

Wimbledon and Putney Commons  
Annual Conservation Report 2019/20



*The Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common (May 2019)*

## Summary

1. **Introduction** – The Annual Conservation Report for 2019/20 provides a summary of the conservation, volunteering and public events activities that have occurred on Wimbledon and Putney Commons from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. (Page 5)
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3. **Heathland Management** – According to the National Vegetation Survey and Habitat Assessment that was carried out on the Commons in 2016, only 19.99 hectares of heathland remains on the Commons. It was reported that all heathland areas on the Commons were species poor versions of the communities they are assigned to. (Page 7)
4. **Heathland Management** – At an operational level, the Commons' heathland is managed under the guidance of a Countryside Stewardship agreement with Natural England. At the current time, the Commons' heathland and the SSSI as a whole has been categorised by Natural England as '*unfavourable recovering*'. This means that while not all units are fully conserved, all of the necessary management mechanisms are in place to maintain and improve the site. (Page 8)
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13. **Woodland Management** – During the second year of the Commons' involvement with the current woodland Countryside Stewardship agreement, the main woodland activities that were carried out included Hazel coppicing, cutting back Holly regeneration, pond work, tree safety work, control of non-native invasive species and the provision of public information. (Page 18)
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25. **Putney Lower Common** – During 2019, two separate Hedgehog surveys were carried out on Putney Lower Common. (Page 33)
26. **Putney Lower Common** - In September 2019, Putney Lower Common was presented with a Gold Award at the annual London in Bloom Awards Ceremony. Out of a total score of 200 points, Putney Lower Common was awarded 179 points which was only four points less than the winner of the London Common of the year: Wimbledon Common. (Page 35)
27. **Volunteering on the Commons** – From 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, a total of 3908 voluntary hours were provided on the Commons. Volunteering activities included litter picking, wildlife recording, conservation activities, helping with events, leading walks and administration. (Page 36)
28. **Volunteering on the Commons** – Throughout the year, members of the Commons' Wildlife and Conservation Forum devote many hours on the Commons collecting wildlife data and helping to lead a variety of walks, talks and workshops. (Page 37)
29. **Public Information** – To ensure that people are kept up to date keep with events on the Commons, throughout the year, public notices are displayed on site, the Commons' website, Facebook and Twitter pages are kept updated and a variety of newsletters are circulated to people who have subscribed to the Commons' mailing list. (Page 38)
30. **Public Events** – As part of the Commons' annual programme of walks and talks, one of the regular events that has remained very popular throughout the year has been the Commons' fortnightly Walking for Health events. (Page 39)

# Wimbledon and Putney Commons

## Annual Conservation Report 2019/20

### Introduction

The Annual Conservation Report for 2019/20 provides a summary of the conservation activities that have been carried out on Wimbledon and Putney Commons from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. Written by the Commons' Conservation and Engagement Officer, this report also provides details of the wide range of volunteering activities and public engagement events that have taken place on the Commons during the year.



*Scrub bashing along Ladies Mile during January 2020*

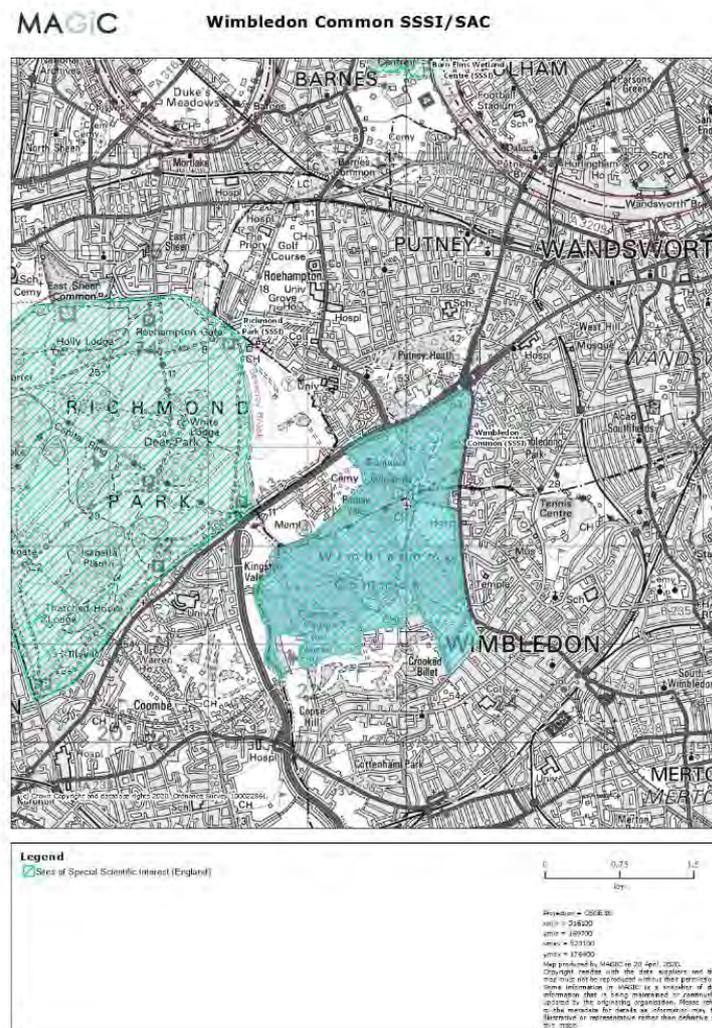
### Heathland Management:

