

## **Report of the Environmental Audit Group**

### **Terms of reference for environmental audit**

-To survey the two fields and assemble a log of the main environmental assets on the site.

-To make recommendations to the committee on which areas of the site should be protected as important environmental assets and how they could be enhanced and the cost of doing so.

-To propose arrangements which could be instituted to collect and monitor information on flora and fauna on the site and report to association members from time to time making further recommendations as necessary on any actions needed to safeguard and develop it.

-To make a first report back to the Committee by 1 March 2010 so that a report can be placed before the AGM

### **Summary of Groups findings**

The group's members were- Phill Hughes, Chairman, Ann O'Sullivan Secretary, Gordon Bell, Penny Baker and Faye Bennett.

#### ***The Groups conclusions are:***

The primary purpose of the Allotment Association is to promote allotment gardening and the production of fruit and vegetables on the site. This needs to be borne in mind when considering what can be done to make the site more environmentally conscious and wildlife friendly. When the two objectives conflict the allotment gardening priority should normally prevail.

However, much can be done to improve the environmental impact of this site, surrounded as it is by ever increasing development and loss of habitat. The group's recommendations fall into three groups:

- i) Major projects to improve the site.
- ii) Smaller projects on the communal areas and borders/fences/entrance areas.
- iii) Measures individual plot holders can take to make their allotment gardening more environmentally friendly.

### **Major Projects**

There are two areas of our site which cannot be used for allotment gardening. These are the wood at the bottom of the upper field and the area at the bottom of the lower field which is regarded as too wet for vegetable growing. The group recommends that:

1. Work should be carried out on the wood in the upper field to clear rubbish, develop a path through to make a woodland trail and associated minor works and plantings to enhance its overall appearance and attractiveness to wildlife.
2. Clear some of the area at the area in the lower field closest to the houses and construct a large pond – subject to expert advice. This would be surrounded by selective tree planting. Such works should be carried out at times that cause least damage to wildlife-primarily between September and January.

Note – An audit of trees in uncultivated areas has been started.

### **Smaller Projects**

These projects should concentrate on improving the border areas of the site and also the areas (mainly on the lower field) which are currently covered by brambles. It should be made clear to plot holders that these areas cannot be cut or cleared without approval by the Allotment Committee after consultation with the environmental group.

In particular the group recommends:

1. A programme of native hedge plantings to screen ourselves from the cemetery border.
2. Enhancement of the two communal grass areas with complementary bush/tree and flower planting around the borders.
3. Protection of the existing bramble areas on the lower field.
4. Protection of the remaining blackthorn hedge along the border joining the two fields providing it does not unreasonably impede allotment gardening on the adjoining plots.
5. Improvement of the entrance areas with suitable plantings to make the approach areas more attractive and encourage pollinating insects.
6. Measures to make the site more attractive to birdlife by fixing bird boxes in suitable areas. In the wood owl boxes and bat boxes could be installed after consultation with local wildlife groups.

### **Plot Based Projects**

7. Plot holders should be encouraged to garden in an environmentally friendly way wherever possible by offering some simple best practise suggestions such as minimising the use of pesticides, building log piles, leaving small areas which are not weeded and used for cultivation and where possible recycling prunings and cuttings rather than burning them. The website could be used to promote this.
8. Similarly the website can be used to record bird sightings (there is already a bird list) and this could be extended to include a listing of flora, insects, amphibians and mammals. It

could also highlight interesting seasonal phenomena such as bird nesting locations, what is in flower, and moths/butterflies/dragonflies to spot.

### **Organising the programme**

This work cannot be done overnight and a programme can be worked out to cover a number of years and to fit in with the allotment volunteer days so that every time there is a volunteer weekend some environmental improvements can be included in the work programme.

### **Proposals in Detail**

#### **The Wood in the upper field**

It is quite exceptional to have such a substantial wood at the bottom of the upper field which already provides a very valuable area for wildlife. It could well be argued that this should simply be left alone to let the existing wildlife enjoy. This is largely what the group recommend. However the wood is largely impenetrable in certain areas and a lot of rubbish has been dumped in it. Considerable improvements could therefore be made with a minimum of effort by clearing the rubbish and creating a trail around the edge of the wood which members could follow. Wildflower plantings (bluebells and other native species) could be carried out along the border of the path and a seating area could be provided. A simple bird watching hide could be constructed – subject to advice. A small pond could be built near the hide to encourage birdlife. All this work would require quite a considerable effort in terms of volunteer time but would involve only minor financial cost for the plants and possible for the pond construction. Any seating could be made from available wood etc.

#### **The Lower Field area.**

There is a considerable boggy area at the bottom of the lower field. The group proposes that a pond should be constructed in this area and to encourage the growth of native water plants within it. Ponds are generally regarded as excellent for encouraging bio-diversity.

Surrounding the pond there could be planting of some indigenous tree species which could survive the damp conditions, such as Birch, Alder and Willow.

In order to carry out this project a small digger would need to be hired for a number of days to clear the existing area and dig out the pond. There would be a cost for this together with purchasing any necessary plantings. Expert advice will be sought concerning the need to use a pond liner on our heavy clay soil.

## **The Borders**

There is a need to work on the border areas of the site. This is to improve security (particularly in the upper field) and to provide extra privacy on the border with the cemetery on the lower field. Individual plot holders can help in some areas by planting their own barriers but the Association as a whole could implement a programme of planting suitable indigenous species along the fences (over 50 trees for hedging were planted in Spring 2011- see website for details). Some expenditure will be incurred in buying these plants although plot holders could be encouraged to pot up any suitable seedlings they find on their plots for this purpose.

The group also felt that along the borders and the separating fence between the two fields closest to the entrances some wildflowers and additional hedging could be planted to make the approach areas to the allotment more wildlife friendly and attractive (some cowslips, primroses and violets were planted in Spring 2011). Similar enhancements on the two communal areas should also be considered as well as some permanent seating arrangements on both.

The Association should also make it clear (possibly through a section on the website) that specified areas which are currently uncultivated and (usually) covered in brambles should not be cut back providing they are not interfering with allotment gardening. These areas should not be used under any circumstances for dumping rubbish or weeds etc.

## **Encouraging the Birds and Bees**

The site is already a haven for birds (note the current bird list on the web site) and many members already encourage feeding etc. The ponds on site also help. But more could be done and in particular the group considered whether more could be done to encourage either bats/owls by providing nesting boxes in the woods. Local interest groups could be consulted for more advice on what to do.

There are already two thriving bee colonies on the lower field which seem to blend in well and cause no problems for members. Some plot holders may be concerned by the proximity of the hives, so careful consideration should be given to any requests from plot holders to introduce further hives. But it is important to ensure we have a good supply of pollinators available on site not to mention the honey which is produced. Planting more wildflowers and indigenous flowering hedging in the communal areas should also enhance the range of pollinating insects.