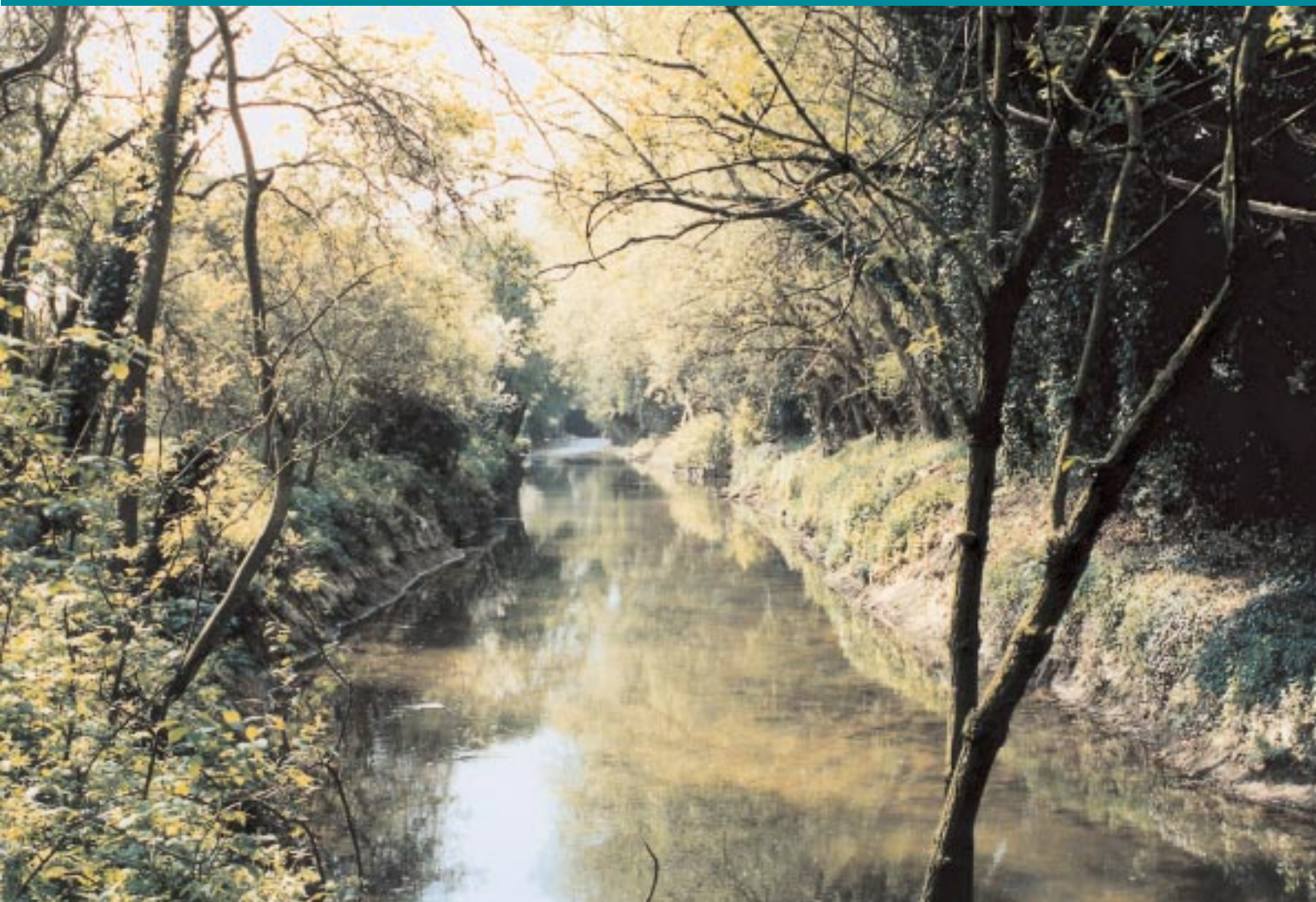


ENGLISH NATURE
Magazine

Issue 67

May 2003



Wildlife on your doorstep

Conservation in our towns and gardens

Balancing act

Restoring confidence at Ainsdale
Sand Dunes

Partnership in action

Outcomes of the SRP conference

Farming for wildlife

English Nature awards

English Nature is the statutory body which achieves, enables and promotes nature conservation in England.

We do so by working in partnership with individuals and a wide range of organisations including Government, representative bodies, agencies and voluntary organisations.

English Nature Magazine is published six times a year to promote nature conservation in England and make people aware of the latest developments. The views expressed in it by individuals are not necessarily those of English Nature.

For further information contact any of our offices. English Nature's National Office is: Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA Tel: 01733 455000 Fax: 01733 568834

We operate a number of other offices across the country, from where our staff deal with local nature conservation issues.

Details of your nearest office can be obtained by phoning Northminster House, or by requesting a copy of English Nature Facts and Figures Information guide, free from the Enquiry Service at Northminster House, Tel 01733 455100.

You can also learn more about us via the Internet. Our address is: www.english-nature.org.uk



Awarded for excellence

Cover picture



Cover photograph: Kentish Stour Countryside Project

The River Stour in Ashford, Kent, part of the Green Corridor Local Nature Reserve running close to the heart of the town. See the full article on pages 10-11.

English Nature magazine can now be read on the English Nature website at: www.english-nature.org.uk/magazine

brief update

Come and join us

English Nature will be touring a host of local and national events this year. The show calendar will give staff the opportunity to meet thousands of gardeners, landowners, farmers and ornithologists – among many others.

"Local and national shows are an excellent way of giving people an opportunity to find out more about the work of English Nature," said Catherine Prasard, English Nature Events Officer.

