

**CHESHIRE WILDLIFE TRUST**  
**WIRRAL WILDLIFE LOCAL GROUP QAVS**

**51<sup>st</sup> ANNUAL REPORT April 2022 until March 2023.**

As Wirral Wildlife leaves its first fifty years behind, we remember and appreciate all those who built such sound foundations and established our deserved reputation for Inspiring, Informing, Educating and Encouraging people to protect nature in Wirral. We contribute to many governmental consultations and address planning issues which can be of great complexity and can call for evidence to be provided to public enquires. We are immensely fortunate to have a team of such able people to take the work forward.

We are now embarked on the journey towards our first century. It has become apparent that great battles lie ahead both internationally through climate change and locally as there have been concerns over Wirral's Local Plan and we are now aware that Leverhulme Estates have proposed large scale housing development on environmentally sensitive, valuable, agricultural, prime Green Belt Land which would have harmful impact on wildlife and ecological networks. Although Wirral MBC refused the applications, Appeals are imminent. Questions have arisen over HMG housing policies and perceived housing need. Wirral Council views have also evolved. We have agreed to collaborate with Wirral Green Space alliance formed by Wirral Civic and Amenity Societies. Our comments relate strictly to the impact of any proposed development on the flora and fauna of Wirral and we seek to enhance biodiversity and wildlife connectivity across the peninsular. The professional expertise and profound knowledge mastered by Dr Hilary Ash and exhibited in her detailed submissions to the array of issues confronting us are simply invaluable. We owe her an enormous debt of gratitude. The Environment Act 2021 will require developers to demonstrate how biodiversity net gain will be achieved but the regulation has not yet come into force so many sites are being stripped of all vegetation prior to a planning application being submitted. It is damaging and a cynical exploitation of the environment for financial gain. Our concerns have been submitted to Government and to all local MPs.

We greatly valued the input and support we received, over so many years, from Eric Greenwood the former Keeper of Liverpool World Museum, who has written valuable botanical and museological papers, edited a major work on the Mersey Basin and lastly wrote a learned volume on the Flora and Flora of North Lancashire based upon surveys spanning forty-six years. He received the President's Gold Medal of the Royal Society of Biology a few months before his death in November. He is greatly missed and our thoughts remain with Barbara and his family.

In December 2022 we were distressed by the death of Margaret Gilmour, who had given invaluable service to Cheshire Conservation Trust, later Cheshire WT and was an original Wirral Wildlife Committee member from 1971 for ten years, being thereafter a greatly respected botanical recorder. She was revered by all who knew her. In 2010 she received an Eric Thurston Award for her achievements as did her husband Jim Gilmour for his services as Secretary for sixteen years. Our thoughts are with him and their family.

We were also saddened to learn of the passing of Hilary Davies who had conducted a series of memorable guided walks highlighting aspects of Wirral's geology and its implications for the landscape, flora and land use.

On a happier note, in May, Mr Mark Blundell, the Lord Lieutenant of Merseyside opened the new gates to celebrate and mark the Silver Jubilee of New Ferry Butterfly Park. It was a joyous occasion enjoyed by over a thousand people.

In October the committee were delighted to show Alison McGovern MP round the ancient woodlands at Dibbinsdale, at her request, in order to hear of her concerns and for us to explain issues around conservation and biodiversity.

In November Mr Charles Neame, Vice Chair of CWT helped us to celebrate sixty years of Cheshire Wildlife Trust by assisting us to plant 180 native tree whips in 22 minutes, in Brotherton Park. Never have I seen so many trees planted so quickly by so few. Another happy occasion and perhaps a record.

We received £2,000 raised by pupils from Woodchurch High School as part of The Archbishop of York's Young Leaders Award. I had the pleasure of meeting them and was impressed by their commitment. We are most grateful and shall use the funds for Heathland Restoration in Cleaver Heath next autumn.

We were very happy to see June Mortazavi receive an Eric Thurston Award for her hard work and contribution to conservation and recording in which she has been engaged since 2017.

