



Restharrow Scrape Development Project Evaluation Report

Introduction & Overview

It has long been a goal of Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust (SBBOT) to gain ownership of the wildlife site known as Restharrow Scrape, which the Observatory had been leasing since 2002. In 2018 we were given the opportunity to purchase the site at a price based upon a professional valuation and this kick-started our development project.

From the outset, this was seen as a much wider project than just the acquisition of the land on which the wildlife site is situated. Security of ownership meant that we would be able to make improvements that would make it even more attractive to both wildlife and the people who use it. The site had become a focus for many of our activities, such as children's groups and groups for people with disabilities and wildlife walks. It had also led to an increase in the number of visitors to Sandwich Bay (both experienced and novice birdwatchers) and a steady growth in our membership numbers. The redevelopment would increase capacity and lead to further benefits in all of these areas.

Our strategic goals had, for several years, included increasing the numbers and diversity of our users and members, with particular emphasis on younger people. We also saw the need to build awareness and 'ownership' within the local community. However, we had lacked the capacity to properly implement these, due to our dependence on an ageing group of volunteers for this work. The development project and its associated fundraising was a unique opportunity to fund the staffing needed to develop this. The publicity associated with the project and the outreach to schools and community groups in the local area and beyond would build awareness of SBBOT and its activities. In turn, this would create new opportunities to find volunteers and roles for them.

The end of lease payments and the increased numbers of users and members would help to strengthen SBBOT's financial position thus helping us to fund the outreach work beyond the end of the project.

In the event, sufficient funding was raised for the project during 2018 to enable us to proceed with an application to the then Heritage Lottery Fund, confident that we would be able to implement our plans in full. Once this key funding had been secured we were able to proceed with implementation under the supervision of a project management group, all of whom had been involved in its design from the outset. When the grant from HLF was awarded in 2019, we were able to go ahead with the land purchase and, after the breeding season was over, the development work on the site and the installation of an additional hide for users. This was mostly completed during 2019.

Also in 2019, we held workshops for potential volunteers, explaining the project to them and seeking their views on it. (A report on these is attached as Appendix I). We successfully recruited an Assistant Warden (on a 2-year contract) to focus on outreach work and she commenced employment on 1st January 2020 (AP3). On 23rd March the first lockdown was announced and our project was inevitably affected in a number of ways. There was still some minor work to be carried out on the site and this had to be fitted in when possible later in the year or even in 2021. The official opening had to be postponed and the hides and our field centre were kept closed until late in 2021.

Fortunately, our Warden and Assistant Warden (AW) were both living in the field centre so were able to continue at work throughout. However, conventional outreach work was not going to be possible, so in the first place the AW spent time familiarising herself with our recording area and the wildlife it supports. She began to develop online activities for children and, whenever opportunities presented themselves, open-air activities such as school holiday clubs. More conventional work with young people and other groups was unable to commence properly until well into 2021. This was now dynamically supported by a former head teacher, who had joined as a volunteer through one of our workshops and had subsequently become a trustee. By the end of the year a strong education team numbering 16 people had been established, comprising staff, trustees and 8 dedicated new volunteers. We are confident that this work will go on from strength to strength.

The outreach and education work implemented by the AW is fully detailed in her comprehensive report that she prepared before leaving at the end of 2021 (see Appendix II). A replacement AW was recruited to start in the current year and the opportunity was taken to divide the outreach and education role between the AW and a new part-time Seasonal Education Officer who has recently been appointed. This will enable the AW to spend time assisting with the recording and monitoring work of the Observatory.

Our successes and failures associated with the project are detailed more fully in the subsequent sections.

Analysis of Outcomes

This section sets out the outcomes achieved by the project and compares them with the proposals contained in our application form. Frequent reference is made to the Approved Purposes and these are referred to as AP1 to AP10 for convenience. The numbering refers to the order in which they were set out in your Grant Award Letter and the Completion Report.