"Last year showed how important it is for national and area teams to meet face to face with the people who are putting these ideas into practice, and it's something English Nature is keen to build on."

This year's show calendar includes:

- **Devon County Show** (Thursday 15 - Saturday 17 May);
- **Royal Bath and West Show** (Wednesday 28 - Saturday 31 May);
- **North Sheep 2003** (Wednesday 4 June);
- **BBC Gardeners' World**, NEC Birmingham (Wednesday 11 - Sunday 15 June);
- **Three Counties Show** (Friday 13 - Sunday 15 June);
- **Royal Norfolk Show** (Wednesday 25 - Thursday 26 June);
- **Royal Show**, National Agricultural Centre, Warks (Sunday 29 June - Wednesday 2 July);
- **The Cotswolds Show** (Saturday 5 - Sunday 6 July);
- **Cumberland Show** (Saturday 19 July);
- **The New Forest Show** (Tuesday 29 - Thursday 31 July);
- **CLA Game Fair**, Harewood House, Yorkshire (Friday 1 - Sunday 3 August);
- **Birdwatching Fair**, Rutland Water (Friday 15 - Sunday 17 August);
- **Kilnsey Show** (Tuesday 26 August);
- **Dorchester Show** (Saturday 6 - Sunday 7 September);
- **Westmoorland Show** (Thursday 11 September).

More information is available from English Nature's Events Office on 01733 455450.

Hen harrier threat



The future of England's hen harriers has been further threatened by the burning of heather moorland around several known breeding sites.

At Bowland Fells Special Protection Area (SPA), an uncontrolled fire –

used to stimulate new heather growth for sheep and red grouse – has burnt out around 250 hectares of the most important moorland nesting area for breeding hen harriers. The fire has destroyed two active hen harrier nests.

English Nature has become increasingly concerned about the status of the hen harrier in England. Following a prolonged decline, the English population now consists of just a handful of breeding pairs – there is a danger that the species will become extinct as a breeding bird within the next few years. As a result, English Nature has set up a recovery project to help increase the hen harrier population in England.

Preserving our geological heritage

Great Britain is particularly rich in 'geodiversity' – the variety of rocks, fossils, minerals, landforms and soils that shape the landscape – with many sites being of international scientific importance. As such, there is a very real need to conserve this fascinating resource.

With this in mind, English Nature, the Quarry Products Association and the Silica and Moulding Sands Association have produced guidance, *Geodiversity and the minerals industry – conserving our geological heritage*, on the role of the minerals industry in conserving geodiversity.

Copies are available free of charge from English Nature's Enquiry Service on 01733 455100.

Editor: Amanda Giles Tel. 078106 55418 Designed & printed by: Corporate Document Services, 7 Eastgate, Leeds LS2 7LY www.cds.co.uk on Evolution Satin (75% recycled post-consumer waste paper, elemental chlorine-free bleached), 17M.

Although English Nature magazine does not have a regular letters page, I am always interested in receiving feedback about the magazine, or letters on subjects that may be of interest to our readers. If there is a subject that you feel would be relevant to our readership, please write to me or email me, and I will certainly consider publishing your letter in the magazine.

Contact me, Amanda Giles, at English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA, or at amanda.giles@english-nature.org.uk

If this copy of English Nature magazine is not your own, and you would like to go on our mailing list to receive the magazine regularly, please contact Alison Eley, IMT, English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA.

Or you can email your details to alison.eley@english-nature.org.uk

Wildlife and people on NNRs



Mid-April saw the largest gathering of English Nature's National Nature Reserve (NNR) management staff for several years.

More than 80 NNR staff from across England attended a conference in Buxton to discuss

the theme of Wildlife and People on NNRs.

An entertaining, yet thought-provoking, presentation by John Ververka, a specialist in heritage interpretation from the USA, raised the audience's awareness of the huge potential that English

Lathkill Dale is part of the Derbyshire Dales NNR managed by English Nature.

Nature's NNRs have for informing and inspiring visitors about the importance of wildlife and wild places.

Three site managers gave illustrations of the practical issues around wildlife and people at three NNRs: Ainsdale, Beacon Hill (Warrford) and The Stiperstones.

A day-long visit to one of three key reserves in the Peak District (Lathkill and Monk's Dale NNRs and the National Trust's Dove Dale) provided examples of good practice in maintaining heavily-visited reserves in 'favourable condition'. The three subsequent presentations reinforced the message that wildlife and people can co-exist on NNRs.

Sustainable future for UK fishing

Plans to ensure a sustainable future for the UK fishing industry have been welcomed by English Nature following an announcement by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, Elliot Morley.

Marine scientists at the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) – representing English Nature, the Countryside Council for Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage – are encouraged by the news.

Senior Fisheries Advisor for English Nature, Andrea Carew said, "This project offers a glimmer of hope for the future of fishing and conservation of fisheries resources in an otherwise grim period for the sector"

The poor state of some key commercial fisheries and the impact these fisheries may have on the seabed and other species is a priority issue highlighted in the *State of Nature: Maritime – getting onto an even keel* report.

The report calls for:

- full consideration of the wider environmental effects of fishing on marine ecosystems;
- better integration of all stakeholders in the decision-making process to implement critical fisheries management measures such as an ecosystem-based approach; and
- balancing the capacity of the European Union fishing fleet with availability of fish stocks.

Reaching agreed solutions to the complex issues facing the management of our coasts and seas will need the cooperation of many organisations. English Nature is working with others to develop a Maritime Strategy to address the needs of stakeholders and gain widespread support from a range of different users. The aim is to halt biodiversity loss and promote the recovery of our coasts and seas.

Once completed, the report should identify the way that fisheries should be managed for the benefit of the industry, nature conservation and the public interest as a whole.

