



Case study: Owlthorpe Fields Action Group

Name of project or group

Owlthorpe Fields Action Group. Case study by Sandra Fretwell-Smith, March 2022

What actions for nature did your group want to take and why?

The land at Owlthorpe Fields had previously been arable fields but had been left to rewild for 20+ years. As a result the biodiversity had increased enormously. However, the council put the land up for sale for housing development. OAG, and the local community, recognising the importance of the land for nature recovery, climate crisis mitigation, mental and physical health, set out to protect the area by recording as much as the flora and fauna on site that we could manage prior to the planning decision. The hope was that the non-monetary value of the land would be recognised by those holding the power to make a positive step towards tackling the nature and climate emergency.



Photo credit: Philip Jackson

What resources or support did you use?

In terms of equipment we either used our mobiles for photography or a camera. We also had a number of trail cameras for recording wildlife remotely. We created a project using an app called iNaturalist in order to record all our data very easily in one place. However, having made contact with the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust we were directed towards the Nature Counts recording system, which feeds into the NBN (National Biodiversity Network), a database accessed by Ecologists nationwide. OAG now has a dedicated area on the Nature Counts database so all our data is reliably stored in one place.



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How did you empower or involve others?

We held a community bioblitz event, which we advertised via social media and a group update newsletter. On a lovely sunny day in June, families walked the fields with their mobiles and cameras having a lovely day looking at the flora and fauna in much more detail than they had ever considered before.

It also inspired us to join forces with other community groups to form Nature Recovery Sheffield with the goal of encouraging the citizens and businesses of Sheffield to help fight the massive decline in biodiversity.

How did it make you feel?

We felt we were taking a positive step to protect the biodiversity of the area. We were particularly focussed on protecting it for the wildlife that lived on the fields or used it for hunting/foraging. We also felt we were taking a stand for the community, for their mental and physical health. We were the voice of both the wildlife and the community.

“It made us feel about 10 years old again, looking at the world around us in much more detail than ever before and discovering something new almost daily.”

What changes have there been as a result of your actions?

Sadly planning permission was granted for one of the areas we were trying to protect. However, the council did remove the other 2 sites from sale. We are now fighting to have these removed from the local plan. We also commissioned a professional habitat survey and the land was assessed against the criteria for designation as a Local Wildlife Site. All 3 of the sites meet the criteria and we are pushing to have the remaining 2 undeveloped sites designated as LWS.

Have you had any memorable nature encounters while doing this?

Three in particular spring to mind. The first was recording a badger on the trail camera for the first time. It was so exciting finally seeing the little stripey face on the video. We knew they were around but obviously we never see them as they are so elusive.

The second is seeing the barn owl that nests nearby, flying over the field having caught a juicy rat for its owlets on one of the fields. We see him/her regularly during the breeding season, they are local celebrities.



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Third is seeing woodcocks within the fields. Sadly, I've never managed to get a photo as you only know they are there when you accidentally disturb them in the grassland.



Photo credit: Philip Jackson

How have your actions been shared or inspired others?

Our actions have been shared far and wide on social media, particularly Twitter. Twitter enables us to link up with a huge network of other campaign groups fighting other irresponsible developments. It also enables us to make contact with local and national conservation organisations and individuals, many of these contacts gave us much needed advice during this campaign. In terms of sharing our observations, we have an Instagram page where we share images of some of our favourite observations. We also create a yearly calendar with photographs our observers have taken throughout the year. These are very popular with our supporters.

What's next?

We are continuing to record as much as of the flora and fauna possible on the remaining 2 areas of grassland and are pushing for the land to be designated as Local Wildlife Sites. We are also lobbying the council trying to get the remaining land removed from the New Sheffield Local plan. We are also carefully watching the progress of the development to ensure that the surrounding wildlife is protected as much as reasonably possible during the construction phase.



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Photo credit: Lydia Fretwell-Smith



Photo Credit: Sandra Fretwell-Smith



Photo Credit: Claire Baker