

Encouraging wildlife on the park

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Rufus Bellamy, the Association's National Adviser on conservation and environmental management, discusses the creation of wildlife habitats on parks



It is one of the pleasures of being involved in the David Bellamy Conservation Award Scheme (DBCAS) that I get to visit parks around the country that are working hard to look after the wildlife within their boundaries. What always strikes me is the pride taken in the work and the way in which it pays off by making the whole park experience richer for guests.

For example, when I recently visited Witton Castle Country Park in County Durham, I was able to enjoy the park's nature trail which has become a real draw for visitors. The trail starts at the oldest tree in the park – a 655-year-old English oak. It then leads the visitor around the park, pointing out the wonderful diversity of plants and animals that can be seen, weaving in stories of the park's social and industrial history to place everything in a wider context.

At parks such as Witton Castle, the benefits of nature, in terms of enhancing the holiday experience, are very evident and often those benefits extend far beyond the park boundaries.

The importance of parks for biodiversity

'The value of these park environments should not be underestimated,' said Kevin James from the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust (one of the assessors for DBCAS). *'As our countryside continues to be intensively managed for food, small parks such as these within our landscape provide a rural retreat of inestimable value. Good ecological management can transform a park into a flourishing oasis amidst an arid arable landscape. Cultivating and supporting a variety of habitats will offer the best chance of survival to our native wildlife.'*

The results from the annual RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch survey 2013 demonstrate just how much help Britain's wildlife needs. The survey showed that numbers of some of our best-loved and most familiar garden birds have

fallen in gardens. For example, numbers of house sparrows have dropped by 63% since 1979, starlings suffered an 82% drop over the same time and song thrush numbers have dropped by 59%.

The RSPB's Adrian Thomas, author of RSPB *'Gardening for Wildlife'*, said; *'Gardens can offer a real lifeline for wildlife. Just doing a few simple things in our gardens can mean they provide food, shelter and nesting spaces for birds, which are vital for the species that are struggling.'*

Feed the birds

Adrian's words about gardens apply equally to parks (which, depending on their size, straddle the ecological management divide between gardens and open farmland), so it is interesting to see what he says should be done:

'What sparrows really need are gardens full of insects. Try leaving some areas of grass to grow long. You can still give it neat edges and make a design feature of it, but crucially this will allow certain insects to thrive and the grasses to set seed,' said Adrian.

His advice about starlings also focuses on supplying the right food: *'In summer starlings seek out insects such as beetles, flies, flying ants and worms, and especially leather-jackets, so gardens with a lawn will help,'* he said. *'In autumn they love fruit like elderberries, so try planting an elder tree. You could also put a starling nest box high up on the shady side of a house, which is a large box at least 25cm deep with a 45mm round hole.'*

(1) Monty, a magnificent male osprey near Morben Isaf Holiday Home and Touring Park, Machynlleth

For song thrushes Adrian highlights the importance of berries: *'Plant berry-bearing bushes and try to avoid sweeping up all the leaf litter as they'll hop around in it, flicking over leaves to find food,'* he advised. *'They like moist and shady areas and will really benefit from a garden full of worms and snails, so keep up the mulches in your flower beds, which will help you control weeds too.'*

Adrian's words highlight the importance of providing wildlife with food and shelter throughout the year. Indeed, providing these basic requirements (and making sure that there is enough water) should be the starting point for any park wildlife conservation programme.

'Growing' biodiversity

Parks can do much more than a gardener can, both in terms of scale and ambition. Someone who knows just what is possible is the agronomist Marek Nowakowski, who is part of an organisation called the Farmed Environment Company (FEC). The FEC has been working closely with landowners to develop techniques in which landowners can 'farm' biodiversity.

'My philosophy is simple,' said Marek. *'If you put back natural habitats then nature will find them and wildlife will benefit. If you can sow winter bird food or pollen or nectar sources in the form of native wild flowers then you will be doing something of immense importance.'*

On the farms where Marek and his team have been putting in flower-rich grasslands and other important habitats, the number of butterflies and other insects have increased dramatically. On one farm, four butterfly species – marbled white, small copper, small heath and common blue – apparently colonised only after his planting plan had been put in place.

To encourage wildlife, parks must therefore do two main things: manage their grounds to provide the food, water and shelter which will help support as wide a range of species as possible; and work to create new habitat areas and habitat types to enhance the wildlife value of their parks.

Surveys

Such work needs planning so an important first step is to identify what wildlife already exists on a park and to highlight what steps can be taken to support it. This is where a simple ecological survey can come in handy.