EDITORIAL

May is the month of bluebells and blossom, symbols of Spring for even the most stoic of city dwellers. Most of us live in towns and cities, and our closest contact with nature comes through gardens and other areas of urban green. Wild garlic in the woods may tell the countryman that winter is over, but it will be cherry blossom in the streets and honeysuckle on the pergola that tells his friends in town.

We can help wildlife hugely though our gardens. Wildlife gardening has become fashionable, with everyone wanting their personal wild flower patch. But even the smallest changes to the way we garden can make a difference to overall biodiversity, from buying peat alternatives (see page 7) to planting more native plants (see page 8).

My inspiration for a career in conservation came in 1970, a designated "Year of Conservation", when as 10 year olds in our local village school, we were encouraged to search the fields and hedges for wild plants, which we then identified and drew, stimulating a life-long awareness and appreciation of nature.

Local authorities now play a similar enthusing role by creating Local Nature Reserves and other wildlife habitats (see page 10 and 11) that help bring the countryside right into the towns.

I hope you enjoy reading this May issue of English Nature Magazine. As always, I would love to hear from you.

Amanda Giles

Seeing the bigger picture

As Acting Chief Executive for the last year, Andy Brown has done much to develop English Nature's role in nature conservation. Now, having taken on the role of Chief Executive, he talks about his vision for the future.



"I am determined that we ensure our work contributes to improving the quality of life of a much wider range of society."

What experience and skills do you bring to the role of Chief Executive?

"I come from a fairly traditional science background – a zoology and environmental studies degree, a doctorate in fresh water ecology and then lecturing and research in West Africa. It's a background that I think is important because there are very strong scientific roots to nature conservation in England.

"Having come up through the organisation, I think I've also developed a very good knowledge of the practical 'business' of nature conservation and am familiar with the wide range of organisations we need to work with. Then there's the strategic perspective I bring to the role – I'm quite keen to look over the horizon to see what the up and coming issues are and to plan for the longer term."

What course have you tried to steer during the last year?

"In many ways it was a difficult period for the organisation because of the tragic illness of David Arnold-Forster and his untimely death. During that time it was very important for the organisation to have a sense of stability and to maintain the direction that David and our Council had set. That meant ensuring that the organisation remained focused on delivering some of our key targets, such as bringing Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) into a favourable or 'recovering' condition by 2010.

"David was always very passionate about making sure that we approached conservation in a way that was relevant and meaningful to all parts of society. We have developed our agenda around greater public participation in nature conservation and are looking to see how it fits with issues like the health and tourism objectives of Government.

"This latter area has been a fascinating area to develop. Much of the tourist industry is dependent on the nature of the landscape and its wildlife and I think we now have a much better appreciation of its contribution to the 'environmental economy' of the country. We need to engage more fully with the sector by sharing what we know about the natural environment. By providing information that shows what, where and when wildlife is out there, we may even be able to extend the tourist season in different parts of the country. We are also interested in finding ways to recycle some of the profits from tourism back into conserving the countryside on which the industry is dependent.

"On the health agenda, I think a lot of us have known intuitively for some time that we all benefit from getting out into the countryside or simply out into an urban park. That's now been supported by a mass of scientific evidence: research even shows that people recover much more rapidly from major surgery if they have the opportunity to look out over a bit of natural environment. People prefer natural environments and contact with the natural world can benefit mental and physical health."

And now that you have taken up the official appointment, what are your long-term priorities?

"I am determined that we ensure our work contributes to improving the quality of life of a much wider cross-section of society. That means increasing our focus on urban areas and urban green space – finding ways of working with other organisations that are helping to turn deprived inner city areas into better places to live and work. We are going to try and ensure that nature conservation is seen as a central part of the Government's sustainable development agenda as the big challenge is how to maintain economic growth and social development without constantly eroding the natural environment and using up natural resources.

"I want to make sure that we better demonstrate the true value of what we do and capitalise on our immense knowledge of the natural environment – making it more accessible and interpreting it for different audiences."

How important are partnerships to achieving English Nature's aims?

"We are a relatively small organisation in Government terms, but with a big agenda: to look after the rich, natural heritage of a densely populated, highly urbanised country. It's therefore critical that we forge very strong, mature partnerships with others and ensure that our agendas contribute to nature conservation goals. These partnerships range from those with the large conservation organisations through to the 32,000 landowners and managers we currently deal with on SSSIs. By building close working relationships with these partners, we'll achieve far more than we ever would through a purely regulatory approach.

"We also have to work very closely with other parts of Government. For the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), in particular, we're a very important source of expertise, advice and knowledge about what's happening on the ground and it's key we ensure that this is fed effectively into the wider policy agenda of the Department."

How does English Nature improve the lives of people living in England?

"Look at the huge audiences that television natural history programmes regularly command. This tells us something about what people value and find interesting. Look at the joy people get from pond dipping, bird watching or seeing hedgehogs in the garden! Likewise, look at just how many

people visit National Parks and walk in the countryside or visit an urban park during their lunch break. These places are of enormous benefit to people and they draw all sorts of benefits from them. We're looking after the very best wildlife areas in the country, over 200 National Nature Reserves visited annually by more than nine million visitors, but we're also developing many more Local Nature Reserves in conjunction with local authorities. We are helping others look after the fabric of the countryside, which we all enjoy and benefit from, including having properly functioning natural systems, which provide the life support systems on which we all ultimately depend."

What motivates you personally?

"One is seeing achievements on the ground – areas that have been conserved for the benefit of our children and future generations. Seeing wildlife flourish and seeing people enjoy nature is an enormously powerful motivator for me.

"Another is seeing really strong innovative partnerships able to achieve so much more by joining up objectives and delivering better public services that bring real and lasting benefits to society.

