

Building a Nature Recovery Network

Introduction

Ecosystems operate at a landscape level so conservation needs to as well. The Trust was at the forefront of the move towards landscape-scale conservation and restoration of habitats, alongside preservation. Around the turn of the century, we were pushing for large scale projects outside of nature reserves with the desire to reverse decades of habitat loss and deterioration through bold creative conservation and ecological restoration (Colston, 1997). Our Living Landscape work followed on from this and took into account the need for species to move between areas and the potential value that many sites other than nature reserves hold. In 2010, the Lawton report was released and landscape-scale conservation became more mainstream. Landscape-scale conservation continues to play a key part in our work. This section details how we are influencing wildlife conservation across the three counties and beyond, to build the joined-up network of habitats that will allow wildlife and people to thrive. This will be a nature recovery network to not only preserve what we have but to also enhance our local area for wildlife.

 **Find out more**
wildlifebcn.org/nature-recovery-network

Key components

These are the gems in the crown, key sites for wildlife conservation.

Nature reserves

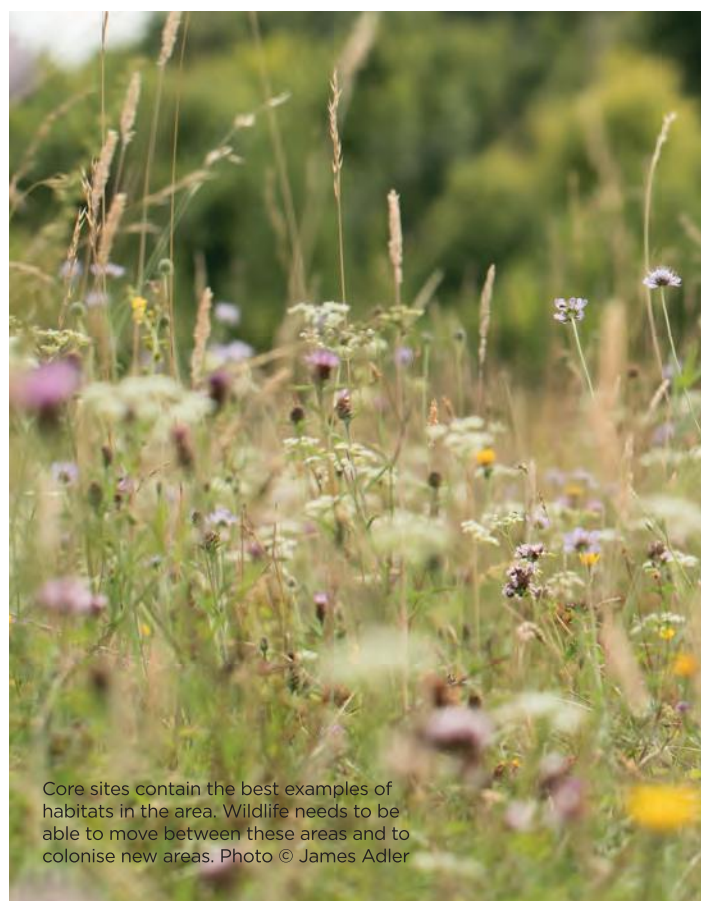
Nature reserve management is at the heart of our work. We manage over 100 nature reserves, covering over 4,000 hectares of land. These are the strongholds for a large number of species and habitats and we work tirelessly, spending over £2 million a year, to ensure that the reserves are the best that they can be for people and wildlife. The majority of people in the three counties live less than five miles away from a Wildlife Trust nature reserve.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves

Some of the sites we manage are of international importance and many of our reserves are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, reflecting how precious they are for wildlife. A small number have the additional accolade of National Nature Reserve, reflecting their value to people in addition to containing some of the most valuable wildlife habitats and species assemblages in the country. The Trust is proud to be the holder of “approved body” status in recognition of our site management standards.

Local Wildlife Sites

Local Wildlife Sites recognise all known examples of special sites for wildlife that do not have statutory protection. Alongside nature reserves, these are the core sites containing critical reservoirs of biodiversity with wildlife populations that can spread out into sites managed with wildlife in mind. There are over 1600 Local Wildlife Sites across the three counties. We work closely with partner organisations to survey sites and keep site information up to date. Wherever we can, we help encourage and advise site owners on managing their sites for wildlife.



Core sites contain the best examples of habitats in the area. Wildlife needs to be able to move between these areas and to colonise new areas. Photo © James Adler

Other components

The primary purpose of these sites is not for nature conservation, but all of these sites have the potential to play a vital part in the nature recovery network.

Churchyards

Many of these sites hold the oldest examples of managed grasslands in the area and have amazing potential for wildlife. The ancient buildings, walls and memorials are especially important for unique lichen communities. We provide advice and encouragement to those wanting to manage their churchyards in a wildlife-friendly way.

