

**A Conservation Management Plan
for Watercress Wildlife Association,
St. Albans**

2015– 2021

Watercress Wildlife Association

Registered Charity: 1011944

www.watercresslnr.org.uk



Management Plan 2015 - 2021

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Introduction

1.1 Background

This is the third plan for the Riverside Road Watercress Beds, St. Albans. This small site is one of former watercress beds and allotments and which suffered much dumping of rubbish. The land lies along the east bank of the River Ver on the southern edge of St. Albans. It has residential areas around it but is also part of the Ver valley which has some important remaining wetland sites, although partially degraded. It has been managed as a Reserve since 1992. The plan includes a site description and a site assessment. It sets out the vision for the site over the next 20 years and identifies the management proposals to be implemented over the next 5 years.

1.2 Site information

Site Name: Riverside Road Watercress Beds

Location: Grid reference TL1506. Access is from Riverside Road.

Size: Under 2 hectares.

Status: The site was designated a Local Nature Reserve by English Nature in 2003. It is also a County Wildlife Site (designated for its reptile and amphibian population) and falls within one of the Hertfordshire's key biodiversity areas: Ver Valley and Gorhambury designated for wetland and woodland.

Ownership: St. Albans District Council, Civic Centre, St. Peter's Street, St. Albans.

Tenure: A 20 year lease to Watercress Wildlife Association (WWA). The current lease ends in 2024.

Lease restrictions: No sub-letting, no development, no auctions on site, maintenance as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR).

Organisation: WWA is a charity founded and run by the local community. It is a membership based organisation, run by its committee. It currently has around 200 households as members. There is an elected chair, treasurer, secretary and site manager. All management is done on a voluntary basis.

Trustees: All committee members are trustees of the charity and operate under the Charity Commission's rules. The trustees have the ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of the charity and ensuring that it is solvent, well run, and meeting the needs for which it has been set up.

WWA site plan



1.3 Purpose

To provide an urban sanctuary for wildlife with access for local people.

2. Environmental and other information

2.1 Site description

At the heart of the site are the former watercress beds (now called The Mere) fed by artesian wells. The Mere is mainly fed by clean, fairly warm, but slow flowing groundwater. Some parts are deep and potentially dangerous. The water exits to the River Ver via a bund and tunnel system at the south western end of the site. This can become partially blocked and can help to keep the water level high but The Mere is also vulnerable to drought and has dried out in some summers (most recently in 2006). Reductions in local water abstraction have helped some recovery of the water table over the last 5 years. Pumping upstream has recommenced but with plans to cease pumping coming into operation. Plans are being developed to enhance water flow upstream in the Ver especially through Verulamium Park. The effect of these changes and also the impact of climate change are not yet known. The basin is in part exposed chalk and elsewhere covered with gravel and/or fine sediments. It provides a range of habitats and some aquatic wildlife including kingfisher, water rail, wildfowl, dragonflies and some fish.

The other main wetland habitat is The Bog which is fed by a small water inlet from the Ver at the northern end of the site. This has some old pollarded crack willows and younger coppiced willow along its margins. This creates a long marshy area which joins The Mere at the southern end of The Spit which is low lying land constructed of dredged sediment with willow, flag iris, bramble and nettle. There is a limited range of aquatic and marginal flora. Over time, both the Bog and the Mere will acquire more silt deposits.

The Ver runs along the western boundary of the site. Access to the banks is limited by a planted hedge containing a mix of natural species. This was designed to limit disturbance, in particular to safeguard potential habitat for the water vole. A similar buffer zone has been created by the Council on the far bank.

The rest of the site is a mosaic of habitat, with mainly native tree and shrubs including alder and silver birch. There is an orchard with neutral grassland which contains both old apple trees, and more recently, planted traditional varieties of fruit trees. Some of this grassland is dominated by false oat grass, cow parsley, nettles and hogweed or returning to scrub. The Pyghtle area has nettle/bramble scrub with two small ponds and a few orchard trees.

Several large saplings have been recently felled. The Sanctuary has several mature alder trees which are attractive to siskin and redpoll.

