

Moulscoomb Allotments Nature Site review 2024

Ten years of the Nature Site by Dave Witts

Yes, this was our tenth year! We started in January 2015 and since then we've developed the site from a small patch of waste ground into an area about the size of 14 allotment plots. We have created 8 different habitats to support a wide range of wildlife. We've seen the numbers of plants and wildlife increase substantially. This is quite an achievement for such a small group.

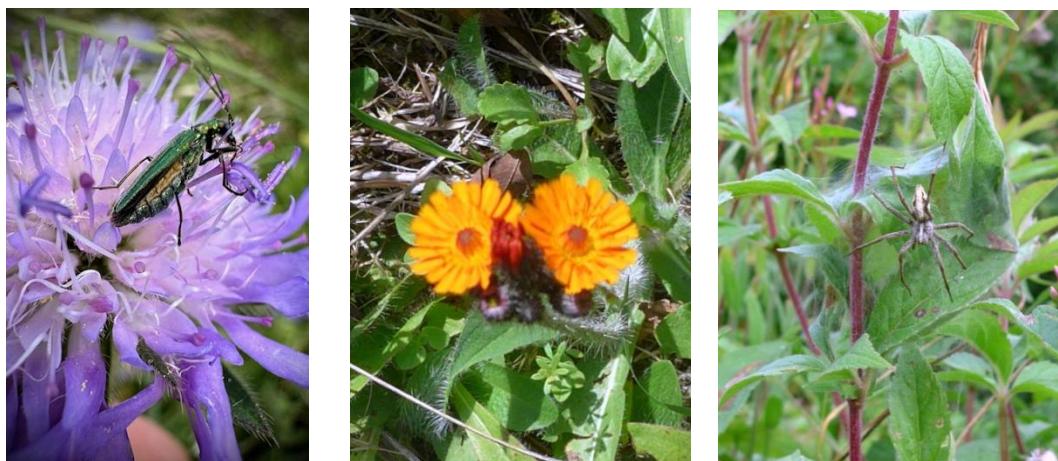


Common Slow Worm and Common Wave moth

The year was very much one of consolidation. In June we were pleased to get help and advice on managing the site from Laurie Jackson, an ecologist with Sussex Wildlife Trust. She walked round with us, fortunately on one of the few warm and sunny days, and assessed the site. In her view there is a good mix of early and late flowers, for pollen and nectar, and tall grasses, all supporting a wide range of insects throughout the year. The range of light and shade is also good, providing nesting and hibernation options. However we lack areas of short sward (grassy turf) and she suggested the best places to create these.

We've struggled to keep on top of the work over the past 2-3 years, with many of us feeling the effects of age and infirmity. So Laurie suggested we be more relaxed about management: concentrate on clearing paths throughout the year and do most of the cutting back and the clearing the ponds in October and November. Building on Laurie's ideas we have now moved to more flexible working arrangements and also revised and simplified our management plan.

So what did we see?



Musk Beetle; Orange Hawkweed; Nursery Web Spider

We can't really discuss what we saw during year without considering the weather. The unpredictable weather patterns are causing chaos for animals in particular and also having a serious impact on trees and plants. Insects and other animals are emerging at the wrong time for their food sources. Pollinators are seeing flowers closed up in the cold or smashed by torrential rain. Queen bumblebees are struggling to keep warm and foraging when they should be incubating their brood. We had the fifth warmest winter on record and locally well over twice the average rainfall in February. May was very hot followed by a cool summer and an exceptionally wet autumn and early winter. The last few weeks of the year ranged from freezing to balmy so hibernation was badly affected.



At the end of March we were amazed to see hundreds of Buff-tailed queen bumblebees emerge from hibernation and start feeding on the Goat Willows (left). However by June we were remarking on the low numbers of bumblebees and the absence of workers. Nationally bumblebee numbers were down 17% over the year, with a severe decline in Red-tailed bumblebees which we had observed locally.

