

Getting help for a conservation project

Boundary Brook Nature Park was created on a hectare of, what was once, derelict allotments in the heart of East Oxford. It started in 1990 when Oxford Urban Wildlife Group was given permission by Oxford City Council to turn a lesser-used part of the allotment land into a Nature Park. The Council fenced it off and charged a peppercorn rent. It is now a valuable mosaic of diverse habitats ranging from rapidly maturing native woodland and hay meadow to a demonstration wildlife garden and organic kitchen garden. The large pond and marsh area regularly attract amphibians, dragonflies and birds such as kingfishers and heron and, one year, a bittern came during the frog-mating season. The park has thrived, receiving many awards, and used extensively by school and leisure groups as well as attracting crowds on Open Days which are held at all seasons of the year. Now the group is in the process of acquiring more land surrounding the original park to make even more habitats such as a reed bed, coppices and woodland with glades. All this obviously involved a lot of hard work. How was it done?

Launching the project

Originally we asked many conservation specialists including BBOWT, the City Countryside Rangers, Pond Action and experts among the members of our group. Initial clearance and planting was done during well-publicised events which attracted local residents, our members and their friends. Children came armed with plastic buckets and spades and worked enthusiastically alongside the grown-ups. We applied for grants to obtain a collection of tools and to provide a shed to keep them in. Grants also provided money for hiring a local firm with a JCB to excavate the large pond and marsh area. Once the initial high-profile events such as site clearance, woodland planting, preparation of wildlife garden and hedge planting had been completed, day-to-day management was carried out mainly during fortnightly work parties when a small group of our members would improve paths, mow the hay meadow, tend the areas demonstrating what people could do in their own gardens. Gradually we added refinements, as we could afford them: an ambitious bird feeder, hedgehog, bird, bee and ladybird boxes and more recently an information centre, permanent notice boards and a bird hide.

Outside help

Heavier and larger scale tasks are carried out at intervals by Oxford Conservation Volunteers. Sage, a group of Christians from a number of Oxford churches with a particular concern for the environment, come to help two to three times a year, usually just before Open Days in case we need any tidying up or special work done to make the site ready for the visiting public. More recently BTCV, who have been very helpful in giving advice, both in connection with using grant money and in the running of the group, came to the Park to run a hedge-laying course. We benefited by having an overgrown hedge laid to professional standards and as several of our members took the course, we now have “home-grown” hedge-layers in the group. A willow-weaving day run by a professional weaver was also popular with

both members and visitors and we now have some small willow sculptures, willow plant supports and a neat woven fence by the wildlife garden. Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) have put us in touch with volunteers who wanted to do conservation work. Two in particular have been a wonderful addition to regular work parties and have come in at other times to continue with projects. OCVA also liaise with companies who want to do a voluntary task as a group activity. In the past we have had work parties from a Scout Group, Young Farmers Club, a school group getting experience in conservation work after their exams and a Duke of Edinburgh's Award participant.

Although we have a core group of knowledgeable, hard-working members, we could not have achieved this without all the valuable physical help we have received from outside volunteers and also we were able to buy the plants, tools and raw materials we needed with funding from generous grants from Oxford City Council, Lottery money and numerous grants from other organisations.