Lowland heathland is comprised of a mosaic of habitats that are found on impoverished, acidic soils which occur in areas with mild temperatures and regular rainfall. The landscape is characteristically open and dominated by low growing vegetation such as Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Common gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and various different types of grass. Having once been a relatively widespread lowland habitat, since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the effects of agricultural intensification, afforestation, urbanisation and a decline in traditional heathland management

techniques has resulted in a much reduced and fragmented coverage of this valuable habitat across the United Kingdom. Supporting a wide range of important plant, invertebrate, bird and reptile species, Lowland heathland is a very important landscape for biodiversity conservation and as such it is classified as a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat.

As a result of the Lowland heathland that is found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, since 1958, 364.5 hectares (856 acres) out of the total coverage of 461 hectares (1140 acres) that make up Wimbledon and Putney Commons has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In 1986 the same area of land was also designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Both the SSSI and SAC designations are assigned to areas of land that are considered to be valuable in terms of the flora, fauna, physiological or geographical features that can be found on them and as a result these areas are afforded a high level of legal protection.



*The Wimbledon Common SSSI/SAC includes all of the land apart from the Richardson Evans Memorial Playing Fields that is registered to the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators and is located south of the A3. Part of the same SSSI/SAC also extends into an area of ground that forms part of the Royal Wimbledon Golf Course.*

In terms of the heathland found on Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, according to the National Vegetation Survey and Habitat Assessment (NVC) that was carried out by ecological consultants (Penny Anderson Associates) in 2016, only 19.99 hectares of this valuable habitat now remains on the Commons. Unfortunately, it was reported that all heathland areas on the Commons' were species poor versions of the communities they are assigned to and it was suggested that this was almost certainly related to the high level of human impact on the habitats over time due to their location in such an urban setting.

With the Commons' remaining areas of heathland spread across the plateau of Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, from 2006 to 2016, a Higher- Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement with Natural England provided the framework for the management of these sites. Since 2018, this work has continued under the management of a Countryside Stewardship (CS) agreement which is also administered by Natural England.

Lowland heathland is an extremely dynamic habitat which is constantly under threat. In a largely natural or rural setting, the most significant threat to Lowland heathland is the issue of woodland succession which means that if the correct management or use of heathland ceases or is significantly reduced, woodland will soon begin to take over. In the case of the heathland on the Wimbledon Common SSSI/SAC, given the largely urban setting of this site, the pressures on this valuable habitat significantly increase to include issues such as recreational disturbance, arson, a high level of dog fouling and air pollution. As a result, the successful management of the Commons' heathland is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of our overall programme of habitat management.



*Heathland fire on Wimbledon Common*

At an operational level, over the duration of the Commons' HLS and CS agreements, the management of Lowland heathland on the Commons has included the following tasks:

- The control and management of Birch, Oak and other scrub species by cutting and stump treatment.
- Rotational cutting to maintain a varied heathland vegetation structure.
- The creation of bare ground sites through the scraping back of turves.
- The maintenance of a full range of age classes of Gorse by cutting and removing arisings.
- The management of dense bracken stands and deep bracken litter layers by rotational cutting, bruising or spraying.
- The control of non-native species.
- The control of pernicious weeds such as Creeping thistle, Common ragwort and Hogweed by topping or spot spraying.
- The reduction of accumulated nutrients to expose seed banks
- The maintenance of fire breaks.

Despite the observations that were presented by the 2016 NVC report which stated that the Commons' heathland was generally species poor, over the past two decades, a great deal of work has been carried out to maintain and improve this valuable habitat.

While there is still a long way to go, at the current time, the Commons' heathland and the SSSI as a whole has been categorised as unfavourable recovering which means that while all units are not yet fully conserved, all of the necessary management mechanisms are in place to so.



*All SSSI land is assessed against the six 'conditions' described below. All sites are divided into units (although some only have one). Each unit is assessed separately and this can often result in a mix of Favourable, Unfavourable and Destroyed units across one SSSI. Each unit should be assessed at least every six years.*

## Condition assessments for SSSI's

***Favourable*** - The SSSI is being adequately conserved and is meeting its 'objectives'.

***Unfavourable recovering*** - Often known simply as 'recovering', SSSI units are not yet fully conserved but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the SSSI will reach favourable condition in time.

***Unfavourable no change*** - The special interest of the SSSI unit is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to the site management or external pressures. The longer the SSSI unit remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.

***Unfavourable declining*** - The special interest of the SSSI unit is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to site management or external pressures. The site condition is becoming progressively worse.

***Part destroyed*** - Lasting damage has occurred to part of the special conservation interest of an SSSI unit, such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover. Conservation work may be needed on the residual interest of the land.

***Destroyed*** - Lasting damage has occurred to all the special conservation interest of the SSSI unit, such that it has been irretrievably lost. This land will never recover.

