

Newsletter from the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to inform those who can affect nature's position in politics and help inspire community involvement.

A new vision needed for HS2

The Wildlife Trusts' report *What's the Damage? Why HS2 Will Cost Nature Too Much* shows that huge swathes of irreplaceable natural habitat and precious wildlife sites will be destroyed by the project. That is why we were particularly disappointed when the Government gave HS2 the green light. We have campaigned against HS2 for years, but now our focus must switch to making the best of a bad situation and ensuring that HS2 is the greenest it can be and contributes to a Nature Recovery Network.

The Government and HS2 must reassess the approach they have taken to date and ensure that the impact on the natural environment is fully assessed and plans drastically changed to deliver a net gain for nature.

“ A flagship infrastructure project must demonstrate an exemplary regard for the environment. ”

Over the last few years BBOWT has met with politicians, HS2 representatives and their key contractors to set out the devastating effect on wildlife the project would have. However, works have continued with scant regard for the environment. In early December 2019, HS2 undertook clearance works at our Calvert Jubilee nature reserve in Buckinghamshire without advance warning. This approach must change if the project is to turn a corner and contribute to restoring our natural environment.

A flagship infrastructure project must demonstrate an exemplary regard for the environment. The Wildlife Trusts' Greener Vision is not just to prevent further declines in species and habitats, but to restore our natural environment. Our vision is a 1km ribbon of wildlife-rich landscape either side of the line where recreated and naturally regenerated habitats would buffer, link and provide 'stepping stones' between wildlife sites. Funding for ongoing maintenance would be part of the HS2 legacy.

On Tuesday, February 4 our Chief Executive, Estelle Bailey, was part of a delegation which went to Downing Street to deliver a letter to the prime minister asking him to re-think HS2. The letter was supported by the signatures of over 66,000 people, including an amazing 7,500 people across Berks, Bucks and Oxon.

We were overwhelmed by the support people displayed. BBOWT still believes that nature need not pay the price for HS2.



What you can do

- Scrutinise HS2's plans for offsets in your area and ensure they deliver gains for wildlife.
- Work with BBOWT to minimise the damage caused.

A new hope for nature

Following December's general election, two landmark pieces of legislation have been reintroduced into Parliament, both of which will be crucial in shaping how we are able to respond to the nature and climate emergency we are facing.

The Agriculture Bill marks a clear intention to change how taxpayers' money is spent towards environmental 'public goods'. The Wildlife Trusts is working with other NGOs to ensure that as the Bill goes through Parliament, the Government's focus on turning the tide on nature's decline is not lost. This can only happen if farmers and land managers are properly supported by long-term and substantial funding.

The Environment Bill, the first of its kind for over 20 years, will establish a new structure for managing the environment and will aim to strengthen environmental protections to reverse nature's decline. The Wildlife Trusts has welcomed the Bill's

commitment to create local nature recovery strategies to support a Nature Recovery Network. However there are other areas of the bill which cause concern and again, working with other NGOs, we will be pressing for several improvements as it make its passage through parliament.

Progress of the Bills has understandably stalled as a result of the coronavirus. However, once Parliament's scrutiny of the Bills continue, it is vital that the legislation is improved to reverse nature's decline.

What you can do

- Press Government to ensure funds are made available under the Environment Bill to local authorities to create Nature Recovery Strategies.

Unleashing the potential for wildlife in our countryside

With our three counties under huge development pressure, our ambitions for the natural world must not be limited by the Environment Bill and new requirements for developers to deliver biodiversity net gain. Our countryside has huge potential to be thriving with wildlife if managed with nature in mind. Whilst mandatory biodiversity net gain is a positive step forward, changing land management practices could have a much greater impact on our threatened wildlife. The Environment Bill and Agriculture Bill must operate together to fund wildlife friendly farming and not facilitate the development of farmland.