"It's also a real privilege to manage an organisation like English Nature because it is full of really committed, very able and knowledgeable people. Being able to release all of their energy and expertise and direct it into achieving things for the benefit of everybody is a wonderfully motivating and rewarding thing to be able to do."

New Chief Executive, Andy Brown has outlined the continuing need for English Nature to reassess its role to account for the pressures from modern society on our natural heritage. And that has meant focusing on the wildlife value of gardens and urban environments.

Common and garden

Bugs in your garden

Domestic gardens have the potential to improve urban biodiversity, according to research carried out by the University of Sheffield.

The Biodiversity in Urban Gardens (BUGS) project was begun in January 2000 to measure the biodiversity value of a sample of domestic gardens in residential areas of Sheffield ②. Part of this was to test the success of popular methods of enhancing garden biodiversity.

Data from the initial study is currently being analysed and is due to be published through the year. However, the most important outcomes of the initial research so far are:

- all gardens help biodiversity in some ways;
- every garden is a conservation opportunity; and
- every little helps. Because there are so many gardens – there are 175,000 in Sheffield alone – it will make a difference even if only a small percentage of gardeners actually do something positive to encourage wildlife.

The research, carried out over three years by a team led by Professor Kevin Gaston, has initially been funded under the Urban Regeneration and the Environment (URGENT) programme of the Natural Environment Research

Council (NERC). English Nature is following up this research by providing funding for a further three years.

English Nature is planning to extend the work and develop it across the UK in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland. The funding is due to start this summer, with the project recommencing in the autumn.

“This is a very important part of England’s Biodiversity Strategy”, said David Knight, English Nature’s Urban Advisor. “We are recognising the importance of gardens and their significant land use. For the majority of people, gardens are the most direct way that they can experience, and actively encourage, wildlife.”

It is hoped that the data from the research will lead to a series of recommendations for the management of gardens for biodiversity.

For more information about BUGS visit the University of Sheffield website: www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/bugs.



Peat-free plan

English Nature is funding a new website and CD-ROM, the *Peaterring Out Plant Finder*, which will provide information on where to buy plants grown in peat-free media.

The website and CD-ROM will be launched in July this year.

The *Peaterring Out Plant Finder* builds on the peat work that English Nature has already been involved with. *Peaterring Out – towards a sustainable UK growing media industry* is an English Nature and RSPB joint report, based on commissioned research by horticultural consultants, Rainbow Wilson Associates. The aim is to produce an achievable plan to phase out the use of peat in amateur and professional horticulture.

In the UK, peat-based growing media has been used by the horticulture industry for more than 40 years. This has contributed to a staggering 90 per cent reduction in the rare lowland raised peatbogs – with devastating impacts on biodiversity.

“We support these initiatives because we are committed to protecting peatbogs and the habitat they sustain,” says Roger Meade, English Nature’s Senior Peatland Advisor.

Part of the long-term plan involves conducting trials, funded by Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) and Recyclable Market Development Essex (ReMaDe Essex). There are currently over 40 trials in the UK (including Ireland, Scotland and Wales) testing a full range of commercial crops in peat-free and peat-reduced growing media.

According to John Adlam, one of the project leaders, “This study is an opportunity to demonstrate to the growers and gardeners that there are commercially viable peat-free alternatives.”

Research findings are due to be published more fully later this year.

Some types of commercial peat-free growing media are currently expensive, but there are alternatives that are not environmentally damaging. Composted wood fibre, bark and green compost can be made from selected plant residues, which are cost effective, eco-friendly and sustainable. Using these alternatives will not only help reduce peat extraction, but will reduce the need for landfill.

For more information about the project and the *Peaterring Out Plant Finder*, visit the website: www.peaterringout.com.



English Nature goes live

English Nature will have a larger than life presence at this year’s BBC Gardeners’ World Live show, held on Wednesday 11 – Sunday 15 June, at the NEC Birmingham ①.

A new and improved stand will allow visitors to explore a giant-sized garden – complete with a four-metre high shed, a two-metre high compost bin and huge deckchairs.

Returning for a second year will be the see-through wildlife pond, which shows visitors how to make a pond more attractive to wildlife, while keeping it safe for children.

Staff will also be on hand to help visitors with their questions and leaflets on amphibians, reptiles and plants will be available (see page 7).



What’s in your garden?

English Nature has produced two new leaflets aimed at helping people encourage wildlife into their gardens. *Reptiles in your garden*, explores the types of reptile you might find in your garden, how to identify them and how to make them more at home. It also addresses the worries that some people have – especially about snakes.

Plants for wildlife-friendly gardens, lists the plants most likely to attract wildlife into gardens. It also offers advice on the most suitable plants to use in ponds – with an added section on avoiding invasive species.

Both publications will be launched at the BBC Gardeners’ World Live show in June and will then be available from English Nature’s Enquiry Service on 01733 455100 / 101 / 102 and its website: www.english-nature.org.uk.



Britain's largest nature reserve

Domestic gardens collectively make up the largest 'nature reserve' in Britain, covering approximately 270,000 hectares. Gardens, with their diversity of soils, habitats and mix of native and exotic plants, represent an ecosystem in their own right and make a significant, but often overlooked, contribution to biodiversity.

Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species, such as song thrush and some solitary bees and wasps, are increasingly using gardens as a refuge. Many areas of the UK now have their own BAPs for gardens, which include actions and targets that feed into the UK BAP.

Nature conservation is often seen as a threat by gardeners, rather than an opportunity – less than one per cent of Britain's 22,400 species of insects are garden pests, so encouraging them into the garden is unlikely to cause any major problems.

