

RAILWAY LAND WILDLIFE TRUST

Sept. 2019

www.railwaylandproject.org

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Editorial

We hope to see many of you at 6.30pm on the 16th October at our AGM. Steve Savage will give an illustrated talk about the Ouse seals he has been following and studying as part of his Zoology course at Sussex University. This edition of our newsletter is crammed full of detail about our work over the last four months and our plans for the future, but we would love to have a discussion about these at the AGM with members of the Trust.

On a personal note I can't believe that this is the 99th edition of the Trust's newsletter, and that I've edited 93 of them!! My thanks to all the contributors who have made this such a pleasant task. Pat Rigg

Works on the Railway Land

It has been really busy on the Railway Land in the last few months and the clanking and banging of heavy plant machinery has been disrupting the tranquillity somewhat. So what has been going on?

Construction of the Egrets Way

The Egrets Way is a community led project to create a safe off-road, multi-user network of paths which will, when completed, connect Lewes and Newhaven and the villages in between, provide access to local amenities and businesses in the lower Ouse Valley, and link to the South Downs Way and other walking and cycling routes. Nearly half of the network, roughly five miles, has already been completed and is in daily use. The section now under construction will take the path from Ham Lane to the Linklater Pavilion.

The remaining sections required to complete the riverside route will be constructed when we have secured the necessary funding, around £1.5m.



For more information visit www.egretsway.org.uk

The route through the Railway Land is along the main path that has always been maintained as an accessible route for wheelchair users and people with limited mobility. In recent years this path has become increasingly craggy, so the resurfacing will be a great improvement. One of our Trustees, Jackie Ralph, is keen to hold assisted walks when the work is complete, with volunteers helping people with limited mobility to enjoy sociable, supported walks on the Railway Land. If you would like to take part – either as a volunteer or a participant, please do get in touch with Helen Meade. (*Contact details on the back page*).

Essential River Repair Works

The Environment Agency are undertaking essential river repairs works where the Winterbourne Stream meets River Ouse. The works being undertaken include the repair of a river outfall flap, and repair of the riverbank using rock, which will be installed and placed by an excavator. As the work has to be undertaken at low tide, there may be a few occasions that work takes place outside usual working hours, so as to fully utilise the tidal conditions. The works are programmed to be completed within 6 – 8 weeks and the Environment Agency will be re-seeding and making good any impact on the Railway Land.





left: Looking Out Festival. The anonymous art auction organised by Susie Monnington.

right: The Lewes Printmakers' Egrets Way Poster.

below: the signal box is repaired and improved



Repairs and improvements to the Signal Box

At last the signal box is getting the attention it needs! Thanks to a grant from the South Downs Conservation Volunteer Fund, donations from the public, and supplemented with money from the Railway Land Wildlife Trust, the signal box is being repaired and improved. As well as replacing rotten timber and re-

decorating the exterior, a bat loft, bat access tile and swift boxes have been installed, and the windows have been adapted so they can open fully and flap shutters installed to create a nature watching hide. It is wonderful to see it being brought back to life.

This autumn the South Downs Volunteer Rangers will be planting a variety of native shrubs and saplings to attract birdlife, and a few limbs will be removed from the large sycamore next to the signal box to improve sight lines to the water meadows. We will be using a code lock to secure the signal box, and so that Friends of the Railway Land and community groups can get in and enjoy watching the wildlife on the water meadows.

Work to the ditches

The ditches on the water meadows are a valuable habitat and are home to a huge diversity of invertebrates and amphibians. Maintaining them involves dredging, ideally on a seven year cycle. It is a long time since they were last dredged, and this autumn some of the ditches around Chilly Brook will be dredged. We also hope to break out the edges of the ditch that runs across Chilly Brook to provide a variety in water depth and thereby increase the diversity of wading birds that visit.

And that should be it for works on the nature reserve... we can all breath a sigh of relief and enjoy watching it return to it's beautiful, peaceful natural state!

