

Graham Walley, Historic & Natural Environment Team Leader, Leicestershire County Council. East Midlands Biodiversity Forum - A brief view of the work of this group and its role in getting biodiversity information into regional policies.

The presentation started by highlighting how regional Government policies and planning influence our local conservation policies and programmes and the importance of making these links as a tool to influence biodiversity issues.

The primary tool is the East Midlands Regional Biodiversity Forum that links to the Regional Assembly and monitors works across the region to make and develop positive links. This Forum is associated with the Environment Advisory Group of the Regional Assembly. The Forum discusses issues relating to regional biodiversity habitat targets and also specific project relating to species such as re-introduction. This forum also manages the SITA fund for the region. The East Midlands Biodiversity Forum has 23 members, including representatives from each local Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), statutory agencies, NGOs, voluntary organisations, businesses and regional bodies. It is currently chaired by Natural England.

The Forum:

- Provides a focus for biodiversity priorities, issues and initiatives, to ensure that biodiversity is recognised as key test of sustainable development;
- Provides advice on biodiversity and sustainability issues, influences and supports the implementation of the UKBAP and local BAPs at a regional level, as part of linked network of regional groups;
- Facilitates co-operation, partnership working and effective communication between those working towards sustainable development in the East Midlands;
- Facilitates good practice amongst local BAP practitioners and acts as a focus of expertise and advice; and
 - Monitors and evaluates progress towards BAP targets and State of the Region's Environment Assessments.

The region is important, having 15% of England's land surface and 25% of the UK BAP parkland habitats. The Biodiversity forum also deals with geo-diversity issues, since this is a key feature influencing the biodiversity of the region

Putting Wildlife Back on the Map' – The East Midlands Biodiversity Strategy has been prepared by the East Midlands Biodiversity Forum. It adopts the vision and approach set out in Defra's 'Working with the Grain of Nature – A Biodiversity Strategy for England' and builds on the headline objectives of the Regional Environment Strategy and other regional policies. It is endorsed by the East Midlands Regional Assembly. This has 26 objectives with linked actions. Warren Priest is the dedicated officer working on the East Midlands Contract:
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The regional Biodiversity Strategy, Putting Wildlife Back on the Map has been launched by the forum and can be downloaded from the Regional Environment Strategy Action Plan website, www.actions4environment.org.uk.

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Martin Heathfield and David Lepper Natural England. Developments within the East Midlands with the formation of Natural England

Natural England was formed on 1st October 2006, by bringing together English Nature (EN), the Landscape, Access and Recreation elements of the Countryside Agency (CA) and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service (RDS). A strategic direction booklet has been produced

http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/pdf/about/Natural_England_Strategic_Direction.pdf

NE is now part of the Public Service and staff are no longer part of the Civil Service. It employs around 2500 staff. The new Headquarters is in Sheffield

Natural England is working for people, places and nature, to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public well-being, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and in the future.

Natural England is working towards the delivery of four strategic outcomes, which together deliver on our purpose to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment for the benefit of current and future generations.

- A healthy natural environment: England's natural environment will be conserved and enhanced. (EN has a target of getting 78% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest into a favourable condition by March 2007)
- Enjoyment of the natural environment: More people enjoying, understanding and acting to improve, the natural environment, more often.
- Sustainable use of the natural environment: To make the use and management of the natural environment more sustainable. (In Leicestershire this can be seen in the Charnwood and River Eye areas where NE is facilitating bringing farmers and conservationists together)
- A secure environmental future. Decisions, which collectively secure the future of the natural environment.

The importance of partnerships as being key to the way forward that NE is proposing was stressed.

The new East Midlands staff structure was introduced, along with the division of work between new teams.

Glenys Willars Learning and Information Development Manager, Leicestershire Library Services, Leicestershire County Council. Breathing Places. An update on the campaign and how you can get involved

Libraries are a key venue for reading, information and learning and the Breathing Places campaign has offered a focus opportunity to promote these services and link to the BBC lead initiative.