HERITAGE WILL BE IN BETTER CONDITION. As planned, the land was purchased (AP2) and works carried out to enhance and extend the existing scrape and improve the land beyond for breeding birds and other wildlife. This included erecting a breeding box for Barn Owls. This was not in our original plans but, on the other hand, we decided not to proceed with a Sand Martin bank because attempts to lure birds to the site using recordings during 2020 and 2021 were unsuccessful (AP5). A second, fully accessible hide was installed (AP5) and the existing one was refurbished. New, wheelchair-friendly paths were laid, outdoor seating installed and dedicated parking areas were created for users with disabilities. Site plans and photographs are attached to the Completion Report showing the site before, during and after development.

In October 2019, once the main works on the site had been completed (deepening, extending and varying the existing scrape), Observatory members were invited to join one of a series of guided walks to view the improvements that had been carried out. They were offered the opportunity to complete comment cards on the changes made and these can be seen in Appendix III.

The benefits for wildlife, including biodiversity, will not be fully realised until well beyond the life of the project as the site continues to mature. Nevertheless, monitoring to date has already demonstrated some significant improvements. These are detailed in a wildlife evaluation report written by the Warden and attached as Appendix IV.

A conservation plan has been drawn up (Appendix V) and is being implemented.

HERITAGE WILL BE BETTER INTERPRETED AND EXPLAINED. Interpretation boards have been installed in both hides and an audio post has been set close to the path between them (AP10). A survey of users was conducted towards the end of the project to compare with the baseline one taken in 2018 (see Appendix VI). The number of people visiting and completing this was significantly lower

than in 2018, unsurprising given that coronavirus infection rates have continued at high levels. However, it does demonstrate the continuing loyalty of our members and that the improvements we have carried out are quite clearly reflected in the responses.

Permanent information boards have been installed at the Restharrow site and the Centre. These acknowledge the funding from the Lottery and, as appropriate, the other funders. The information held on these boards is very similar to that carried on the leaflets that we have available for visitors. People are encouraged to photograph these to save paper (and printing costs!). Also, our website has been enhanced with upgraded maps and information and more internal links.

A series of 10 leaflets has been developed showing walking routes in the general area and identifying the wildlife that might be expected at various times of the year. These sell at 50p each at the Field Study Centre and are proving extremely popular with visitors.

Photographs of the information boards and 2 examples of the walk leaflets are attached in Appendix VII.

We commenced work on identifying volunteers to assist/support visitors to the hides, but this was overtaken by the pandemic and remains to be implemented. Also, a number of the volunteers who meet and greet visitors at the Centre have decided not to continue post-pandemic. We have recently resumed recruitment of volunteers for these roles (AP4).

HERITAGE WILL BE IDENTIFIED/RECORDED. Our procedures for monitoring, recording and analysing wildlife have been reviewed and redesigned where necessary. Our bird data recording is now fully compatible with the national British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) BirdTrack System. Historic data is now almost completely digitised and available on national databases, to partner organisations, researchers, etc. (AP6).

Significant sightings of birds and other taxa are reported daily on our website and on a noticeboard at the Centre. A full analysis of sightings is included in our monthly newsletter to members along with a bird-ringing report and a section on what to look out for over the coming months. An example of our newsletter is attached as Appendix VIII. (It should be noted that although the replacement AW was welcomed therein and the changed role described, no mention was made at that stage of the new role of a Seasonal Education Officer. One has since been appointed and this will ensure that our outreach and educational effort has been strengthened when compared with the last two years).

Our ability to monitor, record and analyse wildlife has been strengthened by the changes to the AW role since 1st January 2022 and by a university student on professional placement since September 2021. We expect to be able to offer and fill further such placements or internships in the future.

PEOPLE WILL HAVE DEVELOPED SKILLS. Staff skills and training needs were audited informally and steps taken to action these (AP7). For much of 2020 and 2021 it was neither practicable nor desirable to seek external training, but our Trustees possess a wide range of skills/experience and were able to provide mentoring where necessary. The AW, in particular, made extensive use of online training, while she was developing online activities and plans/materials for workshops, etc.

The Warden has gained huge experience from being fully involved in the design and implementation of the project. This will surely stand him in good stead in his future career. He has also gained from the opportunity to line-manage other professional staff for the first time. More detail is set out in his report (Appendix IX).