Such surveys (which local Wildlife Trusts can help with) provide a number of key benefits. They give a baseline to start working from and they highlight anything of specific value that a park already has. For example, one park that takes part in the DBCAS had a survey only to find that it had water voles using its drainage ditches, something of which they were not previously aware.

Surveys can help a park see what potential it has got; they allow managers to set priorities and suggest a number of projects which staff might want to consider. For example, one park in the DBCAS conducted a survey which indicated it was in a good area for barn owls, so the park decided to put up owl boxes – which have been a great success.

Knowing what there is to work with can really help focus wildlife conservation projects. Take bats, for example: the 17 species of British bat eat insects and often forage along tall hedgerows. If a park finds they have a population of bats, they can be helped by creating water features which attract insects, by planting night-scented plants, by putting up bat boxes and by avoiding the use of pesticides that reduce insect numbers and can be directly harmful to bats. *continued...*



Wild flowers on the park encourage wildlife © Sue Fagg

Wild flowers

Although the majority of grass on a park will, by necessity, have to be close mown, there are many areas that can be managed as an incredibly valuable source of food for key pollinators such as bees. This work can range from simply allowing grass strips, road verges or field corners to develop a more varied wild flower flora to putting in wild flower plug plants or setting aside ground to create a wild flower meadow.

On farms and parks a diverse legume mix and a regionally-appropriate mixture of wild flowers will provide nectar and pollen for insects (and therefore food for birds) from April to September. The value of such work has been shown in the field – the five-year LINK Farm4bio project recorded a 450% increase in the number of wild bees in flower-rich grassland (compared to grass-only margins).

Such wild flower areas can be complemented by other planting. For example, many parks have achieved great success attracting butterflies by planting David Bellamy butterfly bars – clumps of different varieties of buddleia which provide vital nectar for many butterflies and other sorts of pollinating insects. Rambling roses, honeysuckles and night-scented stocks are also ideal candidates for wildlife-friendly planting.

It is also important to provide food for the autumn and winter. Here planting winter birdseed cover and ensuring that the park has a good mix of berry-bearing hedgerow, shrubs and trees is vital. One other idea is to think about establishing

a small orchard – fruit trees are of wildlife benefit from flower to fruit.

As with all planting work, remember that what works in one bit of the countryside won't work in another. For example, many botanists are wary about a blanket suggestion of planting buckthorn as it is a very invasive pest in sandy soil coastal parks.

In order to spread the availability of food across the seasons, remember to choose plants which flower at different times so that nectar and pollen are available for as long as possible and don't cut back perennial plants until spring so that their seed heads can provide winter food.

Wild areas matter

When it comes to implementing a wildlife-friendly planting strategy, DBCAS assessor Dave Miller from the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust advises a mix of action and inaction: *'I am always encouraging my parks to plant wild flowers and butterfly areas as sources of nectar for butterflies, bees and moths,'* he said. *'But I also like wild areas where very little is done so that there is cover for wild animals with nettles, umbellifers, brambles and the like. These areas are often around the boundary of the park.'*

The importance of wild areas is also backed up by the RSPB's Adrian Thomas when advising on what can be done

to help the bullfinch (7% fewer bullfinches were seen in the Birdwatch this year compared to ten years ago).

'Nettles are not compulsory in wildlife gardening, but if there is space then this is one species that will appreciate a nettle bed, as bullfinches do like the seeds, as well as areas of thick undergrowth. Nettles will benefit several butterfly species too, which have suffered terribly due to the relentless wet and cold weather last spring and summer.'

When it comes to any planting – from wild flowers and shrubs to hedges and trees – there is no doubt that planting native species, preferably of local provenance, is the best bet for wildlife. To see which trees and other plants are best for the park and which will provide the most benefit to local wildlife, visit www.floralocale.org. This includes a list of suppliers of British and Irish native flora and advice on how to choose the best biodiversity boosters for the park.

Another strategy is simply to look at what grows naturally. If space allows, then look into setting up a greenhouse or nursery to propagate and grow plants native to the area.

Creating new habitats

Planting is only one part of the habitat management challenge. Another key way in which a park can encourage a wider diversity of wildlife is to think about how they manage and enhance existing habitats (and put in new habitat areas). A key goal here is creating structural diversity: in other words create lots of different types of places – or microhabitats – where animals and plants can make a home.

For example, when putting in new woodland areas or hedges (or enhancing existing ones) plant several different, regionally-appropriate native species. Hedges with both shrub and taller tree layers have been found to be particularly good for birds.