Since the last plan, the Allotment area has been brought under Reserve management. The hedge bordering the Ver has been laid, the central area allowed to return to grass (currently dominated by cock's foot) with alder trees planted at the southern end. New hedging has created an area for Reserve activities; there are new bird feeders and an extension of the circular walk around the site. Log piles and an insect hotel have been created.

The entrance area beside the bird hide is now maintained as an area of butterfly friendly flowers. There has been some planting of grasses in this area, and additionally around the ponds, to widen the variety of grass species on site. The Shady Place is a woodland patch with woodland flora such as ramsons, woodruff, bluebells and ferns. The non-native Spanish bluebell is present. Although not formally part of the site, the southern margin comprises a woodland bank along the route of an old railway line with standards of oak and ash with much bramble scrub and ivy. The soils are generally neutral becoming more acidic nearer to the Ver.

The site is well used by the local community. It attracts other visitors although it is not actively promoted beyond the local area. There are clear paths around the site although some paths have a soft surface. The Mere margins, in particular the south western parts of the site, much of the Allotment area, the Pyghtle and the banks of the Ver have no visitor access and are maintained as wildlife refuges. Two viewing points of these wildlife areas are maintained. Members have access to a hide overlooking the Mere. There are good, regularly updated, interpretative notices around the site. All management is undertaken by volunteers.

Species records, both formal and informal, indicate that the site maintains a good diversity of species which is believed to be growing. On site are song thrush (UK priority shortlist, local flagship species), kingfisher (long list and local flagship species) and water rail (rapidly declining species and locally scarce). The site contains bullfinch and the occasional reed bunting (UK middle list priority species). The site attracts bird watchers, especially in winter, when siskin and redpoll are often present. The loss of colony of sparrows (a declining species) appears to have been associated with the decline of a bramble patch which was a nest site. The site contains both reptiles and amphibians but there has been no recent survey.

It is thought the site may have held water vole but currently there are no water vole in the Ver Valley. There are records of interesting aquatic invertebrates but no recent surveys have been undertaken.



2.2 2009-2014 management achieved

The previous plan contained a supplementary plan to develop the new Allotment site. This has been fully implemented and includes new tree and hedge planting, restoration of the shed, the creation of an area for Association activities and public engagement, new bird feeders and an insect hotel. Other major achievements have been in meadow creation, hedge management, and controlling the spread of trees with two major arboricultural interventions to remove saplings, coppice willow, remove dangerous branches and control tree growth. Repairs have been completed to the bridge, allotment shed and blockhouse. The number of volunteers has grown supported by better communications. Events such as the Winter Wassail, occasional bat walks, guided visits for U3A groups have been maintained and new materials and events for children have been developed. The newsletter remains a popular resource for members. A donation box near the entrance has been successful despite occasional vandal attacks. Reserve orchard fruit is now made more available to members, either bagged or made into jam and fruit juice and has resulted in an improved income from donations.

2.3 Features influencing the current Management of the Site

Important feature	Influencing Management
Former watercress beds	Historic feature, typical of Hertfordshire but scarce Important for several key species (see below) Key habitat of Reserve – requires management to arrest succession but also to further increase diversity and manage water levels and quality
Mosaic of habitats	Includes orchard with old fruit trees, small woodland, wet and dry grassland and scrub, butterfly friendly flower beds, hedges with native species, new ponds. Diversity provides interest for Reserve users. Management required to control growth of scrub and trees.
Wildlife refuge in urban area	The main interest is the bird population. It often provides a winter refuge for ducks when conditions are freezing but it is also a good habitat for reptiles and amphibians. The plant life is reasonably diverse but dominated by ranker grasses and herbs. There are some old crack willows and mature orchard trees. The invertebrate population is under-recorded.
Local access	Valued 'wild area' for local residents and visitors. Important to retain welcoming, educative, approach with need to maintain a quiet natural environment for wildlife. Also maintain an active volunteer support.

3 Vision and Objectives

3.1 Vision

A rich and diverse wetland site which conserves the historic interest of the watercress beds and provides a valued wildlife amenity for local residents.

The site benefits from and will continue to contribute to the wildlife within the Ver Valley.