Information taken from Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – condition assessment for SSSI's

From 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, the main aspects of heathland management that were carried out on the Commons' included Gorse cutting, Heather cutting, the mechanical control of Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), control of non-native species, maintenance of fire breaks, scrub control and the removal of large trees on Putney Heath.

While all of the mechanical work that was required on the heathland was carried out by the Commons' full time Maintenance Team, the routine activity of cutting back invasive saplings on the heathland is carried out by the Commons' stalwart group of volunteers. Including groups from local schools and the Commons' Saturday morning Scrub Bashers, between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, an incredible 568 voluntary hours were provided to help protect the Commons heathland.

Helping to preserve the open aspect which is both synonymous with heathland in general and an important part of the historical landscape of the Commons as a whole, regular volunteer 'scrub bashing' sessions have not only been invaluable at keeping invasive scrub at bay but they are also a great way of providing local people with the opportunity to have direct involvement in helping to look after the Commons.



*Saturday morning scrub bashers at work near the northern section of Ladies Mile*

Apart from the regular cutting back of invasive scrub on the heathland, perhaps the most dramatic heathland operation that was carried out on the Commons' between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 was the thinning of trees on an area of heathland to the immediate north of Jubilee Path on Putney Heath.

In accordance with the Commons' current CS agreement with Natural England, there is a requirement to carry out tree thinning work around a number of areas on the heathland which will help to either increase the total area of open heathland on the Commons or provide a more natural edge to the surrounding woodland. During December 2019 and the beginning of January 2020, approximately 5961 square metres of woodland consisting mainly of Silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) was significantly reduced of tree cover by the Commons' Maintenance Team. As a result of this work, a large area of ground has been re-connected with the surrounding heathland and work will be carried out in the future to ensure that Bracken, Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) and saplings are kept in check.



*The Commons Maintenance Team at work on heathland near Jubilee Path*

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, work on the Commons' heathland will continue to follow the guidelines provided by our current Natural England CS agreement. As ever, volunteer groups will hopefully continue cutting back saplings around the heathland, scallops will be created by the Commons' Maintenance Team along the various parts of the woodland edge which surrounds the heathland and it is hoped that further work to create areas of bare ground on Putney Heath and around the edge of the Wimbledon Common golf course will be agreed upon.



*Bare ground created along the edge of the Wimbledon Common golf course.*

## **Acid Grassland Management**

Occurring on nutrient poor, free draining soils with a pH from 4 to 5.5, acid grassland is an essential part of the habitat mosaic that is found on heathlands. Supporting a wide range of species including invertebrates, reptiles, birds and flowering plants, this increasingly rare habitat is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan habitat and as such it is a top priority for wildlife conservation nationally.

On Wimbledon and Putney Commons, there are currently three areas of acid grassland that are managed under the guidance of the Commons' Natural England, CS agreement. These areas include The Plain, the area of grassland immediately south of Tibbet's Corner and a small area of grassland located close to the southern end of Centre Path. While all three areas of acid grassland undergo an annual programme of work where contractors cut and remove vegetation from the site, it is the largest of the three areas, The Plain, which is subject to the most intensive programme of management. With an overall area of 11.7 hectares, between 1 March and 31 July, 9.7 hectares of this site are designated as a Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) Protection Area where visitors to the Commons are asked to keep dogs on lead, keep to mown paths and not fly kites near the restricted area.

As part of this work, 30 public notices are positioned around the perimeter of the Skylark Protection Area and during late spring, three paths are mown by the Commons' Maintenance Team across the area to allow visitors to cross the site.



*Line of public notices on The Plain*



*Skylark Protection Area public notice on The Plain*

From observations made during seven visits to monitor the level of disturbance on The Plain, it was noted that during April and May 2019, the majority of visitors that used this area did so while accompanied by their dogs and sadly, most of the dogs were off lead and allowed to roam freely.

Despite the presence of 30 public notices around the area and regular mounted patrols by the Commons' Keepers, it was noted that very few people appeared to read the notices but when physically approached and informed about the restrictions, all but a very small number of individuals were very cooperative and politely agreed to put their dogs back on lead. With approximately seven months of the year when visitors to the Commons are allowed to roam freely across The Plain with very few restrictions, it appeared that by the beginning of March when the restrictions were back in place, people have simply forgotten about what is expected from them.



*Ensuring The Plain is protected during the important spring and summer months is an ongoing task which is helped by the regular presence of the Commons' Mounted Keepers.*

In addition to the cut and collect work that is carried out by contractors during the beginning of August and the ongoing patrolling of the site, towards the end of 2019, ground staff from the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club agreed to cut and collect mature Heather from the north east corner of The Plain. Carried out as part of the initial planned phase of creating new Heather beds around the edge of the Wimbledon Common Golf Course, cutting mature Heather on The Plain has helped to create an improved mosaic of different ages of this dwarf shrub across the site.

Using a specialist cutting machine, Heather was cut to a height slightly in excess of 2.5 cm to avoid exposing frost sensitive dormant buds and all cut materials were removed from site to prevent a litter matt from developing over new Heather growth. By using a cut and collect system of Heather mowing, we have been able to create a patchiness of Heather regeneration that will result in small scale variations in structure across the site.



