

Moulsecoomb Allotments Nature Site - Review of 2023 by Dave Witts

"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.

Developments: we started the Nature Site in early 2015 and have made improvements to the site every year. This year (2023) saw 3 significant developments, enlarging the site to around 3,600 sq metres (4,300 sq yds):

The Scrapes – we expanded further west, clearing a considerable area and making a series of scrapes. We based this work on a report from the City Council's Wilder Verges Project which found that scrapes attract more than double the invertebrate species with conservation status compared to 'butterfly banks' and flat areas.

We scraped away fertile soil leaving chalky soil where only chalk wildflowers are likely to grow, unimpeded by grass, which demands richer soil and made our scrapes circular, or bomb crater shaped with a higher lip at the down/ north end to trap the most sun and warmth on its slope. We sowed a general mix of wildflowers in March and by July the area was filling up with flowers. Charlock in particular has proved to be a real winner, attracting masses of insects.



Top Field: with the Site Reps' approval we took over a sizeable patch of ground just below the Site Shop which is no longer considered lettable by the Allotment Service. We cleared out masses of brambles, ivy and Hemp Agrimony roots. We planted 8 saplings along the fence-line at the bottom of the field and a further 6 saplings higher up and sowed wildflower seeds, including a large area of Yellow Rattle which helps to suppress grass. Our small group had considerable help in all this, with a work session with Huw Morgan's Hit Squad of Sussex Wildlife Trust volunteers.



"Grecia's Meadow": a year ago we cleared a very stony area at the bottom of the site, and sowed wildflower seeds. It was a mass of flowers and insects this year – even better than expected.

Highlights of the year

Rain! Rain may not be everyone's idea of a highlight but it certainly stood out. 5 of our regular monthly work sessions had to be cancelled, but we managed to fit in 2 replacement sessions and some extra work by individuals in order to keep on top of things

Insects: we again saw a Large Scabious Mining Bee (*Andrena hattorfiana*) pictured right. This bee is a very rare Southern species which has declined a lot and is currently the subject of a survey on the Downs by Buglife. The female bee gathers pollen from Field Scabious, and to a much lesser extent, from Small Scabious. We planted out both in 2018 from seed sown in pots; a year later we had our first sighting of the bee.



In mid-May we spotted 3-4 Green Hairstreak butterflies; there have only been 2 before on the Nature Site and they are not common in this part of Sussex. We had an exciting sighting in mid-July of a pair of Green-veined White butterflies mating. It is very unusual to see these locally as they are more commonly found to the north of the South Downs.



Perhaps most exciting this year was a sighting of a female Brown Hairstreak butterfly in September. They are fairly rare and very elusive. They are usually seen locally only across the West Sussex Weald, although there is a small colony in north Patcham. We have made 3 sightings on the allotment site and they may be breeding here thanks to our planting lots of Blackthorn on which they lay their eggs.

Are we fulfilling our aims?

Nature is currently struggling in the face of pollution and climate change. Numbers of most species are falling drastically and species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. We have created a wide range of habitats with the aim of supporting the widest possible range of 'creatures' and plants. To get some measure of whether we are achieving our aims, we record the number of species we see on the site itself. It would be an impossible task to record the number of individuals!

Apart from 3 timed counts we simply record what we see at each visit. We can identify plants, birds, butterflies and bumblebees, and some other insects but identifying most insects requires more specialist knowledge than we have. Pictured right: signs of a Leaf-cutter bee having taken Tutsan leaves for her egg cells.



Timed counts:

- 10 minute insect count on the Scrapes recorded 46 insects
- 15 minute count (at the seat above the small pond) recorded 49 butterflies, including 11 of the 'target' species in the national Big Butterfly Count.
- 15 minute count (at same location) recorded 46 butterflies, including 12 of the 'target' species. Gatekeeper and Meadow Browns accounted for 27 of these, plus 5 Commas and 2 Green-veined Whites.

Number of species recorded

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Plants	64	134	157	175	210	205	210	210	224
Butterflies & moths	16	15	15	25	21	23	21	20	25
Bees & other insects			11	15	29	23	30	26	37
Birds			14	21	23	29	16	19	22
Reptiles & Pond life								5	5

The ground which is now the Nature Site was originally disused allotment plots swamped by brambles and nettles. Although these are important for wildlife, it's a very limited habitat. Trees and shrubs were mostly Hawthorn and Wild Plum. Over the past 9 years we have planted over 150 native saplings of 25 different species, sown wildflowers and dug 2 ponds. In 2003 we recorded 224 tree and plant species. It would seem that we have created the habitat to support a fairly wide range of wildlife.

There are inventories on our website of all the species we can identify. We'd like to pick out just a few in addition to the ones highlighted above. Sadly we have lost the colony of Small Blue butterflies which had established on the West Bank. They were attracted by the Kidney Vetch, their larval food plant, we had grown there but eventually plant numbers waned due to a natural change in the conditions. On the plus side there were several sightings of Small Tortoiseshell butterflies (right); in the previous year their numbers had fallen massively in national records. We again saw Brimstone butterflies and it looked as though a female was laying eggs but we couldn't confirm this. We didn't see any Orange Tip or Large Skipper butterflies.



We did however record our first ever sightings of a Large Yellow Underwing moth, a Flower Crab-spider, a giant puffball fungus (*Calvatia gigantean*) and a Hazel leaf-roller weevil (*Apoderus coryli*), pictured right. We also spotted male and female Broad-bodied Chaser dragonflies. The ponds are used by newts, frogs, dragonflies and damselflies, and the site has lizards and slowworms, badgers, foxes and bank voles.



Site maintenance: the site generally looks beautiful and we want to keep it that way. It's also important to maintain the site and keep it safe to visit, and this takes a lot of time and hard work. We are regularly trying to recruit new members as several of the current group are feeling the limitations of age and infirmity. We know from comments that a lot of people, adults and children, visit the site and enjoy it as much as we do. Every plot holder is very welcome to come and spend time there. All we ask is that there are no dogs or barbecues, both of which can cause damage.



Many thanks to the following:

Special Branch Tree Nursery : the majority of our 150 saplings came from Special Branch and most were generously donated. Our thanks to Chris, Martin and their volunteers.

Sussex Wildlife Trust Hit Squad: our thanks to Huw Morgan and his team of volunteers.

Plot-holders who donated in the box in the shop. Our funds stand at £45-35.

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

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

Email: mahsnaturesite@gmail.com