a human body with an oddly oversized cycle helmet), musk (not smelling of musk, nationally scarce, declined by 70 per cent) and frog orchid... in late winter!

People travel far and wide to see orchids. So it's nice to finish on a story about orchids that travelled to see people. Recently Essex Wildlife Trust got the opportunity to show off some of their orchids to the King and Queen at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. 'Orchids in the Wild – The Beauty of Nature' showcased the county's native orchids and the Trust's important conservation work. The orchids making the journey were common spotted, green-winged, pyramidal and man orchids. I wish I could have seen the effect the VIP's (very important plants) had on the Royal visitors.

Orchids highlight just what is at risk if we don't address the causes of the nature emergency. Orchids have declined like other plants and species. Restoring habitats that support orchids will have benefits for a vast array of other species. Of my much loved orchid walk the woodland

holds three orchid species but is home to hundreds of other plants and animals not to mention fungi and micro-organisms. In the meadow, six orchids make their home amongst herbs and grasses, 44 different species in a metre square.

If you were to do just one thing in the coming spring and summer, make your own orchid story. If you were to do another, ensure the places we should find these special plants are restored and conserved. The more orchids the merrier.

To find an orchid haven near you and see these masters of mimicry for yourself, visit wildlifetrusts.org/where_to_see_orchids



© PAUL LANE

Common spotted orchid
Dactylorhiza fuchsii



Fly orchid
Ophrys insectifera

© THOMAS MARENT, NATUREPL.COM

Will you take the City Nature Challenge?

Did you know you can turn your phone into a wildlife wonder? Using a free app such as iNaturalist, your phone can help you to identify any wild species you're able to photograph! So if you've ever been intrigued by an insect or foxed by a flower that you're not able to name, iNaturalist can help you to learn what you're looking at. Even better, every record you submit to the app is picked up by EcoRecord, our colleagues in the local biodiversity record centre, so it helps us to monitor wildlife across our region and let us know what's doing well and what may need our help!

Whilst you can use the app all year round, there's no better time to give it a try than during the City Nature Challenge, which takes place this year from April 25 - 28th. The City Nature Challenge is an annual competition between cities all over the world to see how many wild species their citizens can spot over the space of four days, and this year more than 600 cities across the globe are taking part! During last year's challenge we collectively managed to make over 12,866 observations of a massive 1,340 different species!



THE CITY NATURE CHALLENGE IS A GREAT TIME TO SEE WILD GARLIC

This result meant that Birmingham and the Black Country made more wildlife observations than any other UK city area and the 9th most of any city in Europe – an absolutely epic result!

Taking part is the easy bit! Simply take a photo of any wildlife you spot in Birmingham and the Black Country from April 25 - 28th using iNaturalist, whether that's wildflowers in your garden or birds in your local nature reserve. **Every record counts and will help towards our overall total. Last year was the closest ever competition across the United Kingdom, and we truly managed to pip York at the post by beating their 12,828 wildlife observations by a mere 38 records** – it really made for a nail-biting Sunday evening for anyone watching the live global leader board (which we absolutely were)!



CITY NATURE CHALLENGE AT BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS

So can you help us to show the world how wild Birmingham and the Black Country really is this year?

The City Nature Challenge is a fantastic excuse to get out into nature and discover the wealth of wonderful wildlife on our doorstep. Whether it's a plant, fungi, mammal or lichen, simply see it, snap it, sorted! And if you'd like to join like-minded people alongside our expert team, head over to **bbcwildlife.org.uk/Events** to see the range of free City Nature Challenge events we'll be hosting this year.

Don't worry if you'd like to take part in the challenge but won't have access to the mobile phone app, you can also upload your wildlife records to the iNaturalist website at **inaturalist.org** or by emailing them to us at **enquires@ecorecord.org.uk**.

However you take part, citizen science projects such as the City Nature Challenge are a great way to learn more about our wonderful wildlife, at the same time as helping to protect it.



Natural Rivers, Green Corridors 2

by Sally Clague
Senior River Restoration Officer

Natural Rivers Green Corridors (NRGC) 2 is the follow up project to the successful NRGC1 project that concluded in 2021. Our work in NRGC2 continues to focus on improving the condition of the Upper Rea Catchment, including the main River Rea and its tributaries (mostly the Bourn Brook).

The River Rea is one of three major Rivers in the Birmingham and Black Country, the others being the River Stour and the River Cole. The River Rea rises South of Rubery in Waseley Hills Country Park before flowing north through Longbridge, Kings Norton and Cannon Hill Park. From here it is largely culverted as it passes through Digbeth before joining the River Tame at Spaghetti Junction just after Star City. The Tame then flows into the Trent and

finally into the Humber before reaching the sea on the East Coast.

