

Best Practice Guidelines for Friends Groups & Volunteers

Friends groups and other volunteer organisations can make a real difference to the protection and preservation of local wildlife sites. However, it can often be confusing for newcomers to know how best to help wildlife. These guidelines aim to help volunteer groups find the best way to enhance Bromley's biodiversity through the work they do. They are not comprehensive and should be read in conjunction with the Bromley Friends Forum Toolkit (www.bromleyfriendsforum.org).



Getting to Know Your Site

Any park or green space will have potential for wildlife but don't rush in to do things, research your site first.

- Find out all you can about the potential biodiversity of your site.
- Check with the local authority or local biological records centre to see if there are any existing wildlife records for your site.
- Speak to the land manager to see if the site has an existing management plan before starting work.
- Check if the site you work on is already listed as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) – See current list of SINC's in **Appendix 1**.
- If the site is on private land, check for Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) that may have been put on significant trees.
- Some species are protected by law. If you find evidence of bats, great crested newts, adders or dormice please seek further advice. See more information in **Section 4: Protected Species in Bromley**.
- See if you can find any information about the site's history – was it always woodland or was it grazing land? Look for old boundary features. What type of soil does it have - chalky, acid, clay?
- Always get permission from the landowner or site manager before commencing any work.

Habitats with Particular Wildlife Value

- **Semi-natural Ancient Woodland** This is woodland that has been in situ for 400 years or more. It supports a rich mixture of wildlife that takes many hundreds of years to develop. Although the trees were regularly harvested the ground was relatively undisturbed so the soil fungi and plants may be the oldest things in the wood. Many of them are not found away from this habitat and support special invertebrates. Bromley contains a third of Greater London's ancient woodland habitat.
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- Wood Anemones are an ancient woodland indicator.*
- **Secondary Woodland** Not as species rich as ancient woodland, but it is also important for wildlife and may support rare and protected species including dormice, bats, stag beetles and birds .
 - **Ancient Trees** Because of their age and the different niches they provide, each one provides a stable habitat supporting hundreds of species.
 - **Hedgerows** – a line or narrow belt of closely spaced scrubs which forms a barrier. Typical hedgerow species include hawthorn, field maple and blackthorn. Some hedgerows are very old, and may have historical significance. Hedgerows often act as 'corridors' for wildlife, linking habitats and providing protection from predators.
 - **Meadows** – grassland that is allowed to grow long and is rich in wildflowers. Many 'improved' grassland areas such as playing fields will once have been wildflower meadows. In some of these areas, wildflowers will regenerate given the opportunity.
 - **Heathland** – scrubland found on acid soils, with heather and gorse being typical species.
 - **Wetland: Ditches, Ponds & Rivers** – support some of the hundreds of plants and animals which need freshwater or damp habitats.
 - **Scrub** – often undervalued, it provides food and protection for a wide variety of invertebrates, birds, mammals and other animals.
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- Jersey Tiger Moths like scrubby habitats.*

For more detailed information on habitats, please see **Section 3: Habitats in Bromley**.

Managing Habitats for Wildlife

Regarding habitat management, only do tasks that you have been trained to do. Make sure that adequate risk assessments have been carried out for tasks in the field and that they are adhered to.

Ensure any planting you do is site suitable. Look after the native wild plants you have, they support more invertebrates than non-native species and therefore more birds and bats. If you have to buy native plants for planting make sure they are of local provenance, or at least from south-east England.

Remove plants that don't belong on your site, e.g. Spanish and hybrid bluebells. Garden plants may hybridise with or out-compete native species. Many are unsuitable for native invertebrates and therefore reduce site biodiversity e.g. cherry laurel.

Make sure any work you do is seasonally appropriate:

- **Scrub clearance** - must only be done during the winter, approx. October to February (observe weather and act accordingly). This will ensure that birds are not disturbed during the nesting season. **Note: it is against the law to disturb some nesting birds.**
- **Coppicing & felling** (under supervision only, or if trained) mid-winter, when leaves have dropped and trees are dormant and birds are not nesting.
- **Tree planting** approx. November to February
- **Pond/ditch work** September and October are the best months; most amphibians will have left ponds by then and they will not have started hibernating. If you have rare species on site, e.g. great crested newts, seek further advice.
- **Fires on site** October to March. Try not to have fires on site. If you have no alternative, re-use old fire sites whenever possible and remove the ash when cold. Always check piled up dead brash for hedgehogs and other animals before having a fire.
- **Hedge trimming** November to February. It is not necessary to cut hedges every year. Natural England recommends that hedges are cut only twice over a six year period. Consider cutting sides of a hedge on rotation. **Never** cut long grass at hedge bases. It is a very important part of hedgerow habitat and will be home to many invertebrates, e.g. butterfly caterpillars as well as larger animals such as toads, slow worms, shrews, voles and hedgehogs.

- **Grass cutting** September: leave till late summer to ensure the seed has set. Always remove any cuttings that you produce (you could either pile them up on site as a habitat pile or remove them off site and compost them).

As you can see from the above list – most habitat based work needs to be carried out during the winter (October to March), leaving you the summer months to concentrate on tasks such as footpath clearance and maintenance, furniture repair and installation and survey work.

Consider adding value to your site through...

- Bat boxes / bird boxes etc – but discuss how you will check, clean and record what is using them.
- Leave some wild areas as insect refugia.
- Make log piles and/or stag beetle loggeries. Leave dead wood on site whenever it is safe to do so as it is important for invertebrates, fungi and creatures that eat them.
- Maintain main paths in good condition and discourage trampling elsewhere within your site as this will reduce biodiversity.
- Where appropriate, plant native hedgerow species of local provenance.



For more detailed habitat management guidance please see Appendix E: Guidelines for Land Managers, Bromley Friends Forum Toolkit or contact the local authority, Bromley Biodiversity Partnership or local wildlife charities for further guidance or training.