3.2 Objectives

3.2.1 Maintain the current extent of the Mere and further increase its interest as a site for wildlife

3.2.2 Control scrub and succession to woodland; improve the range of grassland habitats within the woodland, orchard and grassland areas

3.2.3 Maintain or increase the range of bird, mammal, butterfly and plant species on site

3.2.4 Maintain visitor enjoyment and awareness of the site

3.2.5 Improve the monitoring and recording of species on site to cover mammals, reptiles and amphibians, plants, birds and invertebrates including butterflies.



4 Habitat and Species Management

Key factors: This site is one of habitat creation, not conservation. The presence of water on site contributes to habitat diversity but the small size limits scale, inhibits sustainable populations and hence species diversity, although this is mitigated for some species by being part of a bigger landscape feature, the Ver Valley. Former use of the site means there is still much dumped rubbish below the surface and also nutrient enrichment from former allotment use. Space for silt, tree and grass cuttings to be stored and composted is limited.

Woodland

In the early years of the Reserve, tree planting was important to develop diversity of habitat and species. Now there is a range of ages from old crack willows and mature orchard trees to younger trees, some now reaching earlier maturity. The challenge now is to restrict the growth of seedlings and saplings; maintain healthy trees and control growth by coppicing so that the level of shade does not lead to a loss of open habitat and trees do not become too large to manage. Already it is now necessary to use professional tree surgeons on the larger specimens. Similarly, expertise is required to effectively prune the orchard trees. The cuttings provide a source of woodchip to maintain paths, willow branches for hedge laying, logs for the creation of invertebrate habitats and the potential to provide logs for members as a new source of donation income. Several diseases e.g. Ash dieback may threaten individual specimens. Trees will need to be inspected annually.

Hedgerows

Hedges need a rotational cut and those not yet laid will benefit from laying but this again will need to be on a rotational basis. The larger hedges may require professional help and volunteers will need periodic training in hedge laying techniques.

Wetland Habitats

- The Mere

The Mere is shallow and lacks submerged and floating vegetation making it vulnerable to algal blooms. This can be controlled to some extent. Allowing fallen branches to remain in the water will be beneficial both to help control blooms and also to provide a habitat where plants may be established. Additional use of Siltex and barley straw extract can be used as required. Attempts to introduce aquatic plants have not been successful so creating a favourable habitat for natural establishment is important.

Marginal vegetation is developing well; management is required that flag iris does not dominate to the exclusion of other species and sight lines are maintained. Allowing the water levels to fall in

summer creates a good marginal muddy habitat for plants and invertebrates. If water levels fall so that silt can be removed from the central areas this opportunity should be taken to prolong the life of the Mere by arresting successional processes.

- The Bog

The Bog is threatened by succession. Willows grow rapidly and if left will shade and dry out the bog. The stream is also subject to silting. About 25% of the area needs to be cleared on an annual cycle leaving sufficient undisturbed habitat for wildlife such as the water rail. The area also needs to be checked annually for invasive and weedy species which can rapidly colonise recently disturbed or cleared areas. These are best controlled by topping before setting seed

- Ponds

These need occasional clearance (once in 5 years) to maintain the habitat.

Scrub

Areas of scrub include the Pyghtle, the margins of the Mere and bramble patches. These provide a valuable source of food and refuge for wildlife but needs to be controlled by periodic cutting to prevent spread and growth of saplings. Care needs to be taken not to leave open, disturbed ground into which ruderal species can spread.

Grasslands and Meadows

These require regular cutting to control rank grasses and ruderal species. In particular an early cut in June before grasses seed and again in autumn. Yellow rattle if established could help control the growth of rank grasses to assist the establishment of herbs within the meadow.

Butterfly and herb beds

These need gardening to maintain a high density of flowering plants. Where possible perennials or self-seeding annuals should be selected with a focus on nectar rich flowers.

Species

There is already good provision of additional nesting, shelter and feeding to encourage a range of species. There are 3 bird feeding stations, bird boxes and bat boxes, 2 hibernacula, an 'insect hotel' and various log piles. These will be maintained as required. Mink have not been detected recently but further monitoring and trapping is possible to create a safe environment to encourage the

return of water voles. It is desirable to create more perches for kingfishers to improve their visibility.

