

# CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF THE WILDLIFE GARDEN

The Museum's Wildlife Garden was the far-sighted vision of Clive Jermy, who worked in the Botany Department until 1992. The idea was to represent the major habitats that exist in lowland England, showing the natural diversity of the wider landscape within a day trip of the capital. Researcher **Steve Brooks** picks up the story.

**T**he Wildlife Garden is an educational resource enabling visitors to immerse themselves in the English countryside in the middle of London. It is not a typical wildlife garden – essentially a patch of uncultivated ground where nature is left to get on with it. Instead it is akin to a living gallery – linked to and complementing other exhibits inside the Museum, which explore ecology, ecosystems and biodiversity.

## FROM VISION TO REALITY

Planning for the garden began in the late 1980s, with Clive Jermy convening an advisory group with a representative from each of the science departments and the exhibitions team. I was the entomology representative and am now the only member of staff still here who was involved in the early stages. Landscape architect Mark Loxton of the Adams-Loxton Partnership and

ecologists Dennis Vickers and Gary Grant joined the team to help develop the vision.

The habitats include deciduous woodland, hedgerow, heath and bog, meadow, chalk grassland, an urban wasteland area, wetland, ponds and a chalk stream. An orchard was later added near the garden's entrance. While most of the animals could be expected to make their own way there, it was necessary to obtain appropriate plants and even soil from the countryside to create authentic-looking bioscapes.

Many of these elements were sourced from sites threatened with destruction, or from nature reserves undergoing management work. Several of the woodland plants and soils, for example, were rescued from a road-widening scheme in Northamptonshire. Fen plants were received after scrapes had been dug to enhance bittern habitat, and an area on a nature reserve

cleared to create open sandy patches for sand lizards, solitary bees and wasps provided us with heathland plants and soil.

## EARLY COLONISERS

I suggested that the drinking water supplied to millions of Londoners was not of sufficient quality to fill the three ponds that had been dug. This was because the water, largely obtained from sources that had already passed through people and sewage treatment works several times, was still sufficiently high in nutrients. Derived from detergents, these could cause algal blooms in the ponds, resulting in green water and blanket weeds. Not only unsightly, this also impedes the growth of more desirable submerged aquatic plants.

The ponds were so large that we didn't want to wait for the rain to fill them. Instead we opted for water from a lake in Essex, delivered by tanker courtesy of Anglian Water. In fact, rain water did start to accumulate in the ponds soon after they were lined and within days a huge swarm of water-fleas, *Daphnia*, appeared. These crustaceans were probably transported on the feet and feathers of mallard ducks who took advantage of the new pools.

## FINDING A NICHE

The Wildlife Garden occupies an area that was previously a formal garden, and had been managed like a municipal park, mainly laid to lawn with a few ornamental shrubs. Unsurprisingly it supported relatively low biodiversity. In contrast, the mosaic of habitats provided in the new garden had the potential to attract a wide variety of organisms.

Some expressed scepticism that such a broad group of disparate habitats could be sustained in a small area, and that they were unlikely to attract appropriate creatures into the heart of London. These detractors, on the whole, have been proved wrong – as they have cheerfully admitted.

While to an extent the garden is self-sustainable, it does require intensive management to retain the integrity of each of the habitats, by removing plants that are invasive or alien, or just growing in the wrong place. Through the careful management regime formulated by the garden's manager, Caroline Ware – assisted by the Scientific Advisory Group, and implemented by the Wildlife Garden Team – it has been an outstanding success. The Scientific Advisory Group meet with the team on a quarterly basis to review progress against the management plans and provide advice. I am no longer on the team and I miss the meetings that were held in the garden's shed. The scent of the timbers, the pattering of rain on the roof, bird song and steaming mugs of tea, all combine to make >

The Wildlife  
Garden is a very  
special place





**Top to bottom** An audience deeply engrossed by the findings of naturalist Tom Thomas during Big Nature Day. View from the pond-dipping platform, across white water-lilies and open water to the reed bed. Along the board walk in the fen habitat with meadowsweet, yellow and purple loosestrife. Young visitors examining the contents of a sweep net during an event in the Wildlife Garden

this the best of the various meeting venues available in the Museum.

**PONDLIFE**

After two decades, each one of the habitats is still recognisably distinct and supports different plants and animals. Remarkably some, such as the chalk grassland and woodland, have been colonised by species typical of those habitats, including grass vetchling, six-spot burnet moths and broad-leaved helleborine, even though South Kensington is miles from the nearest wild examples.

