

Moulsecoomb Allotments Nature Site, Review for AGM 2022, 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 allotmenters 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 8 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 pipe-work 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: The work has been greatly helped by occasional visiting work groups from Sussex Wildlife Trust and City Council Countryside volunteers. Some people from these groups have liked the site so much they have become regular monthly work group members. Over the 8 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.

You can see a full list of these on the Nature Site web page: [Nature Site – Moulsecoomb Allotment and Horticultural Society \(MAHS\) \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.moulsecoomballotments.org.uk/nature-site/)

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

In 2021-22 bird species and numbers were the lowest in 4 years. We commented on many occasions on the lack of specific common bird (and butterfly) species. No Long tailed tits, Goldfinches, Goldcrest nor Fircrest were seen on the site by us this year. Butterflies are known to have had a very tough time overwintering in an exceptionally wet winter 2020-21 followed by a hot spell then very cold spring. Our butterfly sightings are boosted by identification of increased numbers of moth species, but several usually abundant butterfly species were not seen: Small Tortoiseshell, Comma, Painted Lady, Orange Tip and Brimstone.

Developments:

2021-22 –Planting Blackthorn for Brown hairstreak butterflies: We planted yet more tree saplings during the last 2 winters, donated by Special Branch Tree Nursery and by Race Hill Orchard. Many of these are Blackthorn bushes which we hope will attract the rare Brown Hairstreak butterfly, which depends on these for rearing its caterpillars. A mature Brown Hairstreak butterfly was seen on the Allotment site last summer, and a local expert, Jamie Burston, thinks it a strong possibility that they are breeding somewhere on the site.



Expanding the site: This winter we expanded westwards, clearing another tranche of brambles. There is a small collection of large mature trees under which we plan to site a shady bench. We plan to sow the sunny slope with wildflower seeds, and run a path through it. More wildflowers, of course, mean more and a wider variety of insects, which in turn feed birds, reptiles etc, etc.

New management plan: Planting wildflowers is not the end of the work. 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. But when exactly? Reading the literature is confusing as it depends on how established (and poor) the soil is. We have perhaps been allowing the flower banks to stand for too much of the summer, resulting in the proliferation of rye and couch grass. After much research we have now produced a written management plan for the site, complete with charts and calendar showing which sections get mown and when; which butterflies need certain conditions; and which areas are best left completely wild. This isn't an exact science so we will continue to experiment and modify the plan.

Wildlife we see: We continue to see and hear a wide variety of wildlife on the site. Frogspawn, newts, damsel 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!

Picture: **Scarlet Tiger moth**



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 2021			£22.87
Donation box in shop 20.4.22	22.48		
Balance at AGM May 2022		0	£45.35

We are discussing how to spend this money as a group. Until now we have used our own gardening tools for Nature Site work, but may choose to build up a stock of Nature Site tools.

Many thanks to the following people and organisations:

Special Branch Tree Nursery : donated many native saplings

Neil Doyle, BHCC Countryside ranger: timber for rain roof, and occasional volunteer work groups

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 new tools, seeds and plants: Sally Griffin, Rachel Cohen, Tara North, Simon Wrigley, Liz Yeats, Jim Grozier, Rossano & Grecia Barone, and Dave Witts.