English Nature's Cheshire to Lancashire Team is taking the lead on developing a BAP for gardens in the northwest for inclusion in the region's five Local BAPs.

For further information on the above project please contact Mandy North or Anne Brenchley on 01942 820342.

For general information on BAPs, including those for gardens, visit the UK Biodiversity website: www.ukbap.org.uk

Ferns in your garden

Although they have been around for more than 300 million years, the many species of fern are little known to the average gardener.

Yet according to Rob Cooke, Area Team Manager for English Nature's Norfolk Team, ferns can, and do, make very good garden plants.

"Britain has a range of native species that can be suitable for most garden settings ranging from rockeries and walls to damp, shady spots and even pond margin conditions," he says.

"They can be both deciduous and evergreen, so, if desired, can provide year-round interest and the architectural leaves (fronds) provide structure, form and pattern to any garden. They are also useful for ground cover."

Wild facts Ferns

- There are around 50 native species of fern in the British Isles;
- The greatest diversity can be found in the south and west;
- Once established they are very hardy;
- They are extremely disease tolerant and pest free; and
- They range from the very small, to the very large – the largest being the royal fern, which can grow up to 1-2 metres high.

For more information about ferns contact the Pteridological Society: www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/bps/. This site also includes the latest information on fern distribution from the *Botanic Society of the British Isles Atlas 2000*.

Mike Wilkinson

Now is the time for... road verges

Continuing in our expert series, this month we look at the flowers now to be found on road verges.

Spring is the time when many of our road verges are brightened by displays of wild flowers. The wild daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* is a smaller neater version than the widely cultivated daffodil and is found mainly in woodland and scrub in southern and western

England. However, in one special area on the borders of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire the wild daffodil reigns supreme and dominates road verges, copses and fields.

More common across many parts of the country are displays of cowslips and primroses along our road verges. These may be followed later in the year by a wealth of wild flowers, including cow parsley, cranesbills and knapweed.

Displays of planted daffodils have also been visible across many road verges and edge of town sites as well as more formal public spaces. Local groups and schools often look for new sites to plant bulbs and increasingly these seem to be spreading onto our wilder road verges. Cultivated daffodils have been selected by plant nurseries to grow vigorously and spread and can dominate our more delicate wild flowers.

Two seasonal tips:

- If you are thinking about a planting project next autumn, plan early, survey sites and select your planting site to avoid damaging native wild flowers;
- Instead of the ever-present cultivated daffodil, why not identify what is characteristic of your area and plan your planting to reinforce that local character – sourcing native wild flower seed or collecting your own.

Mike Wilkinson

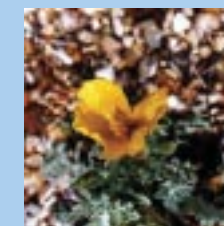
Mike Wilkinson

gardening by the sea

Nature Coast Project

Nature Coast Project

David Nicolls



The shingle plants of Shoreham-by-Sea, including the yellow headed poppy



Following local efforts by English Nature to raise awareness of the importance of native shingle beach plants, residents of Shoreham-by-Sea are actively encouraging the long-term survival of the species.

Many have now set aside an area of their own gardens specifically for the plants to flourish. Householders received a free pack containing seeds, trays, pots, growing instructions and advice from the Nature Coast Project — a Heritage Lottery Fund project with key partners including English Nature, the Environment Agency, West Sussex County Council, Chichester District Council, Arun District Council, SCOPAC, South Downs Coastal Group and Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Once established, the plants need the minimum of care and yet produce a colourful display. In addition, the

shingle plants are nectar-rich and produce an abundance of seed, attracting a variety of insects and birds, which complete this special wildlife community.

The community intervention has come none to soon. Shoreham Beach is one of the few remaining vegetated shingle areas left in the world, its habitat being lost to urban development and coastal defences, trampling from beach walkers and the spread of non-native garden plants.

It has recently been designated a Local Nature Reserve.

A leaflet, *Coastal Shingle Wildlife*, is now available from the Nature Coast Project on 01243 863141. More can be found on the Project Website: www.pebbledash.org.uk

Wild Garden CD

English Nature will be launching the *Wild Garden CD*, to be published by the Plant Press in July this year.

The CD-ROM will be packed with information and stunning photographs of more than 800 species of plants and animals. It will explore the complex relationships between predators and prey, provide information on which plants give the best sheltering and nesting areas for which birds, as well as what to avoid in order to maximise the wildlife potential of your garden.

Although gardens can never make up for wild habitat losses, they are important in bringing people into contact with nature and they do make a significant contribution to the populations of some species.

However, they could be even more useful if people follow a few simple guidelines:

- avoid the use of chemicals as far as possible;
- stop buying peat; and
- use more native plants in gardens, which tend to be the best for attracting wildlife.

wildlife

in our towns and cities



Kentish Stour Countryside Project

Kentish Stour Countryside Project



Kentish Stour Countryside Project

Paul Glendell/English Nature



Nature good for body and soul

Kentish Stour Countryside Project



More than £6.5 million has been spent on giving people back their green space, thanks to English Nature's Wildspace! grant scheme.



Take a walk on the wild side

The Wildspace! scheme, which is supported by the New Opportunities Fund, announced awards of more than £700,000 in April to be spent on Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) in seven regions.

One such Wildspace! project has been the recently designated Green Corridor LNR in Ashford, Kent. Running along the River Stour and its tributaries, the LNR provides a natural link between the town centre and its surrounding countryside.

"Its real appeal comes from its originality – it brings green space right into an urban environment and links residential areas with central parts of the town such as the civic centre and the leisure centre," said English Nature Conservation Officer, Anna Gundrey.

"It also unusually includes recreational areas such as football pitches and formal parks alongside more natural woods and ponds."

