

Impact Report 2024–25

wildlifebcn.org



Chair's Introduction



Welcome to the Impact Report 2024/25 for the Wildlife Trust BCN, highlighting the work we have done to protect our region's wildlife and habitats and to grow our public support.

This is my first year as Chair of the Trust's Council and I am proud to have stepped into this role at a critical and exciting time for the charity. It is a great privilege to take over the reins from Professor William Stephens who led the Council with good humour and wise judgement.

The first few months have been a steep learning curve for me – there's so much going on at the Trust, but there's also more work than ever to do behind the scenes to ensure we remain financially sustainable, compliant with charity rules and guidelines, and a supportive and safe employer.

One of my first tasks as Chair has been to help shape and launch the Trust's new <u>five year plan 2025-2030</u>. It considers the future challenges that face us and how we will overcome them. This impact report, though, covers the last year of the previous five year plan. Next year's report will look a bit different as it's brought into line with a new set of impact measures. These will be based on monitoring and evidence to show how our work has benefitted wildlife and people.

Writing a plan is the easy part - delivering it is going to be a huge undertaking for our dedicated, tireless and highly professional team of staff who are stretched thinly across the three counties we serve. We need to find new ways to support their work if we are to achieve the goals we have laid out. We have new income streams to find, and tough choices to make.

Nonetheless during 2024/5 the Trust has achieved a huge amount which gives me hope we can innovate, and meet the challenges ahead. For example we raised an amazing £1.5million to buy Strawberry Hill Farm in Bedfordshire and save it for nature. With the complex acquisition process now complete, our focus must be on keeping its magic intact whilst allowing access in a sensitive way.

We have also brought beavers back to the Nene Wetlands in Northamptonshire, something that seemed impossible just a few years ago. They joined more than 100 reintroduced water voles proving that we can bring back what has often been lost for decades, even centuries.

I have also been impressed by the Trust's focus on inclusion through initiatives to encourage women and non binary people out into the countryside in Northamptonshire, and to sustain the enthusiasm of our Young People's Forum, all of which add to the richness of our work and broaden our relevance to new audiences.

The past year has seen a new Government in Westminster. As ever, new administrations like to set out a bold agenda; however it was worrying to see nature held up as a blocker to building more housing and infrastructure. It illustrated the vital need for charities like ours to speak up for wildlife which otherwise has no voice, and to show how nature enhances new

neighbourhoods like the one alongside our Trumpington Meadows reserve in Cambridge.

We have continued to speak out about the threats of climate change, the ways nature can provide solutions and how our large scale Cambridgeshire Great Fen wetland project in particular provides flood alleviation, locks in carbon through peatland restoration and gives stressed species space to survive in healthy habitats.

I hope after you have read this report you will share my confidence that, despite big financial, political, social and climate challenges ahead, we are making a difference right now for wildlife. My heartfelt thanks go to each and every supporter for your vital help to us over the past year.



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 – local activities joining together to create a national network of linked spaces – because we believe that a wellconnected 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 including:

- 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.

19% Across the UK, species studied have declined on average by 19% since 1970*

16% Nearly one in six species are threatened with extinction from Great Britain*

*State of Nature Report 2023



We will make Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire wilder



Director of Conservation, Matt Jackson

Wildlife Trust staff have been heavily involved in the development of Local Nature

Recovery Strategies. These strategies are a key plank of the Government's commitment to nature and each is led by a local authority. The idea is that all interested parties agree the priorities for nature in an area, with a view to greater collaboration and collective impact. As such, it's vital we not only share our expertise but have a strong voice in the decision-making process.

North Northamptonshire was the second region in England to complete its strategy, which maps out where key actions are needed for nature conservation, and drafts have been produced for all of the areas in our three counties. The strategies will affect where support is provided for conservation activity. We also completed work on the first full scale review of the Ancient Woodland Inventories for the three counties.

Initial habitat creation works for the Peatland Progress Project have started in the Great Fen. Strengthening the links between Holme and Woodwalton Fens, the new habitat has also been designed with visitors in mind. We've also extended the area we manage at Soham Meadows in East Cambridgeshire.

Thanks to a major grant from Biffa Award, we started the year acquiring the freehold of the southern half of Strawberry Hill. The generosity of the public, and a major anonymous donation, allowed us to secure the northern half forever, after members of We Have the Power, a group of conservation-minded lenders, had stepped in to hold the land for us until the funding could be raised

While the fens remain one of the few national strongholds for water voles, they had almost vanished from the rest of the three counties, largely because of invasive mink introductions. Recent improvements in management, and the ability to control a large area at the Nene Wetlands, made a reintroduction of water voles in Northamptonshire feasible.