Monitoring of species needs to be maintained and expanded as a measure of the success of management. It should provide evidence of success in maintaining and increasing biodiversity. Changes can also indicate problems e.g. increase in shade loving species may indicate lack of management of the wooded areas and scrub. Surveys of invertebrates are particularly needed. Regular monitoring for invasive/alien species will enable prompt action to eliminate where possible.

5 Reserve Management

Key factors: The management is dependent on maintaining a committed team of reasonably skilled volunteers. The site attracts good support from both members and visitors. It is popular for short strolls. Managing the balance between maintaining a quiet atmosphere and limiting disturbance to wildlife and people's enjoyment and use of the site is well achieved but occasionally there can be problems of anti-social behaviour and petty vandalism.

Paths, fences, bridges etc.

Maintain all fences, paths, buildings and seats in a state of good repair as required. A minimum is an annual safety check. New areas need to be created on the Pyghtle for compost, log-store etc.

Community Engagement

The visitor feedback shows high levels of satisfaction from users of the site. In particular, they value the quietness and the focus on wildlife within the Reserve. They can benefit from surplus produce in return for a donation. A donation box near the entrance attracts regular donation income.

Communication with visitors is maintained by informative notices and sightings board on site, newsletters for members, the website and sightings blog and regular work party emails for volunteers. The latter has increased the number of volunteers both on Sunday and Wednesday morning working parties. There is an activity sheet available for children. Occasional events include a Winter Wassail open afternoon, guided walks and events for children at working parties.

We need to continue to seek ways to attract new members and volunteers and to ensure there is adequate succession planning.

We will continue to engage with organisations e.g. Ver Valley Society, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and the local Council to promote wildlife within the Ver Valley. We will also maintain close

and co-operative links with neighbouring organisations where we have interests in common.

Our members will continue, through membership subscriptions, to be the chief source of funding but we will remain grateful for additional donations from individuals and local companies. We will, where appropriate, seek grant funding for specific projects.



6 Action Plan

Priority

Action

Measure

Timescale

1

Maintain paths, fences, gates in an accessible and safe condition

No observable or reported hazards

Annual check, seasonal mowing

Maintain tools in safe and workable condition

No broken tools

Annual check

Tree surgery

Canopy < 30% site cover

In plan lifetime

Hedges trimmed

>35% (annually)

Annual (winter)

Meadows cut and cuttings removed

>65% cut

Late June and Autumn

Algal control if required

Early summer

Bog clearance

20% area cut back

Annual

Maintain flowering plants on Butterfly and Herb beds

At least 4 species in flower

March to September

Other urgent repairs

As required

Run AGM

Event

Annual (Spring)

2

Run community events/maintain newsletters

1 event/ 2 editions

Annual

Monitor species

Birds, Butterflies and Plants recorded

Site list updated annually

Maintain sightlines

Minimum 3 cut

Annual (mid-summer)

Collect and make surplus produce available

Autumn

Create better onsite storage for compost and logs

Site created and used

2017

Prune Orchard trees

All fruit trees pruned

Annual

New Children's activity sheet

In plan lifetime

Inspect for invasive alien plants and tree diseases

Margaret Harris

WWA Management Plan

Dec.2016

Species removed or actively managed

Annual

Lay unlaidd hedges

10m

Annual (winter)

Develop website

Updates >3x per year

In plan lifetime

Clear ponds of excessive vegetation and silt

>25% open water

In plan lifetime

3

Perching branches for Kingfishers

Remove silt from Mere

Introduce yellow rattle to control rank grasses

Other actions

There are a range of other activities which are vital to the successful maintenance of the Reserve. These include collection of membership subscriptions, maintenance of records, ensuring good governance, liaising with individuals and local organisations. There is also the co-ordination of volunteers, the seeking of funds, developing the web-site and making jams from produce that are examples of other activities. On site, maintaining the bird feeders and emptying the donation box are examples of small but regular and important maintenance jobs. Opportunities will be taken to further enhance the habitat, to encourage and reward both new and existing volunteers and to respond to feedback from visitors.