The protection afforded by the scheme is all the more important as Ashford is earmarked for massive residential development over the next 30 years.

To find out more about the project, contact Anna Gundrey on 01233 812525 or email: anna.gundrey@english-nature.org.uk

Town and country

English Nature is working closely with Surrey County Council to help bring nature back to town in Britain's most urbanised shire county.

'Wildlife on Your Doorstep' is a unique biodiversity project that's seeking to improve wildlife habitats in Surrey's urban areas close to where people live and work. English Nature drafted the initial habitat plan that forms the project and is helping to finance the role of Leah Mathias as Surrey Urban Biodiversity Project Officer within the Council itself.

"Surrey is rich in a range of very high quality habitats such as chalk grassland and much is already being done to conserve these. But there was some concern among local people that wildlife wasn't being encouraged closer to home – specifically near the places where they live and work," said Leah.



Mole Valley District Council



Surrey County Council

A city haven for wildlife

One of the UK's rarest plants, creeping marshwort (*Apium repens*), has been discovered on the edge of London's urban centre at Walthamstow Marshes Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

A critically endangered European species, creeping marshwort is found in only one other area in the UK and, as such, is also listed within English Nature's Species Recovery Programme. English Nature is currently working with the Lea Valley Regional Park Authority to develop management plans that will make the habitat more suitable for the fragile plant. Part of this will be the reintroduction of cattle later this year to create more bare ground for the plant to spread.

As a nationally important site for wintering wildfowl and supporting a large number of breeding birds, Walthamstow Reservoir SSSI is also benefiting from work by English Nature and Thames Water to improve its habitat value.

As well as creating new reedbeds and re-sculpturing islands at Walthamstow Reservoir, which is owned by Thames Water, the partnership extended to replacing nesting tern rafts.



Lea Valley Regional Park Authority



Lea Valley Regional Park Authority

WHEN NATURE CALLS

Wasn't March lovely? Almost summer-like – but we had surprisingly few calls about early snakes out enjoying the sunshine. The frogs seemed to be packing the ponds though, and we had a reasonable number of enquiries on the subject.

As I write this in early April, it has been snowing and sleeting, no way to welcome the first nightingales is it? I am amazed swallows are already breeding in Nigel Pargeter's barn in Ambridge – it must be true, it is on the radio. Another thing on the 'wireless' was the *Today* programme's recent magpie feature. I did not hear it myself as I am, of course, at my desk by 7.30 am, feeling smug. But I started to get calls about a lady in Glasgow who had said we could supply Larsen Traps! I gave them English Nature's view that it is changing farming practices that are causing the decline of 'songbirds' and not the fault of the poor, demonised magpie.

On another note, the new *Focus on Bats* publication is out. You can get up to ten copies from us, free. (Bulk orders to English Nature publications in Wetherby 0870 1214 177.)

Shortly Jim Foster is producing *Reptiles in your garden*, which will be a big help in answering snake and slowworm enquiries as the days ahead warm into summer – we hope.

By Dick Seamons
English Nature's Enquiry Service

Farming for birds and business

Many farmers are now demonstrating that conservation and profitable farming can go hand in hand, as shown by the winners of this year's English Nature Farming for Wildlife award.

Farmland covers about 70 per cent of the country, so farmers have a very important role to play in encouraging wildlife in the way they manage their land. English Nature sponsors this award – one of the National Farmers' Union Farming Excellence awards – to give recognition for achievements in nature conservation, and to provide the funds for new wildlife projects on the winning farms.



Winner Charles Bransden Laleham Farm, Surrey

Nestling between Heathrow and the M25 ①, a restored gravel pit is the site of this year's winner, Laleham Farm. It is not an obvious spot for bird watching, but the winning entrant, Charles Bransden, has taken a stark setting and transformed it into a haven for endangered bird species. A love of nature and common sense have also enabled him to boost the intensive exotic vegetable farm's status to a Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) demonstration farm.

What has your farm done to encourage wildlife?

"For the last 20 years we've been learning, by accident sometimes, the lifecycle of everything from owls through to crows and seed-eating birds. We've learnt, for instance, when we put in a new hedge to choose blackthorn and hawthorn and we cut it into an 'A' shape to give nesting shelter. Lapwings, skylarks and other ground-nesting birds are vulnerable to predators because there's limited vegetation. As they are so difficult to spot, we mark out the fields so that their nests are protected from our farming activities.

"We're learning by observation. Take, for example, the piles of logs we had scattered around the farm. Instead of burning or mulching them, we hang onto them. They're an excellent habitat over the winter for moths, butterflies, toads and newts.

"We do use some pesticides. They've been blamed for much loss of wildlife, but are fine if used correctly. Surviving on the urban fringe means using the best of traditional and modern methods."

What do you plan to do with the £6,000 prize money?

"I've wanted to put in metres of hedging on the farm, but sadly it is a luxury rather than a necessity to the business. This money enables us to do it."

How important to you is your work to support wildlife?

"We're absolutely delighted that a small urban farm can achieve so much, not quite by accident, but by looking and learning. We don't choose the wildlife that comes – we've just created a number of sustainable habitats. Nature does the rest."



The yellow wagtail, a bird of conservation concern, pictured at Laleham Farm



Sir Martin Doughty, English Nature Chair, presenting winner Charles Bransden with his award

Runner-up Richard Cotham Sutton Mill Farm, Shropshire

The ravaging of Sutton Mill Farm ② by Dutch elm disease in the 1970s was a severe blow to its indigenous wildlife. But runner up Richard Cotham used the disaster as a springboard to countless conservation initiatives. And he's reaping the rewards for his efforts, finding that conservation doesn't go against the grain of good, modern farming methods."

What has your farm done to encourage wildlife?