We were less aware of numbers of solitary bees but these seemed to be lower than other years. So it was wonderful to see masses of Ivy Bees in October feeding on Ivy flowers at the bottom of the site. The most exciting sighting though was a Large Scabious Mining Bee (right). This is a very rare southern solitary species which has declined a lot and is currently part of a Buglife project on the South Downs. We've recorded it every July since 2020 on Scabious flowers. We'd been on the lookout but hadn't seen any, until this late one spotted in August.



Butterflies followed a similar pattern to bumblebees. Species emerged late and in low numbers and we saw no Common Blues or Small Blues at all. A consolation though was sighting several Green Hairstreaks (left), seen most years in May since 2018. Both male & female Brimstone butterflies appeared too with the female laying eggs on the Alder Buckthorn trees which we planted 10 years ago for their benefit. Presumably the trees are now mature enough to feed the caterpillars of these beautiful yellow butterflies. We saw our first Small Copper butterflies shortly after a new

mowing regime to create an area of short grass. Yes, it worked! Also a couple of Small Heath butterflies also making use of the short grass and sunshine.

We saw more butterflies during a warm spell in August and 15-minute count recorded 39 butterflies, 26 of which were Gatekeepers. However the total number of butterflies was down

from 49 last year. Nationally numbers were the lowest recorded in the 14-year history of the Big Butterfly Count, leading the Butterfly Conservation Society to declare a “Butterfly Emergency”. In fact numbers of most species of wildlife are falling drastically and entire species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate.

Spiders seemed to do well, though. There were countless Garden Spiders (right) and Nursery Web spiders lurking in their webs in early autumn. As you’d expect, there are populations of Foxes and Badgers and we also have a good number of small mammals. Brighton University EcoSoc carried out a survey with traps in late October, but the exact species weren’t identified, although we’ve often seen evidence of Bank Voles.



So, are we achieving our aim?

Our aim is to support the widest possible range of wildlife but a crisis in nature on the scale described above makes our efforts seem tiny. Crucially, though, the Nature Site is part of a bigger picture. Research shows that for pollinators many small sites together can act cumulatively to work just as well for conservation. In fact, pollinators increased the most in sites the size of the average garden. The Nature Site also forms part of a ‘green corridor’ which links the wild areas on the surrounding hills, so our site is helping wildlife to move around for food and breeding.

We record the number of species we see on the site at each visit rather than the number of individual plants and animals. We can identify plants, birds, butterflies and bumblebees, and some other insects but identifying most insects requires more specialist knowledge than we have. Our record of the number of species gives a good idea of the wildlife we are supporting. We also carry out a number of timed insect counts.

Number of species recorded on the Nature Site:

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Plants	64	134	157	175	210	205	210	210	224	216
Butterflies & moths	16	15	15	25	21	23	21	20	25	18
Bees & other insects			11	15	29	23	30	26	37	40
Birds			14	21	23	29	16	19	22	24



A few more examples of the species we saw also add to the picture:

- * Brimstone, Holly Blue, Speckled Wood, Marbled White, Small Copper, and hundreds of Gatekeeper butterflies;
- * Common Red Darters (dragonflies); Large Red and Common Blue Damselflies;
- * Swollen-thighed Beetles; Flower Crab spiders (left); and
- * Buff-tailed Bumblebees, Common Carder bees and evidence of Leaf-cutter bees.

New Website: we now have a new website with a brief history of the Nature Site, our species records and a gallery with lots of photos of plants and animals on the site. Why not have a look!

Acknowledgements:

Sussex Wildlife Trust: our thanks to Huw Morgan for support and advice and to his Hit Squad of volunteers for their hard work; and to Laurie Jackson for her survey of the site.

Plot-holders: thanks to everyone who donated tools and money in the box in the shop.

Moulsecoomb Allotments & Horticultural Society and the Site Reps: our thanks for their support.

The current core work group: who maintain the site, and who also donate new tools, seeds and plants: Sally Griffin, Rachel Cohen, Grecia Garcia, Simon Wrigley, Liz Yeats, Jim Grozier, Rossano Barone and Dave Witts.

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