



Greenprint Forum visit to SWT Worlingham Marshes

26 June 2024

On this glorious June evening, 17 of us attended this visit, during which we were treated to a look behind the scenes of this new nature reserve of 154 hectares less than 3 km from the centre of Beccles. Our hosts for this visit, arranged on behalf of the Greenprint Forum, were Vicky Eyles, Wilder Communities Officer, and Lewis Yates, Broads Area Reserves Warden, both from Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

The SWT were able to acquire the land with a grant of just under £2 million from the Heritage Fund, and the site comprises a single hydrological unit conferring to the SWT control of the flow of water on site and thus the power to shape the way the habitat develops and is enhanced to fulfil its potential as a vital part of a landscape-level wildlife corridor running along the valley of the River Waveney connecting the reserves of Redgrave & Lopham Fen at the source of the river with Carlton and Oulton Marshes at its mouth.

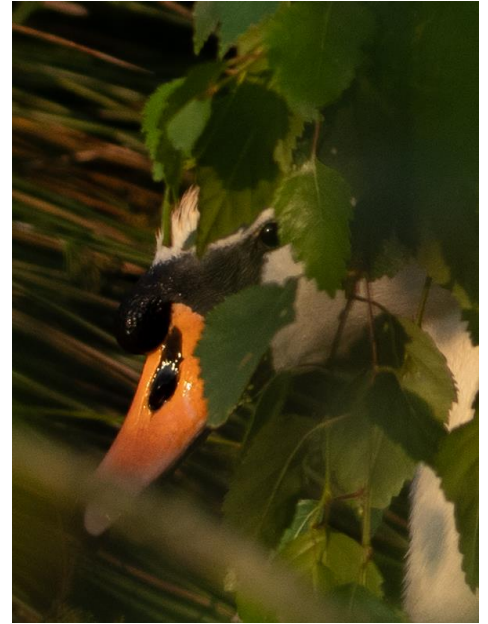


Image above: Matt Bailey

The SWT are working to increase the water carrying capacity of the site, which initially will mean having more water on site to start with. Working within limits set by the local Internal Drainage Board, and using sluices, the plan is for the site to help provide a flood buffer where water flows slowly, and to feature reedbeds to help reduce pollutants in the ditches.

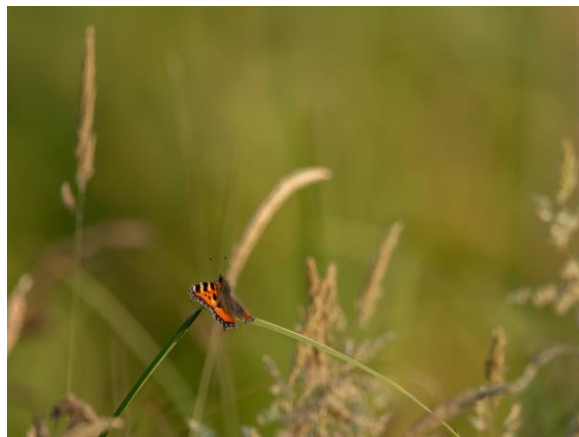


The land was previously owned by a shooting syndicate from Italy, who did not carry out sufficient management of the ditches on site; as a consequence, the ditches contain a degree of cover by duckweed indicative of high levels of nutrients, which the SWT are in the process of clearing of the duckweed to create more open surface water and stimulate the growth of a richer subaquatic community of plants and in turn support more birds, dragonflies and other animals, including potentially fen raft spiders; these are present on neighbouring land within approximately 200 m of the reserve, but the quality of the habitat on the reserve itself is not, as yet, suitable for the species to colonise.

Already, surveying of the site has revealed nearly three times the number of species previously recorded, and surveying of the species present, as well as the topography (whilst the land may look flat, it is not quite), is ongoing.



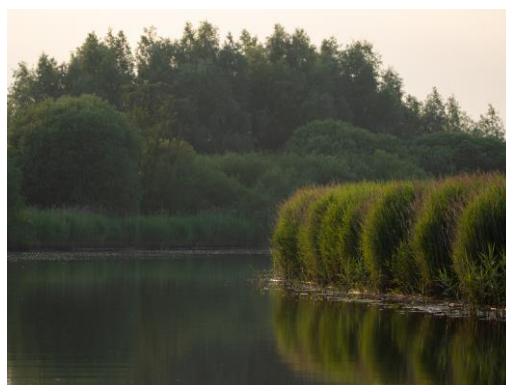
During our visit, we were privileged to see barn owls hunting over the marshes, and a Chinese water deer; we also heard a Cetti's warbler and a cuckoo. Three barn owl nest boxes are in use on site, with five short eared owls having been seen hunting last winter. Two cuckoos were tagged on site this year, with cuckoos having been tracked between this site and SWT Carlton Marshes, demonstrating the value of the connection between the two sites. Other species known to be present include otters, grass snakes, common lizards, wasp spiders, and Grasshopper warblers.



All photography on this page: Matt Bailey

Grazing forms part of the management of the site, serving to reduce the cover of vegetation to promote opportunities for birdlife. Rushes are cut early in the year, so that the graziers can monitor the welfare of their animals.

In terms of access, the Trust do not plan to extend access beyond the current byway of Marsh Lane bisecting the reserve and the Angles Way on the banks of the River Waveney along the northern boundary of the reserve, with the latter forming part of a longer walk of about 16 km between Beccles Town Marshes upstream and SWT Carlton Marshes downstream. However they do plan to provide a couple of additional viewing platforms as well as interpretation boards. Other opportunities for people to engage with the reserve include group visits, surveys of the biodiversity, and volunteering on the reserve itself.



The Trust are gradually removing the shooting infrastructure left behind by the previous owners, and in the course of allowing the land to take the lead, grazing marsh on the site will tend to be restricted to the areas of clay rather than on the peat where taller vegetation and scrub will be encouraged for the benefit of species such as the grasshopper warbler. Scrapes will be created on the marsh for the waders.



The trust are actively making connections with their neighbours, including Beccles Town Marshes and the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, exploring opportunities to work together at this landscape level.

There is a County Wildlife Site in the woodland area neighbouring the reserve, though the reserve itself carries no official designations; a future aim for the site is to achieve designation as a National Nature Reserve (NNR).

The whole reserve covers 154 hectares, so we were only able to see a small part of it as we walked round. At the time of our visit, the Trust have raised just over £300,000 of the total of £775,000 needed to deliver their vision for the site. Their fund raiser remains open for donations; so if you can help, you can donate via:

<https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/appeals/help-us-buy-restore-worlingham-marshes>

<https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/worlinghammarshes>

*Report by Daniel Wareing,
Secretary of Greenprint Forum*



Image above: Matt Bailey