"I'm becoming quite well-known in the area for my work in conservation, but what people don't know is that the farm is in the top five per cent of sugar growers in yield and output. We're showing that sustainable farming can go hand-in-hand with modern agriculture – you can feed the nation and conserve wildlife at the same time. We're trying to encourage cross-transfer of wildlife. We've planted hedges using ten berry, nut or nectar-bearing species to increase biodiversity and to link existing habitats with neighbouring ones. We invite local schools to see what we're doing. We've established beetle banks as an extension of the hedgerow system to provide breeding, feeding and over-wintering for beneficial predatory insects and to reduce reliance on pesticides and soil erosion. We've also put in raptor posts, which act as artificial trees to encourage birds of prey to keep small mammalian pests down."

What will you do with the £4,000 prize money?

"I have an overall plan in mind, but there are financial restraints because all these things have to be done with profit out of the farm. Now I can get all those little things done. I want to bring the water voles back to the wet part of the farm and really utilise the area with bird-watching and badger-watching as an extension of what we already do with school children."

How important to you is your work to support wildlife?

"Very. I get lots of satisfaction out of walking around the farm and seeing the difference I've made. For example, a hedge I planted five years ago had seven different types of nest in it last year. It's a great feeling."



"We don't choose the wildlife that comes – we've just created a number of sustainable habitats. Nature does the rest."

At the award ceremony, held in London on 13 March, English Nature Chair, Sir Martin Doughty, presented 2003 winner Charles Bransden of Laleham Farm Surrey with the award. His £6,000 prize money will be used to fund further work on the farm that will benefit wildlife.

"It is very exciting to find a farm so close to the airport and motorway that is such a mecca for wildlife," said Sir Martin. "With its careful consideration of soil, water and biodiversity, this successful farm business sets an excellent example of what can be achieved."

The judges were impressed by the way Charles had combined profitable farming with conservation, and his encouragement for school groups to visit and learn from the farm.

Everyone's a winner – Regional rewards

Congratulations to all the nominees from the seven National Farmers' Union regions in England. All seven of this year's regional winners stood out for their commitment to providing the best possible opportunities for wildlife to thrive on their farms, two of which went forward to become overall winner and runner-up. The regional finalists were awarded £200 and the runners up £100.

East Midlands

Roger Pykett, Grange Farm.

North East

Ian Brown, Lee Moor farm.

North West

John Alpe, New Laund Farm.

South West

Peter Walters, Fishleigh Estate.

East Anglia

John Errington, Heathcote Farms Ltd.

The controversial tree felling at Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve in the 1990s caused a wave of opposition from the local community. Steve Berry reports on the troubled past and, more importantly, on the steps taken by English Nature to rebuild the confidence of the community.

Balancing act

Ainsdale Sand Dunes on the Sefton Coast is one of the best places to see a red squirrel. Curiously, this is one reason why the management of this National Nature Reserve (NNR) became controversial in the 1990s. It still is controversial – though to a lesser degree since 1999, when English Nature took a series of significant steps to understand and address the concerns of the community and find a way forward for the management of the NNR.

This is a story of inflamed passions and scarred landscapes. It involves a curious mixture of sand lizards, natterjack toads, Corsican pines, sea buckthorn and herdwick sheep and, above all, people and organisations with very different perspectives.

The scene is the sand dunes of the Sefton Coast, one of the largest dune complexes in Britain. It is a scenic area, rich in wildlife, with the flowers and associated insects of the dunes the stars of the show, at least as far as the professional nature conservationists are concerned – others see things differently.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, many of the sand hills around Ainsdale were planted with Corsican pine. The shrub, sea buckthorn, was also introduced to protect the new plantations from exposure to the salty winds and sprays.

The dunes were listed as one of the top 22 wildlife sites in the country, so it was no surprise that, when the estate came on the market in 1965, part of it was snapped up for the nation by the Nature Conservancy, English Nature's predecessor body. The new NNR of Ainsdale Sand Dunes was then about half-covered in woodland.

By 1992, English Nature had prepared a detailed management plan for the reserve. This involved removing much of the scrub and then felling large areas of pine woodland, in four staged phases up to 2004. The woodland concerned was all to the seaward side of the reserve – the 'frontal' woodland. There were squirrels in the area, but it was not their ideal habitat. Its loss was estimated to reduce the squirrel population of Sefton Coast by less than five per cent. It was planned that the remaining woodland area, the 'rear' woodlands, where most of the squirrels live, would be retained. Management was re-started under a 20-year Forest Plan, which would gradually restructure the woodlands and provide optimum habitat for red squirrels.

The first part of the plan was implemented and few facts seemed in dispute. However, from 1996, when the second phase ended – with the removal of around 6,000 cubic metres of pine (combined from phase one and two) over an area of 22.6 hectares – agreement on what happened becomes harder to find.

English Nature was satisfied that it had consulted local people about the plan, but many of those local people took another view entirely.

From English Nature's viewpoint, the trees just had to go. The conifers were shading out the specialised flowers of the dunes. They were sucking water out of the dune slacks and reducing the population of the rare natterjack toads. The coast was eroding and the woodland expanding – the dunes were at medium-term risk.

Sefton Coast Watch, a local pressure group, disagreed. People loved the trees, which were, for many, the most appreciated part of the landscape, in a part of the world where woodland of any kind is scarce. What about the squirrels? How could English Nature ignore their needs in this cavalier fashion?

English Nature agreed to suspend the implementation of the management plan for two years. In June 2000, an independent report was commissioned to look into the sand dune restoration project. Significantly, the staffing levels at the NNR were strengthened, with the appointment of an additional Assistant Site Manager and the recruitment of a new Community Officer, Lynne Collins, whose role was to rebuild the damaged relationships between English Nature and parts of the community.

