

Countryside Team Annual Review 2022



Introduction

It has been great to see the Countryside Team's work in 2022, culminating in the relaunch of this, its Annual Review, for the first time since 2018. Much like the team itself, this review is in a new format but aims to continue to achieve the same outcomes as previous versions.

As ever it has been an inspirational year of achievements for the team with Knapp Cope being designated as a County Wildlife Site, a recognition which is long overdue for anyone who knows the site and, while the team lost one of its Education Rangers, an impressive 68 group sessions were run throughout the District, engaging and educating over two thousand young people in aspects of our environment.

The ambitious Wild Honiton project is back underway after a short hiatus and outputs from this collaborative project working across Honiton's green spaces and gardens will shortly follow.

And finally, a new bridge has been built, linking our award-winning nature reserve of Seaton Wetlands with the popular tourist attraction of Seaton Tramway, allowing people to alight at the newly opened halt and explore the reserve as part of their day. A project long in its planning, it was great to see passengers piling off the trams this summer and enjoying the site.

My sincere thanks to all of the team for such a fabulous year despite difficult conditions, and look forward to seeing what 2023 brings!



Cllr Geoff Jung, Portfolio Holder Coast, Country and Environment

Introducing the Team

It has been four years since the last published review of the team's work, and much has changed in that time within the team. This seems like the perfect opportunity to introduce the team and each of their work areas.

James Chubb, Countryside Team Manager

I first joined the Countryside Team in 2003 as Education Ranger on a three-year role funded by Natural England. The role was made permanent after that initial contract and I enjoyed eight years working with local schools and groups, enthusing them with the fabulous wildlife and wild places of East Devon. After a short period working in agricultural roles locally, I returned to the team as Sites Team Leader and was thrilled to be back at the council with the remit of looking after these incredible Local Nature Reserves. I transitioned into the role of Countryside Team Manager at the beginning of 2022 and have really enjoyed having an overview of all aspects of this multi-disciplined team.



Dave Palmer, Countryside Ranger

Dave has been working in the team for so long he really is part of the countryside furniture! Whether leading a volunteer task force on Seaton Wetlands to repairing a broken boardwalk in the teeth of a February storm, or strimming the South West Coast Path in the searing heat of summer, Dave is a consummate countryside professional who knows the local landscape like the back of his hand. Dave leads a weekly volunteer group at Seaton Wetlands, carrying out vital habitat and infrastructure repairs and improvements. With so much of the wetlands being constructed from timber, this is a full time role just keeping on top of it all!



Jon Gardner, Nature Reserves Ranger

Jon has been with the team since 2019 and oversees the site management of all of the Local and Community Nature Reserves away from Seaton Wetlands. His hard working group of volunteers gather every Thursday to tackle a new challenge and they all appreciate that Jon reprised the volunteer biscuit tin on his arrival into the role. Jon co-ordinates the logistics of the team's charcoal production which last year moved from Knapp Copse to its new home of Offwell Woods just outside Honiton.



Penny Evans, Education Ranger

Penny joined the team in 2013 as maternity cover for the Education Ranger role. She subsequently took on the position as a job share, with a multitude of interim contracts and project work keeping her busy on top of this. In 2022 her contract was made full time as Education Ranger, but her strong links with other teams here at EDDC, and other partnership organisations means that her work across the District continues to be enjoyed by a wide audience of children and families. Penny's background in Forest Schools means she can create a wide range of engaging and educational outdoor activities and many of the team's events are sell-outs because it's a "Penny Event" and her faithful crowd line up to attend!



Amelia Davies, Engagement & Participation Officer

Amelia joined the Countryside Team after a five year spell as Wildlife Warden on the Exe Estuary and Pebblebed Heaths. She is a great communicator and has taken the team's social media outputs to the next level since joining us in November 2021. She loves meeting people and sharing her passion for the natural world so will be developing new events and activities in the weeks ahead as well as running the rule over our nature reserves to ensure the visitor experience is at its absolute best at all our sites.



Ben Morgan-Brown, Assistant Ranger

Our newest recruit joining in May 2022 and a direct product of our volunteering programme, Ben was studying a diploma in Land & Wildlife Management at Bicton College when he joined us as part of the Thursday volunteer group. Despite our recruitment coming before the completion of his course, Ben showed the initiative and sought confirmation that he could complete his education in his own time upon accepting the new role. That initiative has continued to propel Ben as he develops new skills and experience within the team and takes on more responsibility for our sites. As well as being a pivotal role in our new Wild Honiton project, Ben has taken on responsibility for our people counter systems which monitor public use of the sites.