The river is thought to have been instrumental in the creation of a settlement in the area. Dating back to the 7th Century, this provided a basis for Birmingham to build and develop throughout centuries, particularly during the industrial revolution. It was the industrial revolution that most heavily impacted on the natural state of the river, largely by manipulating river channels to serve mills and forges.

Multiple organisations are now working together to help improve the condition of the river corridor and NRGC2 is no different. Whilst here at the Trust we are heading the delivery of the project, the Environment Agency are funding the four-year project until March 2027 and we are working closely with Birmingham City Council to enable delivery of individual projects on their land.

Adam Noon the catchment coordinator for the EA has said that: *"We are thrilled to continue our long-standing partnership*

MEADOW CREATION AS PART OF NRGC1



with the Wildlife Trust by providing funding and technical guidance for the ongoing efforts to enhance and re-naturalise the Upper Rea catchment. The continuous restoration of this river system offers immense benefits and long-term effects on the area's biodiversity and contributes to the climate emergency response.

Re-naturalising rivers and watercourses is crucial for improving the environment. It helps slow the flow of water, reducing flood risks, and creates vital corridors for the migration of fish and other aquatic organisms. By restoring these natural processes, we enhance habitats for wildlife, supporting biodiversity and promoting healthier ecosystems."

Our main focus for this phase of the project is to continue minimising and mitigating the negative impacts of manmade interventions on the River. Such manmade interventions include;

- canalisation (straightening of the channel)
- removal of weirs and;
- removal of hard engineered banks (concrete, bricks or gabion baskets).

The project aims to re-naturalise the flow of the river as much as possible, and open up several kilometres of uninterrupted river corridor, whilst also considering the implementation of natural flood management processes where possible. Works to enhance terrestrial habitats adjacent to the watercourse such as

wetlands and woodlands are also being undertaken.

Our work to date includes weir removals at sites around Kings Norton and Lifford. So, what are weirs and why are we looking to remove them?

A weir is a structure built across a river or stream to control the flow of water, often by raising the water level or creating a pool for water storage or managing water flow. Weirs are usually made of concrete or stone, and they can serve purposes like flood control, water supply regulation, or even for purposes like creating small reservoirs for irrigation or recreational use. Many weirs were installed during the industrial revolution to help supply water to mills and forges along the river channel.



Whilst once thought to be effective tools for managing water flow, weirs can have significant negative impacts on rivers and their ecosystems.

Water Quality: Weirs can cause water stagnation in the areas behind them, reducing oxygen levels and increasing the risk of pollution build up. The slower-moving water behind a weir may not be as well oxygenated, which is detrimental to fish and other aquatic life.

Sediment Accumulation: Rivers naturally carry sediment downstream. When a weir is in place, sediment tends to accumulate behind it, disrupting natural sediment processes. This can lead to silt build-up, upstream of a weir and to downstream areas having reduced sediment, which affects riverbed habitats and can make the riverbed erode over time.

Blockage to migratory species: Many fish species rely on free-flowing rivers to migrate, breed, and access different habitats. Weirs can block these migrations, this is also true for invertebrate species.

Erosion and Habitat Destruction: Weirs can cause erosion downstream as they alter the natural flow patterns. As sediment accumulates behind the weir and doesn't move downstream, the force of water can erode riverbanks and destroy habitats for plants and animals. It can also create deep scour pools where the power of the water over topping the weir structure.

Flood Risk: In some cases, weirs are used to manage flood risk, but they can actually exacerbate flooding by concentrating water in certain areas and causing more severe downstream flooding when they are unable to handle sudden, high-volume flows (like during heavy rainfall).



Removal of the weirs allows the for natural river processes such as water flow, sediment transport, and nutrient cycling to re-establish, this helps to support healthy riverbeds, which in turn helps to support an increase range of flora and faunal species. It also allows for easier fish migration which is essential for breeding, feeding, and maintaining biodiversity. It's crucial for fish like salmon, trout and eel, which are currently either not present or present in low numbers in the catchment, which have specific migratory needs. We hope removal of these features helps towards the eventual return of these species in good numbers to the Upper Rea catchment.

In some cases, removing weirs can help reduce the risk of floods by restoring natural river dynamics. When rivers are allowed to flow freely, they are better able to handle sudden surges of water, lowering the risk of catastrophic flooding downstream. All these changes benefit both the environment and communities that surround them.

In short, removing weirs helps to restore rivers to their natural states, benefiting ecosystems, improving water quality,

and reducing flood risks, which is why there is a growing push to remove them, especially in areas where they are no longer serving their intended purpose.