*During 2019, staff and machinery from the Royal Wimbledon Golf Club cut and collected mature Heather from The Plain*

## **Additional Grassland restoration work**

As part of the Commons' 2016, Natural England, CS application process, soil samples were collected from 13 of the Commons' various grassland sites to determine whether they were suitable for inclusion in the final CS agreement. In total, 325 soil samples were collected and sent off to Natural England's soil laboratory for analysis. Unfortunately, the results from the soil sampling resulted in only three areas of the Commons being included in the current CS agreement with all other areas found to be too high in nutrients for inclusion.

Without the current option of grazing which is generally considered to be the most beneficial tool for the management for acid grassland, one alternative method of reversing the problem of high nutrient levels is to carry out a programme of cut and collect where vegetation from a small number of sites could be cut and removed in order to reduce excess nutrients.

Following advice from Natural England, two small grassland sites were initially selected and using a Rytech tractor mounted mower, during 2018, a programme of cut collect was carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team on one site near Cross Road Cottage (Putney Heath) and on another area of grassland near the Southern Pound (Wimbledon Common). During 2019, this work was carried out for a second year and an additional area which is close to the Roehampton War Memorial was added to the list. It is anticipated that, in time, this work will help to improve these areas as acid grassland sites that are of a suitable quality for inclusion in any future Natural England, CS agreements. During the beginning of 2020, a tractor mounted mower was purchased by the Commons. This machine will provide the Commons' Maintenance Team with added flexibility in carrying out any future cut and collect work that is required across the site.



*Hired tractor and flail collector photographed on grassland near Telegraph Road during August 2019*

## Woodland Management

Covering an area of 291 hectares (649 acres), woodland is the largest habitat type across the whole area of Wimbledon and Putney Commons. As described in the Commons' 2016 NVC survey, the Commons' woodland is largely categorised as oak-bracken-bramble woodland-typical community (W10, *Quercus robur-pteridium aquilinum-Rus fruticose*) and at present all of the woodland found within the Wimbledon Common SSSI is classified as *unfavourable-recovering*.

To help manage the woodland on Wimbledon and Putney Commons, all work is carried out under the guidance of a five-year Countryside Stewardship agreement (2018 to 2022) that has been agreed by the Forestry Commission, Natural England and the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators.

Lasting for a period of five years, the FC's, CS agreement involves the following objectives:

- To create a more varied range of tree age to ensure good succession
- To maintain and enhance Hazel coppice
- To reduce the dominance of Holly in the understorey
- To increase open areas within woodland
- To remove invasive non-native species
- To retain non-intervention areas
- To improve wetland areas and ponds
- To encourage a wider range of native species
- To maintain an appropriate and effective health and safety regime
- To maintain and improve amenity
- To obtain grants where available to further objectives.
- To continue to encourage the use of the Commons for recreational and educational purposes.

During the second year of the Commons' involvement with the Forestry Commission, CS agreement, the main woodland activities that were carried out included Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) coppicing, cutting back of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) regeneration, pond work, chemical treatment of Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*), tree safety work, the provision of deadwood habitats and the provision of public information. While all tree safety operations and chemical work was carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team, between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, volunteers from the Commons' mid-week Volunteer Estate Team were involved in a number of woodland based activities. These included Hazel coppicing in the woodland below Stag Bog and cutting back Holly regrowth in the woodland near Warren Farm Ride.

In accordance with the Commons' Forestry Commission, CS agreement, all of the materials that were cut back during the groups Hazel coppicing activities were kept on site and allowed to undergo a natural process of decay which is of vital importance to the Commons wide variety of flora and fauna.



*Volunteers from the Commons' mid-week Estate Team Hazel coppicing near Upper Gravelly Ride.*

## Pond Management

Over the past few years, pond management has become an increasingly important part of the habitat work that is carried out on the Commons. Varying in size, depth and setting, there are currently nine ponds located around Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath all of which are extremely important for the diversity of wildlife they attract.

Having been created by damming up wet areas of the Commons or through the flooding of old gravel pits, each of the nine ponds has a specific set of management objectives that are required to ensure the ongoing protection of these special sites. Located within the surroundings of a largely urban landscape, all of the Commons' ponds are exposed to ongoing pressures such as pollution, recreational damage and the introduction of non-native invasive flora and fauna.



*Evidence of additional unwanted pressure on the Commons ponds from invasive non-native species... Terrapin (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) on Queensmere.*

To help tackle some of these threats, during 2018, special attention was focused on 7 Post Pond and Curling Pond as both of these areas had become particularly blighted by non-native invasive aquatic plant species which included Parrot's Feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*) and more specifically New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*).

While the management of invasive non-native aquatic flora and fauna is something that will remain part of the ongoing management of the Commons' ponds, during 2019, the most significant pond work that was carried out on the Commons was at Scio Pond which is the only one of the Commons' ponds which is north of the A3.

Following a visit to four of the Commons' ponds by members of the Commons' Wildlife and Conservation Forum in July 2019, it was agreed that selective tree thinning around the edge of Scio Pond and Curling Pond would be beneficial in these areas. The effects of selective tree thinning would be to help reduce the amount of leaf fall entering the pond, increase the amount of light that reaches the water and to also reduce the amount of water that is taken out of the ponds by the surrounding trees.