Sites Review

Knapp Copse

- 125m new hedge laid and fenced
- 80m hedges laid across site
- Multiple surveys undertaken, especially botanical. New moth survey started
- Dormouse survey transect set up (50 new boxes)
- 20 bankside trees coppiced (increasing light and diversity)
- Pond enlarged
- Two People counters installed
- Orchard trees pruned and grassland improved
- First year of newly sown wildflower meadow
- Path widening in areas to improve access and encourage greater biodiversity

White Cross

- 2 acres new/regenerated heathland
- Seasonal pond enlarged
- New circular walk fingerposts installed

Honiton Bottom

- Grassland/meadow improvements and expansion
- Pond enlarged
- Path/access improvements
- Large ash trees removed from entrance gate area (safety and improved visibility)
- Fruit trees pruned



Holyford Woods

- Step repairs and improvements
- Glade restoration and improvements
- Reservoir clearance agreement with adjoining landowner
- Tree safety works undertaken (esp. ash)
- Continue to remove conifer
- Dormouse surveys
- Path widening to improve visitor access/experience and improve biodiversity
- Holly reduction to increase light and encourage more diverse structure

Trinity Hill

- More rhododendron removed
- Heathland restoration continues with help of successful grazing programme
- More species recorded on site
- Scrub clearance to expand and benefit heathland
- Harvest mouse survey
- Reptile surveys (doing well!)
- Bracken clearance continued to encourage more diversity
- Two people counters installed

Hillcrest Community Nature Reserve

- Large scale tree safety works undertaken
- Continuation of laurel removal
- Bridge repairs and improvements
- Path widening
- Large new 'dead hedge' habitat created
- Orchard improvements incl. tree pruning and meadow expansion



The Maer

- Exclusion boxes built by contractors around three dangerous manhole covers
- Extensive litter-picks undertaken

Exmouth LNR

- Dilapidated allotment cleared to make way for wildlife garden (future project)
- Extensive litter-picks undertaken
- Scrub cleared and undergrowth paths blocked to discourage anti-social behaviour
- Increased police presence
- Main track improvements to keep visitors feet dry!
- Unofficial access routes to estuary reduced

Delderfield

- More surveys undertaken
- Wildflower meadow expansion (through scrub control)
- Infrastructure repairs (fencing and steps)



Environmental Education

- 68 groups
- 2075 people
- £13,020 income



Over the course of the year the Wild East Devon Education Ranger has provided outdoor activity sessions for over 2000 people from 68 groups (not including public events). We were able to provide free sessions to 34 of these groups thanks to funding from Natural England for Seaton Wetlands and Knapp Copse nature reserves and in partnership with the Offwell Woodland and Wildlife trust.

We have worked with primary, secondary and pre-schools, youth groups and charities to deliver activities for children aged 15 months to 16 years, as well as for adults. We have used 13 different sites across East Devon including EDDC's nature reserves as well as school grounds, beaches and green spaces local to the groups we are working with.

As well as repeat bookings from schools and groups we have worked with in the past we have provided sessions for 9 new groups. This included Axe Vale Academy who we worked with to develop and deliver 3 days of fieldwork for their GCSE biology students at Knapp Copse, a site that we haven't previously used with schools. The days were such a success that the school has already booked for next year.

By taking part in hands-on activities from stream dipping and bug hunting, to arts and crafts using natural materials, story themed adventures, or foraging and campfire cooking we have enabled participants to connect with the natural world and have positive and fun outdoor learning experiences.

Wild East Devon Events

- 32 events
- 323 people
- £6,200 income

2022 saw the ever-popular Wild East Devon Events programme back to a level on a par with pre-Covid outputs. Group experiences such as our Canoe Safari evenings were back again and bookings rose accordingly.

Through the course of the year a total of 323 people booked and attended an event run by the team, raising over £6,000 in the process. From Christmas wreath making in the Seaton Wetlands Reedbase, to Bug Hunting at Honiton Bottom, all aspects of the natural world and all our sites were explored through the course of the year.

Free of charge explorer trails were once again a very popular activity at the Wetlands, and in 2022 we had un-staffed offers in February half term, as well as more involved treasure hunts for Easter and October which carried a small charge and had themed prizes for everyone who successfully completed them. As always the guiding principal of our events programme is to encourage exploration of our natural world and the only limits to what we do is the collective creativity of the team!





Wildlife on our sites

As well as providing much-needed access to nature and the countryside, our sites also provide critical habitat for any rare and threatened species and our work constantly seeks to improve and increase these precious populations.

Dormice have long enjoyed a stronghold in Devon, against a backdrop of national decline. From recording a record number of dormice in our National Dormouse Recording Scheme site at Holyford Woods in 2020, we failed to find any dormice in the same boxes in 2022! There were nests and field signs to indicate their presence in the area, but we didn't catch up with one on any of our licenced monthly checks. Keeping an open mind, we see this as a positive for the wider woodland which is full of natural nest sites and feeding opportunities, but it will be something we bear in mind through the course of next year's survey.

Funding from DeFRA has paid for a second box scheme to be established at Knapp Copse, a site we know has dormice, but at an unknown level. The boxes were put up late in the year ready for a first check in April 2023, but a dormouse nest was already present in one box three weeks after siting them when we returned to number and map the boxes, so this bodes well for the season ahead!

Harvest mice presence at Trinity Hill and Seaton Wetlands has been confirmed once again this year, with breeding nests found through fingertip surveys, and active harvest mice being encountered in the Seaton Wetlands reedbeds. Hugely under-recorded, it's unknown how the species is doing in East Devon, but their presence influences our management approach to ensure scruffy grassy margins are left uncut in various places every year.

