

Moulsecoomb Allotments Nature Site, Review for AGM 2023 by Liz Yeats

"The Moulsecoomb allotment nature site acts as an important part of the "green corridor" linking the wild areas that run down from the hills above Bevendean and Whitehawk. This allows wildlife to move around in search of shelter, breeding and food relatively easily within the urban environment. The site offers excellent habitat for a wide range of creatures in an increasingly busy city."

Huw Morgan. (Sussex Wildlife Trust, Brighton & Hove Project officer).



History: The Nature Site started in 2015, with the permission of the Allotment Officer. A small group of allotmenteers cleared huge, very old brambles from a steep, north facing bank at the back of the Allotment site. No allotments had been on this patch for at least 20 years.

Now 9 years later we've expanded the area, created paths, built and maintained countless steps. With collected local seed we've sown wildflower banks. We've installed benches, dug and planted 2 wildlife ponds and planted over 150 native trees. We've built a rain-collecting roof with pipework to fill the large pond.

The nature site is part of 'city's green infrastructure' and fits the Council strategy to encourage biodiversity.

The work group: Over the 9 years the regular work group has included 11 plot holders and around 17 people who don't have plots. People change but we maintain a regular monthly group of around 9 people.

So, what's the point? Nature is currently struggling and species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. As gardeners, we know how important wild creatures are for crop production, not just pollinating insects, but soil creatures and microbes, insects in our compost bins, and up the food chain to birds to eat the aphids. We have created on the nature Site a wide range of habitats to support the maximum number of 'creatures'. We also hope it will be beautiful and welcome all plot holders to visit and spend time on it. To measure if we are achieving our aims, we count all the species of plant, bird and butterfly we see and can identify each year.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Plant species	64	134	157	175	210	205	210	211
Butterflies & moths	16	15	15	25	21	23	21	20
Bees & other insects			11	15	29	23	30	26
Birds			14	21	23	29	16	19

You can see a full list of these on the Nature Site web page, scroll to the bottom:

<https://moulscoomballotments.wordpress.com/nature-site>

Birds: In 2022 bird species and numbers remained low. For a second year we saw no Firecrest, Goldcrest, Greenfinch and only one Goldfinch. We did see several Long-tailed Tits this year, though nothing like the numbers seen previously.

Butterflies: The site continues to support large numbers of Ringlet, Meadow Brown, Speckled Wood & Gatekeeper butterflies, all like habitats with fairly long grass, and dappled light, exactly what we have. Numbers of Small Tortoiseshell, Comma, Painted Lady, Red Admiral, Peacock remain very low; as these butterflies like sunny hedges for basking, our habitats may be too shady for them, though we also failed to see any or many of these species on the allotment site in general. We did see several gorgeous yellow Brimstone butterflies, and a couple of Orange Tips, probably because we have planted their food plants Buckthorn and Garlic mustard respectively. As mentioned later -'lost Small Blue colony', we saw only a couple of lone Small Blue butterflies this year.

Bees & other insects: We continue to see lots of different species, but can give no estimate of increase/ decreases due to our limited identification skills; there are around 25,000 insects species in the UK and none of us is an entomologist.

Developments:

2022-23 Western expansion, new 'Scrapes': This winter we re-modelled the wildflower area west of the large pond. Flowers sown last year weren't entirely successful, and more bramble roots had sprouted. This winter we dug the areas over again to remove roots then re-shaped it into 3 large 'scrapes'.

An insect survey by ecologist Graeme Lyons (*Brighton B Banks: invertebrate, botanical and management survey 2020, pub*



2021) shows that in Brighton and Hove dug out 'scrapes' had far more butterflies and other insects using them than either 'butterfly banks' or meadows. Scrapes are large areas where soil has been removed down to the chalk in the deepest part, gently sloping up towards the sun (south side) with the excess soil heaped on the north side making a steep 'lip'. The effect is a lopsided bomb crater, angled to the sun to get the maximum warmth and shelter from winds.

This is a habitat ideal for warmth loving insects to bask in, and to burrow into the steep slope for nesting or hibernation. The thin chalky soil at the deepest part is ideal for downland wildflowers and should minimise dense grass growth, and leave bald areas of soil, again ideal for many insects.

We have sown the whole area with perennial wildflowers plus some annual cornfield flowers for a 'quick fix' of colour this summer. We have planted Kidney Vetch seedlings, raised by us from

collected seed. Hopefully this new sunny site will attract back a Small Blue butterfly colony. (see below)

Management plan: We continue to follow our plan for mowing different parts of the sites at different times, to give all insects some habitat of the correct height, while minimising the growth of too much coarse grass. To maintain wildflower areas, growth of grass and brambles has to be managed. Wildflowers thrive on very poor, low nitrogen soil. To get soil fertility down, constant grazing or, in our case, cutting and raking off is necessary.

Lost Small Blue butterfly colony: for the last 6 years we have had a breeding colony of these tiny and very lovely butterflies at the top of the site. They depend on Kidney Vetch flowers for their caterpillar food, and we realised we had almost lost these flowers last year as the bank had become too shady. We have cut down a couple of the offending trees, and hope the habitat will subsequently revive. We are also creating a new Kidney Vetch habitat for these butterflies in the new sunny scrapes (see above).

Pic: Small Blue on Kidney Vetch flower



Water-collecting roof & large pond: The roof plus water butts worked well and we kept the pond topped up throughout last summer despite the heat. We frequently spotted around four Common Newts in the pond, a mixed blessing as they are known to eat every other small creature in sight, so no tadpoles last year despite some frogspawn, and we saw no Dragonfly exuvia on the water plants (the cases left by nymph dragonflies as they change into adult dragonflies). Several species of Dragonfly and Damselfly visited and laid in the pond, so maybe some nymphs will survive hungry Newt jaws this year.



Wildlife we see: We continue to see and hear a wide variety of wildlife on the site. Frogspawn, newts, damselflies and dragonflies using the ponds. Many types of bees, both bumblebees (which we can identify), and solitary bees (which we can't). A range of birds, lizards and slowworms, plus evidence of badgers, foxes and bank voles- plus an occasional moggy!

Visits to the site: Plot-holders continue to visit the site regularly, especially bringing their children. We are asking that dogs do not come, and no barbeques as both can damage wildlife.

Money	Income	Expenditure	Bal
Balance as AGM May 2022			£45.35
Donation box in shop	10.10	0	
Balance at AGM April 2023			£55.45

We have discussed how to spend this money as a group. As we use our own gardening tools for Nature Site work, we will use the money for sharpening and maintaining these.

Many thanks to the following people and organisations:

Special Branch Tree Nursery: donated native saplings again last year and this.

All the plot-holders & shop volunteers: who donated cash to the collection box in the shop.

The current core work group: who work every month developing and maintaining the Nature Site, and donate tools, seeds and plants: Sally Griffin, Rachel Cohen, Tara North, Simon Wrigley, Liz Yeats, Jim Grozier, Rossano Barone, Grecia Garcia and Dave Witts.

You can read about the work on the Nature Site throughout the year by visiting our web site page:

[Nature Notes – Moulsecoomb Allotment and Horticultural Society \(MAHS\) \(wordpress.com\)](http://Nature Notes – Moulsecoomb Allotment and Horticultural Society (MAHS) (wordpress.com))

