

The Heart Beats On – The Wonder of Wildlife

Morgan's Field and its stretch of Cradley Brook are two beautiful natural resources. Our plans for a new Heart of the Village include enhancing and opening up both of these 'jewels' for local people to enjoy. But – it is obviously very important that such special spaces are protected. And so, in the autumn we commissioned a Habitat and Protected Species Survey – the first work we have funded as part of the Heart project.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little access to the brook within Cradley -roads cross over it and footpaths run nearby but it only runs through private land at present. We plan to enable local people to enjoy and have safe, easy access to a new 200-yard stretch of bank and stream.

We have now received a full report of the study carried out in early October by Bearwood Associates Ltd. It is full of interesting facts and photographs and the complete report can be seen on our website (www.heartofthevillage.co.uk).

Sadly, the report confirmed that there was no evidence of the presence of otter, no evidence of badger activity and no evidence of bats or reptiles, although of course it is still possible that they are around in the area. However, the survey suggested several ways we could improve the habitat for otters. These include establishing a small woodland area by the brook directly between the building and the brook which would provide more thicket cover for otter. The report also suggested mitigating tasks we could employ whilst work is taking place in order to avoid frightening potential otter visitors.

The brook itself is known to be home to the invasive foreign species The American Crayfish, which can damage river banks. It is currently not home to our native crayfish. The Environment Agency is happy for American Crayfish to be trapped in our area – and we can confirm that they are delicious cooked with butter and garlic. How about an annual village crayfish supper?

The hedges around Morgan's field are described in the report as very old and "important" hedgerows as they contain eight different woody species. Some of the hedgerow bottoms also have a very rich variety of flora. Managing the hedges to allow them to grow thicker and higher would improve the overall nesting habitat for birds. We could also allow some current hedge plants to grow up into hedgerow trees, an increasingly rare sight in local hedges.

The grassland in the field itself has been much improved over the years by fertilisers and possibly even reseeded. This in fact means that a few grass species alone are thriving but wild flowers and more unusual grass varieties are not. This "improved" grassland is a suboptimal habitat for many animals, but the good news is that a very small patch of "unimproved" grassland has been identified that has been left well alone and shows a wide variety of grasses and wild flowers. We could manage this patch of unimproved grassland so that it can expand into a larger area of wild flower meadow. This could be done by avoiding all chemicals, reducing grazing to allow the vegetation to set seed, and then spreading the seed-rich hay from this area over a larger part of the field to allow the species to expand into the "improved grassland". We could also introduce some yellow rattle seed. This is an annual flower that is semi parasitic on grass and weakens the growth of the grasses to allow the flower species to thrive. This is a long-term process but is known to work well and a species-rich wild flower meadow would improve foraging habitat for badgers, bats, reptiles and amphibians as well as being beautiful.

The lower part of the field does flood infrequently and a design for a new community building must take this into account. The proposed part of the field for the Heart shop and cafe is up by the gate and is a zone considered by the Environment Agency to be at low risk of flooding. It is only the lower half of the field by the brook itself (Flood Zones 2 and 3) that is considered to be at high flood risk. If we gain permission to build, we will need to manage surface water runoff. We are looking at this as a means to increase the environmental diversity in the field by possibly incorporating a collection area for surface water. This could have the added benefit of reducing the rate of flooding further downstream.

The trees along the brook are wonderful and some are quite old. The report suggests that a number could be coppiced to increase age variation and to increase sunlight down to some parts of the brook's banks. This would enable the ground layer of vegetation to increase and would help provide a more diverse habitat. Some old fallen wood could be left as an invertebrate and fungal heaven. We could also plant some rarer specimen trees in the field too, such as the locally important Black Poplar.

It is fascinating to see that what appears at first glance to be an entirely perfect and natural site is less than ideal and really could be enhanced and improved upon with careful management. Watch this space – or visit the website – where we will confirm the next step of the Heart Project. And please do get in touch with any one of us if you would like to volunteer to help with the future management of hedges, trees and the brook.

Alan Eldridge - 07813 543492
Wynne Harries - 01886 880976
Sarah Herriot - 01886 880146
Tracey Iwanczuk - 07834 455773

Michael Plant - 07881 304800
Holly Welford - 07468 359333
Kevin Welford - 01886 880664

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