Helen Meade Coordinator

Events

Looking Out festival

This year's festival was a storming success and revolved around an anonymous art auction, with artwork donated by amateurs and professionals alike, all inspired by views looking out from Lewes. Huge thanks are due to Susie Monnington, who masterminded the auction, and to all the contributors – the final display was a sight to behold, and the festival raised over £600 for the Trust.

Egrets Way Exhibition

The Jolly Room was transformed for Artwave this year, as a collection of artists showed their work inspired by the Egrets Way. Artists included the Lewes Printmakers who were also selling their Egrets Way inspired 2020 calendar, Steve Homewood, Julian Warrender, Judith Berrill and Sarah Mitchener

Songs of Nature

On Sept 7th the Jolly Room was transformed into a magical, musical space and we opened the doors for our sell out concert, Songs of Nature.

The concert was driven forward by volunteer Alice Passey, whose creative vision and professional approach made it a huge success. We were very lucky to be supported by local performers and technicians who gave their time and expertise free of charge and enabled us to raise nearly £1000 for the Trust.

The evening opened with local DJ Danny Webb playing a glorious selection of nature inspired tunes, and you can find these now on his MixCloud page – they are well worth a listen. Danny was followed by an intriguing performance by Iain Paxon, who combined recordings he had made whilst out and about in the countryside with visual projections and sounds played on his bicycle. It was a truly unique performance!



A few weeks before the concert we were contacted by guitarist Geoff Robb. He explained that he is working on an album called 'Songs of Trees', so the fit with our concert was perfect, as were his insights into how his music was inspired by trees and their different characteristics. Geoff's music was absolutely sublime and you can find out more about his upcoming album at www.geoffrobb.com

above Danny Webb DJ

left Geoff Robb ©Alice Passey



We were overjoyed when Shirley Collins offered to take part in the concert! Her set with Pip Barnes felt both intimate and far reaching, as they read extracts from her memoirs, *All in the Downs*; *Reflections in Life, Landscape and Song*, and she sang with her extraordinarily distinctive voice. It was really an honour to have Shirley and Pip at our inaugural Songs of Nature concert, and their participation undoubtedly played a large part in the evening's success.

The evening was rounded off in great style by Blue Jambalaya, whose African Jazz fusion was uplifting and inspired. As well as playing their traditional instruments with remarkable skill, the addition of conch shells, gourds and water brought the theme of music inspired by nature to life in fabulous style!

left: Shirley and Pip

below: Blue Jambalaya



Many, many thanks to Danny Webb, Iain Paxon, Geoff Robb, Shirley Collins, Pip Barnes, Blue Jambalaya, Adam Bickerton, John May, Burning Sky Brewery, and the Railway Land volunteers who always play such a large part in all of our activities.

***** We would like to run more events like these – please get in touch if you would like to volunteer to help! *****

School visits

The summer term saw the Year 6 classes from the Lewes primary schools revisiting as part of the 4 6 8 project. The pupils delighted in looking back at the maps they made in year 4, and then went on to enjoy a variety of activities that deepened their understanding of the Railway Land and the ecosystem services it provides. The summer is such a busy period for year 6 classes that, after consultation with teachers, we have decided to move these visits to the autumn term – so the next round of visits is already underway!

In addition to the 4 6 8 project, Education Officer Milly Hawkins has been welcoming an increasing number of primary and secondary schools from further afield, and in the summer term was working at full tilt! Some of these visits were curriculum linked and others were part of the schools' enrichments weeks. Seeing children unwind in the outdoors at the end of the school year and leave refreshed was wonderful to see, and a testament to the power of leaving the classroom to spend time in the natural world.

Active Access for Growth visits, autumn and winter 2019

We have received a grant from East Sussex County Council's 'Active Access for Growth' fund, which aims to inspire active travel. The funding is for the 'Up River' project that will invite schools and community groups from Newhaven and Seaford to come to the Railway Land by train and take part in a nature walk along the banks of the Ouse before getting the train back from Southease.



