



# ANNUAL REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

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2022/23

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

At the start of the year, Durham Wildlife Trust's activities were broadly managed under two areas of work with clearly defined senior management responsibility for each area.

Conservation, led by the Head of Conservation – incorporating management of nature reserves, species and habitat conservation projects

Operations and Development, led by the Head of Operations and Development – incorporating administration, income generation, education and engagement, and communications.

During the year the Head of Operations and Development left the Trust to take a new role. This brought forward the process of reviewing senior management structure to ensure it still provided the best possible leadership for the organisation. As a result of the review a new role of Governance and Administration Manager was created reporting to the Trust Director, the Head of Operations and Development position deleted, and a new role of Head of Development and Communications created.

Recruitment for that role was not possible within the year due to the late withdrawal of the selected candidate. The recruitment strategy was reappraised, and the decision made to postpone recruitment until early 2023-24 and focus on developing existing talent within the Trust. The Trust director therefore assumed line management responsibilities for development staff for the last 6 months of 2022-23.

To reflect the new structure this section of the annual report is subdivided into Conservation, Development and Communications, and Governance and Administration.

## CONSERVATION

During the year Durham Wildlife Trust continued to acquire new nature reserves as part of the 50@50 campaign, which aimed to increase the number of Trust nature reserves to 50 by the end of the charity's 50th anniversary year in July 2022. The 50@50 initiative supported delivery of the Business Plan objective of 30% of land for wildlife by 2030.

The following sites were acquired during the year:

- **Cuthbert's Moor** – Became the Trust's 50th reserve, with the completion of the purchase of the freehold in August. This is an upland moorland site in the North Pennines AONB near Middleton-in-Teesdale and represents a substantial acquisition for the Trust. The reserve is part of the Teesdale Allotments SSSI.
- **The Folly, Chopwell East Fields and Hill 60** all came across to the Trust under a long-term management agreement with Gateshead Council. This will see the management of these sites for between 25-30 years.

As a result at 31st March 2023 the Trust had a suite of 50 nature reserves covering 1095 hectares of land.

In addition to the acquisition of land to add to the Trust's portfolio of nature reserves, during the year the Trust worked with Natural England to acquire land for the purpose of nutrient management in the Tees catchment. This work was part of the Nutrient Neutrality measures put in place by Natural England to prevent further degradation of designated habitats at the Teesmouth & Cleveland Coast SPA. Two sites were acquired during the year – Horse Close Lane (50.91 hectares) and Mordon North Farm (118.57 hectares). The land acquired is a mix of arable and improved pasture with some small areas of woodland. The arrangement with Natural England requires the Trust to not apply any form of artificial fertiliser to the land for a period of 125 years, which reduces the level of nutrient entering the Tees catchment. The Trust has received a payment for delivering the nutrient saving and that payment provided the funds required to purchase the land. The sums involved are significant in relation to the Trust's annual turnover and the financial and accounting implications are discussed later in this report.

The land acquired for nutrient reduction is within the operational area of the Bright Water project. The habitat restoration that will be delivered on the land complements the Trust's aspirations for the legacy of Bright Water, namely more environmentally sustainable land management across the catchment and large-scale wetland restoration to create the Great North Fen. Habitat restoration at scale can also provide income generation from the delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain, so the land secured in 2022-23 will hopefully deliver both improvements for wildlife and income to support further nature restoration in future years. As a result, management of the nutrient sites will be delivered in a different way to the Trust's nature reserves. The land forms part of the Trust's estate and will deliver nature recovery, but the scale and existing agricultural operations on the land mean that, for several years at least, management operations will be on a more commercial contract basis than is usual. This means access will also be limited in comparison to the charity's nature reserves, with members being able to visit the sites as part of guided tours and public access by formal rights of way only.

## CONSERVATION

Volunteer support for nature conservation activities, severely impacted by Covid 19 the previous year, returned to pre-covid levels. A new cloud-based volunteer management system was implemented during the year to improve the onboarding of new volunteers and provide better recording and recognition of the volunteer contribution to the Trust. The system provides a self-service platform for volunteers to view and manage their data, view their volunteer hours and register for opportunities, all functions that weren't available with the previous system. The cloud-based system also offers volunteer managers better access to reports, live updates on volunteer activity and easier access to emergency contact information when out in the field. The new system has streamlined volunteer administration for new and current volunteers and allowed the Trust to manage an increase in new volunteer enquiries.



Works required under DEFRA Stewardship agreements across the Trust's land holding continued to be delivered as required, where applicable agreements were extended for a further 12 months. The long-running Gateshead HLS agreement ended, and this was replaced by a new Countryside Stewardship Agreement which applies to the Gateshead sites and Stanley Moss. Agri-environment schemes and Forestry Commission grants continue to provide a valuable source of income.