We have always sought to reach out to and engage the public, we have, for many years, run regular talks and events on wildlife related topics. In April 22 we were delighted to welcome Dr Jess Walkup of the British Antarctic Survey to talk of her experiences on Bird Island and of later overwintering as Base Commander, it was a fascinating discourse. In January we appreciated a talk by Andrea Powell on Water Voles and their recovery in Cheshire. In February Gary Hedges provided a fascinating insight into threatened invertebrates in Lancashire and Cheshire. In May we attended a climate awareness day in Heswall engaging with many people. In June we benefitted from an open day at Poulton Hall. The estate is supported by the work of Wirral Countryside Volunteers who make an outstanding contribution to our work across the ancient woodlands around Dibbinsdale, at other sites and notably at New Ferry Butterfly Park. We are greatly in their debt. They are a happy and welcoming group, so do go and have a go, hedge laying, coppicing, scything and so much more. In October we enjoyed a fungal foray in Dibbinsdale led by John Ratcliffe, so many remarkable species in such a small area. We are grateful to Sally Walsh for organising the talks.

New Ferry Butterfly Park has its own committee and is a hive of activity. We work well together. A new Green Flag has been awarded to add to the collection and high praise was given in the inspector's report. Its varied habitats appeal to young children as well as to many professional groups and adult students. It is open on Sundays from May until September from 12am until 4pm. Many groups visit by arrangement and there are many work parties. We are most grateful to Mike Maher for his production of nature friendly plants which are sold there, through which he raises large sums for Wirral Wildlife.

Cleaver Heath, a valued and rare lowland heath is overseen by John McGaw who is also a spider expert and recorder. He has been assisted by parties from CWT. Major heather restoration works are being planned in the autumn. We are most grateful. Access is open.

We receive many requests for advice on wildlife friendly land management from schools, community groups and individuals. We are glad to assist.

The Committee operates like a well-oiled machine in which all parts work well together. Never has our work been more important and so we must engage in succession planning and encourage and support those who shall take our places in due time. All are welcome.

The committee have had the benefit of Margaret Jackson's meticulous minutes and the collated reports about each area of activity which cover every aspect of our considerable efforts. We were sorry when Ron Warne decided to retire from the committee after he had overseen wildlife recording for four years. We thank him for his service.

Recording and regular monitoring of wildlife sites on a repeated basis over many years is fundamental to conservation. We appreciate the efforts our recorders make to keep up with the programme. We are fortunate to have Sheila Ross, an ecologist who this year oversaw recording on Local Wildlife Sites. We have a group of around twenty of whom a dozen are experienced, others being trained. Many have a botanical interest but we include specialists for groups such as spiders, bats, hoverflies and pond life. This year we have surveyed twenty sites including golf courses at Heswall and Wallasey and the quadrats at Thurstaston.

Dr Hilary Ash also continues to run a series of botanical training courses which, for many, could lead to the start of their recording careers. You will be encouraged and supported.

Caroline Smallthwaite scrutinised forty planning applications of various complexities. It is detailed technical work at which she excels. If not lodging an objection, she seeks conditions to protect and enhance wildlife at the site. She works closely with Hilary Ash.

Linda Higginbottom is our link with the world. Her contribution is immeasurable as she runs the Wirral Wildlife Blog, providing a commentary on all that occurs which is open to all. She provides a monthly activity update to all who sign up for it – around 800 at present. Articles have been written for CWT magazine. She engages in all our events and provides activities for children. We are thankful that she is ably assisted by her daughter Laura, who has the technical know-how, to operate the web site and responds quickly to outside enquiries by the public to ensure an effective operation.

Paul Loughnane is our priceless link to Wirral Countryside Volunteers and to NFBP. Always very knowledgeable, hands on and enthusiastic. We also thank his wife Phillipa who caters at our talks adding a vital social cohesion.

No group can manage without a Treasurer and we are fortunate to have Gillian Lacy who is now equipped with a card payment machine, so gold bars or plastic cards can all be dealt with. Many thanks are due to our former Treasurer John Gill who provides regular quiz sheets by which monies are raised for our funds.

We appreciate the support we receive from Bill Stothard, the trustees and from Charlotte Harris CEO of CWT. It was a pleasure to welcome her to a committee meeting. It is reassuring to hear how membership is holding up. We also thank Kellie Barnard, who is our link with CWT, and who has provided us with comprehensive reports of all that is going on across the Cheshire Region and who responds quickly to any request we may have. It has been good to welcome new team members to our committee meetings.

It is over forty years since an Australian cousin asked why on earth do you let the scrub come right up to the houses here? Climate change is impacting us. Now houses have burnt down in Kent during a wild fire. We can but hope the message from COP meetings will be learnt and steps taken meaningfully to change policies and reduce CO2 emissions.

All we can do is our best for this area and that is undoubtably what we shall do together. Do come and join us in this endeavour. Meanwhile enjoy David Attenborough's Wild Isles series.

STEPHEN R. ROSS

Chair, Wirral Wildlife Group of Cheshire Wildlife Trust