Holiday club

We had another fantastic two weeks of holiday clubs on the Railway Land! More than 40 children took part over the course of the fortnight and our imaginative and experienced staff (Milly Hawkins and Jenny Lindop) led them in an inspiring range of activities that were not only great fun but also deepened the children's understanding and love of the natural world in general, and the Railway Land in particular. Children who take part for four days have the opportunity to complete the John Muir award and this year eight children did this, creating this wonderful display of some of the creatures they found here

Dates for your diary

Sunday 22 September 11am-4pm, Apple Pressing

Wednesday 16 October 6.30pm, AGM and Seals of the Ouse Talk

Monday 28 – Tuesday 29 October, Holiday Club

Sunday December 1st 10am – 1pm, Tree day.

Our annual celebration of National Tree Week will include a winter tree walk, wreath and natural tree decoration making, and other activities to help support wildlife through the winter.

Introducing a new Trustee

Welcome to new Trustee Jackie Ralph! Jackie joined the Board of Trustees in June, having already been involved with RLWT as a volunteer. She has a background in Marketing and PR, a function often overlooked in charities, and hopes to use those skills to make the Trust more visible and accessible to local people from all walks of life.

Helen Meade



Stephen Savage Returns

It's great to be back at the Linklater, working with faces both familiar and new, this time as an intern from Sussex University where I am studying Zoology. The internship has been funded by the university through the 1st Generation Scholars' Scheme. Last time I was here was for Railway Land Live - more about that project later, and the first time was 2005 (ish) - pond dipping with a school group in the pouring rain, before the fabulous Linklater Pavilion was built. So, I would just like to share some of my work and experiences during my 8 week internship; an opportunity to put into practice some of the knowledge and skills I have learned at Uni.

A major project for me focused around the pond dipping area and the massive reduction of pond life present in recent years. Helen set me the task of investigating the loss of species and to produce a methodology for continued monitoring that could be undertaken by the Trust's adult volunteers. It was immediately apparent that there is a large number of rudd (fish) now in the pond which are voracious feeders on freshwater invertebrates. To eliminate other causes, I surveyed the pond and while no species were sampled off the dipping platform, in the cover of the reeds I



I sampled 100 specimens, but only 14 species, far fewer than a few years ago. However this did include dragonfly, damselfly and caddis fly nymph and using a biotic scale this showed the water quality is very good. We can eliminate school use of the pond, as we successfully pond dipped with 15 schools over 4 weeks during Railway land Live and always found a rich diversity, so this all supports Rudd as the cause. Whatever management decision is made to increase the pond life biodiversity, following a training session on 4th Sept, the volunteers will be able to continue to monitor the changing water conditions, including salinity, across the site.

Another major project has been to analyse the wonderful video clips recorded from the live webcams during 'railwaylandlive'. When the project came to an end we were left with lots of footage that was stored for later examination and use. As I had a good understanding of the project and what we observed, I have been able to analyse and catalogue the clips and provide a report on what we learned. This included the fascinating flood water connection that brought rudd, tench, stickleback and even marine fish such as mullet, and a juvenile seabass into the Heart of Reeds. Also, the rich diversity of life found beneath the layer of duck weed on Leighside pond which includes stickleback, great diving beetles, newts, freshwater eels and much more. The underwater cam also captured some fascinating behaviours such as newt courtship.

I will be sharing some of these discoveries on Sunday 15th September at the Linklater in a presentation called 'Hidden Secrets of the Railway Land'.

I led a series of four evening strolls in August which were a great success and attracted 12 to 26 people at each walk. We were lucky to have the perfect weather for enjoying and soaking up the tranquility of the reserve. Each walk started at the Linklater and headed through the woods to the Leighside pond; then took a winding path through the woodland, along the Winterbourne stream, up the steps and round the Heart of Reeds to the first ditch before strolling back to Linklater for a round up. Conversation included the intriguing links between the various water habitats, plants as much more than just food and shelter for animals, and also the wildlife we encountered such as fox, wasps, jays, heron, moorhen, grey wagtail and more. We also discussed the challenges of maintaining habitat fragments such as those at the Railway Land and the role of natural places such as nature reserves as essential places for our wellbeing. Very much in keeping with John Parry's 'Places to Think With'. I also made sure we had time to just soak up the atmosphere. On Fridays I spent time with the Wellbeing group and enjoyed the many discussions we had as we walked around the site.