Visitor numbers to Trust sites have remained high, continuing the trend established during the pandemic when more people made use of their local Durham Wildlife Trust nature reserve and enjoyed the benefits that nature can bring. The support of volunteer site wardens remained vital in ensuring that the nature reserves remained safe and welcoming places to visit.

The Healing Nature project was completed in June 2022 following an agreed extension in recognition of its success. The initiative, funded by DEFRA via the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, operated across sites in Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland. The local authorities in each area also provided support. Healing Nature delivered significant achievements in just 15 months of project delivery and was highly commended by the project funders and partners.

Link Together successfully secured support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) in March 2022 for a 12-month development phase. The development period began in November 2022, with Anne Gladwin appointed as Link Together Project Manager. The Link Together project will focus on sites across the Sunderland Coalfield area, in particular the catchment of the Lumley Park Burn. This project is a first for Durham Wildlife Trust as it will make use of social prescribing via the Sunderland G.P. Alliance to engage volunteers. Sunderland City Council are joint lead on the project, which will focus on habitat and access improvements across Council owned sites.

## CONSERVATION

Seascapes – Tyne to Tees, shores and seas is a National Lottery Heritage Fund supported partnership project led by Durham Heritage Coast, with Durham Wildlife Trust as one of the lead delivery partners. The Seascapes Officer employed by the Trust delivers the Intertidal Interactive programme, this engages people and groups of all ages in coastal and marine wildlife. Highlights have included volunteer monitoring programmes for shore birds and cetaceans, beach-based school activities and snorkelling experiences for school aged children. In addition, Seascapes funds little tern conservation efforts on the Durham Coast, delivered by the Trust. In 2022 the terns nested and bred at Seaton Carew and 70 chicks fledged. There was a significant improvement on previous years and a welcome success when considered against the backdrop of avian influenza that impacted bird breeding colonies elsewhere on the North Sea coast.

Nextdoor Nature is one of the latest initiatives in The Wildlife Trusts' mission to inspire and support 1 in 4 people to take action for nature. Centred on a community organising approach, each of the 46 local Wildlife Trusts have employed a Nextdoor Nature Community Organiser. Durham's Officer, Tom Parkin, began in post in July 2022. Working across Sunderland, South Tyneside, East Durham (Easington area) and Darlington (DL1 postcode), Tom's highlights to date have included work with residents in Hendon (Hendon Growing Garden), Washington (Washington Mind) and Dawdon (Dawdon Dene). This is a 2 year project administered by RSWT, funded by NLHF.

Delivery of the Naturally Native water vole conservation project continued throughout the year in partnership with Northumberland and Tees Valley Wildlife Trusts. The project is addressing the two most significant causes of water vole decline; predation by American mink and habitat loss. The project is an example of how collaboration between Wildlife Trusts and landowners can support nature's recovery at a regional scale. Naturally Native delivery will continue with NLHF funding until October 2023, when it is hoped interim funding can be secured to continue mink control whilst Naturally Native 2 is developed. It is hoped that Naturally Native 2 can deliver water vole restoration across a larger North region.



## CONSERVATION

The Discover Brightwater Landscape Partnership, which is the largest programme to be led by the Trust to date, has continued to successfully deliver on its programme of 19 workstreams and over 50 projects. These include: environmental projects, archaeology and community events with the aim to “Restore, Reveal and Celebrate Life Around the River Skerne”. Notable achievements included in-river improvements between Fishburn and Holdforth Bridge and work with DWT volunteers improving public footpath and bridleway access to our planned new Bishop’s Fen nature reserve at Bishop Middleham.

A series of creative writing classes led to a competition run by the Northern Echo to support new writers to produce short stories with the Skerne as the focus. The resultant Brightwater Anthology was published in September 2022 with a launch at Waterstones bookshop in Darlington.

Discover Brightwater Big Weekend events in September 2022 and April 2023 attracted over 8,000 participants for walks, training and celebrations at a range of parks and venues. The creation of a Natural Heritage Trail in Hardwick Park has been used by thousands of school children and other visitors whilst our Hidden Gem Trail, celebrating local women, starts at the Locomotion National Railway Museum and helps encourage visitors to walk through parkland, enjoy our railway heritage and spend time in the town centre at Shildon.

Our 8 young trainees have all moved into either full-time employment or have been accepted into local colleges for study after working to support families at Brightwater events to build over 500 bird-boxes and improve local landscapes, including the Quaker cemetery in Darlington and the newly refurbished Timothy Hackworth House garden at the Locomotion site.