*Scio Pond photographed during the beginning of 2020*

Removing mainly Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and Holly from around the edge of Scio pond, small pockets of shade were also maintained around certain sections of the pond to provide a shelter for wildlife that prefer or require this type of habitat.

Unfortunately, as a result of conflicting pressures upon the Commons workforce, tree thinning work around Curling Pond was not carried out during 2019 but it is anticipated that this work will be completed during the autumn/winter period of 2020. This work will involve thinning non-native Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) from the edge of the pond and hopefully, in time, replacing some of these trees with smaller native tree species that will be far more attractive to wildlife and less detrimental to the pond as a whole.



*Curling Pond March 2020*

In addition to the tree thinning work carried out around Scio Pond, other pond work carried out between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 included the refurbishment of the floating platforms on Queensmere, cutting back low lying Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) along the northern edge of Queensmere and enforcing the Commons' dogs on lead policy which is in place from 1 April to 31 August every year.

This policy is in place to help protect the Commons' breeding waterfowl and the ponds that are included are Bluegate Gravel Pit, Hookhamslade Pond, 7 Post Pond, Kingmere and Queensmere. As a result of multiple reports that dogs were harassing ducklings and generally disturbing the waterfowl in Rushmere, public notices asking dog walkers to keep their dogs under control were positioned around Rushmere on 1 May 2019. Rushmere will be included in all future campaigns that require dog walkers to keep their dogs out of the Commons' ponds.



*Rushmere - March 2020*

### **Beverley Brook (Wimbledon Common)**

Carried out in partnership with the South East Rivers Trust (SERT), Wimbledon and Putney Commons Conservators and Merton Borough Council and funded by the Environment Agency (EA) and Viridor Credits (landfill tax) the first phase of the Wimbledon Common Beverley Brook project was completed during the last week of February 2019.

Involving a programme of work that included tree thinning, the removal of creosote covered tow boarding from either side of the brook and the creation of a number of berms and in-stream modifications, by spring 2019, everything was in place to allow at least one section of the Beverley Brook to return back to being a fully functioning riverine eco-system.



*According to SERT, by the end of February 2019, 'a total of 1.3km of the Beverley Brook had been enhanced with 60 new pieces of large woody material and 63 berms installed. By the end of the project, 2km of creosote covered tow-boarding (bottom right corner of the photograph above) had also been removed which filled eight 20m<sup>3</sup> skips.*

Despite the fact that no major works have been carried out along the Wimbledon Common section of the Beverley Brook over the past 12 months, from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, management of this important part of the Commons has nonetheless been ongoing. Besides the regular updating of public information along the edge of the Beverley Brook, the main activity that has been carried out over the past year has been the ongoing requirement to remove litter from the brook.



*High water levels along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common often result in large amounts of litter being washed downstream and becoming deposited along various parts of the water course. (photograph - June 2019)*

Located downstream from a very busy urban catchment area, the natural setting of the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common has always managed to collect a large amount of litter. While in previous years, this would result in litter becoming dispersed along the entire 2km section of the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common, since the recent addition of large pieces of wood into the watercourse, the result has been that certain areas have become collecting points for all manner of rubbish. Unfortunately, while this has made it much easier to locate and remove the litter, the appearance of road cones, footballs, wooden pallets and even furniture all collected around one site has proved to be quite distressing for some visitors.

While the problem of litter collecting along the Beverley Brook is unlikely to go away, to help prevent it from floating even further downstream and potentially entering the Thames, between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, volunteers from SERT and the Geo-cache community as well WPC staff have carried out regular litter picking sessions where huge amounts of litter have successfully been removed from the brook.

To help support the activities of these groups and keep the Wimbledon Common section of the Beverley Brook even clearer of litter in the future, a new volunteer group will be initiated on the Commons during spring/summer 2020.

Supervised by a member of the WPCC staff, this small group will meet on a monthly basis during the spring, summer and autumn months of the year and they will be provided with all of the equipment that will be needed to litter pick along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common.



*Volunteers from the Geo-cache community litter picking along Beverley Brook on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2019*

## **Bog Management**

One of the very special features of the Wimbledon Common SSSI/SAC is the presence of three spring fed bogs or Valley Mires. These bogs are Ravine Bog, Stag Bog and most notably Farm Bog which is located on the southern boundary of Wimbledon Common and just to the north of Caesar's Camp.

During the past year, the management of bogs on the Commons has been focused on Farm Bog where London Wildlife Trust (LWT) volunteers have cleared invasive scrub from the site and created shallow pools through the removal of Molinia grass tussocks.

In order to help maintain a high- water table on the site which is vital to the ongoing survival of the bog habitat, during February 2020, the Commons' Maintenance Team

also completed a small damming project along the narrow stream which is located just below Farm Bog. In total, three dams were created by the team using 100% recycled plastics and sourced from a British company that specialises in the manufacture of rot and maintenance free construction materials. Providing strong interlocking sections, the final positioning of the dams was determined by the necessity to avoid large tree roots and the need to work around a wide range of building materials that had been left behind and submerged from previous damming projects.

While LWT volunteers will continue to carry out much of the work at Farm Bog, over the course of the next twelve months, it is anticipated that the next bog management project carried out by the WPCC team on the Commons will involve some much needed restoration work at Stag Bog.