"Removing weirs helps to restore rivers to their natural states, benefiting ecosystems, improving water quality, and reducing flood risks."

Whilst the areas that we have worked on will continue to settle into a natural flow regime, improvements can already be seen with reduced silt build up, variety in flow of the channel upstream of the weir location and wildlife making use of new habitat, including birds such as wagtails having been noted only a week after the works were completed. The areas will continue to be monitored moving forward, including invertebrate monitoring which will be done by the Trust as well as by local 'Friends of' groups.

If you are keen in getting involved and helping us sample the river

invertebrates to better understand the local water quality along the River Rea and River Cole, please contact Birmingham River Champions at birminghamriverchampions@gmail.com.

Looking forward to the next couple of years, you might see us popping up across the region, including at Pebble Mill, Northfield and Bourn Brook Walkway. We will be continuing to remove more weirs, replacing hard engineered banks with natural banks where appropriate, planting up riparian and river bank areas, creating wet meadows and enhancing riparian habitats.

All of this will help to improve the condition of the river corridor, encouraging more wildlife and biodiversity into these valuable blue/green spaces. These corridors provide connectivity across an urban landscape which is becoming more crucial to climate change resilience as the temperatures increase. We are excited to be able to continue our work and to ensure the river corridors are in the best condition they can be, to support nature moving forward.



GREY WAGTAIL ON MAN-MADE WEIR

YOU CAN SPOT LITTLE EGRETS ALONG BIRMINGHAM'S RIVERS



Pond life

The best way to boost wildlife in your garden

Boosting the wildlife in your garden couldn't be simpler or more exciting. What you need is a garden pond. Believe me you won't regret it, says the BBC's Justin Rowlatt.

There'll be a little digging. You need to go a bit deeper than you'd expect. Just over a metre is good. All the wonderful pond creatures that are going to make their home in your garden need somewhere to shelter away from the ice that will form in winter.

Then you'll need a pond liner, gravel, some native UK pond plants and aquatic compost bags. Then you just fill it with tap water and wait. This is when the magic happens.

During the first week or so your pond will go a sickly shade of green as algae makes itself at home. If you're lucky, you'll get your first creature in the second or third week. Mine was a hoglouse, a watery cousin of the woodlouse.

Next came mosquito larvae. I had loads, wriggling and squirming beneath the surface. I was transfixed

– my wife was not so impressed. But don't worry, they are the lure that is going to tempt in other creatures for whom mosquito larvae are the tastiest of treats.

The nymphs of dragonflies and damselflies can't get enough of them. Frogs and newts love them too. And if any do manage to hatch into actual mozzies, they'll be dinner for swallows, swifts and bats.

What you've created is an entire ecosystem, an intricate food web. The algae is food for the insects who are food for the frogs who are food for hedgehogs. You get the picture.

When you find yourself wondering why you are spending so long just staring at your new pond here's the answer: what is unfolding before you is nothing less than the story of life on earth.



Justin Rowlatt

is the BBC's first ever climate editor. He describes his job as reporting from the front line of climate change. Justin is also a huge fan of ponds. He put his in three years ago and hasn't looked back.





Pond algae

Learn to love your algae. It is the bottom of the food chain and without it your pond would be a lot less enticing.



Hoglouse

Hoglice are an aquatic relative of the woodlouse. And before you get sniffy about these little lice, you should know they are one of the most ancient animal species on earth at more than 300 million years old.



Rat-tailed maggot

This is one of my favourite pond creatures. Think of maggots but with snorkels attached to their bums. Except because rat-tailed maggots are aquatic, they are wonderfully clean and mutate into beautiful hoverflies.



Marsh marigolds

There are few sights more cheerful than a clump of bright yellow marsh marigolds. Think buttercups but bigger and framed by dramatic dark foliage. They provide a hiding place for frogs and nectar for insects.



Yellow flag iris

There are lots of water iris species around the world but only one real choice for UK ponds, in my opinion. The yellow flag iris, the only aquatic iris native to the UK.



Hornwort

This is one of the workhorses of a thriving pond. Hornwort is a dark green plant that floats beneath the surface releasing life-giving oxygen. But beware, just like algae, happy hornwort will grow like topsy.



Large red damselfly

On a sunny spring day there is always at least one red damselfly hovering, like a tiny helicopter, over my pond. These creatures live out their entire lives before your eyes and their nymphs Hoover up mozzie larvae.



Common frog

We have three. All slightly different colours. My wife insists she recognises each one. You'll be spellbound as they lay their spawn. The tiny black dots in the centre evolve into surprisingly rapacious tadpoles and then, majestic frogs.