Churchyard Advice

We provide advice to churchyards across the three counties to enable local people to maintain wildlife-friendly burial grounds. In Northamptonshire, there was a churchyard scheme established in 1983 that recognises the work of churchyards in the county to enhance their sites for wildlife. The Wildlife Trust BCN administers this scheme, arranges judging and advisory visits and keeps in regular touch with over 90 churchyards in the county. There are currently 21 churchyards that hold a current bronze, silver or gold award. There are similar schemes in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, often working in partnership with others to achieve positive outcomes for wildlife in these special habitats.



Find out more
wildlifebcn.org/churchyards

Gardens

The area of gardens in Britain covers a much larger area than nature reserves do. A recent study in Bedfordshire showed that gardens make up over 5% of the land area of the county. Through our education programme, we try to encourage people to manage their gardens with nature in mind. We have a network of over 33,000 members across the three counties and communicate in a wide variety of ways to be the voice for nature. Everyone can play their part in nature's recovery.

Development

We recognise the need for development for our growing population and we work with developers to ensure that developments can achieve more

for wildlife. Building nature into the heart of development is essential for our future. Inappropriate development can harm our natural heritage, but well-considered planning has the potential to protect or even enhance our environment and help nature's recovery - by restoring and creating wildlife habitats. We advise on planning applications and formally object to those that will detrimentally affect wildlife. We support the change in emphasis for development to deliver 'no net loss' to delivering 'biodiversity net gain' and have advocated for this approach for a long time.

Farmland

Over 60% of the UK's land cover is farmed in some way. We work alongside farmers to help them create spaces for nature on their land by providing advice and support. Our Farming for the Future project in Northamptonshire advises and provides financial support for farmers in the Nene Valley to restore wetland and meadow habitats. Farmland is essential to provide the links between sites needed to build a nature recovery network, as well as having the potential to support important habitats in its own right. By working with landowners there is also an opportunity to help reduce the use of pesticides, decrease carbon emissions and to create and manage new habitats.



One of the components of our Farming for the Future Project is the creation of new ditches and scrapes using a piece of machinery called a rotary ditcher. This creates shallow habitats perfect for a range of wetland birds and invertebrates. Photo © Helena Darragh

Climate change campaigning

As an organisation, we campaign at both local and national levels to ensure that nature is at the heart of decisions that are made. At the local level, we need the support of local government, councils and communities to ensure nature is considered at every turn. At a national level, we believe our existing laws are currently too weak and that the climate and ecological crisis we face is not being taken seriously enough. We need ambitious natural climate solutions that reduce and capture carbon, stop ecosystem destruction and make our towns and cities cleaner and greener. We are one of 46 independent Wildlife Trusts across the country, connected by the work of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. As a part of this larger network, we have an even stronger voice to lobby for effective protection for the natural world.



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Linkages

These habitats are important in their own right but are also key features that allow species to disperse through the landscape. This is especially important for climate change mitigation.

Watercourses

Our waterway network is one of the most significant features in the landscape. The channels themselves support a diverse array of species. Alongside the channels, there are associated grasslands, ponds, pollard willows and old river channels. Our watercourses are also under severe pressure from the changing climate, abstraction and pollution. Our water for wildlife project is helping to restore watercourses across the three counties. This includes laying gravel, rebuilding and reprofiling banks, carrying out tree work, and installing cattle drinks.

Road verges

There are nearly 313,500 miles of rural road verge in the UK – equivalent in area to our remaining lowland species-rich grassland (Bromley, McCarthy and Shellswell, 2019). They are a complex mix of a variety of habitats; from broken ground to grassland, scrub, ditch banks, wet or dry ditch bottoms and hedges (sometimes with significant hedgerow trees). This provides significant habitat in itself but is also a key asset in linking up larger sites. We campaign for the appropriate management of road verges and designate those with particularly important assemblages of wildlife as Local Wildlife Sites.

We work with councils to ensure they are safeguarded for the future.

Other linear features

Hedgerows, ditches and farmland borders are also really important linear features, linking up larger areas of habitat as well as providing essential habitat in their own right. Our Wider Countryside and Reserves teams are involved in multiple projects to protect and enhance these habitats.

Thinking big

We work in partnership to achieve larger-scale outcomes for nature.

Nature recovery strategies and maps

With partners, we have developed nature recovery maps which highlight key areas where targeted restoration work would achieve the greatest outcomes for wildlife in the face of climatic change. In 2020, the government published its nature recovery network strategy, the biggest nature restoration project in our nation's history. As leaders in this area, we will work closely with the government to ensure that nature thrives across our area.

