



The Wildlife Trust for
**Birmingham &
Black Country**

Our vision for a greener future



our strategy for
2017–2022

Leading the way



The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country has been leading the way in urban conservation since 1980 when we helped to save Moseley Bog - an inspiration for JRR Tolkien and future generations.

Introduction

The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country (the Trust) is the only charity uniquely focused on protecting and enriching the habitats and wildlife of Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. This is combined with a national reach - as one of the network of 47 independent organisations which cover the whole of the UK and make up the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT)*.

Our strength is in the support of our people: members, volunteers, staff, partners and donors. More than 10,000 members and 2,000 volunteers work with us, led by our team of 19 dedicated staff and governed by our Council of trustees. Passionate about securing nature's recovery, they are all taking action for wildlife. Our members provide essential financial support enabling us to grow and deliver important habitat management and education work that would not be funded otherwise. Our members are also a voice for nature, supporting our advocacy work. For these reasons, we will grow our membership so that we can deliver more for nature. Apart from the membership, our work is funded through a mix of grants, donations, and service contracts.

Our focus is to create a 'Living Landscape' for Birmingham and the Black Country. The Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area (NIA) is our main opportunity to achieve this. Since 2012, it has galvanised people to become involved with protecting and enhancing nature. Working at a landscape-scale means protecting, improving and creating vibrant, wildlife-rich green spaces throughout the conurbation. These connect both wildlife and people to high quality natural areas, providing many benefits and contributing to mitigating the effects of climate change.

For the next generation, we aim for Birmingham and the Black Country to become recognised as a leading green region, where nature is valued by everyone and wildlife habitats are protected, restored and expanded. We have achieved many successes already, including the creation of many wildflower meadows, improved management of local woodlands and wetlands, working with volunteers to manage their local nature reserves, welcoming hundreds of thousands of people to those reserves, and engaging thousands of families and children through our education programmes.

Our 25-year vision and this strategy for 2017 – 2022 set out what needs to be done to promote nature's recovery across Birmingham and the Black Country. It shows how the Trust will prioritise our efforts and work in partnership with individuals, communities, voluntary organisations, businesses, local authorities and government agencies who all have a vital role to play in nature's recovery. We look forward to working with you all to achieve goals that will make a real difference to people and to wildlife.

Signed by:

Georgia Stokes
Chief Executive

Peter Shirley MBE
Chair of Trustees



*Together the Wildlife Trusts are creating Living Landscapes and Living Seas, whilst inspiring people to value and take action for nature. Championed by The RSWT since 2006, Living Landscapes take a landscape-scale approach to achieving a 'recovery plan for nature'. This helps to create a resilient and healthy environment rich in wildlife that is valued and protected by everyone. Collectively we manage 2,300 nature reserves, work with 300,000 young people each year, and are supported by 800,000 members. We are the local wildlife experts, using our knowledge and national perspective to provide and campaign for nature, and influence decision making for the benefit of wildlife.

The rare and special

Nature and wildlife in Birmingham and the Black Country

The landscape of Birmingham and the Black Country has a rich social, economic and natural heritage shaped by a complex history of rural, industrial, and more recent suburban and commercial land use. The wildlife is as varied and valuable as that of any other part of the United Kingdom.

The rare and the special are here, from scarce mammals like water voles and polecats to dragonflies and kingfishers, plus a huge variety of plant life, as documented in the trailblazing book 'Flora of Birmingham and the Black Country'. Adding spice to this is an astounding mix of species reflecting the many peoples and trades that have come here from around the world – for example plants grown from Argentinian seeds, and African parakeets.

The area's natural heritage includes surviving historic countryside with ancient woodland, hedgerows and unimproved grasslands, large areas of heathland and nationally important historic parks and gardens. Examples of open spaces range from Sutton Park National Nature Reserve and the Leasowes in Halesowen to the Sandwell Valley and Rowley Hills. There are also numerous 'brownfield' sites which are scattered between houses and factories, and connecting them all the network of streams, rivers and canals.

The underlying geology of Birmingham and the Black Country is remarkably complex, diverse and well recorded, and many nationally and internationally important designated sites are found here. Though frequently obscured by vegetation, many geological formations exposed by quarrying and the building of roads remain accessible, from fossil-rich limestones and ironstone nodules, to coal deposits and the remains of a volcano. These rock exposures often support scarce plant and invertebrate species that rely on their thin soils.