In a series of articles, we're going to be meeting a number of people who use nature as an inspiration for their art.

The Art of Nature

Part One

In Part 1 we introduce Dan Steel, an Erdington-based photographer who only relatively recently discovered a love for picture taking which has led him to capture the most incredible, close-up photos of beautiful bugs, tiny slim moulds and anything else which captures his attention. You don't need to invest in vastly expensive equipment to find a inspiration of your own – so why not get out and give it a go yourself!



In Dan's own words:

"I was interested in wildlife from a young age but like many people, real life got in the way. It was only later in life, less than 8 years ago when I got a dog that, during his daily walks, I really started noticing the world that we share with all of these amazing creatures. Whether they were feathered, furry, scaly or have more than two pairs of legs there were all these wonderful things suddenly around me...

I quickly realised that, as good as modern phones are with their cameras and apps for helping identifying what I was seeing or hearing, I needed something that could transport me closer and deeper into the worlds I was only just starting to discover, so I invested in a bridge camera with the ability to zoom. Not particularly expensive or even at the high end of capabilities, I wasn't even sure if photography would be my 'thing'. Well, the more I pointed that camera at things, I soon realised that photography WAS my thing, especially macro photography, although birds like the kingfisher and green woodpecker, along with almost all raptors, will always hold a special fascination for me.

My new-found interest helped immerse me into a macro world of such vivid colours and patterns that only Mother Nature could create. Whether it be the

SALMON-EGGS (HEMITRICHIA DECIPIENS) - A SLIME MOULD JUST 3MM TALL



shimmering metallic blues of a ruby-tailed wasp as it furtively goes about its daily business, the intricate patterns on the wings of moths and butterflies or even the seemingly shy personality of a damselfly as it shimmies around a blade of pond reed trying to avoid the gaze of my lens. Each new experience and discovery helped make me want to spend even more time looking through my viewfinder.

As the lighter mornings start to come around in spring I even find time to visit the canal near to my place of work and just take an hour or so strolling the towpath, hoping to find something glistening in the morning dew that hasn't quite warmed up enough to disappear too quickly.

I very quickly upgraded my camera equipment to dedicated systems and lenses because I soon realised that there will always be something slightly further away or even smaller than the last thing I photographed that I'd want to capture, and probably fall in love with. You don't have to travel far either, the lens does that for you. You could spend pretty much eternity in your garden or local park with your macro lens and still not discover everything there is to

DAMSELFLY HIDING BEHIND A BLADE OF GRASS
FAR LEFT: RUBY-TAILED WASP

discover. Seasons don't limit your world of discovery either, whether that be the new growth of spring, the buzzy busyness of the insects in summer or the fungus and slime moulds of autumn and winter.

Discovering wildlife through a lens needn't be expensive, you don't need to spend a fortune on kit - a bridge camera is light and versatile enough that you can easily discover all the different worlds around, above and below you and is an excellent introduction to the more dedicated kit.

There are even some excellent clip-on macro lenses that you can get that fit almost all modern phones and are extremely good for helping you scratch the surface of what may well be your next obsession!"

To see more of Dan's brilliant photographs, you can give him a follow on Instagram or Flickr under the username: FantasticMrDan

All photographs in this article © Dan Steel 2025

The power of *nature notebooks*

Small observations, big impact on wildlife

Joanna Foat shares why she believes we should all have a nature notebook to aid in our efforts to protect wildlife.

Many renowned botanists, like Ellen Hutchins – Ireland’s first female botanist – began their passion for nature with a simple notebook.

