



TOP TEN WAYS TO ATTRACT WILDLIFE

Rufus Bellamy, BH&HPA National Adviser on conservation and environmental management, provides ten inspirational ideas on how parks can attract wildlife

BOXING CLEVER

Last year, I was lucky enough to be asked to take part in a family fun day at Old Hall Caravan Park near the Lake District. The park's Manager, Mark Warburton had laid on a full day of events for visitors including a folk band and barbecue, but for me, the highlight of the day was when I accompanied a group of holidaymakers round the park's wildlife trail. On our way around we stopped, every now and again, to put up a bird box - bird boxes that the park's team had been building, with the public's help, all morning. These were wonderful, rustic boxes made out of hollowed-out logs and as each was placed up a tree, a cheer went up from the crowd. There were many really happy children around that day, who were delighted to see 'their' box being installed.

It is events like the one at Old Hall that provide a satisfying and, relatively easy, way to boost wildlife on a park. Its success got me thinking about what other, relatively simple things parks can do to attract wildlife. The fact of the matter is that, while long-term habitat management is vital for wildlife and should be the bedrock of any park's environmental work, it is always good to have a few 'quick wins' too - quick wins that don't take up too much of the staff's time, but provide things for guests to see and enjoy. So, in order to help score a few 'easy' goals for wildlife, here are my top ten 'mini-projects' that park owners and managers might like to try in 2009.





1 PILE-EM HIGH

Many of the things that can be done for wildlife on a park involve doing less rather than more. For example, instead of hauling away any cut or fallen timber, leave it in place so that its nutrients can return to the soil. Better still, create a log pile that wildlife can colonise and enjoy. To see why a log pile is such an important thing from a biodiversity point of view, think about the life that you can find under an old log. Beetles, wood wasps, woodlice, grubs and many other mini-beasts all love to munch on wood or live amongst it and these, in turn, are food for birds, hedgehogs, frogs and many other animals. If a park is in the south of the country, a log pile may also provide a home for the wonderful stag beetle, which is Britain's largest insect. Log piles also provide a shady retreat and a place to hibernate for many of Britain's amphibians.

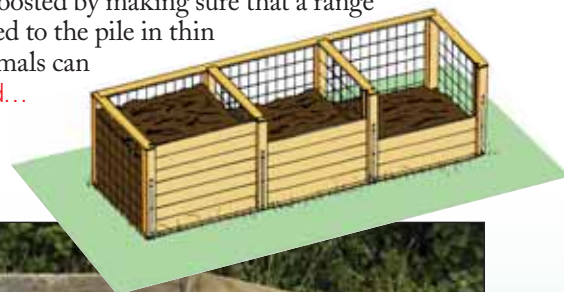
There are a number of ways in which the wildlife benefits of a woodpile can be maximised - it all depends on how it is arranged. A concentrated stack is probably the best way to maximise the amount of cool, moist shade that a pile can provide; sunken or half-buried wood is also great as it provides a range of 'mini climates' for mini-beasts to enjoy. Whatever the shape, the best place for a woodpile is in a shaded, out-of-the-way spot, so that it stays nice and damp - and swarming with life.



2 CREATE A HEROIC HEAP

A compost heap is a must for any wildlife-friendly park. It is, obviously, a free way to dispose of organic waste and will provide organic goodness for the park's plants. A compost heap is also a fantastic habitat for a range of animals, from the humble (but oh-so-important) earthworm to more exotic creatures such as slow-worms and grass snakes (which are known to use the heat that a compost heap gives off to incubate their eggs).

A really wildlife-friendly heap should be in contact with the ground (to let the mini-beasts in), so think about building a slate-sided wooden enclosure rather than buying one of the ready-made plastic bins. Most organic waste can be added to a compost heap, although meat should be avoided and large pruning should be shredded before it's put on. Remember to let air circulate and add an activator (like animal manure) to get it going. The wildlife importance of a pile (and its effectiveness) can be boosted by making sure that a range of material is added to the pile in thin layers, so that animals can crawl in. *continued...*



3 HAVE A REAL HOOT

The hoot of an owl is a really evocative countryside sound and many parks are in a good position to provide these wonderful creatures with a place to live and feed. BH&HPA members can help by putting up an owl box. According to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), this kind of work is vital and well-designed and properly-sited boxes 'undoubtedly help'. They estimate that about half the UK population of barn owls now nest in boxes provided by man.