The Environment Bill will require that developments for which planning permission is granted create a greater biodiversity value than existed pre-development. The current minimum biodiversity uplift proposed is 10%, and such modest gains would only be protected for 30 years. This represents the minimum of what we should aspire to achieve. However, we should not only focus on the potential of what developments can create, but also the potential of the land that has been lost.

Ten per cent biodiversity net gain will apply regardless of whether it is a concrete desert or arable farmland that is being developed. Depending on the farming practices both could be deficient, but arguably building on farmland would represent a greater impact on nature due to the loss of potential. An area that is already covered in concrete has little potential for wildlife so a 10% improvement on its redevelopment, whilst small, is positive. However, arable farmland has great potential to support an abundance of wildlife if managed with nature in mind, so a 10% increase on what could potentially be a low baseline is not a good enough aspiration.

Barn owls, corn buntings, linnets and a glorious array of other farmland birds could become a more common sight if farmers are supported to help wildlife, rather than agricultural land being built on. The diversity of plants and insects would also be greatly improved.

Our three counties face huge development pressures with a large amount being on farmland, such as the new Grazeley Garden Settlement, south of Reading, with over 15,000 homes being built over circa 770ha. The large-scale urbanization of farmland can result in the loss of potential to restore it to semi-natural habitat. If managed better, farmland can be much more attractive for wildlife. We should not assume that developing farmland to create a 10% biodiversity net gain is an adequate ambition; it is the bare minimum. Many farmers manage their land with wildlife in mind, and where farmland is not rich in wildlife, we need to improve farming practices to make them havens for wildlife. This is what the Agriculture Bill needs to achieve.

What you can do

- Advocate to ensure the 'public funds for public goods' in the Agricultural Bill focus on environmental benefits and wildlife friendly land management practices.
- Advocate for greater ambition from the Environment Bill – 10% biodiversity net gain should be a bare minimum. We recommend 20%.

Why local authorities need Nature Recovery Networks

We are in the midst of a nature emergency. The recovery measures tried so far have failed to make any dent in the consistent and precipitous decline we are witnessing in our nation's biodiversity. Three successive national State of Nature reports have revealed a detailed picture of yearly declines in the abundance and distribution of monitored species. Over half (58%) of the 697 species monitored have been on a downward trajectory spanning the last 50 years.

This is not a temporary problem, but a fundamental crisis of how we are managing our natural environment. Pressures on wildlife come from many sides; farmland management, pollution, climate change, built development, hydrological change, invasive species, poor habitat management and human disturbance. Much effort is expended protecting and managing nature reserves, which are too often isolated in a landscape of intensive farm or urban land use and remain vulnerable while the climate shifts and pressures increase. Any truly effective solution needs to address all of these drivers yet be realistic to implement and, crucially, resourced.

We have known for nearly a decade what is needed in order to fix the nature emergency. We need a Nature Recovery Network - a nationally coherent and resilient ecological network - which is fully integrated with the planning system. The Wildlife Trusts have been campaigning for government to support development of a Nature Recovery Network for many years. In 2018 we began a concerted campaign for the Nature Recovery Network to be the means of realising a Wilder Britain.

Gradually the institutions and policy mechanisms have been put in place to begin this new chapter in UK conservation. The planning system is now expected to consider the natural environment in decision making and strategic planning by delivering biodiversity net gain, green infrastructure, climate mitigation and adaptation, and enhanced natural capital. It is envisaged that the Nature Recovery Network becomes the comprehensive local framework for prioritising investment in the natural environment to meet this range of policy priorities.

The National Planning Policy Framework expects the Nature Recovery Network to be this unifying instrument and the re-introduced Environment Bill puts the onus squarely on local authorities to prepare them for their area. But by making use of existing partnerships with local expertise, data, information, and help implementing the actions on the ground, local authorities can ensure that the preparation of the local Nature Recovery Network is not simply a paper exercise, but an investment in developing a realistic and integral tool for better planning.