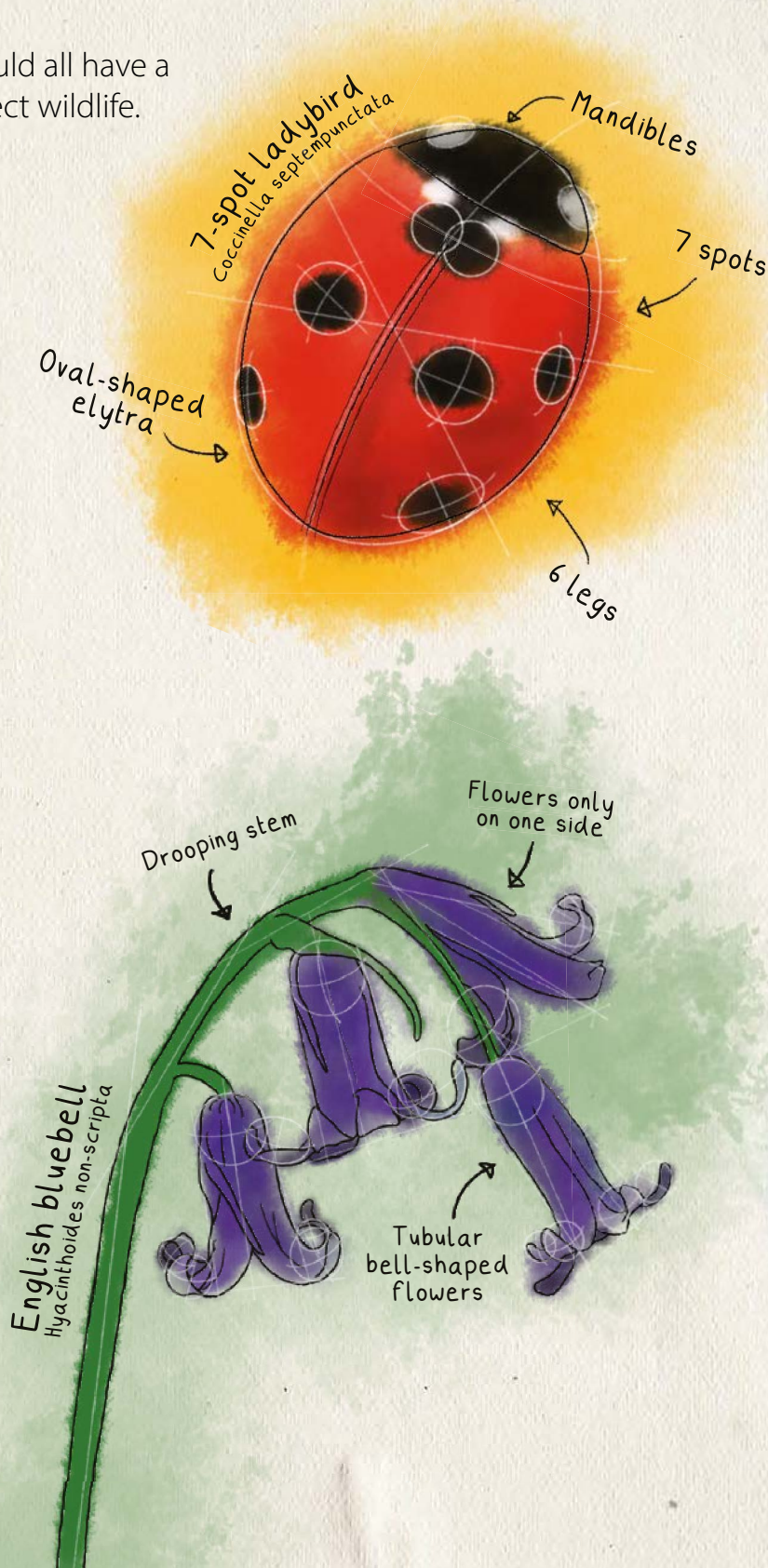
Hutchins famously spent five days admiring a piece of seaweed, carefully preserving fragments and sketching her ‘little beauties’ of mosses and lichens. The eminent Francis Rose’s field notebooks are all we have as records for some of the rarest of British lichens historically.

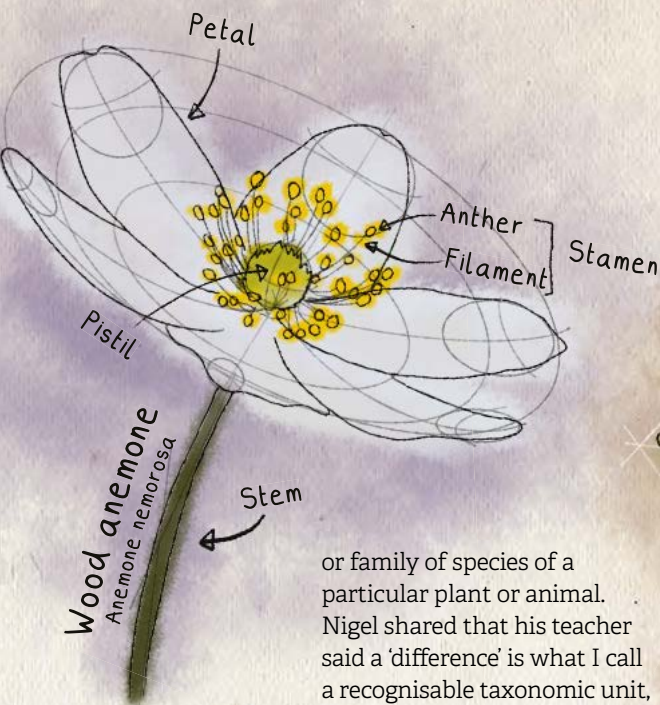
Early records of flora and fauna like these in notebooks across the UK have laid the groundwork for The Wildlife Trusts in protecting nature reserves since 1912. As we face the dual nature and climate crises, collecting data on wildlife is more critical than ever. These precious sightings not only inform conservation projects but also, eventually, government policies.