The initiative is also leading to new internal links working with teams from the Environment and Heritage Services also in Leicestershire County Council

The talk highlighted how there were many opportunities for societies attending the Nature Conservation Forum to also play a part across the authority's 54-library sites. A few larger town libraries will be more heavily involved in developing the campaign.

As part of the project, in the summer of 2007, there will be a reading challenge developed around nature, plus a new 'Focus-on' project looking at promoting wildlife and nature. Some sites will be offering family based activities and short talks. It is also hoped that all libraries will be involved in a nest box campaign, with boxes erected at all sites, plus there are opportunities to develop a wildlife reading garden at the Markfield library in partnership with the local school

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Further information can also be obtained from the officer developing this work:

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Rosemary Mills, Country Parks Manager, Leicestershire County Council. Nature Conservation in the County Council's Country Parks. An introduction to the programme of work benefiting biodiversity that is underway in the varied landscapes managed by the Country Parks Service

Leicestershire County Council's Country Park service currently holds 1600 acres, 4 SSSIs (Sheet Hedges wood, Beacon Hill Country Park and Broombriggs, Jubilee Wood and Misterton Marsh), 4 local nature reserves, 2 wildlife sites and a number of areas in stewardship. In addition Market Bosworth Country Park has a Green Flag.

The sites are managed with wildlife and habitat improvement in mind with 5 year management plans being in place, with annual work plans identified within them. These also balance the fact that there are 1 million visitors to these land holdings who have expectations for informal recreation and education that need to be balanced against the need of often sensitive habitats. This often causes concerns from the wider public – such as tree clearance for heathland restoration or when areas are fenced to contain grazing.

Much is done in partnership with agencies such as Natural England, the Forestry Commission, the National Forest Company, (the latter two particularly for guidance on woodland management) Wildlife Trusts (e.g. advice on grazing) and many of the community natural history groups and societies that have vast local expertise.

Enthusiastic talks were then presented by the rangers on specific examples of projects and area of work of the service:

Andrew Hickenbotham – Bosworth Battlefield – how the service works with volunteers

Mick Moffatt – Senior Ranger Beacon Hill – the heathland recovery programme on Beacon Hill

Dale Osborne – Senior Ranger Watermead Country Park – reedbed habitat creation at Watermead Country Park

Ken Goodrich, Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society. How LROS is working to gather information from its expert members and make it available to the planning process

LROS has 650 members and was launched 1941. Nowadays has a mixture of indoor and outdoor meetings with an electronic newsletter. In 1941 the annual report was just 12 pages of records, last year it was 150 pages with photos and more details about the birds recorded. The society also has an extensive web site

The objectives and aims were to record birds using the British Trust for Ornithology formats. The Common Bird Census was carried out in the Stoughton area from 1964 to 1999. This highlighted that the skylark had reduced from 15 territories to just 3.

The society also ran the successful garden bird survey which highlighted that between 1996 and 2005 the Song Thrush in gardens fell from 30% to 20%

Records are vital and in 1941 131 species were recorded in the county, whilst in 2006 up until the end of October 223 species had been recorded. The current species list for county sighting is 306 species – although 9 were prior to 1941.

Over 500,000 paper records are held at Holly Hayes and over 30,000 are added per annum – so e-recording has been vital. Now members can download a form from the website and enter their own data, using a database that is interrogatable in English and Latin names. All sites and local Ordnance Survey Grid References are entered to avoid confusion

Jenny Harris, Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group. Leicestershire Village Bat Survey. An introduction to the work on this project and development within the Bat Group

Leicestershire and Rutland Bat Group (LRBG) has been awarded £4,600 to develop conservation and recording skills among members and the general public. £3,477 has come from the Better Communities Award, which is a partnership between Leicestershire County Council, The Learning and Skills Council and Leicestershire Rural Partnership. A further £500 has been awarded by a small local charity, The Ken Chamberlain Trust. Additional support is being given by the Community Heritage Initiative (CHI), as part of their work to help local natural history groups develop new programmes.