Water voles continue to do well in their reintroduction site at Seaton Wetlands, and mink numbers in 2022 were down at an all-time low of less than 10 individuals. Daily otter field signs give the best indication of why mink are less prevalent, but we will continue to manage water bodies with water voles in mind to increase their complexity and therefore increase their carrying capacity for these rare mammals.





Seaton Wetlands continued to provide an essential breeding site for many bird species with swifts returning to the man-made tower again in the summer. Two kestrel pairs fledged a total of 9 chicks in the boxes at Stafford Marsh and Seaton Marshes, which is a vivid illustration of the quality of the grassland in this area supporting a multitude of small mammals. The bird ringing group caught a rare lesser whitethroat in the summer which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a very recently fledged chick, so close observation will be kept in 2023 to see if breeding of this small warbler is taking place on site.

Beavers continue to expand in range along the River Otter and when they were afforded legal protection in October 2022, James undertook training to attain a CL51 licence in beaver management, allowing him to legally intervene in beaver engineered structures where absolutely necessary.





Wild Honiton

After two false-starts for the follow up to our hugely popular Wild Exmouth Project, 2022 saw the team push ahead with delivering Wild Honiton. A stakeholder group came together and plans were put in place for a series of public events and activities to increase residents' understanding and appreciation of the wildlife which shares their town and the green spaces within Honiton, where this nature can be enjoyed.

While the public events are set to go live in 2023, the groundwork was very much undertaken in 2022 to ensure that the impact of this work is fully felt. Key greenspace sites have been identified to form a Discovery Trail through the town, marked by entrance posts and new information portals. Flagship species for the project have been chosen as hedgehogs, a species which Honiton has a particularly strong population, and beavers which have recently been recorded living on the Gissage in the very heart of the town.



The Wetlands Halt

Many years in the planning, and many months in its construction, the Wetlands Halt for the Seaton Tramway was finally opened in August and proved an instant hit with visitors to the area!

We have installed passive people counters along the boardwalk to enable the team to monitor numbers of visitors alighting from the tram through next year's tourist season. It's easy to see the appeal: a short 10 minute tram ride from the Seaton Terminal takes you to the halt which is an easy stroll along a boardwalk, directly into the heart of the Wetlands and our facilities hub at Stafford Marsh.

With the completion of the Stop Line Way cyclepath due for early 2023, this will enable people to explore the site with a circular route combining tram and track, and is the prompt for the team to widen its marketing radius of the wetlands to a regional audience.



South West Coast Path

EDDC is responsible through an arrangement with DCC for looking after the non- National Trust sections of the SWCP between Exmouth and Lyme Regis

As with previous years, the majority of time spent working on the coast path consists of ongoing maintenance.

This involves keeping the route open and free from encroaching vegetation, maintaining coastal views and undertaking minor repairs and improvements.

This year there have been signage improvements at Underhooken, Peak Hill, Otterton and Sandy Bay.

A boggy section between Peak Hill and High Peak was improved by narrowing in 4 tonnes of limestone.

Finally, in the Undercliffs NNR extensive step repairs were carried out.





Volunteering

Our volunteer network continues to grow with 283 people now registered on our system to volunteer in a number of roles from practical site management to greeting visitors and providing information about the reserves.

An incredible 4401 hours of volunteer time was committed over the course of 2022, in one of 13 roles we currently support.

This equates to a staggering £41,809 cost equivalent workforce. More importantly, this incredible commitment allows us to achieve so much more than we could operating exclusively within the team staffing.

2022 also saw the return of the Volunteer Christmas get together, a chance for the team to say thank you and organise some food and drink. This was the final element of the volunteering set up to return from covid-related restrictions, and so it was all the more heartfelt and sincere that our volunteers had stuck by us through this incredibly difficult period.



Sustainability

To support the Council's commitment to tackling climate change, the team are constantly looking for ways to reduce carbon emissions and go about our work in the most efficient and effective way possible.

With our fleet resource, rationalising vehicle journeys and driving down annual mileage is the first step, while options for low emission and emission free vehicles are constantly assessed. We have used an electric van for road journeys for many years, but have struggled to find off-road options with the same functionality.

This year the team purchased an electric All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) to be used primarily on Seaton Wetlands, but also for supporting our work in other nature reserves. The quad has a range of 40 miles on a single charge and will recharge from zero to 100% in a little over two hours plugged in to a standard 22 amp wall socket!

Not only does this mean we can carry out many site maintenance tasks with electric off-road capability, but an added benefit is that the quad is much lighter over the ground and so will access difficult sites without damaging the ground, as can happen with pick up 4x4 trucks.

As well as looking at our fleet, we are also adopting electric hand tools in preference to 2-stroke petrol-engine machines, as and when tools require replacing. We now have use of an electric chainsaw and hedge cutter which not only carry out the tasks without carbon emissions but are also quieter to use on the reserves.

As we are fast finding out, moving away from combustion engine options brings a raft of additional benefits on top of carbon reduction.