In established woodlands, the goal of structural diversity means working to create a thriving understorey and considering the role of glades and rides within the wood to provide areas suitable for less shade-tolerant plants. In any woodland, it is also vital to think about dead wood and decay. The decaying products of woodland plants, from leaf litter to rotting wood, provide food sources and microhabitats for thousands of other different kinds of organisms. Large individual rotting logs, piles of logs and old tree stumps provide a staggering number of microhabitats, as will old trees – so leave them in place. The rule of thumb is that the longer wood is left to rot, the better it will be for wildlife.

A particularly good example of this comes from Forest Park in North Norfolk, which recently won a DBCAS Special Distinction Award. At the park, a long-term programme of woodland management work has seen the understorey of the park's wood burst into new life.

Before the park started its work, the understorey of its woodlands was dominated by rhododendron, which reduced its biodiversity. An enormous amount of work has been done to remove much of this non-native species. The woods are now returning to their former glory and there are signs of a much more diverse woodland floor flora developing.



The Springs Holiday Park, Pershore

The work at Forest Park shows the importance of systematic, long-term planning when dealing with any significant piece of habitat management. The project also highlights the importance of dealing with alien species (such as Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed) which can crowd out native species.

Linking habitat areas

When establishing new habitats, one general rule is that large continuous areas of habitat support larger numbers of species than small isolated areas. If possible aim to create large habitat areas or provide ecological corridors (such as hedgerows and banks) linking otherwise isolated habitats.

In a park this can be done by dividing up open fields with banking and planting using species that are appropriate to the park's location. This provides the shelter that the animals that live in the surrounding countryside need to move freely. Planting between pitches in this way not only provides routes that wild animals can use, but also provides a visual break and enhances each individual plot.

Well-planned and well-managed habitats will provide vital food, water and shelter to a rich mix of wildlife. However, another key issue to take into account when providing areas for wildlife to forage and breed is disruption. For example, if a park is found to contain woodland which has good potential as

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a site for bat roosts, then it is vital to give bats a safe place where they can live and breed. Experts advise setting aside a group of trees or areas of woodland as a nature reserve where they will not be disturbed. The need for peace and quiet is equally applicable to many other species – and a potential challenge on a busy park.

Giving nature space

Kevin James champions the idea of sanctuary areas – areas to which people have no access at certain times of year and limited access at other times. *'Areas that have excluded all human activity will thrive,'* said Kevin. *'Small areas in the corner of a park that may be difficult to manage are often ideal. Water is also a good medium to choose. Entire ponds or areas that are zoned off - thereby limiting access - are extremely beneficial for wildlife.'*

Ponds, along with wild flower meadows, hedgerows and new woodland areas, are obvious candidates for a park habitat creation project. If building a new pond, then the best pond profile for wildlife is a shallow saucer shape with gently shelving sides. Put in a good mixture of appropriate aquatic plants (oxygenators such as hornwort are particularly important). Many parks report health and safety concerns about water features, so please implement sensible signage and fencing to keep everyone safe.

Make sure that animals can get in and out easily by providing escape routes. Also make sure that there are stones for newts to hibernate under, that autumn leaves are removed and that any ice is broken in the winter to let oxygen in.

However, a new pond is not necessary to create a valuable wetland habitat on a park. It might be possible to take advantage of naturally occurring scrapes – shallow depressions with gently sloping edges, which seasonally hold water. According to the RSPB, scrapes are very attractive to wildlife and should be left as they provide a habitat for a wide variety of invertebrates and can provide important feeding areas for breeding wading birds and their chicks.