The Trust’s Exmoor pony herd continued to deliver conservation grazing across grassland nature reserves and the Trust’s indispensable volunteer Pony Wardens continued to look after the animals’ welfare. Sincere thanks must go to this special group of volunteers.

**In summary, throughout 2022 – 23 the charity maintained high standards of nature reserve management and conservation project delivery. Durham Wildlife Trust continues to make a significant contribution to nature’s recovery from Tees to Tyne and targets in the Business Plan to increase wildlife diversity and abundance remain on course. However, one area where progress has not been achieved as quickly as planned is auditing accessibility of the Trust’s nature reserves. This is largely due to an underestimation of the complexity of auditing all the factors that contribute to making the Trust’s work as accessible as it can be. An assessment process is now in place and work and accessibility audits at Rainton Meadows and Low Barns have been completed, with further roll out during 2022 -23.**

## DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

During 22-23 the Trust further implemented its 'supporter' approach, bringing together members, volunteers and donors as supporters, and ensuring that everyone who engages with Durham Wildlife Trust has the best possible experience - the 'supporter journey'. The Supporter Development Manager led a process of identifying the elements of the supporter journey that were to be improved and there was significant attention paid to volunteering. The volunteer management system was reviewed, and the Trust invested in the administration of volunteering by the creation of the Supporter Administration Assistant to follow on from the previous 18-month Apprenticeship post that completed in January.

Membership performance in 22-23 was impacted by outside factors, principally the cost of living crisis. Trust membership is discretionary spend and across the charity sector there has been an impact on income generation. Recruitment of new members decreased by 36% and membership lapses increased by 33%. However, those that were able to give gave more and the average subscription for new memberships increased by 5% and the average subscription for all memberships by 2%. The overall effect on financial performance was minimal with membership income (including Gift Aid) increasing by 2% to £273,373 compared to the previous year.

Diversifying income streams has consistently been a key area of work for the Development team in order to reduce over-reliance on grants and membership. In response the Trust has grown retail income which increased by 14% to £24,300 exceeding targets. The Gift Shop at Rainton Meadows, retail space at Low Barns and the sale of goods at external events and online have all contributed to the successful retail offering and would not have been possible without the contribution of volunteers, for which the Trust is extremely thankful. Donations income also increased, with general donations up by 25% to £62,717 (excluding a donation of £850,000 in relation to the purchase of Cuthbert's Moor and a donation of £42,000 re the replacement of boardwalks at Low Barns). Rent and room hire contributed approximately £19,225 of additional funds. In addition, the team delivered the Durham Carrs appeal in 22/23, successfully fundraising £20,188 against a £20,000 public fundraising goal to support land purchases as part of the Great North Fen. Improved utilisation of digital techniques was an important part of this work and continues to be a development objective.



## DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

During the 22/23 financial year, the Trust reached 1,023,385 people online, through social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn) and the website plus 7,500 views on YouTube. This reach comes in the face of ever-more challenging algorithms operated by the social media networks and a move towards developing more video-focused content, which is more resource heavy to produce. Top content pages for visits on the website were the shop (with a huge peak on 25 November, the day after 'green Friday'), Rainton Meadows and Low Barns nature reserves pages followed by the volunteer and job pages. Round-up emails went to the email database every month featuring the latest news, a blog highlighting the Trust's work, events and promotion of the retail offer. Further to the monthly updates, some additional themed emails on specific issues were distributed at key dates. The monthly email had over 11,000 subscribers.



A total of 2,145 people attended Durham Wildlife Trust events. This figure excludes drop-in attendees at events outside of the Eventbrite system, for example those held by Bright Water.

Educational visits to Trust sites (non-project funded) were lower than anticipated, with 24 school visits to reserves, lower than the 30 visits in the previous year. Whilst some of these included multiple class bookings, feedback suggests that rising cost of transport is a prohibitive issue for schools and as a result there has been an increase in schools requesting Trust sessions at the school premises rather than coming to reserves.

Externally funded education sessions have seen a marked increase on the previous financial year. These include sessions for Seascapes, home educated children and Guide and Scout groups. Education and engagement sessions have been delivered as part of the Trust's Great Woodland Get-Together and Naturally Native projects and on behalf of a variety of partners including Living Uplands, Believe Housing, The Auckland Project and North Pennines AONB Partnership. The Trust has also delivered teacher training sessions for Sunderland University.

Other engagement with young people included monthly Rangers at Low Barns and Rainton Meadows, Wildlife Watch from Rainton Meadows, Low Barns and Watergate Park and Beach Rangers sessions in support of Seascapes. Holiday Fun with Food programmes were also run across all school holidays at both Rainton Meadows and Low Barns, some of which were in collaboration with external providers such as Springboard.



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