



# ANNUAL REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

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2020/21

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

The 2020-21 financial year was of course dominated by Covid 19. The lockdown measures and restrictions put in place by Government in response to the pandemic caused disruption to the charity's activities, but plans were put in place that mitigated the impacts. Support from members, donors, funders and volunteers allowed Durham Wildlife Trust to continue to successfully deliver its charitable aims.

## CONSERVATION

- Durham Wildlife Trust was able to acquire a new nature reserve in the Gateshead area – the Beda Hills Local Wildlife Site, a 7hectare mosaic of acid grassland, pasture and scrub. The acquisition was made possible thanks to support from Gateshead Council and the Bannister Trust. As a result at 31st March 2021 the Trust had a suite of 39 nature reserves covering 850 hectares of land.
- Despite the great majority of our fantastic volunteers being unable to support the Trust due to Covid restrictions the charity was able to continue to manage its nature reserves thanks to emergency Covid support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This allowed additional staff to be recruited so the Trust's conservation team were able to ensure that people could safely visit our sites and enjoy the benefits that nature can bring right through lockdown.
- Development work was able to continue on the Naturally Native water vole conservation project with funding of £507,400 secured in the summer of 2020 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project includes our colleagues at Northumberland and Tees Valley Wildlife Trusts and runs for 3 years across the catchments of the Tees, Wear and Tyne.
- The Trust was also fortunate to be able to secure funding from the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund, a funding stream designed to support nature conservation charities through the Covid crisis. The Healing Nature project was rapidly developed with our partners at Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland Councils and £476,800 was secured in January 2021. This funding allowed the Trust to retain and redeploy the staff that Covid emergency funding had supported. Healing Nature has allowed their skills to be retained and used to support an ambitious programme of nature restoration and community volunteering. Healing Nature runs to the end of March 2022.
- There were delivery delays across all of the Trust's existing projects, from the Bright Water Landscape Partnership Scheme, our largest ever project, down to smaller projects delivered with local communities. Sadly, school visits to Trust sites were completely halted during the year due to Covid, as were all educational outreach activities and engagement projects. The halting of project delivery created a backlog of activity that still needs to be delivered if project funding requirements are to be met and this will have implications for delivery and staffing into 2021-22 and beyond.
- The Trust was able to rapidly and effectively switch to online engagement and created Wild at Home to provide information on the wildlife that people could enjoy seeing in their local area. The online nature conservation and natural history talks proved incredibly popular, with Trust staff and trustees contributing their time and knowledge to make lockdown a little more bearable for Trust members and supporters. Shifting online also allowed DWT to broaden its reach, attracting a new audience with people dialling in from around the world to find out more about our region's wildlife. Nearly 2500 people participated in the online sessions.
- Project development was also disrupted by Covid and many funders closed for applications. Staff have worked hard to restart the project development process and their efforts during 2020-21 will lead to applications being ready to submit when funders re-open their schemes.

And finally, the Trust's Exmoor pony herd continued to deliver conservation grazing across our sites and despite the lockdown restrictions our essential volunteer Pony Wardens made sure that there was no impact on the animals' welfare. Sincere thanks must go to this special group of volunteers.



## OPERATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

- Covid 19 necessitated a significant change to ways of working, with all staff working from home during the most restrictive periods of lockdown. Thankfully, the emergency support provided the National Lottery Heritage Fund allowed the Trust to provide staff with the equipment required for home working. Previous investment in high speed broadband proved vital and allowed the charity to continue to function effectively. Staff demonstrated their commitment to the organisation and quickly adapted to new ways of working. As a result the great majority of staff were retained on active work, with very little use of furlough across the organisation.
- The response of the Trust's members and supporters during a very difficult year for us all was exemplary. Membership recruitment and retention remained strong, despite the difficult economic climate. Improvements in online recruitment were made which ensured that Durham Wildlife Trust was able to continue to recruit new members and grow its support. Thanks must go to the many members who chose to increase their subscriptions to support the charity through this difficult period.
- Having good online content and making effective use of social media was more important than ever as other forms of communication and engagement became more difficult. All staff rose to the challenge, providing the online content material needed to continue to engage the public in the Trust's work.
- Grant funding continued to be secured throughout the year despite significant changes to the types of funding available. The Covid emergency funding and Green Recovery Challenge Fund bids that were submitted required rapid action in order to meet deadlines, with the staff team able to develop and submit successful bids, at pace.
- Unsurprisingly room hire and shop sales were effectively cut to zero, but the income loss was partially offset by a reduction in expenditure on stock and the Trust was also able to take advantage of Durham County Council administered grants provided to support visitor facilities.
- A new financial management system was adopted during the year - Xledger, which offers a Wildlife Trust specific format developed in partnership with the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. To provide the staff resource needed to adopt the new system and have it in operation for 1st April 2021, a new full time Head of Finance post was created.



Photo: Paul Cleasby