The AW's development is evidenced by the achievements set out in her report (Appendix II) in what was her first full-time job in such a role. She also significantly improved her wildlife monitoring and

identification skills under the Warden's guidance. She chose not to renew her contract beyond 2 years and is now in a more senior role at another wildlife organisation.

Meetings were held with representatives from Mencap and Birding for All (an organisation looking to improve access for people with impaired mobility) to discuss the principles to be applied when creating a fully accessible hide (AP9). We now have an in-house adviser on accessibility and have purchased an all terrain mobility vehicle for loan to visitors. The Mencap groups have produced artwork to decorate the hides. A magazine article arising from an interview with East Kent Mencap is included as Appendix X.

We managed to carry out general training for a group of 15 existing and potential volunteers shortly before the first lockdown. See Appendix XI for feedback. Training for education volunteers has been carried out since then on safeguarding, as necessary. A total of 12 staff and volunteers were given training in First Aid during March 2022.

Our conservation team found new volunteers to help with the project and all have gained skills and/or experience, for example in brushcutting. Some feedback is included in Appendix XII.

Members of the project management group have benefited in various ways. See Appendix XIII.

PEOPLE WILL HAVE LEARNT ABOUT HERITAGE. In spite of the pandemic and associated lockdowns, social distancing, etc., we have achieved great progress on this outcome. A significant number of schools and other groups were contacted as soon as practicable (AP8) and a total of 71 events were organised, mainly for young people, and these attracted a total of 3,279 participants, mostly during 2021. 10 online activities, mostly during 2020, attracted a total of 22,505 participants.

Examples of feedback from teachers/leaders included: "The migration game was fantastic, and all the children could recall things they had learned. They loved the walk we went on, and enjoyed using the binoculars." "In all 3 workshops the children were engaged as they were pitched at exactly the right level and conducted in a very professional, entertaining manner." "It gave them new information and built on things we had already covered in class." "I would recommend it. I have spoken positively about it to others already." "Repetition of each bird identified across a range of activities helped everyone to learn and remember their features. This is a key part of the Cubs Naturalist badge too."

The above is fully detailed in the AW's report, which covers the period 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2021 (Appendix II). Also attached, as Appendix XIV is a full evaluation of the Holiday Nature Club, which was organised for vulnerable children early in the pandemic (Summer 2020).

A report by the new AW, which discusses the education work continuing to the end of the funded project and beyond, is attached as Appendix XV and a report/thank you from a Young Birder as Appendix XVI.

Many of our regular learning activities had to be curtailed or strictly limited during 2021 and 2022. In particular, our weekly programmes of classes and lectures in the Centre during the autumn and winter months were unable to go ahead. However, we replaced these with Zoom sessions organised and led by one of our Trustees, with the AW's assistance. These proved to be a big success attracting as many as 100 participants on more than one occasion. An unexpected benefit was that, although the fees were modest, the totals raised were very significant due to the numbers participating. These sessions also, unexpectedly, led to two people joining our bird-ringing volunteers. Examples of unsolicited feedback from these sessions are attached as Appendix XVII.

Other learning opportunities that we were able to offer during the project included: conservation work (see above and Appendix XII), a professional placement (Appendix XVIII), work experience, live-

streamed moth evenings, walks organised and led by the Warden to view Dainty Damselflies on the only publicly accessible site in the UK and adjacent to our Restharrow Scrape site.

PEOPLE WILL HAVE VOLUNTEERED TIME. Many hundreds of hours have been committed to the project in the form of planning and oversight meetings, and implementation through the work of the conservation team, oversight of finances, etc. New on-going opportunities for volunteers have been created in the hides, the conservation team and the education team (AP4). A lot of emphasis was placed on education volunteering due to the need to support the events arising from our outreach work. Several new volunteers joined the conservation team during 2019 to help with the project. However, it was not practicable to recruit volunteers to work in conservation or the hides during most of the past two years. Moreover, we now have to rebuild our team of 'meet and greet' volunteers at the Centre. We see volunteer recruitment as a priority task during 2022.

