



Wildlife Trust for  
**Beds, Cambs  
& Northants**

# Impact Report 2023

**wildlifebcn.org**

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# Chairman's Introduction



Welcome to our annual review – and a new milestone for our Trust. The financial year 2022/3 saw us setting a new record for our region's wildlife. For the first time our total investment in nature conservation and community engagement in

our region will top £10million. This is thanks in large part to an enormous amount of work which has been put into the planning of our National Lottery funded Peatland Progress project, which is part of our Great Fen 50 year vision. We purchased a new area of farmland which connects the main areas of the Great Fen for the first time – this historic moment is the next step in creating a thriving wetland landscape.

Investment like this is vital if we are serious about halting biodiversity declines, bringing nature back and inspiring a new generation to love wildlife. That's why we are hugely grateful to the players of the National Lottery as well as everyone who donated to the £400,000 Landmark Appeal, our largest ever.

On the other side of our region we made the first step towards saving another vital piece of former farmland. Working with some forward-thinking partners we managed to raise enough to secure Strawberry Hill so that it is safe while we generate the full funding needed to buy it for future generations. As I write this the first reports of nightingales singing on the site are coming in – a sound that surely heralds a new future for this unique rewilded corner of Bedfordshire.

In the following pages you will learn about our key work areas: managing reserves, research & monitoring, advising farmers and landowners, and community engagement. We've drawn out some of the key numbers that show how we are making a real difference for threatened species and for people.

It's been a difficult few months in the conservation world. We've had to fight a Government attack on the fundamental protections for nature in the UK, bridge a financial gap as the cost of living crisis made our work more expensive, and deal with one of the hottest summers on record – a glimpse of the huge challenge to come as climate chaos starts to impact our countryside.

But wherever there are people who care about the future of our woodlands, meadows and wetlands we will continue to be able to make a difference. From Ian, who volunteers his time three or four days each week to managing habitat at our reserves in Bedfordshire, to Linda and Susie who raised nearly £2,000 with a curry evening, Julia who gives up her time to help run our Nene Wetlands visitor centre, and the late pioneering botanist Gigi Crompton who left us a generous legacy which will ensure we can continue her work.

To these inspiring people, and to the many more whose names would fill these pages, we owe our heartfelt appreciation. And a special thank you to all those

members who have increased their membership donations this year to help us weather the ongoing cost of living crisis.

William Stephens,  
Chair of the Council



Little owl by Kevin Pigney, Wildlife Trust BCN Photography Competition 2022

Front cover image - Brown hare by Richard Howell, Wildlife Trust BCN Photography Competition 2022

# Strategic Report

## Our Vision

People close to nature, in a land rich in wildlife

## What do we do?



### Nature conservation on our nature reserves

We manage over 100 nature reserves including some of Britain's rarest habitats such as ancient woodlands, wild fen, and wildflower meadows.



### Provide nature conservation advice and support to landowners

We work beyond the boundaries of our nature reserves by advising landowners who own and manage important sites for wildlife.



### Monitor and research wildlife

We carry out surveys to enable us to monitor population trends and assess the success of our practical habitat management.



### Inspire a love of nature

We support people to learn more about local nature through our events, training workshops and school programmes and we help them reap the benefits of simply connecting with nature.



### Advocate for wildlife

We campaign for a Wilder Future by lobbying local and national government for better protection of wildlife, and we review and respond to local development plans, ensuring we can achieve the biggest impacts possible.



### Provide vital green spaces to all sectors of society.

We improve people's lives and wellbeing by giving them places close to their communities to meet, escape, and unwind.

We do all of this work with a Nature Recovery Network in mind, because we believe that a well-connected landscape is better for wildlife and for people.