The beaver reintroduction at the same site is a major step forward for conservation. One of our larger mammals, the dynamic management beavers bring had been missing across our region for more than 400 years. Our enclosed reintroduction, as part of the national strategy, provided one of the last pieces in the jigsaw to allow unenclosed wild releases, and it was fitting that the Government's Wildlife Minister announced the change in policy from the Nene Wetlands a few days later. (see Page 11 for more details)

Case Study: Water voles at Nene Wetlands

Watch the video to see the moment in September when our Nene Wetlands team and partners released more than 100 water voles. They have been absent from the reserve since 2000.







4,477ha of land owned or managed for wildlife



116 water voles released at Nene Wetlands in September



Eight beavers released to Nene Wetlands, the first in our three counties for 400 years



More than 900 wigeon recorded on Higham Lake in the Nene Wetlands - 3% of the UK population - as well as 700 gadwall and 250 lapwing

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Case Study: **Strawberry Hill purchase**

We enjoyed a significant moment for the Trust last year as we hit the target in our largest ever fundraising appeal and purchased Strawberry Hill in Bedfordshire.

The former 150 hectare (377 acre) farm has been quietly rewilding for several decades and become the largest area of scrub and young woodland in central England. When it came on the market in 2022, with no protections in place, it had become home to a range of threatened wildlife including nightingales, several warbler species, turtle doves, a suite of wildflowers, butterflies and more.

Thanks to We Have The Power, and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, who purchased the site temporarily, we were able to take on its management. In 2023 half of the site was purchased with a grant from Biffa Award, then a few months

later we launched our most ambitious appeal yet, aiming to raise £1.5million to buy the remaining half of the site.

The appeal captured the public's imagination with help from articles in *the Guardian* and other regional and national media outlets. In just a few months we had reached the target with nearly half a million pounds raised by more than 3,800 individual donations from the public and the rest raised by a substantial private donation as well as large contributions from trusts and foundations.

In November we completed the purchase, saving the site for nature, forever. We are continuing to survey and record the species there while developing a plan to protect the habitat and ensure the public can visit and enjoy this special place.



We will undertake more research to better understand our wildlife and what it needs



Senior Monitoring & Research Officer, Gwen Hitchcock

Understanding what is on our reserves is essential for managing the habitat for wildlife. As is using evidence

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to underpin all our conservation work. We have been busy over recent months surveying sites for wildflowers, butterflies, bats, birds and other species.

Our new Strawberry Hill reserve is an excellent example of the various types of monitoring that the Trust undertakes. As a newly acquired nature reserve, we put a lot of effort into understanding the habitats and species that already exist on the site. This involved mapping the habitats and working with volunteers, local and national experts to survey as many species groups as we could. We have used this information to inform how we maintain and improve the nature reserve. We always seek evidence from what has worked (or not worked) elsewhere. With such a large site we can also set up long-term trials by subdividing the reserve and implementing different management strategies in each area.

To conserve our wildlife, we first need to know what we have and where. This is particularly important on restoration sites, where casual records can be patchy or non-existent. Baseline surveys of these sites provide the foundation to ensure that the changes we make are having a positive effect. This impact can then be

detected by long-term monitoring. This enables us to pick up on changes and alter our management methods where necessary. By testing out different management techniques we can compare how effective and efficient they are and choose the most appropriate methods in the future.

By working closely with universities, reserves like Strawberry Hill can become important research sites. These studies are now generating data on a variety of cuttingedge topics including climate change, carbon storage and automatic species identification.

Case Study: Wildlife Training Workshops and Conservation Conference

Hear Juliette from our Monitoring and Research team talk about our popular series of Wildlife Training Workshops and our new Conservation Conference, both of which aim to spread knowledge and skills





38 grassland sites surveyed

by our teams, helping to shape management plans and protect threatened wildflowers and invertebrates



4 woodlands have been surveyed

helping us to understand more detail about the distribution of tree species across reserves and the current pressures on our woodlands



Volunteers have carried out 2,064 hours of monitoring & research,

across 13 projects helping us gather vital data about sites with minimal cost to our members and funders



15 sites surveyed by drone, helping us to track habitat changes and build a database of digital maps



We analysed 7 hours of recorded bat data from our reserves and identified 11 bat species using 10 different sites



41 breeding bird transects

completed - with volunteers visiting 24 reserves, giving us vital data on the effectiveness of current conservation management plans, digitising results to compare years/create heat maps



Over 585,000 species recorded to the databases of the Local Environmental Record Centres, hosted by the Trust, improving species and other information available to planners, developers and researchers



More than a decade ago slow worms present on the disused railway line that was to become the route for the Luton and Dunstable Guided Busway were moved to safety. These slow worms were taken to three nearby sites: Totternhoe, Bradgers Hill and Dallow Downs where they are now thriving. In total 1,524 were moved with the majority (902) coming to our Totternhoe nature reserve and the rest going to the other two sites. We were contracted to monitor the populations for the following 10 years and last year completed the final report. This was an almost unprecedented amount of time for post-translocation monitoring.