A helping hand

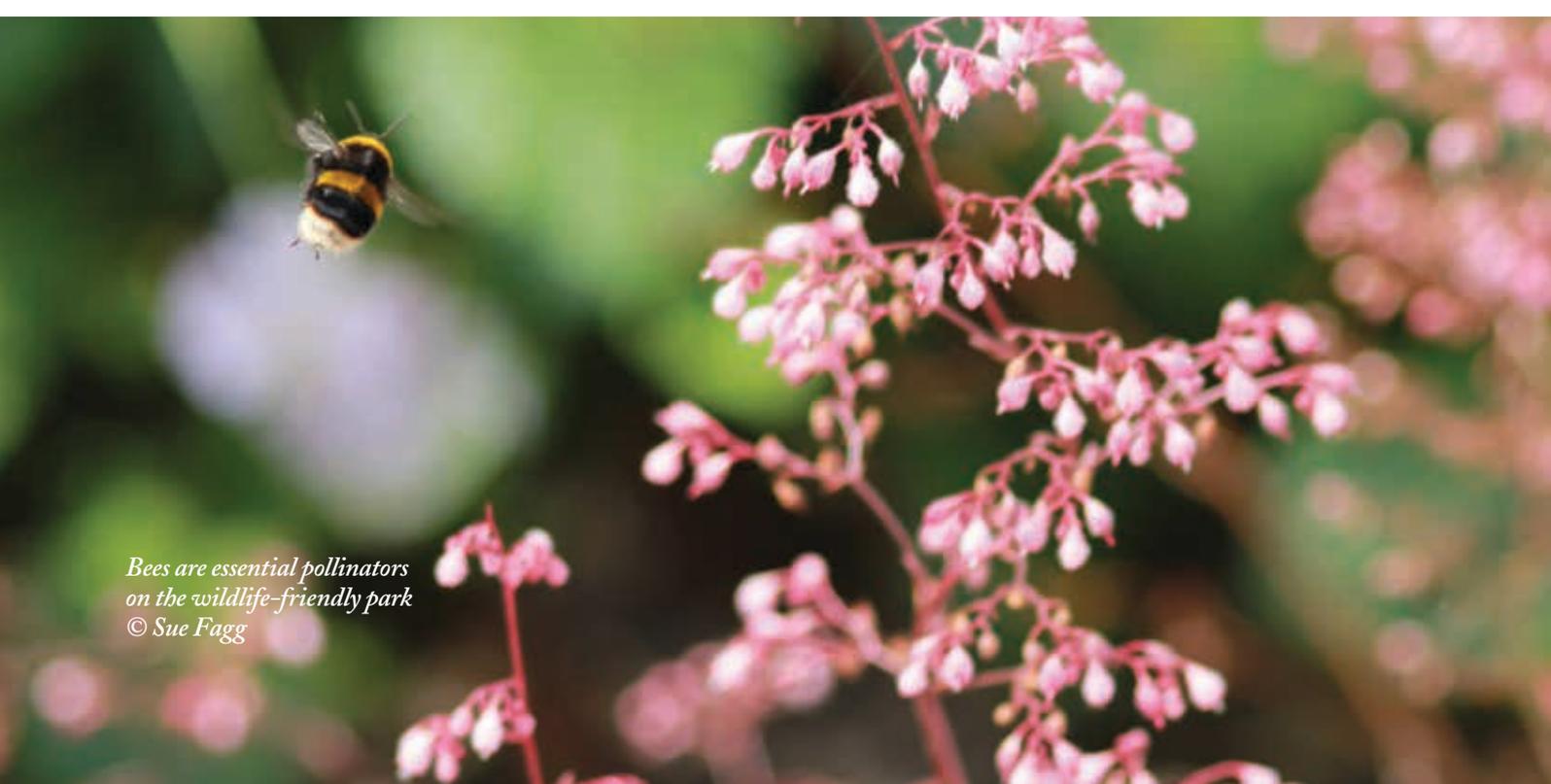
The opportunities for creating new habitats are not limited to ponds, meadows and woodland – for example, many parks have added a reed bed habitat as a final stage of sewage treatment. Some pioneers have even added a new habitat on the roof of their lodges or reception building by planting them up with a matt of sedum or other types of living roofs.

However, in many parks space is at a premium and new habitat creation is simply not possible. In such cases, shelter can be provided in other ways. For example, it is possible to provide an artificial home for the red mason bee. This is a really first-rate pollinator, but unlike its better-known cousin the honey bee, it doesn't live in a hive. Instead the females lay their eggs in hollow plant stems or other tubes such as nail holes in old plaster. A 'bee hotel' or 'bee brick' is simply a collection of tubes that the bees can use. You can get commercial versions but it is possible to make your own out of a bundle of 10-20cm long sections of old bamboo canes. Put the 'hotel' in a sunny spot out of the rain.

Bees aren't the only creatures parks can help in this way. Bird and bat boxes come in many different designs which can cater for a variety of species including hole-nesting birds, hibernating bats and birds of prey, such as the barn owl and peregrine falcon. Less obvious examples of giving nature a helping hand include the provision of artificial egg-laying sites for reptiles and artificial holts for otters.

For such measures to be most beneficial some thought needs to be given about their use and location. For example, bird boxes will be of greater potential value in a young woodland plantation than in older woodland, which may contain many natural nesting sites. A riverbank could be in an area where otters are present, but if it is subject to frequent disturbance (e.g. from dog walkers) then an artificial holt is unlikely to be used.

Overall the wildlife management challenge comes back to the three key ingredients that wildlife needs: food, water and shelter. The exciting thing is that parks can help in a myriad of ways from putting up a feeding station and bird box to creating a new woodland and pond – all of it important and worthwhile. ●



*Bees are essential pollinators
on the wildlife-friendly park*
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