Lynne has now been at Ainsdale for three years. During that time, her face has become one of the more familiar in the area, thanks to its appearance at the head of her regular columns for the local newspapers. She has also helped to introduce a regular programme of guided walks, appeared on radio, produced a widely distributed local newsletter about the reserve and its management and generally done all in her power to soothe the ruffled feathers. Even so, it has been a difficult period and she has no illusions.

"It would be naive to think that one or two people can turn things around in three years. There was a great deal of hostility to English Nature when I came and it isn't going to melt away suddenly. However, we have made progress. There is a greater understanding of our position and of our legal obligations towards an internationally important site, and we now have far more volunteers. On the other hand, we have to recognise the legitimacy of the concerns of others: they live here after all and have a right to their viewpoint."

So where are we now?

The report, undertaken by the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies at the University of Liverpool, was published in December 2000. It recommended a substantial modification to phases three and four of English Nature's original plan and saw it as "important that dune restoration should be carried out in sympathy with the existing landscape features of the coast". English Nature has since removed many of the offending stumps remaining from the earlier felling and there is little doubt that the vegetation of the dunes is recovering well, with the sheep helping to prevent scrub from re-encroaching.

The authors of the report are now conducting a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment of the future management options for the dunes. This will involve extensive local consultation and is due for publication in September 2003.

WHAT'S ON? GUIDE

MAY

MAY 31

Guided Walk via Gellia and Bonsall Wild flowers, Derbyshire

Join our local expert for a round trip taking in the fine wild flowers of this Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Time: 10.00am. The walk lasts for approx 3 hours (6 miles).

Contact: 01629 816640.

JUNE

JUN 8

Farm walk around Wemmergill Farm in Lunedale, Durham

Walk around an organic farm and find out about life on a Dales farm.

Time: 2 pm.

Contact: 01833 622374.

JUN 14

Twilight in Cressbrook Dale, Derbyshire

Join us for an evening exploring the wealth of wildlife active at dusk in the Dale. Time: 8.30pm.

Contact: 01629 816640.

JUN 21

Cow Green to Dufton Pennine Way Walk, Durham

Strenuous 13-mile walk, led by local experts, offers magnificent views across the North Pennines and a panorama of the Lake District and the Solway estuary.

Contact: 01228 561601.

JULY

JUL 27

Guided Walk at Glasson Moss, Cumbria

International Peat Bog Day. Visit one of the UK's finest peat bogs.

Contact: 01697 351517 or email frank.mawby@english-nature.org.uk.

For further details visit www.english-nature.org.uk



Lynne Collins, English Nature Community Officer, with Councillor Anthony Hill, Sefton Deputy Mayor

Partnership in action

Partnerships are at the core of English Nature's Species Recovery Programme (SRP) and have been essential to the recovery of some 90 species in its 12-year history. This was the central theme of the Programme's 11th annual conference on 26 February.

150 delegates, including academics, specialist contractors, volunteers and representatives from non-governmental partner organisations, attended the event, hosted by the Zoological Society of London at London Zoo.

The Programme began in 1991 with just 13 species and a budget of £130,000. Now, over 400 plants and animals are benefiting from the Programme, which has an annual budget of over £1 million.

The speakers represented English Nature and its key partners, including The Zoological Society of London, Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation, RSPB, The Herpetological Conservation Trust, The Natural History Museum, and the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew.

Chris West, Zoological Director of the Zoological Society of London, started the proceedings by stressing how important working in partnership is to species recovery. He encouraged English Nature to continue to develop and extend partnership working in the years ahead. This was echoed by Andy Brown, Chief Executive of English Nature, who described the growth of participation in delivering these changes on the ground as "absolutely phenomenal".



Paul Lacey/English Nature

Chris West, Zoological Director of the Zoological Society of London, welcomes delegates to the annual Species Recovery Programme conference



Martin Warren/Butterfly Conservation

Many speakers stressed the benefits of involving a much wider range of people – something English Nature is keen to promote through its funding activities.

Although the Programme focuses predominantly on rare species at risk – those that are restricted to five or less sites – there are other, more widely dispersed species in need of recovery at a larger, landscape level. The improvement of the general countryside is needed to accommodate animals such as bats and skylarks. This requires working with other organisations, volunteers and individuals such as farmers – the key to effective long-term, large-scale recovery.

The problems caused by non-native invasive species and the importance of basing recovery action on sound scientific research were some of the other issues raised. Several speakers stressed that species recovery is a long-term process, which needs to be reflected in the funding strategy. Examples were given of how funding from English Nature has helped attract financial support from other sources and facilitated links to other projects, making it possible to achieve even more.



Large blue butterfly

Martin Warren/Butterfly Conservation

Case study Butterfly Conservation

Butterfly Conservation has been a partner in the Species Recovery Programme (SRP) since it was established in 1991. English Nature presently has a £200,000 per year agreement with the organisation to fund two initiatives (Action for Butterflies and Action for Moths) under the Species Recovery Programme.

"The restoration project for the large blue butterfly is an example of how funding from English Nature can attract other organisations," said Martin Warren, Chief Executive of Butterfly Conservation. "It is a partnership scheme involving some 20 organisations with the aim of creating a network of habitats to ensure the long-term survival of the species."

"The funding received from English Nature is essential to much of our work. It is used as a platform to build other projects, such as national recording and monitoring schemes."

"These projects rely heavily on the role of the local action groups, which bring together conservation organisations and volunteers to facilitate exchange of information. It is important to show the volunteers – who do a lot of the surveying and monitoring on the ground – how their information is being used and how it is making a difference. We have a very active membership that makes the partnership successful."