The ponds are an example of a habitat that was absent from the Museum grounds before the garden's creation and this has inevitably resulted in the arrival of many new species. The only animals to be introduced in the early days were frogs, toads and newts, which would have had difficulties colonising a garden surrounded by busy roads. They were introduced as spawn. The absence of fish has encouraged a thriving population of common frogs and smooth newts. Toads breed here too.

During summer, visitors can see the colourful and aerobic displays of up to eight species of damselflies and dragonflies that breed in the ponds. A family of moorhens are protected from the resident foxes by the provision of a nesting island. The ponds also provide a range of damp habitats at the transition from water to land for many insects and plants. The ponds are an important source of drinking water for insects,

birds and mammals, and the swarms of small insects emerging from the water are snapped up by predators. Several species of bird take advantage of this food source, such as blackbirds, robins, long-tailed tits, great tits and wrens, who also breed in the cover provided by the trees and bushes in the woodland areas. Winter visitors include redwings and mistle thrushes.

**RECORDING BIODIVERSITY**

English Nature, who provided a substantial portion of the set-up funds, stipulated that a monitoring programme should be instigated to record the species in the garden. A database was set up to hold these records. Many staff and volunteers enthusiastically answered the call to survey the garden and the turnover of plants and animals. These records form the basis of reports published at intervals in the *London Naturalist*. After 20 years this series of papers must represent one of the most extensive and authoritative accounts available charting the long-term development of a small patch of semi-natural habitat in the heart of a large city. And the continued monitoring of wildlife will be of even greater value in 50 and 100 years time.

As well as the expected common species, the garden hosts several animals that are less widespread and have surprised scientists. These include the Jersey tiger moth and the landhopper – a shrimp-like creature that lives in leaf-litter. Several species not previously recorded in Britain, including the micro moths,



*Ectoedemia heringella* and *Prays citri*, and the beetle, *Rhyzobius forestieri*, were also found. The database currently holds records of more than 2,500 species.

**NATURE NURTURE**

The garden is a unique resource enthusing visitors of all ages about the natural riches of the English countryside. Science educators and scientists from the Museum lead wildlife tours and pond dipping trips, popular with school groups and amateur enthusiasts. Annual themed events such as Nettle Weekend, Bat Festival and Hedgerow Harvest are also informative and fun for children and adults. There is no better way of kindling an interest in, and respect for, nature than providing hands-on wildlife experiences.

Many children lose interest in natural history during the distracting teenage years, but those who have had vivid wildlife encounters when they were younger often need little encouragement to reawaken those interests as young adults. The garden also acts as a hub for the Museum to be involved with, and provide a resource for, the local community. An active group of local volunteers help the team with tasks throughout the year, gaining skills such as hedge-laying, coppicing and pond management, while benefiting from the exercise and fresh air.

**AN OASIS IN METROPOLIS**

The Wildlife Garden is a very special place. It's a retreat where visitors and staff can

enjoy tranquil contemplation of the natural world. Visitors of all ages can appreciate and understand how the natural world works and the components that make up ecosystems by seeing them in action. It also provides a means of engaging local communities in conservation activities and improving the local environment by bringing wildlife into the heart of the city.

The garden has been widely recognised as a special place and won several accolades, including the Brighter Kensington and Chelsea Scheme's Wildlife Garden award, and the London in Bloom Environment Trophy in 2004 and 2014. It is now a designated Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

The last words should go to our visitors: 'what a brilliant adventure – so much to learn and discover. An inspiring introduction to a love of nature.' 'Such an unexpected pleasure. A natural oasis in the centre of London, both exquisite and informative. Blissful to hear the bird song above the traffic. Utterly impressed by the primroses and the dedicated volunteers. Thank you.' And from our international visitors, 'a lovely, unexpected experience of the English countryside on our short trip to England. It made my day.' 'We love the Museum and garden. We could see lots of animals and it's a great way to teach children and adults about nature'.



**Top to bottom** A 'bird's eye' view of the Wildlife Garden from the west tower of the Waterhouse building. The edges of chalk downland near the entrance to the garden. After the wild flowers have bloomed and set seed the Museum's grey-face Dartmoor sheep are brought in to demonstrate sustainable meadow management. A moorhen striding across a raft of water-lilies.