Dulwich Society Wildlife Group 17.6.24

Present: Peter Roseveare (Chair), Sigrid Collins, Jeff Doodson, Glynis Williams, Sue Cope, Emily Montague

Apologies: Charles Newman, Sam Taylor, Harry Rutherford, Steven Robinson, Angela Wilkes, Dave Clark

In attendance: Liam Nash, Ecology Officer for Southwark, Claire Richards

MInutes of Meeting 19.3.24 were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting

Matters Arising:

The path in The Copse in Dulwich Park is now completed. A management plan for The Copse is being developed with the assistance of Joe Arrowsmith, the Southwark Tree Planting officer. The aim is to reduce the height and density of the trees to restore the character of The Copse and improve biodiversity.

Swift boxes have been put up as planned. They may be identified as nesting sites for future years by the young Swifts that will arrive later in the summer. The first wave of returning Swifts have been seen locally during the past month, Peter expressed a hope that some would nest on Burbage Road as they have done in past times, and he has observed some flying at roof level suggesting they are seeking nesting sites.

Velodrome: The new trees have been planted on the Velodrome site to replace the habitat destruction that had taken place. Until the understory develops there will be no return of the species of birds previously seen and heard there. There were in the past Thrushes, Blackbirds, Blackcaps and Whitethroats.

Liam Nash, new Southwark Ecology Officer:

Liam was welcomed to the meeting. He joins Southwark having completed a PhD researching fresh water invertebrates in tropical and temperate environments.

He explained that there is now a team of officers filling the roles that Jon Best, the previous Ecology Officer covered. It was acknowledged that Jon had had a wealth of experience in the field and that replacing him is a tough call. The planning department now have their own ecologist, Sarah Morris. Joe Arrowsmith is the tree ecologist and Holly Weber is on a two year placement focussing on climate change biodiversity projects. Liam will be working across all council departments and is responsible for Parks and Natural Environment. He has no capital budget but there is a maintenance budget for the parks and there is a Climate Change Biodiversity Budget from which capital projects can be funded.

At present there is no particular website where it is possible to see what Southwark is doing ecologically across the borough.

A general discussion with Liam about interests and specific concerns in the Dulwich Society Wildlife Group followed. Summarised below:

Belair Wood Meadows Project: This is being progressed by Holly and Joe. Clare reported that the wildflower corner is looking very colourful at the moment.

Wildlife corridors: LN said that wildlife corridors are considered in planning although in practise there are difficulties in developing complete corridors. Highways and Housing departments do have “stepping stone” projects in the pipeline as part of progression towards wildlife corridors.

Complexities of managing wildlife friendly areas in Parks: Burgess Park of all the Southwark parks has probably the widest biodiversity (including breeding Reed Warblers) possibly related to its size, the size of the lake and varied habitats. There was discussion of problems that have arisen there as a result of wildlife areas growing tall providing secluded spaces for antisocial activities.

The partial grass mowing on the verges in Dulwich Village was appreciated by everyone at the meeting but we discussed that initiatives such as stopping mowing were not always understood or welcomed. We discussed the importance of explaining the rationale these initiatives and this may encourage a change in aesthetic appreciation for some local residents. EM also pointed out that people need to understand that these are not cost saving and are in fact often costlier that traditional mowing. The Wildflower growing in Dulwich Park has been controversial. The current wildflower areas in the Park have been developed on advice of experts in Butterfly conservation. Unfortunately this planting tends to have a short peak flowering time and to not be as instantly

colourfully impacting as the annual displays used in the past. These annual displays required use of herbicides and were not as beneficial for butterflies or other insects. Friends of Dulwich Park will be having further consultations with Butterfly Conservation to further develop the butterfly friendly planting.
Need to ensure that capital projects do consider ongoing maintenance:
The group shared past local experiences with Liam particularly highlighting the importance of including need for costing in revenue needs for maintenance of environmentally friendly capital schemes. Emily gave several examples such as tree planting needing to be followed by watering programme for a protracted period of time. The Copse development in the Park is now needing extensive tree work which might have been more appropriately done over the years as routine maintenance.
The Impact on Wildlife of events in the Parks which generate important income:
GW described in detail issues that had arisen in Peckham Rye and the difficulty she had had in having concerns heard. Unfortunately the Gala Festival is still timed to happen during bird nesting season. In addition to noise and light disturbance the area of the park available to dog walkers becomes limited by the barriers erected and as a result the foot fall and dog activity becomes concentrated causing even more disturbance to nesting birds.
SC encouraged Liam to seriously consider setting up monitoring the bird activities before as after events as at present there is no evidence of actual impact on nesting birds or other wildlife. While it was agreed that it is not possible to control variables and carry out reliable research, it might well be worthwhile using volunteers to carry out audit or monitoring to look for trends. Some species of unban wildlife may cope better than others with disturbance.
EM pointed out that although events and filming in parks do cause concern, they also provide significant revenue that goes back into the parks.
Ecological issues have and are considered for many activities that happen in the parks but the flood alleviation projects in Dulwich Park and Peckham Rye have taken precedence over other concerns and did not take ecological issues into consideration.

Claire Richards:
Claire was welcomed and congratulated and thanked for taking on role of Editor or the Dulwich Society Journal. She expressed her commitment to promoting Wildlife and Ecology issues in the Journal. She initiated discussion about actions we can all take to benefit local wildlife and avoid environmental damage. We recommended continued active discouragement of use of artificial grass (Claire's recent article in the Journal has highlighted the damage caused by artificial grass) and also, in this year of abundance of slugs and snails, advising people not to be tempted to use those metaldehyde slug pellets that are still in garden sheds even though metaldehyde slug pellets are no longer sold.

Dulwich Woods Report from Sam Taylor:
The survey of the bat boxes by volunteers from the London Bat Group is reported in the Journal article recently. 38 Soprano Pipistrelles, 5 Leisler's and one Brown Lingered Bat were found. Bats are a good indicator of a healthy ecosystem.
Blackbird numbers in the woods seem to be recovering. A Cuckoo was again heard in the Woods in May. This has become an annual observation in May. The high point of the Woods is thought to be a stop of point on the migratory path.
A Hedgehog has been sighted on the allotments beside the Woods. This is an amazing development as Hedgehogs have been absent for many years locally. Liam said they do thrive on Hampstead Heath.
We discussed that the local species special to our area is the Stag Beetle. PR said he was reminded of its rarity when he heard the naturalist Iolo Williams say on Springwatch that he had never seen one.

AOB
Sunray Gardens: Claire asked if anything to report from Sunray Gardens. There was a lake survey some time ago and work was needed. No update available.
Earth worms: Claire asked about the state of Earthworms. Are there fewer? No-one had an answer but Liam and group members immediately said the person who knows Is Kieran Brown

who has talks on YouTube and has done fair recent webinars on Earthworms and other topics which can be accessed online.
Dulwich Park Boardwalk: JD enquired when the Dulwich Park boardwalk will open. EM reported there is no opening date yet as the underwater piers require a survey by specialist divers.
Merlin App: The meeting ended with some sharing of enjoyable use of the Merlin bird song app. It was suggested that downloading the Merlin App might be a recommendation to add to the e-newsletter.

Date of next meeting: Tuesday 20.8.24