Nigel Doar, Head of Research at The Wildlife Trusts, highlights the need to engage more people of all ages in recording wildlife. Not everyone, he notes, starts with a vast knowledge of species.

“We can worry too much about what something is, when just taking notice and enjoying the beauty in nature can spark interest.”

He recalls his own challenges as a student identifying an oak tree in a hedgerow, a process akin to spot-the-difference. Conservationists use a classification system of taxonomic units – essentially the identification of shared characteristics – to help them work out the species





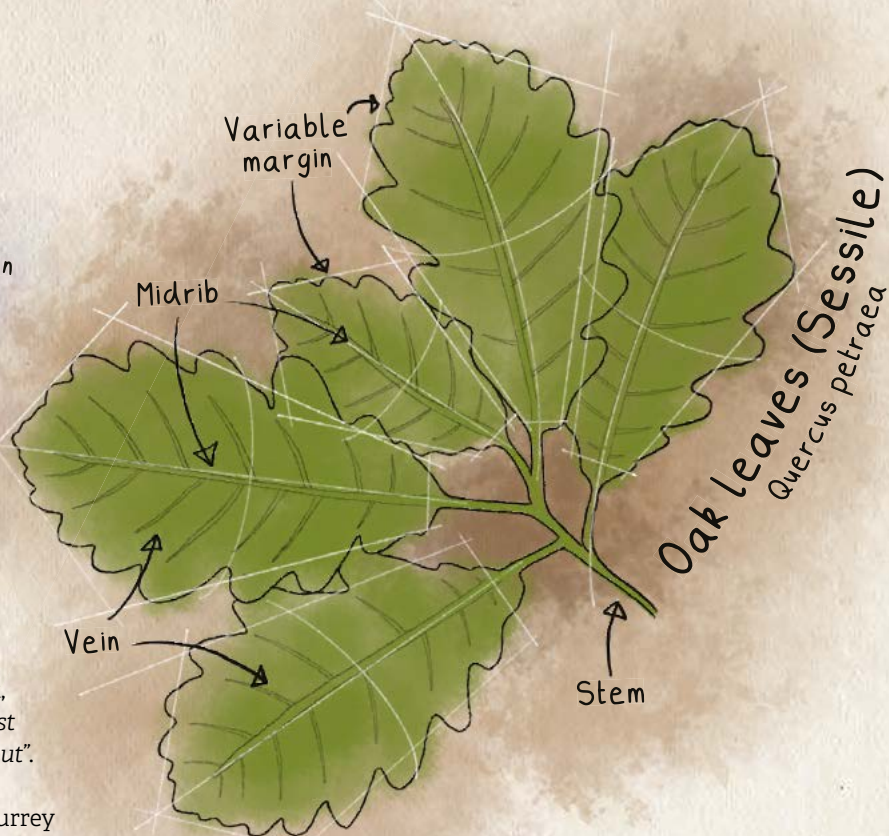
or family of species of a particular plant or animal. Nigel shared that his teacher said a 'difference' is what I call a recognisable taxonomic unit, and that "sometimes that is just enough when you are starting out".

Mike Waite, director of research and monitoring at Surrey Wildlife Trust, sees first hand how curiosity leads people from casual observation to structured surveys and contributions to science.

"Many people move from noting birds on their feeders to eventually learning bird song. Online tutorials offer training, and soon they're taking part in national breeding bird surveys. That's how I started."

Nowadays, he advises the local council on its nature recovery strategy, priority species list and measuring progress towards restoring 30 per cent of land by 2030.

He notes that although some citizen scientists may be naturally introverted or solitary, their observations on rapidly advancing species like dragonflies –



as indicators of climate change – are invaluable.

"Many new dragonfly species have colonised the UK from the continent over the past decade, providing clear data on environmental shifts."