In 2019 we started to work with our partners, Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Wild Oxfordshire, to develop a proposed Nature Recovery Network in Oxfordshire. We engaged stakeholders from across the environmental community, and now have a draft spatial representation of an Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network, which includes core areas to protect nature, and a broader network to help restore nature. The first draft of the Nature Recovery Network is now available online¹, and in 2020 we will continue work with our partners and local authorities to finalise our collective vision for nature's recovery in Oxfordshire.

We will be submitting the proposed Oxfordshire NRN into the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, to help ensure that it can be used to its full potential – to be a comprehensive local framework to inform planning decisions, and for prioritising investment in the natural environment. We're also looking to work with key partners across Berkshire and Buckinghamshire to ensure that similar transparent and robust processes are followed to develop Nature Recovery Networks across all three counties.

1 <http://www.tverc.org/cms/news/proposed-nature-recovery-network-oxfordshire>

What you can do

- Ask your council / local authority to fund a Nature Recovery Network for your county and work with your Local Nature Partnership or environmental groups to deliver it.



Nature: the natural solution to tackle climate change now

The climate crisis is an urgent global problem, which requires action at a global scale. To halt climate change, we must remove carbon already in the atmosphere, drastically reduce future emissions, and transition to a low carbon economy.

Nature is a ready-made solution to help tackle climate change now and nature based solutions could deliver more than 30% of the emissions reductions needed by 2030.

Tree planting is typically the first nature-based solution to climate change that springs to most people's mind. Trees absorb carbon as they grow, storing it in their trunks, roots and in the soil, so allowing woodlands to grow naturally will lock up carbon and help counter manmade carbon emissions. But trees are only part of the solution.

In the UK there are many habitats that when protected or restored can store carbon, such as woodlands, peatland, and grasslands. Even sustainably managed agricultural land can help store carbon through the creation of healthy carbon-rich soils, and the creation of lush habitats like meadows, trees and hedgerows amongst fields.

At BBOWT, we protect habitats within our reserves, supporting the avoidance of loss of more habitat and emissions of associated carbon. We also restore habitats in our reserves and in the wider countryside, which helps to lock up carbon.

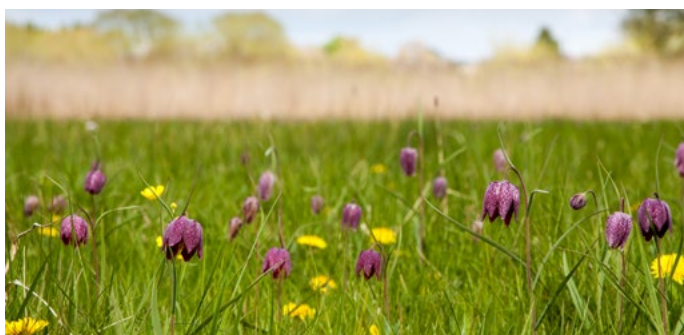
In November this year, the UN Climate Change Conference will take place in Glasgow where countries will plan to ensure that the goals of the Paris Agreement are achieved. For the first time in the history of the UN climate change conference,

nature-based solutions will feature as a key approach to tackle climate change. The emergency response to climate change therefore must require major investment in nature.

Given the urgency of tackling climate change, we are ramping up our conservation activities beyond our reserve network, to our Living Landscapes and the wider countryside. We are investigating new ways of working with landowners to deliver nature-based solutions in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. This will help us restore nature at landscape-scale, to help halt the loss of British wildlife, and at the same time contribute to tackling the climate crisis.

What you can do

- If your council has declared a climate emergency or made a carbon reduction commitment, talk to us at BBOWT about ways you could invest in local nature based solutions to meet your goals.



Contact us



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Estelle leads the team of Directors who are delivering the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's *Strategic Plan 2016 -2021: Be part of nature's recovery*.



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Prue leads BBOWT's conservation efforts in the wider countryside, working with planners, developers and private landowners to address the challenges facing wildlife in our three counties.



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To arrange a presentation on BBOWT's work, or on the topics covered here, please contact Nicky. We'd welcome feedback on this newsletter, or let us know if you wish to be removed from the list.

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