## Why is our work important?

Nature has an intrinsic value, but healthy green spaces also provide ecosystem services like:

- Climate regulation
- Mental and physical health improvements
- Pollination of food crops
- Flood alleviation
- Healthy soils

Pressures such as agricultural intensification, urbanisation and climate change are affecting our wildlife

**41% of UK species have seen numbers decline since 1970\***

**15% are under the threat of extinction\***

\*State of Nature Report 2019



Marbled white by Gary Dean, Wildlife Trust BCN Photography Competition 2022



# Our Reserves

**Connecting wild landscapes and securing the future of vital habitats to help wildlife adapt to climate change have been key focuses of our conservation work over the past year. Whether it's acquiring new land, working with partners to create natural corridors or offering support and advice to farmers and other land managers who want to do their bit for nature.**

That's the ethos behind the Living Landscapes strategy and this year our first Living Landscape entered a new phase as we purchased Speechly's Farm in the heart of the Great Fen. This followed a huge amount of work and planning from the conservation team, fundraising team and education officers which saw us awarded an incredible £8million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and raise £400,000 through our largest ever public appeal. The land connects Woodwalton Fen and Holme Fen, two of the most important National Nature Reserves in our region, for the first time since the 1850s. As well as creating new wetlands and trialling 'wet farming,' which saves the peat and is good for wildlife, this project aims to change lives by engaging with young people and promoting mental wellbeing through nature.

Elsewhere we are continuing to make those connections and secure the future of nature reserves. At Pegsdon Hills Nature Reserve in Bedfordshire we have taken action to stop any future shooting across our reserve by buying the rights thanks to a generous legacy left to us by entomologist and naturalist Dr Bernard Nau. We will now work with Natural England, which has acquired the neighbouring Hexton Estate, and others to connect a wide area of land managed for nature in the north Chilterns for the first time.

On the other side of Bedfordshire, right in the centre of our three counties, we've prevented the immediate loss of Strawberry Hill. Working collaboratively with some forward-thinking philanthropists, there is now a chance to save this 150-hectare former arable farm which has been left to nature for more than 25 years and is now home to turtle doves, nightingales and much more.

Some of our most active sites for conservation work on the ground were in Northamptonshire where our Nene Valley reserves including Summer Leys and Titchmarsh saw newly restored wetland habitats, scrapes dug for wading birds, lakes reprofiled and sand martin banks built thanks to a funding partnership with National Highways, as well as further support from Natural England.

We have faced a huge challenge in recent years in our Cambridgeshire woodlands as a result of Ash Dieback which, despite slipping from the media spotlight, is affecting large numbers of trees at reserves like Lower Wood. But we have responded to this, and the need to constantly replenish our ancient woodland sites with new growth, by undertaking one of our largest ever tree planting programmes across some of our best-loved reserves.

These, and all our conservation activities, need to be as sustainable as possible. So this year we have unlocked funding to begin the transition from petrol powered tools to electric.



6

**wildlife ponds**  
created at  
Pitsford Water  
nature reserve

262  
**lambs**

**delivered on our reserves** at  
Barford Wood and Meadows  
and Lilbourne nature reserves  
this year, ready to graze our  
nature reserves, maintaining  
the biodiversity for  
the future

5,792

**days of work** during  
the last financial year  
provided by our 1,577  
active volunteers restoring  
grasslands, planting  
Sphagnum moss,  
repairing fences and  
improving access

583  
**hectares**

**of grasslands, rides and  
glades in Cambridgeshire**  
kept flower- and butterfly-  
rich by cutting and  
grazing over the  
past year

120  
**hectares**

**of land at Speechly's  
Farm acquired** by the  
Trust to be restored for  
wildlife for the first time  
since drainage in  
the 1850s

3,500

**trees planted in  
Cambridgeshire ancient  
woodlands** Hayley,  
Waresley & Gransden,  
Gamlingay and Lower  
Wood over the  
past year



# Our wider countryside work

**Our reserves are at the heart of our work protecting nature, but they cover less than one per cent of our region. To bring back nature to our three counties our work advising and engaging with farmers and landowners is vital.**

In recent months this has seen us helping land managers to prepare for the new post-Brexit land management rules which are still in flux. We have helped farmers identify sources of funding available for environmental measures and survey land to find the areas where they can make the biggest impact for nature.