Surveys took place in the first two years, then at five and ten years, to monitor how the populations were faring. Artificial refugia were surveyed regularly during spring and autumn, with each slow worm being weighed, measured, sexed and photographed. This allows us to monitor their numbers but also their condition. In this case weight (corrected by length) is used as a proxy for health. Individual slow worms could be identified by their markings, allowing us to look at recapture rates and movement around the reserve.

Our study showed that the populations of slow worms were stable 10 years after translocation, with some evidence of expansion beyond the release area at two sites. Body condition also appears to be stable across the years, with some inter-year variation in numbers and condition. We also looked at breeding rates, which proved more difficult with greater inter-year variation. This showed that the proportion of juveniles within each population appears to be fairly consistent, and in a similar range to that found in other populations.

We will inspire more people to love and take action for nature



Head of Communities & Education, Pete Stubbs

Our communities are integral to what we do and can play a massive role in making our counties better for

nature and better for people. Eco anxiety is a prevalent source of stress and concern for a growing number of the population, none more so than the young, and we have the opportunity to tackle that. Over the past year we've delivered activities and events to families, groups and young people to highlight how they can take positive action for nature, from sustainability workshops to practical events building bug hotels or planting native, wildlife-friendly gardens.

Young people continue to be a focus for us and will be throughout our new five-year plan. Our Young People's Forum continues to grow, inspiring young and old, and actively looking to take proactive steps to protect our natural environment. Youth Rangers meet regularly across the three counties to undertake important conservation work and engage with their local communities too.

We have also continued to provide access to nature for a number of groups, improving mental and physical wellbeing. The community garden at Rushden Lakes hosts regular sessions for charities including Spring, Cando and Headway. In Luton, students from Cardinal Newman School's early intervention unit are benefiting from activities outside the classroom and local children with special educational needs are undertaking forest school sessions at Ramsey Heights and Rushden Lakes. We have started a Northants Nature Girls group to help young women to access nature and host regular nature journalling days at Paxton Pits.

Time in nature is so important for wellbeing and our communities are key in helping us to offer that provision. Through a new community approach called Team Wilder, we will be focussing on how we can empower local communities to develop and maintain that access themselves. Working with people, not doing things for them, allows them to take ownership of an idea, an initiative, a project and be the driving force behind it. That will provide far greater longevity as our communities will be the ones leading the change and maintaining the momentum.





We have worked with 72 individual schools in our region. These include 47 primary schools and 20 secondary schools and colleges, plus 5 pre schools



We have engaged with 6,155 school pupils



We have arranged 91 school visits to our sites



We have run 544 community engagement sessions



Our staff have spent 1,194 hours delivering 154 events for adults, 230 events for families and 86 events for children



3,410 adults and 2,998 children and young people engaged at our community events



6 episodes released of our new podcast *In Conservation*



More than 300,000 people have watched our videos of the new beavers at the Nene Wetlands



Two appearances on BBC Countryfile including a featured visit to the Great Fen in July



At the start of 2024, we launched a new group in Northamptonshire – 'Northants Nature Girls'. This is a group for women and non-binary people who love nature and the outdoors to meet like-minded people, whilst enjoying time in nature. We felt there was a need for a group like this, mainly because many women unfortunately do not feel safe or comfortable when exploring reserves alone, which can create barriers for people to enjoy green spaces.

Time outdoors can have a huge positive impact on our mental health and wellbeing, and we aim to remove these barriers to allow women to enjoy nature and to feel empowered doing so. It is often hard to make friends as an adult, and we want the group to be a way for people to connect and form new friendships.

The response to the group has been amazing; our first launch event sold out quickly with others expressing an interest to join. Since the launch, we have run monthly events which have included walks, crafts, wildlife activities and more, which have all been very well attended. We are regularly seeing people come back for multiple events, and signing up as Trust members. We started a Facebook group for the women to connect with each other outside of events, which currently has over 450 members and is a great platform for us to share our events. We're looking forward to running lots more events and seeing how the group develops.