The type of owl box put up depends on the type of owl in the area. The local Wildlife Trust should be able to let members know what kinds of owls frequent their neighbourhood. Tawny owls, barn owls and little owls are among the most common species and each needs a different kind of box, situated in a specific way. Tawny owl boxes are generally tubular in shape (to mimic a deep cavity in a tree); boxes for little owls (which sometimes nest in holes in the ground) are generally long with a hole at the top. Barn owl boxes are large and often triangular. Park owners and managers can buy these boxes commercially or make their own. Visit www.theowlbox.co.uk for more information.

Boxes should be sited out of reach, for example in a tree, out of direct sunlight. Barn owl boxes can, unsurprisingly, be located in a barn. According to the Barn Owl Trust (www.barnowltrust.org.uk) if there is a large building that a barn owl can enter at about ten feet above the ground then that is almost certainly the best place to put a nest box.

4 GET A BUZZING BRICK

Bees are arguably the most important insects in the countryside as they are a key pollinator of many food plants. Bees are, however, in real trouble. In 2008 according to the British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA), a third of Britain's beehive populations did not survive the winter and spring. This is partly explained by the year's wet weather and the ongoing destruction of the wildflower-rich countryside that bees need to survive. This means that one of the most important things a park can do is to help bees buzz back to health.

There are a number of big things that BH&HPA members can do. They could raise bees in hives on the park - for advice and support visit www.britishbee.org.uk. Make sure that the park is packed full of the plants that bees like to feed on - for information on gardening for bees visit www.bumblebeeconservationtrust.co.uk. However, a much simpler thing that can be done to kick things off is to set up a 'bee hotel' for the red mason bee.

The red mason is a first-rate pollinator like the honey bee, but unlike its better-known cousin it doesn't live in a hive. Instead the females lay their eggs in hollow plant stems or other 'tubes' such as nail holes in old plaster. A 'bee hotel' or 'bee brick' is simply a collection of tubes that the bees can use.

Commercial versions are available from www.birdfood.co.uk or they can be made out of a bundle of 10-20cm long sections of old bamboo canes. Put the 'hotel' in a sunny spot out of the rain. See the wildlife gardening page of the invertebrate conservation trust 'buglife' at www.buglife.org.uk for more details.



5 GIVE A HEDGEHOG A HOME

Mrs Tiggywinkle is probably one of the nation's favourite garden visitors but, like so many of the UK's animals, the hedgehog is in long-term decline and was added to the national Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) in 2007.

One thing that can be done to help hedgehogs is to provide them with the habitats they need - dense, undisturbed undergrowth and nice long grass to snuffle through. They can also be fed - dog food is good, but not bread and milk. But the 'quick win' here is to give them somewhere to sleep. This can be as simple as a 'lean-to' made out of an old board or it can be something a little more complex. If park owners and managers want to provide their resident hedgehog with its own hibernaculum, they can buy one readymade or they can build their own. Visit www.rspb.org.uk for more information.

For the DIY route, make a basic box (2ft x 1.5ft x 1ft) with a removable lid and an entrance tunnel or chamber of about 1.5 feet in length. Once assembled, put the hedgehog home in a quiet corner of the park, amongst thick vegetation and away from direct sunlight and wind.

Other ways to help hedgehogs are to avoid using chemicals, such as slug pellets; to check bonfires before they are lit for any nesting animals; and to make sure that ponds have an escape route. One last thing to keep in mind is that hedgehogs can climb trees and raid nests, so make sure that some trees are kept free of ivy so they cannot climb up.



6 FEED THE BIRDS

Feeding the birds is something that a park, and its visitors and residents, can all do together. Nothing brightens up a park more than the sight of birds visiting a whole host of bird tables and other feeding stations.

In the past, the message was only feed birds in the winter, but these days, as farming has reduced the variety of food plants in the countryside, the consensus is coming round to the belief that it helps to feed birds all year round. The choice of food is, to an extent, a personal one - I like to put out chopped-up bacon rind (non-salty) for the robins at home - but the best choice of food that will attract the most birds is probably the proprietary birdseed mixtures available to buy.

