

Oxford Heights West Conservation Target Area

Summer 2019 update from Camilla Lambrick

There has been a surge of action in the Oxford Heights West CTA – not only in its fens, but also its dry acidic flora. The rare alkaline fens are protected under European law for their unique flora and fauna. Sadly this biodiversity is easily lost if left unmanaged, when tall reed and willows grow up. The long established work on SSSIs is now being expanded to cover Local Wildlife and other Sites.

Experience developed at Cothill by Natural England and BBOWT, and also at Lye Valley in Oxford by Judy Webb and Rod d’Ayala with Natural England is now being applied at Chilswell and Raleigh Park by volunteers of the BBOWT Wild Oxford project – a collaboration of Oxford City Council and BBOWT, grant funded by a local Charitable Trust. This project is now in its sixth year at Chilswell and third year at Raleigh Park. Progress has been fast at this last site due to the additional involvement of the The Friends of Raleigh Park group. Repeated cutting of reed, rush and tall sedge is re-creating



the short sward necessary to small plants such as Grass-of-Parnassus. As part of the restoration, seed of marsh lousewort has been introduced from the Lye Valley. This plant is a root parasite of reed and large sedges; it acts like hay rattle and reduces the vigour of dense sward, so allowing more delicate plants to thrive. At Chilswell marsh lousewort is having a huge effect, and the introduced bog pimpernel is thriving, while southern marsh orchid has appeared without specific introduction. Now there are volunteer groups working at Louie

Memorial Field Fen and, thanks to funding from Grundon via TOE, at Hinksey Heights Fen. At Hinksey Heights this work, and also training courses, is being done by the Oxfordshire Fens Project which is an initiative of the Freshwater Habitats Trust.

Dry habitats on the unique geology of the Corallian ridge are also outstanding for their biodiversity. Extensive work at Frilford Heath Golf Course has been very successful in restoring heathland and acid grassland. Monitoring by the Oxfordshire Flora Group of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire has helped Natural England to focus the restoration management on critical areas of this large site. BBOWT reserves such as Hitchcose Pit and Dry Sandford Pit are subject to conservation work to maintain the flora and significantly their outstanding hymenopteran (bees etc) fauna. At Hurst Hill, Cumnor, a Jubilee initiative started extensive scrub clearance now maintained by light grazing. Heather and other acid loving plants are coming back. In the spring, Sian Liwicki of Wild Oxfordshire hosted an event with tea for local owners of dry acid grassland – an opportunity of emphasize the value of these grasslands and enable survey of further areas. Not least the Oxford Preservation Trust is working on its extensive grasslands on Boars Hill to promote species-rich grassland. Introductions, especially of hay rattle, have dramatically enhanced the sward, of Matthew Arnold Field. Finally I must acknowledge other volunteer groups that are carrying out this work – notably Abingdon Green Gym and the Oxford Conservation Volunteers.

Altogether an exciting scene with so many different sites being worked on, but there is a huge amount more that could be done not only on the separate habitats, but also linking them up with wildlife-rich corridors and footpaths. If you would like to help either with management work, monitoring, or helping run a volunteer group, please contact Camilla.r.lambrick@gmail.com , hoping to hear from you!