Other highlights for me included spotting a mystery bird which may have been a Marsh Harrier over Heart of Reeds. Capturing a fox family on a camera trap, watching honey bees collect water from the surface of the Leighside pond, a fledging reed warbler, long-tailed tits, elephant hawk moth caterpillar, parasitic wasps, kingfisher... The bat Bio blitz is yet to come! Most of all I have enjoyed being back on this wonderful site, it was a joy to see the Linklater so busy and going from strength to strength.

Stephen Savage



top left: Steve Savage

above: a local seal

top right: the Railway Land's elusive kingfisher

middle right: a long tailed tit

below: night vision camera traps our fox

bottom right: dragonfly on buddleia

© Stephen Savage



Wellbeing In Nature continues!

The Railway Land Wildlife Trust are delighted to be continuing our Wellbeing In Nature sessions over the next year. We have been running a successful pilot project since Autumn 2018 and are now keen to further develop these free and friendly sessions, encouraging more people to come along, participate and enjoy themselves.

The Wellbeing in Nature group meets once a week at the Linklater and supports anyone experiencing poor mental health (now or in the past) to access the natural environment as a means of supporting their wellbeing. The sessions comprise of therapeutic activities suggested by participants or volunteers, always including a guided walk around the Reserve, so people can benefit from the beauty and tranquillity of the natural world in a collaborative and safe environment.



We have achieved so much in the first year: a key theme is learning and sharing knowledge about the everyday things we see in nature, asking questions and noticing the smallest details. We have brought together a marvellous team of volunteers with specialised knowledge and histories of working within caring and support services. Through the past year we have learnt about the seasons, hibernation, pollination and pond life; we have written poems, created a clay Green Man, tried out botanical drawings, met a family of toads and had loads of laughter; we managed to catch a glimpse of the elusive kingfisher and we always keep an eye out for the peregrines. Personally, I have been amazed by the knowledge and stories of the natural world that are shared. One participant told me how memories from her childhood, playing outside in the mid-Sussex countryside, came flooding back to her; more than that, she was comfortable in sharing these feelings with the group and felt that she was contributing value to the group. It is in this forming of trust, making friends and learning about the beautiful countryside around us that supports emotional wellbeing.

Thanks to funding secured from The Lloyds Foundation and Sussex Community Foundation we are able to run sessions for another year. The group works together to plan activities, walks and themes and we are keen to encourage people to come along to join a session and get involved. Participants can be referred to us through friends, family, support organisations, community groups and primary care providers or, as often happens, can contact us directly of their own accord.

The sessions are flexible and people can come along for the walk or for the whole session; you will always be offered a cup of tea and the opportunity to chat. There is no pressure to do or be anything – we understand that just walking through the door is a big step.

There is an increasing amount of research about the benefits that being outdoors in nature has on all of us. With this in mind we are keen to work with other organisations who work within green care/ food growing and environmental projects so we can share best practice and signpost people onto other activities going on in our beautiful outside spaces.

If you are interested in any of the above then please do contact me – Ellie, Wellbeing Project Coordinator at wellbeing@railwaylandproject.org

The weekly sessions start on Friday 13 September, 10.30am – 1.30pm at The Linklater Pavilion and will run throughout the seasons.



Wellbeing in Nature.

We created our own clay Green Man



Railway Land Creativity



The Wave

Oliver Cornish is to be congratulated for his determination to produce something in the face of adversity. As one of the Linklater RATS, Oliver had been trying to work on a computer application for young people about flooding but for a variety of reasons found that his best laid plans were thwarted.

So instead of giving up, he simply sat down during one of the RATS sessions and drew this wave made up of words. It was done freehand with virtually no rubbing out and it now looks down from the ceiling of the jolly Room in the Linklater. We are very grateful to Elephant Graphics who kindly enlarged the original.

Well done Oliver on an amazing piece of work which I hope might also feature in the forthcoming Lewes Light Festival in February 2020.

Dr John Parry.