If it's hard to get hold of those, then always use good quality scraps such as (uncooked) porridge oats, fresh fruit or sultanas, currants and raisins and remember, it's best not to put out peanuts when birds are breeding as the young don't thrive on them. In addition, there are concerns that some peanuts can be high in aflatoxin which can harm birds, so buy them from a reputable dealer to be on the safe side.

Putting the food on a bird table - out of reach of cats - is the best place as it provides a perch for both ground-feeders and those acrobatic birds like greenfinches and tits that like to hang about as they feed. Remember to clean the table so that mouldy food and bacteria can't build up.

7 GET DIGGING

If there is one thing that can add a whole new aspect to a park's biodiversity, it is a pond, even a small one. For a park without any water features a pond can, in a single step, bring in a whole range of animals that previously would not have found an easy home. These include the amphibians - newts, frogs and toads - which are desperately in need of places to live. If BH&HPA members want to have fish in their pond, it is probably better to have two ponds, one for fish and one for amphibians. Newts, in particular, don't get on well with fish, which will eat their young when they hatch.

When building a new pond, the best pond profile for wildlife is a shallow saucer shape with gently shelving sides. Dig it in a sheltered spot, somewhere where the animals that come to colonise it won't be disturbed all the time. To maximise the biodiversity potential of a pond, it is vital to provide places for animals to shelter and hibernate - logs, rocks and stones are perfect. It is also just as important to make sure that any animals that do fall in have an escape route.

Put in a good mixture of appropriate aquatic plants to provide cover and oxygenate the water - for example, Hornwort is a good one. Many parks report health and safety concerns about water features, so please implement sensible signage and fencing to keep visitors and residents safe.



8 GIVE THE BUTTERFLIES A BAR

Butterflies are one of the things that we get loads of postcards about at the David Bellamy Conservation Award Scheme. Many people write to tell us about all the beautiful butterflies that they see enjoying the butterfly bars that parks have planted.

These 'bars' are actually banks of the nectar-rich 'butterfly bush' - or buddleia, as it is more properly known. They are easy to put in place and really show what a bit of clever planting can do to bring in the insects. Just head down to the local plant nursery for the raw materials.

For an even easier way to attract butterflies, just leave some nettles standing along the borders. These will attract some of the 'aristocrats' of the butterfly world - red admirals, tortoiseshell and peacock butterflies, all of which like to lay their eggs on the nettle plant.



10 GO BATTY AND BIRDY

Number 10 brings us back to where we started with bird boxes. Bird boxes will bring biodiversity literally flocking to a park. Add some bat boxes and the night patrol is sorted as well.

To get the most types of birds to visit the park, put in a mixture of boxes with a variety of hole sizes - from 25mm for blue tits to 45mm for starlings. Also try putting nest cups in the eaves of barns or outbuilding to give house martins a home; and open-fronted boxes are good for species such as the robin. To provide the maximum help to wildlife, why not start by putting up boxes that will provide a home to those species that are in decline in the UK, such as house sparrows - these are communal breeders and like 'sparrow terraces' such as those sold by the RSPB (www.rspb.org.uk). For more information on what to do and how to put up a box properly, visit the RSPB's website at www.rspb.org.uk. It provides full details of how to make and site boxes for different species.

Bats are becoming increasingly rare in the UK and need our help. Bat boxes, which look similar to bird boxes but with an opening slit underneath, are a great way to provide a boost. Boxes should be made out of rough, untreated wood and situated as high up as possible on a tree or wall. Ideally, a number of boxes should be put up facing in different directions, although none should face into the prevailing direction of the wind and rain. For more information, see the Bat Conservation Trust's website at www.bats.org.uk. ●

9 GET PLANTING

Tree planting is a great thing to do for wildlife and is a great way to add new colour and shape to a park. Planting new woodland is obviously not a quick or easy project, but planting a single tree or shrub is still well worthwhile, especially if its wildlife value is maximised by choosing a local, indigenous variety that will provide food and shelter for wildlife. For advice on how to choose the best tree for the park, visit www.floralocale.org, which contains a list of suppliers of British and Irish native flora alongside advice on how to choose the native species that are best for biodiversity.