In Cambridgeshire, the largest of our three counties, we have made a strategic move towards a deeper engagement with a smaller number of critical land owners. Some of the most expansive estates, including the Burghley and Milton Estates which manage large areas in the John Clare Country Living Landscape, have shown real vision and we hope to continue our relationship and make a real difference for farmland wildlife.

When it comes to individual farmers our advisors on the ground are building important relationships. The Farming for the Future project facilitated by the National Lottery Heritage Fund secured match funding this year from the Environment Agency and Defra to allow it to continue until 2025. This means our team can continue with interventions like bringing the UK's only laser-guided rotary ditcher to Nene Valley farms in July last year to create wader scrapes in fields.

**2,000**  
hectares of farmland  
south and east of  
Cambridge covered by  
the new East Cambridge  
Farmer Cluster to  
enhance nature-  
friendly farming

**637**  
planning  
applications  
reviewed across  
our three  
counties

**10**  
new Local Wildlife  
Sites designated in  
Northamptonshire  
covering 57 hectares  
thanks to surveys  
by Trust staff

**27**  
volunteer river  
wardens actively  
monitoring 25km of  
the River Great Ouse  
and its tributaries in  
Bedfordshire

**25**  
farmers advised  
on boosting wildlife  
on their farmsover  
the past year in the  
Nene Valley

**4,500**  
metres of new  
ditches created on  
farmland in Nene  
Valley to benefit  
wading birds

## Research and monitoring

**Knowing what wildlife occurs where is essential for us to safeguard its future – and making the best use of evidence in conservation ensures we make best use of our resources.**

Trialling nature-based solutions to major environmental problems is the focus of our research work. This means finding the answers to the biggest problems facing nature – including climate change and habitat loss.

Last year we completed full digital mapping of all our landholdings giving us an accurate breakdown of the habitats we manage and the carbon they hold for the first time. The results show that on our 100+ nature reserves the largest habitat areas are grassland and woodland followed by wetlands with smaller areas of scrub, heathland and farmland. As well as the bigger picture, these maps give us a much finer level of detailed information about our reserves and are already helping to inform how we manage them for nature and how vital they are for our climate.

Volunteer groups and amateur naturalists continue to be vital to our work. From the breeding bird survey teams who made early morning visits to various sites, to the mammal groups that checked dormice boxes and walked bat transects. And the insect survey groups that have revealed positive news including the highest number of black hairstreak butterflies at Brampton Wood since the late 1990s

Beyond our own reserves we have embarked on an exciting project in our region as part of the national Ancient Woodland Inventory. Two new officers in the Monitoring and Research team have been busy combing through land records and maps dating back centuries to

build a better understanding of ancient woodlands in the region and identify areas previously unrecorded.

But communicating our work and increasing identification skills and the understanding of conservation evidence across the sector is what gives our work the wings it needs to make a difference beyond our region.

February saw the return of our first face-to-face Monitoring and Research Conference since 2019 with talks from conservation scientists including Professor

William Sutherland CBE covering a range of topics from monitoring in the Great Fen to the climate crisis.

We saw one of our most successful years to date for our Wildlife Training Workshops as we moved back towards a mostly on-site programme of events. From identifying raptors and trees to introductory days on reserves covering millipedes, mosses and much more, these workshops are a vital channel for us to upskill and inspire professional and amateur conservationists alike.





# Community engagement

**The past year saw our ambition grow as we aimed to to inspire more families, school children, community groups and businesses to take action for wildlife.**

The cost of living crisis has brought new challenges as people have been less able to travel to events or continue to support us, leading us to investigate new ways to engage with our communities.

