

We see this project as testing an idea, or rather trying to answer a question. The question is: why, when Britain has 8m members of environmental organisations (more than any country in Europe), we come 189 out of 215 countries for the quality of nature in the natural environment. In Oxfordshire, for example, only 4% of the land retains any value for wildlife. Of course, there may be many complex reasons for this but one reason could be the top down approach to conservation – ie we pay our dues and think we should leave it to the professionals.

But if we think that the conservation organisations own only 2% of land in the UK – however hard the professionals work and however hard the rest of us might work in volunteering for them, we are never going to be able to create sufficient habitat for nature to recover on the scale it needs to today.

So what if we start from the bottom? If we restore habitat rather than try to save particular species, there is a huge amount that we can do as a community with a bit of collective hand holding - bringing in advice from experts when we need it. If we focus on habitat, we don't need to know what, for example, the great crested grebe requires or the silver washed fritillary, we can just recreate wildflower meadows, plant trees, create ponds and the wildlife will come. I have seen this across the fence from Long Mead where Rachel Murphy has been restoring her meadows along the river to Pinkhill Lock, since 2005. Today, curlew frequently stop off here. A few years ago there were even Bittern in their reeds.

And that's the other thing – we live on a unique stretch of the Thames – if you look at our Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Map, you will see the extraordinary concentration of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Local Wildlife Sites between us and Oxford and further upstream. In fact, we should really be thinking about designating this area a National Park. What this means for us is that if we restore habitat that connects into these sites and create wildlife corridors through the village we have a real opportunity to make a huge difference – to create a real nature recovery network.

So, the idea is something like 'charity begins at home'. If we do our biodiversity volunteering in our own gardens or on our doorstep, and bring the professionals to us, we are suddenly dealing with a much larger land area. Also, we can reap the benefit of our efforts every time we step out of the door and so we might be encouraged to do more – and particularly if our neighbour is doing it as well and we can chat over the fence about how the patch of wildflowers that we planted on the verge is flourishing or whether the cuckoo that we documented last year has returned.

The same goes for surveying and monitoring – we want to make a parish database so that **everyone** will be able to see what we have and how our wildlife is recovering (or declining) and then we can share it with others. Currently, it works the other way: if we take part in monitoring garden birds or butterflies or bees, our findings vanish into a national database and we are none-the-wiser about what is on our doorstep. So, maybe this will encourage us to get out there more often and see what we have.

The project is planned for the long-term so that we can monitor what we have over time. There will be free native trees arriving from Woodland Trust in the autumn and funding for wildflower seeds for September but we can also start propagating our own planting material

from what is around us. Long Mead is in the last 4sq miles of ancient wildflower meadows. GreenTEA has rescued many of the Wastie Apples and the Eynsham Society has been planting trees since the 1970s – Dave Russell and Robin Saunders are Eynsham’s gurus of tree-planting and have planted over 1000 trees for the Eynsham Society.

We started propagating some of this material for the project on Long Mead last autumn with our carefarming groups. Raul here – who is Eynsham’s king of care farming has, since 2010, been bringing adults with learning disabilities and autism to Long Mead, they planted up some meadow seeds for the project and a few other things before stopping in December. Then last weekend the scouts came and did a magnificent job, planting blackthorn and wild damson and spindle in a howling gale, which you are welcome to help yourself to.

And this is the extraordinary thing – it turns out that huge numbers of people in the locality have doing things over many years and so this is as much a coming together as a new start. So, it would be great if, over the course of the evening, you could write on our biodiversity map, any thing you might know of where things are, what you might have planted when – I discovered at the wassailing that Julia and James Loken planted all the trees around park meadow. And last July, Julie and Ross Macken started restoring it for wildflowers masterfully executed by Graham Podbery and Simon Webb. The Bannells have created a wildflower meadow behind the High Street.

And if you want to know any detail about the land in this beautiful part of Oxfordshire from the 1950s, you need to go and talk to Norman and Sue Butler Miles. Excerpts from his memoirs are posted up on the wall and make fantastic reading.

That’s probably enough from us. Now its your turn to talk to us in the different habitats, to give us your ideas about how we might realise this project or tap into the collective fount of knowledge for anything you might need to know in order to do what fancy to help nature recovery in our parish.