Case Study: **Peatland Progress project education and engagement**

Hear Great Fen Community and Education Manager Alison Chaves talk about the work her team has done over the past year to engage schools and communities as part of the Lottery funded Peatland Progress project.





We will work nationally when it benefits wildlife locally



Chief Executive, Brian Eversham

A new Government has meant shifting priorities nationally and a change in the political scenery

locally. Soon after the new Labour Government had settled into Westminster, there was clear and worrying rhetoric from the Treasury about the need for growth, without enough focus on how to balance this with the need for green space.

The largest manifestation of the drive for new homes in our region was the resurrection of housing and infrastructure plans for the Oxford to Cambridge corridor. We responded robustly on our channels and in the local media urging decision makers to make wildlife and accessible outdoor sites a central part of any plans, as well as ensuring there was a plan to tackle the impact of scarce water resources in this area.

We also joined forces with other Trusts in the south east to oppose plans for airport expansions in the region, submitted an official response to the latest plans for an East West rail link calling for more to be done to protect landscape-scale nature strategies, rare bats and ancient woodlands. Near Peterborough we publicly opposed the inclusion of land for development in the city's draft local plan which would cause



irreparable harm to the precious Castor Hanglands National Nature Reserve.

Simply opposing unsustainable development in the wrong place is not enough. Homes will be built and they will require supporting infrastructure – we must work across the Wildlife Trusts movement to put forward a positive vision for growth that provides homes for people and nature. The benefits are huge and range

from the mental and physical wellbeing of new residents to cleaner air and water, reduced flood risk and carbon emissions, and space for children to learn and play.

We have continued to use our Trumpington Meadows nature reserve in Cambridge as a positive example of homes and nature being delivered side by side and over the past year it has featured as a case study on BBC Look East and Countryfile.



Defra minister Mary Creagh visited Delta Pit soon after to see our release site for herself and met with BCN chief executive Brian Eversham, and Rob Stoneman, Director of Landscape Recovery at The Wildlife Trusts. Whilst there she recorded clear messages of support for beaver reintroductions which were used a few days later as the Government finally gave the green light for truly wild releases. It was a policy shift we have been pushing for, alongside the wider movement for many years and came after a public consultation and careful consideration of evidence provided by Wildlife Trusts.

The new Northants colony were translocated from Scotland and released by experts from the Beaver Trust thanks to funding from Anglian Water through its Get River Positive fund. The beavers soon got to work managing the ecosystem by removing willow – a vital job that would otherwise require significant staff time and machinery. The beavers have been taken to the hearts of local people and visitors with huge amounts of interest, thousands watching trail camera clips online and events organised to introduce youngsters to the lifecycle of these fascinating creatures.

They will continue to remain in an enclosure under the terms of our licence for the time being - but their future in the wild, and the potential for more releases in our region now looks very bright.



We released a family of eight beavers, two adults and six young, into a 16-hectare enclosure around Delta Pit in the Nene Wetlands, right next door to the popular

Rushden Lakes shopping centre.

Looking ahead

As the Trust starts its new five year strategy period we have lots of projects to look forward to. Here are three that are rolling out over the coming 12 months.



Lorna Parker, Great Fen Project Manager

This year is going to be another busy one for the Great Fen team as we transform New Decoy farm into a thriving wetland. The diggers recently broke the first ground at the site just as we were celebrating 25 years of the Great Fen vision. Already they have dug channels and begun the landscaping which will ensure the land can hold water and will be colonised by reedbeds, insects, wading birds and amphibians.

The work, which is part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund backed Peatland Progress project, will see 25 hectares of new wetland emerge, which, through the creation of a large winter water storage pool, associated ditches, and water control structures, will provide ecosystem benefits beyond the wildlife - prevention of loss of peat soils and the associated CO² emissions as well as increased capacity to absorb excess water, reducing flood risk to adjacent farms and properties.

This new landscape is envisaged as a microcosm of the wider, less accessible areas of the Great Fen, which means it can be a primary resource for public engagement, offering previously unavailable opportunities for people to connect with nature.

Lara Jones, Nene Valley Special Protection Area Engagement Officer

I recently took on the new role of SPA Engagement Officer for the Nene Valley and over the coming months I will be working to connect communities with their natural environment and focusing on reducing disturbance to internationally protected migratory birds as the local human population grows.

Through continuous learning and network building, I am developing diverse engagement opportunities that make wildlife accessible to everyone including "Guide in the Hide" sessions, craft activities, and group dog walks to provide fun, interactive ways for people to learn and connect with nature responsibly.