LEWES RAILWAY LAND WILDLIFE TRUST

Annual General Meeting

followed by a talk by biologist Steve Savage

SEALS OF THE OUSE

Wednesday October 16th, 6.30pm

Linklater Pavilion



Join us for the evening and find out more about our work over the last year and our plans for the future.

After the formal part of the AGM, Steve Savage will share insights into the lives and times of seals in the Ouse and the surrounding area

Drinks and nibbles

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR WORK BRINGING NATURE TO THE HEART OF LEWES

www.railwaylandproject.org

LDC Specialist Advisor's Reflections

The Reserve has flourished over the summer with plant growth vigorous - Highlights have been the plentiful and beautiful purple haze of the Cranesbill, the leggy Rosebay Willowherb, and one of my absolute favourites, the Teasel with its delicate orb of lilac, all swaying in the gentle summer breeze.



Meadow Cranesbill



Teasel with flowering Meadowsweet and Purple Loosestrife in the wider view on the Reserve Summer 2019 (respectively). © Kim Dawson

Bramble, with its succulent crop of big juicy deep-purple blackberries, is now coming into its own, and the cantankerous nettles, that have been successfully dominating the wooded paths, are starting to slowly die back. Nettles, an ever-present reminder of the busy industrial railway past of the site, provide a valuable bioaccumulation service, and indicate the often overlooked importance of soil ecology. Damage to the soil, relating to nutrient-enrichment, pollution and contamination as a consequence of industry and development for example, takes hundreds of years to be restored – so the nettles are here to stay.

Animal life has been seemingly plentiful including caterpillars, butterflies, moths, and bees busily buzzing about, in amongst the flurry of humans engaging in the exceptional environmental education and nature enjoyment programme tirelessly run by the RLWT. It is an absolute joy seeing the delight of children and adults



exploring the Reserve, connecting with the magnificence of the natural world, and appreciating the multifaceted value of such on Lewes's doorstep.

Nature education and family enjoyment © Kim Dawson

This hive of activity has been on top of the several construction projects happening on the Reserve too this summer, which has had its logistical challenges, let me tell you! Works being undertaken include the widening and resurfacing of the access-for-all-path as part of Egrets Way, a community led project creating a safe off-road, multi-user network of paths connecting Lewes and Newhaven; the Environment Agency's essential repair works of the sluice gate and part of the riverbank; alongside the very exciting refurbishment of the Signal Box bird hide, which came to live on the Reserve from Uckfield a good few decades ago.

Thanks to everyone for their patience during the works - we very much look forward to enjoying the fruits of the labour once all complete – likely to be November / December 2019.



Helen, with her adept funding-bid-know-how and way with words, successfully secured grant's to pay for the Signal Box renovation, bringing it back into life as a place to watch and enjoy wildlife for the public, schools and community groups alike.

A Grey Heron enjoying some quiet time on the wet meadows

© Kim Dawson

Further funding is hopefully going towards the much needed dredging of some of the ditches on the wet meadows this autumn. This will tie in with maintaining biodiversity interest notably of aquatic invertebrates,. It should also improve bird life - observed from the refurbished bird hide - fingers crossed!

In the spring, a meeting was held with the ardent bird surveyors, who have been monitoring the Reserve's bird life for many years. Sadly they are noticing decreases in bird life and diversity, which is very likely to be linked to the growing popularity of the Reserve and increased use by our human visitors.

Discussions are on-going on how to redress this, with the planned measures for the wet meadows hopefully helping to go some way. Challenging discussions between ecologists are underlining the often overlooked conflicts of constant demands on open spaces, increasing amenity use, and the impact on biodiversity.

Keeping some areas wild, inaccessible and free of people, dogs and noise may be part of the answer, and so encouraging the public to stay on dedicated paths and keep their dogs on leads and in sight, all goes some way to help us play our integral part.

Now that the main flowering, breeding and active seasons are waning, habitat management works will start to ramp up again over the autumn and winter, with reed works and tractor cuts planned to take place very soon in preparation and expectation for spring 2020.

Kim Dawson
LDC Specialist Advisor.

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