*Dams were created below Farm Bog by the Commons Maintenance Team during the beginning of 2020*

## **Management of Invasive Species**

In general, the main invasive species that are actively managed on Wimbledon and Putney Commons include Oak Processionary Moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea*), Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) and New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*).

Records are kept for the management of all of these non-native invasive species and with the exception of the chemical spraying of Oak Processionary Moth, all management work is carried out by full-time members of the WPCC team.

## Oak Processionary Moth (OPM)

OPM is a non-native species of moth that was first introduced to the United Kingdom (Kew, West London) in 2006. Despite the active management of this pest by the Forestry Commission and various landowners, at the current time OPM is established in most of Greater London and in some surrounding counties.

The caterpillars of OPM are pests of Oak trees and present a hazard to human and animal health. Developing tiny hairs which contain an irritating protein called thaumetopoein, contact with the hairs can cause itching skin rashes, eye irritations and in some cases, can result in sore throats and breathing difficulties.

Having been involved with the management of OPM on Wimbledon and Putney Commons since 2011, our annual approach to dealing with this problem focuses on the two key aspects of communications and risk management. In effect, this involves specialist contractors applying a recognised biological control agent (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) to Oak trees in a small number of high footfall areas during May, the positioning of public notices around strategic points of the Commons and the survey and removal of all OPM nests found under a height of two metres from the ground.

### **OPM life Cycle: (Information sourced from the Forestry Commission)**

**Egg Stage** – Eggs are laid from July to early September where each female lays between 100 and 200 eggs on twigs and small branches in the canopy. The first larvae hatch from the eggs in April.

**Larval stage** – OPM larvae can be found from April to June. There are six stages during the caterpillar feeding cycle with caterpillars getting progressively bigger during each stage. As they mature, thousands of short hairs cover the larvae and it is these short hairs that contain the irritant toxin.

**Stages 1-3:** Caterpillars are very small when they hatch, around 2mm long, and are still less than 1cm by the time they reach the third stage.

**Stages 4-6** – Caterpillars spin silken nests and the larvae eventually moult to the pupal stage within those nests. During this phase, larvae may also be seen massing on the trunks and branches of trees and moving in the characteristic processions that give the moth its Common name.

**Adult moths** – Adult moths fly at night from July until early September and they have a wingspan of around 30-32mm.

As expected, 2019 was a very busy year for the staff involved in managing OPM on Wimbledon and Putney Commons. Following the spraying work that was carried out by contractors during the beginning of May, between June and the end of August 2019, the Commons' programme of OPM management continued with a combination of providing public information, surveying and removal work.

Despite public notices being positioned on site throughout the summer period, during 2019, a small number of reports were received from visitors to the Commons concerned that they may have come into contact with OPM while on site. Fortunately, none of the reports that we received were of a very serious nature but as OPM hairs can be blown in the wind or shed by caterpillars when they are threatened or disturbed, contact between visitors to the Commons and OPM, sadly, seems inevitable. During 2020, the Commons' annual OPM management programme will commence with contractors spraying OPM larvae during the beginning of May.



*OPM spraying work being carried out by contractors on Wimbledon Common*

## Japanese knotweed

Japanese knotweed is a fast-growing non-native perennial which produces bamboo-like stems up to a height of 2 metres (approximately 7ft). Under the provisions made within Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it is an offence to allow Japanese knotweed to grow in the wild and therefore, whenever this plant is identified on the Commons, its location is entered into a specific data base and herbicide treatment is carried out as soon as possible.

The most effective method of controlling Japanese knotweed is through the use of glyphosate which is a herbicide that is able to travel through the plant and kill the extensive system of rhizomes. This work is generally carried out by the Commons' Maintenance Team during late summer.

During 2019, there were 21 Japanese knotweed sites located on the Commons, all of which were treated with glyphosate. This was five fewer sites than were dealt with during the previous year.



*Japanese knotweed located along Tibbet's Ride on Putney Heath*

## Himalayan Balsam

Himalayan balsam is a non-native invasive plant species which is listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and therefore it is an offence to plant or allow this species to grow in the wild. Growing rapidly, Himalayan balsam can grow to a height of between two and three metres in one season, spreading quickly and smothering other vegetation beneath it. Affecting wetland area such as river banks, each plant can produce up to 800 seeds which are dropped or fired into the watercourse resulting in the contamination of land downstream.

During 2019, Himalayan balsam was removed from sections of the river bank on Putney Lower Common and significant patches of this plant were also removed from the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common. Wherever Himalayan balsam is found on the Commons, it is removed by hand, pulling it up from the roots and then leaving it to compost away from the watercourse.



*WPCC maintenance operative involved with the removal of Himalayan balsam along the Beverley Brook on Wimbledon Common*

## New Zealand Pigmyweed

Originally found in Australia and New Zealand, New Zealand Pigmyweed is a non-native and highly invasive aquatic plant species that outcompetes native plants by depleting the oxygen levels in water. Listed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, in England and Wales it is an offence to plant or otherwise cause to grow this species in the wild.

On Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath, New Zealand Pigmyweed can be found at 7 Post Pond and Curling Pond and to a lesser extent, is also present around the margins of Rushmere and Kingsmere.

While there was no manual removal of New Zealand Pigmyweed during 2019, regular checks are made of the Commons ponds in order to monitor the spread of this invasive plant species.



*New Zealand Pigmyweed photographed in 7 Post Pond prior to removal work*

## Putney Lower Common

Separated from the main body of the Commons by a distance of approximately one mile, protecting the wildlife and the natural aspect of Putney Lower Common remains a high priority in the overall management of the Commons.

From 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, work carried out on Putney Lower Common included litter picking, grass cutting and meadow management, control of invasive species such as OPM, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam, updating signage, positioning bird boxes, tree safety work and upholding the Commons' Byelaws.



*Trial area on Putney Lower Common – 2019 has been the second consecutive year where cut materials and wildflower seeds cut from the Oasis Academy Meadow have been spread across an area of cut grassland on the main site. In time, it is hoped that wild flowers will start to spread across this largely degraded grassland site.*

While the most of the work on Putney Lower Common is carried out by WPCC staff, during 2019, other important work which has added to our knowledge of this site was carried out by Zoological Society London (ZSL) and SW15 Hedgehogs.

Organised by Jackie Underwood-Hall, the most local of these two groups is the SW15 Hedgehog group which is engaged in a grassroots campaign dedicated to educating the local community about the wildlife and especially the Hedgehogs that live in the local area. Providing talks to local schools and communities, during 2019, the SW15 Hedgehog group also provided a talk at the Commons' annual Bio-blitz in June as well as hosting a family event within the Rangers compound on Putney Lower Common.

Over the past few years, the SW15 Hedgehog group have become a valued friend of the Commons and therefore it was very exciting to see them becoming involved with Hedgehog surveying on Putney Lower Common. With training provided by Dr Nigel Reeve who is a recognised expert in Hedgehog conservation, the group carried out two surveys on the Common which took place towards the end of September and the beginning of October 2019. Despite damp conditions, six Hedgehogs were found over the course of two night time surveys with three Hedgehogs found during each event. Although one of the Hedgehogs that was found during the second event was a re-capture from the first outing, all of the Hedgehogs captured were found to be well fed and in very good health.



*Hedgehogs found during the survey carried out by the SW15 Hedgehog group. All Hedgehogs were handled by Dr Nigel Reeve.*

Following on from the work carried out by ZSL during 2018, from July to September 2019, a second year of camera trap surveys was carried out on Putney Lower Common and Barnes Common. During 2019, the range of this project was also extended to include the nearby areas of Palewell Common, Bank of England Sports Club, Roehampton Golf Club and the London Wetland Centre.

With a dramatic decline in the number of Hedgehogs over the past twenty years, it is thought that there are currently fewer than one million of these creatures left in the United Kingdom.

This represent a 97% fall in numbers from the 30 million Hedgehogs that were estimated in the United Kingdom during the 1950's.

Through a combination of factors which include loss and fragmentation of suitable habitat, intensification of farming, over use of pesticides such as slug pellets and weed killers, over management of parks and gardens, road deaths, increased numbers of predators such as dogs and badgers and climate change, the importance of the ZSL Hedgehog studies cannot be underestimated.

The aim of the 2019 ZSL project was to provide data for both presence and absence, distribution in relation to different habitats and the relative abundance of Hedgehogs in and around the area surrounding Barnes. As a result of the survey, it was found that out of the six sites that were surveyed during 2019, only Putney Lower Common, Barnes Common and the London Wetland Centre were found to support Hedgehogs. Despite the presence of Hedgehogs on these three sites, it was suggested that the Hedgehog populations in these areas may be more vulnerable than previously thought as no Hedgehogs were found in any of the nearby larger greenspaces. In addition to the areas that were surveyed by ZSL during 2019, smaller populations of Hedgehogs were found living in some gardens and allotments nearby to Putney Lower Common and Barnes Common but unfortunately, it is also currently unknown whether Hedgehogs move between these areas.



*Browning Strike Force Pro camera traps used in the surveys. Cameras were enclosed in a metal box and locked to a tree to protect against theft.*

In terms of the management of Putney Lower Common, over the past few years there has been an increasing awareness amongst the WPCC team of the importance of sensitively looking after the site for the needs of all wildlife but perhaps especially Hedgehogs.

During a meeting with Dr Nigel Reeve on Putney Lower Common in April 2019, it was agreed that our current management regime and the range of habitats on the Common were of benefit for Hedgehog conservation. One aspect of the site that could be improved however would be to provide a number of small openings along the cemetery wall which would help Hedgehogs to move from one area to another and hopefully reduce the need for them to cross the nearby road. This has been raised with Wandsworth Borough Council and hopefully something may be done about this before too long.

As with all areas of the Commons, looking after Putney Lower Common is a real team effort which involves the commitment of volunteers and staff from most of the Commons' different departments. In recognition of all of the hard work carried out on this site throughout the year, in September 2019, Putney Lower Common was presented with a Gold Award at the annual London in Bloom Awards Ceremony. Focusing on the key issues of horticultural achievement, environmental responsibility and community participation, the London in Bloom competition is a campaign where communities, residents, businesses, private land owners and London borough councils can work together with the aim of improving the environment and making London a greener and more attractive place to live.