School visits and strategic partnerships with other organisations extend our reach beyond traditional audiences; these collaborations allow us to engage individuals who might not otherwise participate in our programmes, helping build wider appreciation for the valley's unique ecosystem while encouraging behaviours that protect our vulnerable bird populations.





Matt Sutcliffe, Communities and Education Manager, Bedfordshire

2025 is the first full year of our National Lottery Heritage Fund supported Wilder Luton project, and we started with our ongoing regular activities at Wardown Park and the Bushmead Community Hub, to introduce nature to young children.

However, the main focus of Wilder Luton this coming year will be to work with young people aged 12-25. We will be continuing partnerships with Cardinal Newman High School, the Sixth Form College and Barnfield College, helping students to find out more about nearby nature reserves such as Bradgers Hill and Warden Hill and to learn new skills whilst helping to look after these sites and improve their own school grounds.

Four sixth form college students will join us for a work experience week in early July, run in partnership with the Youth Network and Natural England, and we are supporting the Wild Wellness programme for young people not in education or employment, run by Luton Borough Council. In September we are really excited to be recruiting two trainees to join our work in Luton for six months gaining new skills and helping introduce their peers to conservation and the beautiful landscapes found in and around Luton.

Finance

Total income: £13,977,171

£2,456,602

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 or donations in their memory.

£1,698,659

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.

£2,186,936

Grants

The grants we are awarded each year are vital for some of our most important projects. Competition for grants is always high so we are thankful for the belief in our work of the grant makers who have supported us in the past year.

£552,499

Rural Payments Agency

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

£5,948,942

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.

£1,133,533

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: £ 7,718,823

£4,197,348

Nature reserve management

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

£1,554,990

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.

£1,173,758

Fundraising and income generation Costs invested in generating financial support.

£792,727

Education and community engagement

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

Gifts in Wills

We are always truly grateful when our supporters choose to make nature a part of their special ongoing legacy, entrusting us to protect the local species and habitats they love, beyond their lifetime. Every gift included in a Will has a significant impact on creating a wilder future for our three counties - creating places for wildlife to thrive and for people to enjoy.

This year, legacies have supported the initial management of our newest reserve, Strawberry Hill; improved our grazing infrastructure for vital livestock meadow management; underpinned the next steps in reconnecting habitats within the Great Fen; and brought people closer to nature through our community and education activities. Gifts in Wills are fundamental to making our wilder future a reality.

We deeply appreciate the recent legacy gifts from our generous supporters, in particular:

David Bradshaw
Charles Cooper
Ron and Judy Ferrari
Shirley Fieldhouse
Philip Goodliff
John Haas
Anthony Hill
Sheila Hornsey
Hugh Marks
Paul Nutkins
Hilary Potter
Bernard Scott
Alice Thomas
John Wilson

For more information on

aifts in Wills, visit:



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

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The Biodiversity Consultancy Ede and Ravenscroft Fujifilm UK Ltd Prologis UK Limited Suez Warners Distillery

Silver

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Zeis



Funders

Anglian Water

Benham Charitable Settlement

Bevan Charitable Trust

Cambridge Conservation Initiative

Cambridgeshire Community Foundation

Central Bedfordshire Council

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority

Chiltern Conservation Board

CityFibre

Constance Travis Grant

Desborough Community Development Trust

Douglas Compton James Charitable Trust

Dovehouse Trust

DS Smith Charitable Foundation

Eric Stanton (Northampton) Charitable Trust Frederick and Phyllis Cann Charitable Trust

FCC Communities Foundation Ltd.

Flit Vale Local Group

Flitwick Moor Local Group

Gamlingay Community Turbine Ltd Tithe Fund

Ginpat Charitable Trust

Huntingdonshire Local History Society

John Frederick Stretton Trust

Looker Energy Environmental Trust

Luton Borough Council

Maud Elkington Charitable Trust

National Highways A428 Community Fund

National Lottery Heritage Fund

Natural England

Nene River Church

Nene Rivers Trust

National Highways

Northwick Trust

Penchant Foundation

Philips Charitable Trust

Robin and Henrietta Woods Charitable Trust

Raven Charitable Trust

Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts

Simon Gibson Charitable Trust

Swire Charitable Trust

Co-op Foundation

Environment Agency

EU Horizons Fund

The Greensand Trust

The Leys School

The Wild Flower Society

Tltcomb Foundation

Wakefield Trust

Wixamtree Trust

Woodland Trust

Wright's Clock Land CIO

















