ECOLOGY REPORT

Wildlife and the allotments

1.Introduction

Questions concerning the future direction of the allotments continue to exercise the parish council and allotmenteers. A wide range of views have been expressed, from those who would prefer by far the allotment patch to be neater and tidier than it is now, to those who see the area primarily as a wildlife haven. Opinion has polarised around these positions but it is my aim here to show that there is a middle path.

The primary purpose of an allotment is to grow food. On a well-run allotment, yields can be achieved of about a pound weight per square foot of ground cultivated, placing allotments among the most productive land in the parish. (This value is equivalent to very slightly under 20 tons per acre, far above agricultural yields which are about 4 tons per acre in the parish). Locally-grown food has well-known benefits in terms of carbon footprint, food miles, freshness and nutrient content.

There are as many styles of horticulture practised on the allotments as there are allotment holders. At the extremes, some practise conventional horticulture using pesticides and synthetic fertilisers whereas others use organic methods which employ natural controls and composts. At first sight these two approaches have little in common; this is not true.

Even the most conventional horticultural system relies on wildlife to some extent, and particularly upon pollinators. All soft fruit (raspberries, blackcurrants, strawberries, etc) and all top fruit (apples, pears, plums, etc) are insect-pollinated - particularly by bees. Many crops flower too early to be pollinated by honeybees and so we must rely on wild bees to pollinate them. Also, fruit-set on later-flowering crops is usually superior if wild bees rather than honey bees do the pollinating. As for vegetables, legumes (all beans but not peas, they are self-pollinated), cucurbits (squashes, courgettes etc) and solanaceous (peppers, tomatoes etc) crops among others are bee-pollinated. In every case we must `borrow` wild bees from nearby habitats because they do not live on the allotment plots themselves.

But, we cannot merely supply some pollen and nectar in spring and early summer and expect the bees to hang around. If their needs are not supplied they will – if they can - go elsewhere at the very least or may even be driven to local extinction. They need to collect pollen and nectar when our crops no longer provide any and also need places to nest and to hibernate too. Every useful bee has slightly different requirements; some collect pollen from a very few kinds of flower, some nest in bare soil, some in short turf and others nest in timber and in old, dead stems. There are over 250 species of wild bee in Britain, all with different requirements.

Very similar arguments apply to predatory insects (ladybirds – 43 species; hoverflies – 286 species; solitary wasps – over 7,000 species, and yes, that last figure is correct) that help to control pests (aphids, thrips, mites etc) even in conventional systems.

Wildlife is thus an integral part of small-scale horticulture. The allotmenteers all need beneficial insects - it is just that the organic growers need them more because they do not use chemical props - and we need to provide diverse habitats in which all our insect friends thrive. Ecologists have found repeatedly that the imposition of anthropocentric values such as neatness and tidiness only serve to reduce diversity and thus the number of beneficial insects available to us. A certain amount of wildlife-friendliness is essential to the well-being of the allotments.

The allotments generally made a giant leap towards environmental friendliness with the installation of the rainwater harvesting system. It works, despite teething problems, and improvements are under consideration. I suggest that the following simple steps can also be taken easily to further improve the environmental credentials of the site generally.

2.Shared areas and paths.

Paths are of course the responsibility of the allotment holders, but shared areas which are not often or never used for foot traffic can be used to encourage wildflowers, further encouraging beneficial insects. A few years ago, rather uncommon plants such as hound`s tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) could be found on the allotments; it is a wonderful plant for bees, but has not been seen for some years.

3.Nesting sites for birds.

Birds too are useful predators of pests but there are few suitable nest sites on the allotments. Nests boxes could be erected but the long-term aim should be to encourage plants in which birds will nest naturally. A productive blackberry bush on one of the allotments is home every year to blackbirds and occasionally dunnocks.

4.Trees.

NB. THE PARISH COUNCIL`S TREE REPORT IS NOT ACCESSIBLE. THE LINK DOES NOT WORK.

Trees generally are excellent for wildlife but are not necessarily altogether desirable on an allotment site because they compete with crop plants for light, water and nutrients. However, some of our native species - and apple trees - support hundreds of invertebrate species many of which play a role in pest control.

Unused areas could also be planted with fruit trees further enhancing productivity. The idea, suggested at the on-site meeting, of planting hazel (which is not a tree, it is a shrub) would in just a few years generate a supply of bean poles, pea sticks and plant supports for allotmenteers and would reduce the use of high-footprint bamboo. Also, the simple fact that hazel is harvested on a five- or six-year rotation would serve to eliminate light obstruction of nearby dwellings. The conifers in the corner take a great deal of light from the nearby allotments and houses; the removal and replacement of these non-natives would help all round. At the moment, from the allotments` point of view all they do is provide some physical shelter for wildlife. If an evergreen replacement were desired one could do far worse than yew, which has a great advantage - among conifers – in that it

regenerates from mature wood and can thus easily withstand major pruning, as well as having native status and providing both food and shelter for birds.

5.The common lizard colony.

The common lizard is a protected but declining native species. Advice should be sought from specialists such as the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust on helping the colony to thrive. At the moment vegetation is encroaching on the site of the colony.

6.The ivy question.

Ivy generates heated debate. On one side, ivy is considered to be pernicious and therefore best removed; on the other, ivy is seen as harmless and a great boon to wildlife for its late flowers, winter berries and all-year provision of shelter. This controversy about ivy has rumbled on in Britain for decades. Received opinion today is that ivy only takes hold in trees that are stressed in some way or have open canopies allowing light to percolate down, such as ash. In this view the growth of ivy is more a consequence of poor tree health, rather than the ivy growing and causing poor tree health, in other words a reversal of the view so commonly held. One only has to look at trees in the parish to see that most ivy in trees occurs in either ash with its naturally open canopy or other trees in which the canopy is open or rather small for some reason, such as poor pruning or very packed plantings. Almost any arboricultural website will explain the issue more fully. The Arboricultural Association – the official trade body – has a good site.

7.Finally

The overall aim for the allotments should therefore be one of productivity with enhanced wildlife diversity. With their productivity, the rainwater harvesting system, some existing highly diverse areas and the lizard colony the allotments are already more than halfway to achieving excellent environmental credentials.

It is not unusual for successful community projects to receive recognition officially. There is even a series of awards run by the CPRE for small environmentally-friendly schemes (partially replacing the Bledisloe cup).

Jo Kirby

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