

Kemerton Conservation Trust

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GOVERNORS

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PETER MARREN

BRETT WESTWOOD

ROGER WORKMAN

Kemerton Conservation Trust

Report from Kate Aubury Support Coordinator

October 2019-March 2020

Overview

In the last 6 months I have been busy administering the Friends scheme, writing and issuing the newsletter and dealing with general queries, updating Facebook and the website, organising a couple of events, completing grant applications, assisting with Trust H&S administration and supervising the monthly work parties. I have also continued to assist in habitat management decisions and project management, including managing our Natural Networks Programme project at KLNR. I assist Governor Matt Darby with organising the weekly warden work and liaising with contractors carrying out ad-hoc habitat management. I have also spent quite a lot of time dealing with ongoing vandalism and antisocial behaviour problems at KLNR and assisting with actions required because of Covid-19 and the lockdown. I also managed some fungi surveys in autumn 2019 and have been doing more ad-hoc monitoring as I carry out regular site visits.

Lack of time continues to be an issue which is limiting what the Trust can achieve but we made good use of contractors to assist our warden John Threadingham with the list of practical works on our reserves in the last 6 months. I continue to believe we need to find additional staff or volunteer resource to help with fundraising, project management and habitat management, but recent events including the sad loss of John Clarke and increased demands on key governors and volunteers outside of Trust commitments has meant none of us have had any time to work on options for the Trust as yet.

Nevertheless, a lot was still achieved in the last six months and below is a more in-depth look at some of the activities I was involved in.

Friends of KCT Scheme

The overall Friends scheme numbers have remained stable in the last 6 months. We have 213 individual or joint members and 6 corporate sponsors (the figures were 212 and 6 respectively in 2018/19). The membership mix continues to consist of a higher proportion of donors than volunteers (166) than volunteers (47).

In the last six months, we recruited several new members and lost some existing members. We lost 7 members in the last 6 months (as against 10 members lost in 2018/19). Of these 1 was a donor and 6 were volunteers (as against 5 donors and 5 volunteers last year). The donor did not renew, of the volunteers, 3 were teenagers from one family who now have other priorities, and 1 has requested to rejoin once lockdown lifts.

The new donors were mostly recruited via our website after visiting KLNR (membership forms can be downloaded), although a couple joined at our Curlew talk.

All members continue to receive the bi-annual newsletter, which is very well received and an important part of our communications with the Friends.

I continue to update the Facebook page, which is a more informal communication channel for members and the general public. I post photos of work parties, advertise upcoming events, highlight the diversity of the reserves with photos of flora and fauna throughout the year and write short pieces on any big news items. In the last six months I have also posted about the vandalism issues at KLNR and about lockdown information. I try to ensure it is updated at least twice a month and posts generally reach 250-500 people but sometimes as many as 3000. Average views have dropped to around 35-50 (was 50-100 last year) but some posts generate a lot more interest (our most read recent post was about East Hide vandalism issues, which attracted over 800 click and 107 likes and/or comments, whilst our post about our Curlew talk attracted 148 clicks and 60 likes and/or comments). Many visitors and locals have

also used Messenger, the Facebook messaging app, to make contact with queries, requests or complaints. I try to deal with all of these promptly.

Volunteer Work Parties

Our work parties were forced to stop at the end of March as a result of lockdown and are still suspended at the moment. However, before that our work parties were assisting with habitat management tasks and project activities as usual.

Turnout has decreased from 7.9 per session last year to 5.5 per session in the last six months, which was partly due to the extremely bad weather we had on several of our winter work parties. We had to cancel one work party in March 2020 due to the lockdown, so have only completed 4 work parties in the last six months, which obviously impacts on the total habitat management carried out. We lost five volunteers, including three teenagers from one family, although one volunteer has subsequently requested to rejoin, and we have seen lower attendance from some of our regulars. We gained 1 new regular volunteer, and I have 3 potential new volunteers waiting for work parties to resume to attend their first session. I continue to advertise volunteering at all events and post regular updates on our Facebook page so anyone interested can see what we do and get in touch.

The work parties have continued to prove useful in supporting the Trust's work. The majority of our work is habitat management on the reserves or in the orchards but we also planted bluebell seeds in October 2019 as part of the Woodland Wildflower Project 2019 and assisted with scrub clearance in November 2019 and January 2020 as part of the Natural Networks Programme project. We had planned a litter picking work party at Asham Meadow in partnership with the other meadow owners and residents from Eckington but unfortunately the extreme wet weather locally last winter meant the meadow was under flood water when the date chosen arrived so it had to be postponed.

I estimate that from April 2019 to March 2020, the volunteer work party donated approximately 126 hours of work worth £787.50 to the Trust. (This figure excludes John's and my time). This is almost half the value of the previous year.

I continue to keep H&S records for all work parties. We had no incidents to report in the period covered by this report.

Events

In October 2019 KCT had an information stand at Kemerton Orchard Workers' Annual Apple Day. The event was well attended and we chatted to lots of local people about our work.

In March 2020 we held a slideshow and talk evening entitled 'Curlew and Other Breeding Waders of the Severn & Avon' at Eckington Village Hall, which was delivered by Friend of KCT and Chairman of Curlew Action Group Mike Smart. The talk was excellent and included references to KCT's involvement at nearby Asham Meadow, Upton Ham SSSI and Twyning Ham SSSI. It was well-attended, and feedback was excellent.