At Summer Leys in Northamptonshire, the new visitor centre has helped raise awareness of our work, educate people and reduce anti-social behaviour. Ramsey Heights and Trumpington Meadows in Cambridgeshire both had great success with our first ever family wild camp outs with more planned this year. Following environmental advice for Urban and Civic at their Wintringham and Alconbury Weald developments in Cambridgeshire, we returned in the autumn to engage with the new residents, empowering them to make space for hedgehogs and amphibians in their new gardens.

Young people represent a key demographic for the Trust. At Paxton Pits it all starts with our popular Wild Babies club with children moving through Little Bugs and Wildlife Watch before eventually graduating to Youth Rangers. The 13-strong group has been really busy this year, working with a local care home and engaging new audiences in the area. Our Young People's Forum are meeting regularly and planning to engage with local politicians and contribute to our campaigns. Our aspiration is to have Youth Trustees on our board in the near future.

Schools remain a central focus of our work with teams across the three counties delivering face-to-face

education programmes that include young people becoming Wildlife Investigators at the Great Fen, travelling through time at Paxton Pits and discovering the Tiny Creatures of the Big Hills in Bedfordshire. We have expanded our forest school programme which is particularly beneficial to young people who face challenges in the typical classroom environment. Twelve of our team are either qualified forest school practitioners or currently undertaking training.

Our Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures project in Luton has reached new audiences in one of our largest and most diverse urban areas. Staff have engaged with young people in secondary schools who may have less opportunity to access nature, hosted homeless and LGBTQ+ groups and started working with various faith groups.

We support, empower and amplify the voices of nature-loving people through our new initiatives, Team Wilder and Nextdoor Nature. This is a community-based approach for getting unprecedented numbers of people involved in our work. We're building a movement of people taking action for nature across the region that they love – doers, champions, networkers, campaigners and changemakers!

We renewed our focus on building mutually beneficial relationships with local businesses, offering their employees a chance to take part in lunchtime walks as well as our popular Wild Work Days, which give corporate supporters a real insight into what we do and our impact on the ground.

**“We were absolutely thrilled with the children’s enthusiasm following our visit which led to some incredible follow up work, a new love of nature and the environment and even inspired us to develop our own outdoor area as well as Forest School. We just cannot thank you enough!”**

*Victoria Jordan, teacher  
Lakeview School*

**2,683**

**new members**  
inspired to join  
the Trust

**3**

**new profit  
share partners**  
now donating 1%  
of their profits to  
support our  
work

**150**

**children**  
engaged with  
through our  
Forest School  
programme

**71**

**Little  
Bugs sessions**  
introducing toddlers  
to nature with hands  
on activities on  
reserves

**116**

**new residents** at the  
Wintringham development  
in St Neots attending an  
event in October to learn  
how to create homes  
and safe passage for  
hedgehogs in their  
gardens

**2,461**

**school pupils**  
engaged with  
across the region



# Finance

Total income: £10,533,304

**£1,252,826**  
Donations, legacies and corporate sponsorship

We are hugely grateful to all those individuals and organisations who have given to fund our work over the past year. We remember with gratitude our generous supporters from whom we received a gift in their Will.

**£1,531,368**  
Membership (and Gift Aid)

Our members and corporate members not only provide substantial unrestricted funds that can be used where the need is greatest, they also give strength to our voice when advocating and campaigning for wildlife.

**£5,156,529**  
Grants

The grants we are awarded each year are vital to ensure some of our most important projects can continue. Competition for grants is always high so we are thankful for the belief and support of the trusts who have given over the past year.

**£412,043**  
Rural Payments Agency

Payments made by Defra for the environmental stewardship and management of land.

**£1,231,990**  
Land advice, advocacy and management contracts

Income resulting from partnerships with land owners such as councils and property developers where an improvement for wildlife can be obtained.

**£948,548**  
Business activities

Income from products and services we sell – including from our Nene Wetlands visitor centre and online shop – land rents, and event fees charged and other activities helping to create a sustainable income.