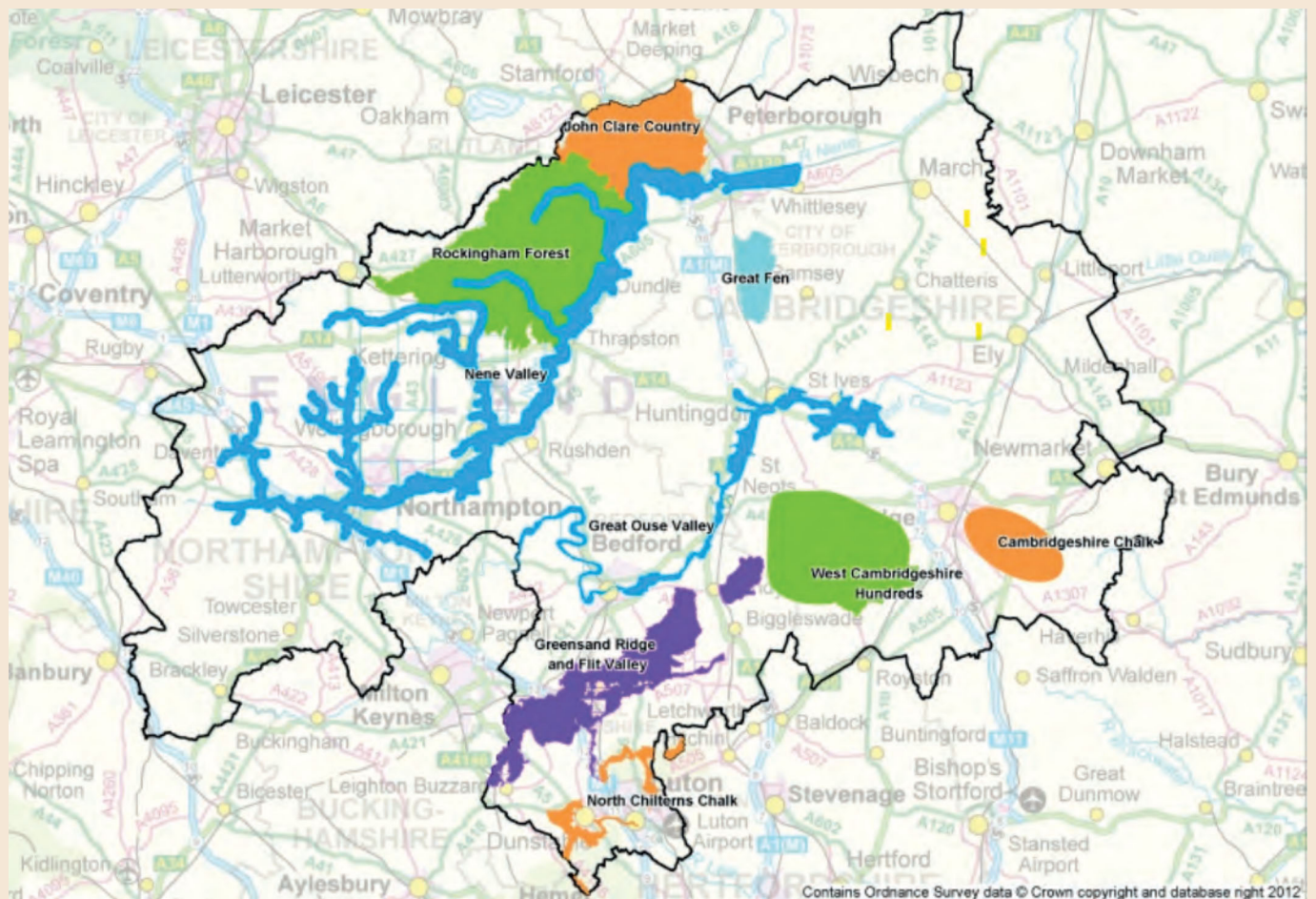
Landscape-scale projects

Our Great Fen project was one of the first of its kind in Britain, thinking large and joining up huge areas to restore a functioning ecosystem and buffer existing wildlife strongholds. This project has achieved national and international recognition. The monitoring of how nature has responded to this project has shown that we have the potential to restore functioning landscapes for both wildlife and people.

Evidence for change

Evidence-based conservation is at the heart of everything we do. We host three Local Records Centres, which hold data on species, habitats and designations across the three counties. These records centres hold and manage over 5 million species records between them. Two of the records centres are currently accredited by the Association of Local Environmental Records Centres and were some of the first in the county to receive this accolade. The environmental records centre for Northamptonshire is currently in the process of achieving accreditation. By hosting these records centres, we have easy access to high-quality data to inform our work.

Living Landscapes in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire



Living landscapes are natural networks allowing wildlife to travel from site to site. Across the three counties, we have established nine living landscape areas that we focus on. By thinking big, we can achieve better outcomes for nature. Map contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2012

 **Find out more**
wildlifebcn.org/living-landscapes

Summary

It is no longer enough to just protect the existing wildlife and habitats that we have. We need to focus on large-scale restoration to achieve the outcomes we need for wildlife and people, in a changing climate. The Wildlife Trust works locally to make a difference to wildlife across the three counties and joins up with others to be a stronger voice for nature.

References

- Bromley, J., McCarthy, B. and Shellswell, C. (2019). *Managing Grassland Road Verges*. Salisbury, UK: Plantlife International.
- Colston, A. (1997). Conserving Wildlife in a Black Hole. *ECOS*, 18(1), pp.61–67.