The grant has allowed acquisition of equipment, including a laptop computer and AV projector; bat detectors, sound analysis software and new display boards.

As part of their contribution to the project CHI is helping the Group put together a new website, new full colour leaflet and local information leaflets, with LRBG providing text.

All this is aimed at raising the profile of both the bat group and bat issues generally, and bringing a wider range of people into recording and conserving bats through a new Village Bats project. Seventeen species of bat are found in the UK and 12 of them have been recorded in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Four training workshops were held in Leicestershire and Rutland to train people in basic bat recording, and to encourage them to take part in the Bat Conservation Trust's National Bat Monitoring Programme. The workshops included some basic information on bat ecology and conservation, habitat preferences, how to search for bat droppings in churches and how to record bats and roosts. Everyone got a full pack of information to take away. Fieldwork sessions followed and at Braunston in Rutland a new roost was found. Over 120 people have benefited from this training.

The aim of the project has been to raise awareness of bats, get more volunteers, more records and thus influence the planning system – since bats are often associated with houses and man-built structures.

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Barry Prater, Butterfly Conservation East Midlands. East Midlands Brownfields Projects update. An outline of the project with the emphasis on what is happening or planned for the Ketton area

Ruth Fenney, Leicestershire & Rutland Federation of Women's Institutes. Leicestershire and Rutland Wildflower Survey. An introduction to this Heritage Lottery Fund supported project for 2007, recording 12 common wild flowers as habitat indicators

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded a grant of £50,000 to the Leicestershire and Rutland Federation of Women's Institutes to enable it to conduct a Wild Flower survey during 2007. W.I. members, and other interested groups, will be hunting for 12 wild flowers, which are good habitat indicators, recording their distribution across the two counties. The project is not just open to W.I. membership (currently 155 Institutes and around 4500 members), but other community groups, schools, Heritage Wardens and interested individuals who want to join the hunt for the flowers across the seasons, starting next spring.

Volunteers are asked to note the dates when they found the chosen species in flower, which includes species such as Primrose, Cowslip and Bluebell, as well as flowers that bloom later in the year, such as Meadowsweet, Ragged robin and Harebell.

All the flowers chosen, with help from local conservationists, are good habitat indicators and will help produce records on the plant's distribution and monitor the state of local biodiversity and the countryside. The project is also supported by other events and activities that will help local people appreciate and celebrate this aspect of their natural heritage.

The Heritage Lottery Fund grant will fund training courses to raise the skills of participants, and to celebrate our wild flower heritage through traditional and modern crafts. It will also be used to digitise the results, making the survey available to everyone on the web. The resulting surveys will be part of a major display in 2008, including competitions on a wild flower theme.

Additional support from the Better Communities Awards, which is supported by Leicestershire County Council, the Learning and Skills Council and Leicestershire Rural Partnership has allowed key volunteers and the WI's wider membership to be trained in ICT, giving them the necessary skills to run and develop this large programme of activities across the coming years.

The Ken Chamberlain Trust, which is supported by Severn Trent Water, has also supported the project with an award of £1,000 to help the WI launch the survey. This is one of two special awards made each year for outstanding projects. The grant allowed the W.I. to produce an introductory pack, which includes a sixteen-page A5 full-colour printed booklet, illustrating the flowers to be surveyed, together with explanatory material. The booklet will also be available via the internet in coming months from the Community Heritage Initiative projects pages (see below).

This is the fifth Federation survey to be undertaken. Previous surveys have covered: field names (1968), church yards & burial grounds (1981) and two countryside surveys (1978 and 1996). The Holly Hayes Environment and Heritage Resources Centre will be giving ongoing advice on the running of the project, and will take on the responsibility of archiving the work when completed.

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