Total expenditure: £7,186,152\*

**£ 3,273,872**  
Nature reserve management

With over 100 nature reserves in our care, we continue to spend the majority of our income on maintaining and improving these precious habitats for wildlife.

**£ 1,569,110**  
Conservation outside our reserves

Key to building strong Living Landscapes and to creating a Nature Recovery Network, this work encompasses our advocacy and advice for land managers, work on our waterways and partnership projects.

**£ 1,346,782**  
Fundraising and income generation

Costs invested in generating financial support.

**£ 996,388**  
Education and community engagement

Inspiring a love of nature is central to our mission. People will not protect what they do not love.

\*This figure does not include the capital expenditure of Speechly's Farm.

# Legacies

We are incredibly touched by the foresight and kindness of our legators, who cared about wildlife during their lifetime and chose to remember us in their wills so that we can ensure the species and habitats we all love will be there for future generations. All gifts, no matter what size, make a significant difference to what we can achieve, and we are truly grateful to every single person.

Over the past year, legacies have helped us set up a suite of training bursaries to enable students to develop botanical field skills and further develop our restoration of the Great Fen, as well as contributing to our overall ambitions to make Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire wilder, to undertake more research, to inspire people to love and take action for nature and to work nationally when it benefits nature locally.

We thank our generous supporters who have included a gift to the Trust in their Will, in particular

- Gavin Boyd
- Peter Cain
- Jean Calhoun
- Dr Bernard Nau
- Bernard Scott
- Anne Syme



Wildflowers at the Manor House, Cambourne



# Supporting our work

**We are very proud to be associated with some of our region's most sustainable and forward-thinking businesses, and exceptionally grateful for their ongoing support for our work.**

**Thanks to all those that have supported us, including:**

## **Profit Share Partners**

Fill Refill, Mulch Ado, Warner's

## **Corporate Partners (Gold)**

The Biodiversity Consultancy, Ewing Associates, Fujifilm UK Ltd, Prologis UK Limited, Suez, Warner's

## **Corporate Investors (Silver)**

Anglian Water Services, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, Colpac Ltd, Colworth Park, HCR Hewitsons, Scott Bader, Scudamore's Punting Co Ltd, UK Power Networks

## **Corporate Supporters (Bronze)**

Alpro UK Ltd, Athene Communications, Cambridge Business Park, Cambridge Econometrics Ltd, Cambridge Steiner School, Cambridge Water Company, Campkins Cameras, Center Parcs Woburn Forest, Cheveley Park Farms, Cranfield University, Dawson Wam, Dojima Sake Brewery, Downing College Cambridge, Eastern Tree Surgery, Global Graphics Software, Granta Park, Holidaycottages.co.uk, Hunts Wildlife Landscapes, The Jordans & Ryvita Company Ltd, Marshall of Cambridge, Perkins Engines Co Ltd, Richard Buxton Environmental & Public Law, South Cambs District Council, Spendlove Contracting, Tarmac, University of Northampton, Wellcome Genome Campus, Zeiss, Jesus College, Whittlebury Park

## **Funders**

Asda (Luton)

Banister Charitable Trust

Barbara Price Charitable Trust

Benham Charitable Settlement

Cambridge Water Company

Chapman Charitable Trust

Constance Travis Charitable Trust

Co-op Foundation

Desborough Community Development Trust

Douglas Compton James Charitable Trust

Environment Agency

Frederick & Phyllis Cann Trust

Garfield Weston Foundation

GrantScape

Jack Patston Charitable Trust

Kirby Laing Foundation

Looker Energy Environmental Fund

National Lottery Heritage Fund

New Gap Charitable Trust

Northwick Trust

The Penchant Foundation

Robin & Henrietta Woods Charitable Trust

The Simon Gibson Charitable Trust

Thomas Rawcliffe Charitable Trust

Wild Flower Society

William Haddon Charitable Trust



**Our Bradgers Hill Wilder Futures project is funded by the National Lottery and is helping to engage diverse communities in Luton with the nature on their doorstep.**