

Stretton Wetlands

Report for Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund 2017-18

Project: Improving access and biodiversity in the Stretton Wetlands

Applicant: Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group

Campaign launch to improve access across the wetlands

Following the good news that the Stretton wetlands had received Wildlife Site Status in January 2017, SACWG launched a fundraising effort to raise funds for building a boardwalk across the Stretton wetlands to improve access and raise community awareness. This combined grant applications and community fund raising events – each targeting a slightly different target audience. Direct personal contributions were also encouraged.



The willing catering team

An attractive flyer was produced to provide a background to the wetlands and contained details of four community fundraising events. First was a wildlife quiz in March (which brought in some real experts). This was followed by an ambitious three course candle lit meal and a plant sale in April. The meal was served to around 70 people and was a great success.



Held on a rainy Saturday in early May, the plant sale was also very successful and provided a great opportunity for folk to share some flourishing plants and vegetables. Lastly we had a music evening from Whalebone on a barmy May evening. All four events included an opportunity to chat about the wetlands. A total of £2208.54 was raised by the community events, with individual donations bringing in a further £1,800.

Four grants were obtained from the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund, the Pathways Fund of Holiday Fellowship, Severn Trent and the Jean Jackson Trust totaling £9,250.

The final total raised was just over £13,260. In addition we were blessed with promises of considerable volunteer labour to the value of over £2,200. However, the final total raised fell considerably short of our original target of £31,000. Discussions with Shropshire council staff, with some adjustment of width of boardwalk and limiting the amount of recycled materials used, meant that they were willing to go ahead with building the boardwalk this financial year (and indeed couldn't guarantee to be able to do this in the future). Plans to hire equipment to build the scrapes and erect a promised hide were therefore postponed a year, in anticipation of further fundraising – and also due to other ongoing plans (see below).

Building the boardwalk



In the summer Storm Doris caused considerable damage with several crack willows falling and blocking the footpath. With landowner help, Dave Hardwicke from Shropshire Council and some willing volunteers cleared and burned the debris and took the opportunity to do further clearing in preparation for the footpath work.

The public access team from Shropshire Council led by Paul Butter began work on the footpath at the end of January 2018. The first section has a raised stone path to allow access across the path for the machinery of the Environment Agency which cuts back vegetation from the Quinny brook each year. The major section through the wetlands has a wooden boardwalk built of highways grade timber with recycled plastic supports. Willing volunteers from SACWG, the National Trust, the Public Paths Partnership and other supporters helped to speed the work along and keep it within our limited budget.



Since completion of the boardwalk, and before a printed article has appeared in the local magazine Focus for the news to spread more widely, we have been delighted by people's response. People are thrilled to be able to walk along the path, vindicating our choice to ensure wide public awareness of the area, before moving forward with other aims.



Promoting the support and aims of Shropshire Hills AONB

The support of our key funders, including the Shropshire Hills AONB, has been mentioned at every opportunity. This was noted in a public meeting hosted by the town council, mentioned in two Focus articles (town magazine), in the [SACWG annual report](#) and will be mentioned at our AGM next week and will be on the info board. The visit of AONB supporters in July to look at the site was appreciated; discussion with supporters directly led to the setting up of an action group with landowner involvement. An information board is at the design stage and will be erected at the Ludlow Rd end of the boardwalk to raise awareness of how special the area is, and what wildlife people can look out for as they cross the wetlands. An official opening event is planned for 20th April to thank all those who have given their support and the press will be invited too.

Improving biodiversity

Alongside the fundraising, work has also been ongoing to improve the biodiversity of the area by introducing some limited grazing with one of the key landowners. This is still at the planning stage and has taken a very long time to put together, but things are looking hopeful.

A water vole survey was carried out in June. The evidence is still tentative but we hope that one day we may have a confirmed sighting! More surveys will be done in 2018.



Among the birds sighted in 2017 on the wetlands were barn owl, little egret, kingfisher and snipe. A wildlife surveying day is planned for June 2018 – looking for birds, butterflies, moths, flora, bugs, beetles and dragonflies – and in particular surveying the area where livestock are to be grazed – so that improvements can be monitored.

Volunteers also helped to clear ash seedlings, which are regenerating in great abundance on several areas of the wetlands due to a lack of grazing.

Now completed, the wetlands footpath will enable SACWG to hold events such as guided walks, bat evenings, bird walks and pond dipping in pools adjacent to the footpath. Reports and articles were written for SACWG Annual Report 2018 and the town magazine Focus.

An action group for the wetlands including a landowner and council representative has now been formed, with the aim of improving biodiversity. Initial aims are to push ahead with plans to extend grazing, build scrapes and erect a bird hide. The focus for 2018 will be to actively build relationships with landowners with a view to leasing, or possibly buying some of the land (this may be under the National Trust's Stepping Stones project or some other approach). This would enable us to achieve a further ambition of building a path off from the boardwalk, and to erect a hide adjacent to a scrape. The action group will initiate a further round of fund raising once we have this go-ahead.

Outputs for AONB funding application

Seven outputs were given in our funding application:

1. Clear and boardwalk the area of the footpath currently prone to flooding
2. Excavate several small pools adjacent to the footpath and road
3. Clear excessive vegetation from an existing pool of particular ecological interest
4. Design and erect an information board to raise awareness of the wetlands and notable species to look out for.
5. Improved biodiversity of an already valuable site
6. More people accessing the site and enhanced community awareness of the benefits of wetlands
7. Improved management of the area through partnership with landowners.

Raising less than 50% of our budgeted aims has meant that not all of these targets have been met during this financial year. The decision to prioritise the boardwalk over digging scrapes was made, in part because Council staff are already facing cut-backs in their working hours and are very concerned regarding the future. In addition, rather than the limited scrapes planned, the action group now want to focus on obtaining - thro purchase, gifting or leasing, improved access to at least one area of land, to build a larger scrape or two.

Of our 7 original outputs we have met 3 of these completely (1, 4 and 6), two more (5 and 7) are on-going and we are very encouraged by the prospect of introducing grazing (by the National Trust) on one large area. The remaining two outputs (2 and 3) are now our focus for the next year with a newly formed action group (including a council member and landowner) resolved to take these forward during 2018 and indeed to enhance their scope if possible.

Communications

Several articles appeared in the Strettons magazine, Focus, during 2017 raising awareness of the wetlands and the various fund raising activities. A further article will be published for March 1st with news of the completion of the boardwalk. This is already available online <https://www.strettonfocus.co.uk/articles/volunteers-help-to-complete-stretton-wetlands-boardwalk-project>. A brief mention was made in the National Trust volunteer newsletter. A report will be given during the Strettons Area Community Wildlife group AGM together with a write up in their Annual report. All donors will be noted on the information board.