OUR ORGANISATION WILL BE MORE RESILIENT. In spite of some of our regular activities that generate income being curtailed owing to the pandemic, we have reached the end of the project in a relatively sound position, financially. Contributory factors have included the end of lease payments for the wildlife site, emergency grants by the District Council linked to the pandemic, the lease of office space by the RSPB for the warden of a neighbouring reserve, the success of our Zoom sessions and bequests (possibly encouraged by the project's publicity).

This has enabled us to continue funding an Assistant Warden and recruit a Seasonal Education Officer, as above. Moreover, student internships/placements look like becoming a permanent feature in the future. We now have a strong education team able to carry this work forward, but we have work to do on filling other volunteer roles.

It has not been possible to welcome visitors during most of the pandemic, because the Centre and hides remained closed until late in 2021. This had a knock-on effect on our membership as many of these are recruited following on from a visit to the Centre. The number of members fell from 682 in 2019 to 638 in 2021. However, with both sites now re-opened we are seeing signs of visitor numbers beginning to pick up and membership has bounced back to 660. Children's activities, university visits, etc. are already showing signs of engaging people beyond the immediate activity.

Conclusions

Overall, we regard our project as having been a major success. The wildlife site has been acquired and improved as planned and is already reaping rewards for both wildlife and users. An excellent start has been made on our outreach work, in spite of the difficulties imposed by coronavirus. Our finances remain strong enough to continue the work carried out by the previous AW and, indeed, appoint an additional staff member. This further strengthens our staff team and demonstrates our commitment to the outreach and education work commenced during the project. However, the 2-year coronavirus hiatus has had some negative impacts that will take time to overcome. A number of members have lost touch with us and not renewed their membership and recruiting new members was difficult if not impossible while our facilities were closed. Also, some volunteers have left us and finding new ones is going to take time although we have made an excellent start with our education team.

In summary, we have made progress on all of the outcomes that we selected and SBBOT is now in a good position to make further progress in the years ahead. Those areas where we made less progress than we originally hoped were the ones that were most heavily impacted by the pandemic. We are confident that we will be able to make up ground in these areas over the next year or two now that coronavirus is less of an issue.

Much the same applies to the Approved Purposes. Some of these, such as acknowledging Lottery funding (AP1), were achieved in full. Others, particularly hide volunteer recruitment (AP4), were inevitably set back by the pandemic. The staff skills audit and training (AP7) had to be adapted to the

changed circumstances, but we are confident that staff did not lose out as a result and future training is now being planned and budgeted for.

We were pleased to complete the project at close to budget overall although, as will be seen from the Completion Report, there were significant variations under some headings, notably the cost of the new hide. In part, these variations were due to us not spending money on items that were affected by the pandemic, such as staff and volunteer travel. Regarding the hide, we were unable to spend as much time on this while developing the budget as we would have liked, owing to time pressure from the site's vendors. It will be seen from our application that they were seeking completion of the sale by Spring 2019 and it was essential that we submit the application when we did. It was only when the project was underway that we were able to fully consider the design implications (and hence cost) of providing the level of accessibility that we considered essential. Your email of April 12th 2022 regarding the reallocations within the budget refers: "we agree to your request, as it is in keeping with the spirit and outcomes of the project overall. The proposals will clearly help the site to become more accessible to visitors, as well as ensure the outcomes of the project are sustained long-term."

Appendices

- I. Report on Volunteer Days
- II. AW's Outcomes Report
- III. Members' Comments on the Project so far, as at October 2019
- IV. Wildlife Evaluation Report
- V. Conservation Plan
- VI. Analysis of User Surveys
- VII. Photo(s) of information boards and 2 examples of walk leaflets
- VIII. SBBOT BayNews (Newsletter) January 2022
- IX. Warden's Evaluation Report
- X. Sandwich Community Magazine: Birdwatching with East Kent Mencap
- XI. Volunteer Training Day Feedback
- XII. Conservation Team Feedback
- XIII. Project Management Group Feedback
- XIV. Report on Holiday Nature Club
- XV. Report by New AW
- XVI. Young Birder's Report
- XVII. Feedback from Zoom Sessions
- XVIII. Professional Placement's Report