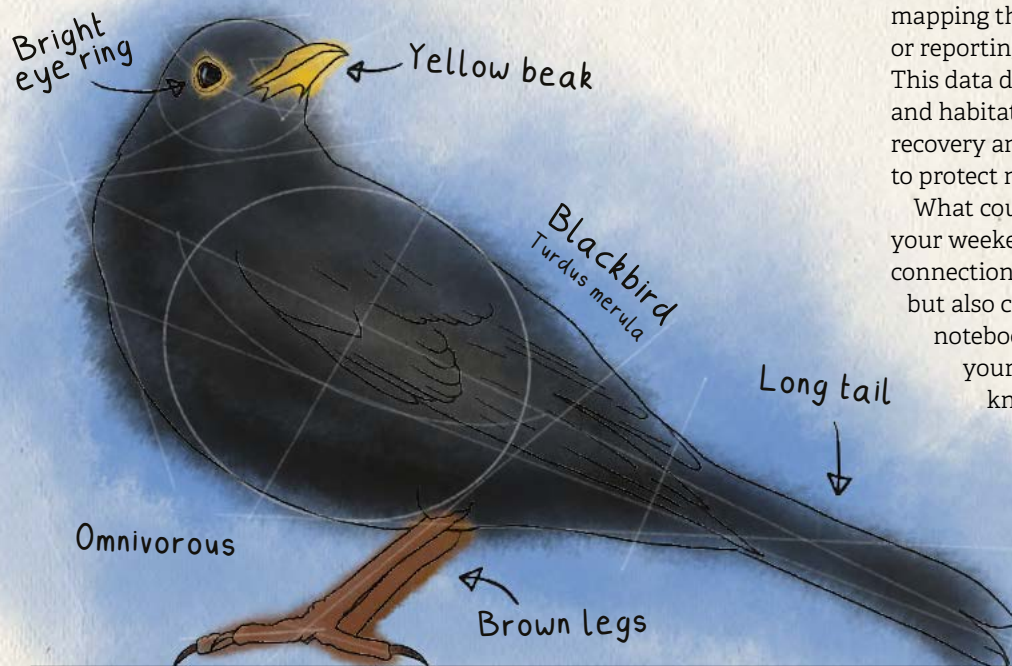
The Wildlife Trusts across the country offer citizen science programmes where volunteers learn identification skills and can contribute to conservation surveillance data. Projects include Shoresearch, Seasearch, Riversearch and Nature Counts for species monitoring to name just a few.

Thousands of people are getting involved walking transects to count the number of butterflies, mapping the distribution of hedgehogs across a city, or reporting field signs of otters along river banks. This data directly supports species conservation and habitat restoration, local strategies for nature recovery and is vitally needed to lobby government to protect nature.

What could be more rewarding than spending your weekend immersed in nature? This hands-on connection not only deepens personal engagement but also contributes to science. So, pick up a notebook, jot down your observations, and begin your journey as a citizen scientist. You never know where your notes might lead.

Find out more about how you can take part in citizen science at:

[wildlifetrusts.org/ citizen-science](https://wildlifetrusts.org/citizen-science)





In sickness and in health

Nature could save NHS £millions

Dom Higgins, head of health and education at The Wildlife Trusts, explores the sickness of nature disconnect, how the NHS bears the brunt and how The Wildlife Trusts can help with preventable illnesses.



Over 20 million people in the UK have a muscular-skeletal condition such as arthritis or back pain, over 5 million have diabetes. In May 2023 the number of people waiting for an operation was at a record high of 7.3 million – and some are predicting a rise towards 10 million, with one in five people on a hospital waiting list. Long-term sickness is resulting in 2.8 million people of working age being economically inactive. How will the NHS survive?

John from Sheffield had a quadruple heart bypass. He said *"I was in a bad way and would have spiralled into being a recluse. I hate to think really. I had PTSD and sleepless nights."* Liz has early stage dementia and couldn't go anywhere by herself. Just two examples of the longer term recovery from illness and plethora of mental health issues effecting our population today.

But there's a quiet revolution going on in the world of health and social care, which involves taking part in activities from gardening and woodwork, to wildlife conservation and walks in the park. That's because many illnesses and ailments are preventable. For example, physical inactivity can cause heart and breathing conditions, while social isolation and loneliness often lead to depression.

A recent highlight in my career was the opportunity to present the findings of The Wildlife Trusts' report *A Natural Health Service* at The Lancet UK Public Health Science Conference. The Lancet is a prestigious international medical journal that advances medical science and practice worldwide. The Lancet Conference highlights public health research from the UK and Ireland. I presented evidence showing that 'green prescribing' programmes, where GPs and healthcare professionals prescribe time in nature

as treatment and therapy, could have significant benefits. If rolled out to 1.2 million people, these programmes could save the NHS £100 million annually. The public health professionals' view was that these cost savings were underestimated.

The Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust's *Wild at Heart* programme reduced costs for the NHS associated with the mental health conditions of their 82 participants over a year by £38,646. The project has literally been a lifeline for John and Liz connecting them both to the simple pleasures of nature. Now they have a reason to go out and look forward to walks in the local park, learning about birds and photography.