As a result of Covid-19, our event schedule was suspended when lockdown began on 23rd March and is currently still on hold.

In addition to our own events, in January 2020 I also gave a talk to Broadway Natural History Group about fungi, which was very well attended, and resulted in a generous donation to the Trust.

Grant Applications

In November 2019 I secured a large grant from Natural Networks Programme for Grassland and Reedbed Restoration at Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve. The two year project started in December 2019 and will continue until early 2021. We have completed our first stage and received our first claim payment. The funding from Natural Networks Programme covered 45% of project costs and I subsequently successfully applied for another £2000 from Rowlands Trust towards the project costs, and also to pay for a moth trap to carry out moth trapping at Kemerton Lake as part of the project, and then to use the trap in the future on other reserves etc.

Sadly our application to the Nineveh Charitable Trust for a joint partnership project mapping invertebrates on Bredon Hill with Bredon Hill NNR was unsuccessful. At present we have no other funding options available for a 3-year project of this nature, so it has been put on hold, although we hope to revisit it if a suitable funding opportunity does come up.

In January I applied to Postcode Local Trust for a grant for scrub clearance equipment for our volunteers, and in March I submitted an application to Severn Trent Community Fund for a new boat and shipping container storage at KLNR.

In addition, we again received a generous unsolicited grant of £500 from the Miss K.M Harbinson's Charitable Trust, which was used to purchase volunteer tools and equipment and replace a life buoy at Kemerton Lake in March.

Much of the grant application work has been completed in donated work time from Kemerton Estate Partnership, as with so many other tasks on my plate I simply could not complete the extra administration in my own time.

Bat and Fungi Surveys

I have not carried out any bat surveys in this period as bats were in hibernation.

I carried out a fungi survey in October 2019 with Governor Peter Marren in some of the fields and woodland, as well as collecting additional fungi records when out and about.

I am now collecting more ad-hoc records whilst out on site carrying out project management or site surveys etc.

All records are sent to Pamela for adding to Recorder, although lack of time means they are often sent in a long time after the survey!

Website

David and I continue to maintain the website, updating the 'news and events' section as required and any other changes such as updating governor information.

Health & Safety including Covid-19 Lockdown

In December 2019 Governor Peter Doble stepped down from his H&S role, although he remains a governor, and responsibility for Trust H&S passed to Chairman Adrian Darby. I have continued to assist in ensuring our H&S documentation is up to date and issued to all relevant people. Following John Clarke's death I updated our policy and other relevant documents to reflect changes to H&S responsibilities, which those that had been assigned to him now being assigned to me.

In March one of the life buoys at Kemerton Lake was replaced as it had become unsafe.

In late March the unfolding situation with Covid-19 led to the government announcing a lockdown. After discussions with our Chairman and our key volunteers, the decision was taken to keep our reserves with permissive access open but to close our bird hides at KLNR as the risk of cross-infection within them was potentially high. We also made the decision to cancel all work parties and events for the foreseeable future. Our volunteer Warden John Threadingham asked to be allowed to continue to work on the reserves but in areas with minimal interaction with the public and doing tasks which involved using his own tools or those of the Trust's which no-one else was using, to avoid cross-contamination. This was agreed. Chairman Adrian Darby, myself and the Trust bookkeeper also switched to working from home, although I have been able to visit KLNR once a week to carry out H&S checks and deal with any issues as needed.

Vandalism at Kemerton Lake Nature Reserve

We have had several difficult periods at KLNR since the last report, with the East Hide being targeted numerous times in the winter and the reserve suffering from anti-social behaviour from youngsters during the Covid-19 lockdown.

In December 2019 we discovered that the East Hide was being used for late night drink and drug sessions by persons unknown, with the hide being found in a total state numerous times, often by the first visitor the next day. Drug paraphernalia was found more than once. Locals managed to photograph vehicles on one of these occasions and the police were able to identify the culprits, follow up and warn them off the site. In addition, they advised that we start locking the East Hide. We decided to add a combination code to the hide so that members and regular visitors could still access it on request, but it would hopefully prevent such issues happening again. Since adding the combination code we have not had any incidents in the hide, although there was some negative feedback from a few locals about shutting the hide.

With sunny weather at the end of March, and the schools closed, the reserve also became a magnet for groups of teenagers and young adults hanging out drinking and displaying anti-social behaviour, in complete contravention of social distancing rules.

I continue to keep the local Community Policing Team in the loop and they have been really good at responding and helping us with the issues. We have also tried to monitor problem areas using our trail cameras but this has proved a waste of time as the events are sporadic in nature.

The vandalism has cost the Trust money and a lot of valuable time as I, our warden, and Governor Matthew Darby in particular have all spent time dealing with the incidents and clean-up/repairs, reporting to the police etc. Unfortunately it appears to be something that we now have to deal with regularly.

Conclusion

That concludes my roundup for the year – I would just like to thank Adrian, Matt, Pamela and John for all their support this year. I would also like to thank my husband David, who has continued to assist me with organising the events and has again helped with maintenance of the website.