

Our Local Wildlife Trusts

Phil Kemp meets with the Surrey Wildlife Trust to learn about the outstanding work they and other Wildlife Trusts do to safeguard and enhance the natural environment for the benefit of nature.

The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts was founded in 1912 with the charity's primary role being to ensure a strong voice for wildlife, with today's network of 46 trusts providing an effective platform throughout the UK to achieve this.

The Surrey Wildlife Trust, together with the adjoining Sussex and Hampshire & Isle of Wight Trusts, are proactively looking out for our local natural environments. And as I was to discover for myself when I met up with Surrey's Chief Executive Sarah Jane Chimbwandira and Jo Foat, their Communications Officer, the work that they do is nothing short of inspirational.

"Last year the Surrey Wildlife Trust celebrated its 60th anniversary and in terms of what it does as a Wildlife Trust we are one of the larger ones. We manage over 18,000 acres of land and have a membership of around 26,000," Sarah Jane explained. "We are a charity and have a really clear mission around delivering biodiversity outcomes and engaging people with nature."

Prior to our meeting, I visited the trust's website and had very quickly found myself totally absorbed in how they are providing us all with very imaginative and practical ways of helping our local wildlife, and especially in our own gardens. These, from an extensive list of personal projects, included making a bee hotel; growing a wildlife-friendly vegetable garden; building a hedgehog home; attracting bumblebees to your garden; creating a vertical garden; and making your garden a chemical-free zone.

“The network of Wildlife Trusts gives us the ability to deliver very local solutions which we can also scale up to act nationally in terms of policy. So, as an example, we are encouraging the government to deliver the Environment Bill which is currently going through its parliamentary process to come into legislation.” Sarah Jane outlined what the bill will provide, which includes providing nature recovery networks, a key tool to respond to the biodiversity and climate crises. And vitally, to ensure that there is a watchdog to make sure the biodiversity outcomes are achieved.

I was keen to find out how the trust works locally, and Sarah Jane’s enthusiasm at what is happening on the ground was infectious. “We have an interesting suite of sites. These range from very large internationally-protected lowland heathland sites on the west of the county primarily, all the way through to some of our smaller more intimate nature reserves – such as Thundry Meadows near Elstead, for example.”

“And very important to us is enabling volunteers to get involved. Lots of people come out every week, come rain or shine, to help us undertake a myriad of tasks that a reserve needs to look after it. And this can be for example in helping to clear scrub in the winter to keep the reserve in good condition. We were recently hazel coppicing at Sheepleas, near East Horsley, a very important habitat for dormice which are a protected species – and with the volunteers were a group of youngsters all of whom were doing their D of Es (Duke of Edinburgh’s Awards) which included my son, who thoroughly enjoyed learning how to coppice.”

“Many of our volunteers are regulars, and everyone enjoys being out in the fresh air especially on a nice sunny day. Volunteering is the lifeblood of an organisation like ours and we really value them.”

The trust runs Citizen Science Projects which are proving very popular. One example is the River Search project where volunteers are trained to survey a stretch of river that they

walk on a monthly or more frequent basis. They report on for example pollution incidents or other major problems, and invasive species such as Himalayan balsam which grows rapidly and smothers other vegetation. They can also volunteer to do vole and otter surveys and also join work parties to restore wetland habitats. Another project launched more recently called Hedgerow Heroes is where volunteers survey these all-important habitats that are declining through over-management and neglect.

“The health benefits are really important for volunteers,” Jo emphasised. “Just being outside and connected to nature is a real plus point. A lot of research has been done where people who have been suffering from low well-being have been seen to improve within about six sessions outdoors, and continue to feel better and better every week. It’s a sense of being sociable by regularly being with a group of people developing green skills and learning about nature.”

Our local wildlife environments support a wide range of species, which include some that are under serious threat.

“On our lowland heathlands you may experience nightjars, which are a very elusive night-time bird species,” said Sarah Jane. “Woodlarks too which are part of the protection for these internationally important sites. If you are very lucky you might see some silver-studded blue butterflies which are a threatened species, and we are looking for opportunities to see if we can provide more suitable habitats for these to help them expand their populations.”



Rodborough Common (Jon Hawkins)

“If you are more interested in wetland environments spotting an otter is very exciting – and we have had some sightings in Surrey, down Surrey, down on the River Wey. Unfortunately, as a county we don’t have sightings of water voles but as a Wildlife Trust we are exploring opportunities to get water voles back in our rivers as they are an iconic wetland species. And up on our chalk grasslands there are huge arrays of butterflies, and if you are into the plant side of things finding wildflower species like kidney vetch is really interesting, especially as it is a food plant for the threatened small blue butterfly.”

Surrey Wildlife Trust has an exciting range of campaigns and activities encouraging people to take an active interest in local wildlife. This includes their 30 Days Wild challenge in June where you can do something ‘a little bit wild every day’, taking on activities to help you re-connect with the natural world and do your own little bit of good for wildlife.

There are many more you can find out about on their website, and one in particular really impressed me for its ingenuity.

“A wildflower garden at home has a high ability to store carbon,” Sarah Jane explained. “To highlight that, last year we took over Guildford High Street to build a wildlife garden, which was incredibly successful because people didn’t expect to find one there. And it showed them what they could do in their own gardens.”

“And what people also didn’t expect to see were so many insects including bees and butterflies there in the High Street on a garden that we had created just that morning,” Jo added, smiling. “Literally within about an hour wildlife had come in, and then quite sadly at the end of the weekend when we took it all down the bees still kept coming! But it shows just how powerful it is. And after the event we donated the garden to Kings College in Guildford.” The trust are repeating the event this year in Woking. Jo also highlighted the Action for Insects campaign the Wildlife Trusts launched nationwide at the end of last year with the aim of advising what people can do to help reverse the loss of insects.

The trust also works closely with a growing number of corporate supporters. They are developing a Health and Wellbeing programme to benefit their supporters’ employees and wildlife, which includes establishing wildlife-friendly gardens at their offices. One of these at Toyota GB’s offices in Burgh Heath near Epsom features a large outdoor area that staff can enjoy during breaks – and kidney vetch is thriving in the gardens there to the benefit of butterflies. The gardens are maintained by employee volunteers and were awarded Surrey Wildlife Trust’s Best Business Garden Award in 2017.

If you want to directly help you can find out so much more on their website, which includes signing up to join the trust as a member, and how to get hands-on as a volunteer.

“With the biodiversity and climate crises we are facing we all

really need to understand the changes we need to make,” Sarah Jane emphasised. “It is therefore now the time to make that difference and get actively involved.”

*Phil Kemp is a Godalming-based writer and photographer.
www.weyriver.co.uk*

Surrey Wildlife Trust

www.surreywildlifetrust.org

Sussex Wildlife Trust

www.sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

www.hiwwt.org.uk

The Wildlife Trusts – nationally

www.wildlifetrusts.org