



THE HURST WATER MEADOW TRUST

Charity number 1050272. Website: www.hurst-water-meadow.org.uk

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Annual Review to 31st March 2019



Fritillaries in the Hurst, April 2018

A new look

In our Review last year we wrote of the need to upgrade our website and stated that it would be a focus of attention in 2018. We are very pleased to report that this has been achieved and a new website was launched in October 2018. If you have not already looked at it please do so: www.hurst-water-meadow.org.uk

A sub-group of trustees, under the expert guidance of Karen Hadley, produced an excellent piece of work at a very manageable cost. We are especially grateful to Karen who voluntarily gave her skill and time to help us with this. The web site and new logo were configured by Chinnor Web Design, and cartographer Linda Francis produced appropriate maps to show the meadows and the footpaths linking them to the village.

The final 'icing on the cake' was the unsolicited receipt of a generous grant from the Spear Charitable Trust which easily covered the entire cost of the project and for which we extend our gratitude.

Meadow management

In March 2018 the 'Beast from the East' brought a spell of persistent cold weather which was followed by flooding of the meadows in April. As a result the first work parties were delayed until late April. An average of 5 volunteers a week worked for 22 Tuesday mornings from then until early December; we are very grateful for their hard work and commitment. All cut material is stacked in habitat piles away from the main hay production areas.

The land management team continues to follow the ten year plan recommended by consultant Rod d'Ayala who visited the Hurst in early December and was pleased with progress. Rod's assessment was that the land was well managed but not over-managed.

The hot, dry summer slowed the growth of nettles and allowed work parties to tackle lower priority work such as cutting back overgrown brambles and laying blackthorn. The good weather also allowed an early hay cut. Once again we were grateful to Shillingford Farm for cutting Overy Mead Piece in late June and to Andrew Townsend for taking the Hurst hay in the first week of July. The Hurst was then grazed by Toby Pejkoivic's horses from November to March.

Members of Sonning Common Green Gym joined us twice during the year, helping to deepen drainage ditches, pull nettles, lay blackthorn and clear encroaching vegetation along the access track to the Hurst. In the autumn our Duke of Edinburgh scheme volunteer, Eloise Marriott, helped to plant six native black poplar saplings in the meadows.

The land management team extends particular thanks to the village residents who kindly assist with storing and transporting equipment which is used by our work parties.

The expert hedge laying on Old Bridge Meadow by three local volunteers deserves special praise and appreciation. Will Partridge, Max Felstead and Peter Norman are masters of their craft and many walkers were impressed to see their work progressing during the winter months so that the entire hedge is now laid with its 'face' towards the footpath and its 'brush' towards the parking field. Regeneration will come from the cut heel, creating a dense and safe habitat for wildlife.



Visitors to the Hurst will have noticed that the guard rails on the access bridge have been badly damaged. Unfortunately this occurred because of the increased size of harvesting machinery, specifically the baler. Trustees plan to engage an engineering firm to repair and widen the bridge by moving the guard rails further out to the side.

Wildlife monitoring

Oxford Brookes University biology student Kevin Mason has been surveying aquatic plants and invertebrates on the Hurst during the year. Summaries of his early findings are on our website (go to 'What we offer' and click on the pictures of aquatic plants and invertebrates). He has also been working with Dr Angie Julian of the Amphibian and Reptile Group to survey the meadows for newts, frogs, toads and grass snakes.



Laying bottle traps for amphibian survey

Ten new woodcrete bat and bird boxes were purchased with money donated from the collection at the Memorial Service for Dr Peter Pritchard. All were hung up by the end of March to await their new occupants. Volunteer Nigel Evans has kindly offered to become the Trust's 'batman' and monitor bat activity on the three meadows.

We have been taking an active part in BBOWT's project to trap and remove American mink from waterways in the three counties (Bucks, Berks and Oxon) in the hope that water voles and otters may become re-established. Volunteer David Scott has taken on the difficult task of setting and checking mink raft traps with considerable success. Six mink have been captured in the last seven months, each captive being taken to the Earth Trust for humane despatch.



Baiting a mink raft

Meanwhile there is evidence from our trailcam and from spraint that otters are present on the lower Thames. Individual otters have been identified, including one large dog otter and a female with two 'pups' last summer.

Fishing

Fishing from the Trust meadows is managed by Dorchester Angling Society to our mutual advantage. We have noticed a welcome reduction in riverbank litter and thank DAS members for their responsible approach. Information on the fisheries can be found on our website.



Chub caught in river Thames from the Hurst

Education

There is a smaller Foundation class for the new school year at S.Birinus Primary School but enthusiasm for the Forest School on the Hurst continues and we hope that other classes will be able to participate in this outdoor education during the year.

The Trust receives a grant from the government Countryside Stewardship Scheme to encourage educational access. In turn we have therefore made a grant to the school for the purchase of equipment for the Forest School. In December four trustees attended an open morning at the school where the Forest School teacher displayed the equipment which had been purchased with the funds. This included a fire box, fire safety and first aid kits, bow saw and whittling knives, adult and child protective gloves and a four-wheeled trolley to transport everything to the Hurst.

Other school visits came from further afield, some associated with student field studies, and we are pleased to link with our neighbour the Earth Trust for combined visits.

Opportunities exist for university undergraduate and post graduate research students who are always made welcome. Reference has already been made to current research into aquatic wildlife.

Thanks

We could not be proceeding with all the activities described here without the support of our loyal and generous friends, donors and volunteers. Our grateful thanks to everyone who has contributed either financially or with their time and labour during the past year.

It is particularly gratifying that those who regularly enjoy walking in the meadows express their appreciation by making a regular donation by Standing Order, adding Gift Aid where appropriate. This greatly helps us to manage our budget for future demands.

These are your meadows and we hope that you will enjoy them throughout this year.

Gillian Johnson, Hon. Secretary

Richard Farrant, Chairman

On behalf of the Trustees

April 2019

Photos: R Tilley, G Johnson

Trustees: R Farrant (Chairman), G Johnson (Hon. Secretary), R Seabrook (Hon. Treasurer), L Aukland, G Beland, C Hill, J Metcalfe, S Puri. M Southon, C Smith