Over 8,000 people took part in seven Wildlife Trusts' social prescribing pilots over two years. The pilots were spread across the country with Gwent Wildlife Trust to The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside leading them; and 57% of participants coming from the most economically under-served places and 21% from ethnic minority communities. There were big reductions in anxiety and depression, and big increases in happiness and life satisfaction, alongside an increase in feeling that 'life is worthwhile.'

Nature prescribing needs to become part of a wider Natural Health Service, one that works hand in hand with the National Health Service.

This is how the NHS will survive.

Dom Higgins is head of health and education at The Wildlife Trusts where he leads their policy and campaigning work in these areas. He is passionate about creating a stronger and more resilient healthcare system that keeps natural connections at its heart.



Members Pages

Send in your photographs and save bees!

As we leave the winter behind (and, from a purely selfish perspective, thank goodness!) we would still love to see the amazing photographs that you are taking of wildlife across Birmingham and the Black Country. You don't have to be a professional photographer - quick mobile snaps are just as appreciated. **As an added bonus, any photos that we use in the next issue of Wildlife will receive a free Beevive Kit worth £11.**

How to send your photos.

Please e-mail your submissions to membership@bbcwildlife.org.uk or

post them to us at our Centre of the Earth address. We can't wait to see them!

E-mails to be less than 10 Mb please and must be attached to the e-mail – please don't send via a File Transfer service. Photos must be your own, and if under the age of 16 you must have consent from your parent or guardian to send. Please do not submit photos that have been sent to other publications or competitions as this may cause copyright issues or invalidate your entry to them.



A Change to your magazines

You might have noticed that this issue of your magazine is a little bit thicker than previous editions. To reduce the transportation, packaging and waste which is part of the production of any magazine, we have decided to change the number of magazines we issue each

year whilst increasing the page count. *Wildlife* magazine will now be issued 3 times a year, instead of 4. The larger size of the magazine means you will receive just as much content as before and of course, if it suits you better, we can send *Wildlife* electronically.

Please rest assured that we still have no plans to carry advertising. For those of you who receive *Wildlife Watch* magazine, we will still send these out seasonally, and you will still receive each issue through the post in good time to enter any competitions or send drawings, letters and photographs.

If you have any questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact us.



A Letter to Our Members

Forty-five years ago, in 1980, a group of like-minded individuals formed the Urban Wildlife Group following the successful campaign to save Moseley Bog from redevelopment. The mission was simple: to promote and further the conservation, maintenance, study and protection of wildlife across Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

A lot has changed since then, both globally and locally. The climate crisis is an existential threat, and we are the only species that can do anything about it. Across the United Kingdom, Wildlife Trusts are working on the ground to do what we can to mitigate climate issues through large, landscape scale projects through to smaller, localised work. And while much work is funded through external partnerships and grants, it is only through the support of **you**, our loyal and engaged members, that we are able to sustain our work now, and for generations to come.

I wanted to take some space in this issue to acknowledge that things have been very difficult over the last few years. As I write this, the UK is approaching 5 years since the first recorded case of Covid-19 on our shores. The pandemic saw the entire charity sector brace itself for a dramatic fall in income. In a survey carried out by the Charity Commission in 2021ⁱ, 60% of charities reported decreased income. Yet you continued to support us.

In 2022, a massive cost of living crisis through high energy prices and increased food costs lead to inflation peaking at over 11%ⁱⁱ. Yet still you continued to support us.

As we move forward into 2025 and beyond, both international and domestic politics are going to continue to create uncertainty and doubt.

The future is not bleak, but it is challenging. No-one at Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust is going to take anything for granted. We will continue to do our work at the local scale, and campaign at the national and global scale with our fellow Wildlife Trusts and other environmental organisations, to ensure that we have a future fit for the natural world.

Whether you consider your membership donation to be big or small, please know that we will always appreciate and care for every penny we receive. Every single membership subscription, donation or minute spent volunteering is vital to saving the amazing wildlife right here on our doorstep.

From me, my team and everyone else at Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust: **thank you**.

David Green
Individual Giving Manager

ⁱ <https://charitycommission.blog.gov.uk/2021/10/28/what-new-research-tells-us-about-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-charities/>



ⁱⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/306648/inflation-rate-consumer-price-index-cpi-united-kingdom-uk/>





Be a hoverfly hero!

Whether pollinating plants, hunting aphids or breaking down waste, hoverflies help keep gardens healthy. Discover more about these incredible insects and how you can help them in return.

wildaboutgardens.org.uk



The
Wildlife
Trusts



RHS

Inspiring everyone to grow