Having been involved with the London in Bloom competition since 2013, Wimbledon Common and Putney Lower Common are now well known and proud supporters of this very special London campaign.

## Gold Award

An exceptionally high standard demonstrated throughout. A consistent approach, which demonstrates both best practice and sustainable effort. Meets all of the judging criteria and objectives of London In Bloom and scores very highly in each section of the judge's criteria. Outstanding – 170-200 points (85% - 100%)

2019 was the third consecutive year that Putney Lower Common had been awarded the Gold Award and like all entries it was marked under eight different categories which include: the welfare of park users, access, facilities, maintenance (including control of litter, graffiti and vandalism), maintenance of hard landscape features, environmental sustainability, conservation and community involvement.

Given the relatively small size of Putney Lower Common, we were very pleased that out of a total score of 200 points, Putney Lower Common was awarded 179 points which was only four points less than the 2019 winner of London Common of the year: Wimbledon Common.

### **Volunteering and Public Engagement on the Commons**

From 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, volunteers have continued to play a huge role in helping to look after the Commons.

With activities including litter picking, wildlife recording, conservation work, assisting with public events such as the Commons' annual open day, Bio-blitz and fortnightly walking for health events, leading walks and administration, over the past year the Commons have been assisted by a wide range of individuals who together have contributed a total of 3908 voluntary hours to helping out on the Commons.

Without these activities being carried out by volunteers, it would be safe to say that not only would many of the Commons' habitats be much poorer but the workload of the Commons' full-time staff would also be significantly greater.



*Volunteer litter pickers photographed on Putney Heath during 2019*

Over the past year, it's been great to see so many volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds become involved on the Commons. In addition to schools, local businesses, organisations, charities and individual volunteers, one group of volunteers that have consistently provided help on the Commons has been the numerous young people who volunteer as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes. From 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, 37 young people involved with various elements of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme volunteered on the Commons. During this time, these volunteers assisted with litter picking, conservation activities and events.



*Every little bit helps...Volunteers involved with various levels of the Duke of Edinburgh Award programme are involved in litter picking on the Commons throughout the year.*

Another group of volunteers that are also very active on the Commons throughout the year are the various wildlife recorders who help to form the Commons' Wildlife and Conservation Forum. With specialist interests in areas such as birds, Badgers, moths, butterflies, dragonflies and plants, this group meets on a bimonthly basis to discuss various issues that are linked to the Commons' natural environment. Providing the Commons with a huge amount of knowledge and experience, members of the Wildlife and Conservation Forum not only help to shape the future management of the site but they are also responsible for leading a variety of walks, talks and workshops on the Commons throughout the year.

To help collect much of the data that was recorded by this group during 2019, reports including The Birds, Butterflies and Dragonflies of Wimbledon and Putney Commons (Podmore, (Ed.), 2019) and the Ecological and Environmental Monitoring Report (Taylor (Ed.), 2019) have been produced. In conjunction with the regular bird sightings that are made on the Commons' and circulated by Adrian Podmore, over the past few years, these reports have provided a wealth of information about the diversity of the Commons wildlife that previously went unrecorded or was largely unknown.



*During the year, at least one visit is made by the Wildlife and Conservation Forum to look at a specific area of the Commons*

To ensure that as many people as possible are kept up to date with events on the Commons, throughout the year the Commons' website is kept updated, public notices are made available on site, there is a Wimbledon Common Face Book page and a variety of newsletters are circulated amongst people who have subscribed to the Commons' mailing list.

First started in 2016, there is also another newsletter that is written on a quarterly basis and intended as a special way of keeping volunteers and staff updated about the Commons and thanking them for everything they do on site.

Entitled 'Common Ground', during 2019, there were four editions of this newsletter and hopefully it provides an informative and light hearted way of further integrating volunteers and staff into the wider life of the Commons.

In addition to the written material that is regularly circulated by the Rangers Office, a wide range of walks and talks are also provided by volunteers and WPCC staff throughout the year. Between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020, WPCC members of staff were involved in providing 35 walks and talks on the Commons. and it is estimated that 890 people attended these events.

In addition to these events, volunteers also led a series of wildlife events on the Commons including butterfly and dragonfly walks, bird walks and bird identification courses.



*All part of a day's work... K2 outlining the role of the Commons' Mounted Keepers during one of the organized walks that took place on the Commons during 2019.*

As part of the Commons' annual programme of walks and talks, one of the regular events that has remained very popular is the Commons' fortnightly Walking for Health event. Supported by the Ramblers Association and the People's Postcode Lottery, Walking for Health is England's largest network of health walks with over 360 walking schemes designed to help people across the country lead a more active lifestyle.

The Commons' involvement with this initiative first began during the summer of 2016 but since this point, our programme of healthy walks has now become a firm part of the Commons' annual list of events.

With increasing evidence to suggest that exercise provides multiple benefits for both health and well-being, it's great see these events so well attended with an average of 25 people attending each event.

During February 2020, it was especially satisfying to have 34 walkers join in with a single event which was the highest number for the year.



Peter Haldane - May 2020