This rich geology supplied the raw materials for the Industrial Revolution and led to the creation of cities and towns from a scattering of pre-industrial settlements. Today, townscapes of Victorian civic buildings and large modern landmarks are home to iconic birds such as peregrine falcons and black redstarts. Many Local Wildlife Sites are concentrated along the floodplains of the rivers Stour, Tame, Cole and Rea and their tributaries. Together with the extensive canal network, including its reservoirs, these watercourses form a network linking the whole area. Since the middle of the 20th century, water quality has improved beyond expectation, and there are recent records of otters, water voles and brown trout penetrating deep into the conurbation - a demonstration of the role the waterways play in ecological recovery and connectivity.

Wildlife sites in Birmingham & the Black Country include:

- **45** Local Nature Reserves (statutory designation)
- **644** Local Sites designated for their wildlife or geological importance
- **17** Sites of Special Scientific Interest (statutory designation)
- **2** National Nature Reserves: Sutton Park and The Wren's Nest (statutory designation)
- **2** Special Areas of Conservation: Fens Pools, Dudley, and Cannock Extension Canal, Walsall (sites containing rare or threatened habitat and / or species with special protection under the EU Habitats Directive)

The rare & the special are here, from scarce mammals like water voles & polecats to dragonflies & kingfishers, plus a huge variety of plant life.

photo by Tom Marshall

New wildflower meadows

Birmingham and the Black Country is home to 131 threatened speciesⁱ, including water vole, black redstart, skylark, kestrel, slow worm, otter, a variety of bats, orchids and native bluebell. There are 22 threatened habitats, of which five are local priority habitats. These can be broadly categorised as follows.

Woodland

There are concentrations of old, ecologically diverse and historically valuable woodlands, ranging from flower-rich bluebell woodlands to wood pasture and wet woodlands found in river valleys. Although woodland cover has increased in recent decades - either through natural colonisation of abandoned land or, more often, through planting - more recent woodlands lack the diversity and ecological value of the old woodlands. They do though contribute to the ecological network, access to open spaces for people, and the development of a Living Landscape.

Heathland

Heathland is dominated by low-growing shrubs (predominantly heather species) but often also includes areas of grassland, bracken, bramble and scrub. Prior to the large-scale landscape changes of the last 200 years, large parts of Birmingham and Walsall were dominated by heathland, whilst smaller heaths were scattered throughout the area. There remain two core areas of high quality, nationally important, lowland heathland (Brownhills Common and Sutton Park) in the north and east, with smaller and more isolated relict heaths also surviving elsewhere.

Grassland

The diverse geology and land-use history of our area has given us a correspondingly diverse range of grasslands including meadows, marsh and wildlife-rich, post-industrial swards. Although these habitats have suffered more loss than most in the last few decades, there remain concentrations on the rural fringe with fragments, ribbons and patches elsewhere. Much of the conurbation's grassland is now dominated by regularly mown and species-poor 'amenity grassland', though in recent years work has started on increasing the ecological and aesthetic value of this.

Wetland corridors

A large and varied interconnected network of canals, rivers and streams reaches almost every part of Birmingham and the Black Country. This network links other habitats and often provides the best opportunity for wildlife to enter and move around the urban landscape. For a long time heavily polluted and largely ignored, significant improvements for wildlife and recreation across the canal network and on some rivers is, perhaps, the area's biggest success story - an indication of what else could be achieved.

Standing open water and wetland

Areas of standing water including lakes, reservoirs, pools and ponds vary significantly in scale and the wildlife they support. Often man-made, larger waterbodies can be important for waterfowl and wading birds, whilst smaller pools and ponds support populations of uncommon wild flowers, amphibians and invertebrates. Densely vegetated wetland habitats, including reed-bed, fenland and bog, are rare here, but where these survive they often support wildlife not found elsewhere. In some cases, this wildlife is otherwise extinct or very rare in the entire lowland midland plain.



A beautiful green-winged orchid spotted on the new meadow created in Castle Vale as part of our pioneering Nature Improvement Area (NIA) initiative.

Our greener vision for a generation

In addition to the local priority habitats we also have to take into account:

Farmland

Hedgerows – many of which are at least several hundred years old and a defining feature of the classic English rural landscape – are found in surviving relict countryside throughout the area. Even in the most built-up places old hedgerows exist along roadsides, as fragments in areas of public open space and forming boundaries of modern suburban gardens. The margins, and less often the interiors, of the arable fields and pastures that remain have a variety of wild flowers that are crucial to the survival of farmland birds, mammals and insects.

Built environment and brownfield sites

These are our speciality. People are most closely in contact with wildlife in the built environment of gardens, allotments, parks and public open spaces - the more formally managed open spaces that form an important part of the 'natural' landscape. Not only do these places allow many species to move through the urban area, but there are groups of species that specialise in making them their permanent home. Together with brownfield sites (see below) they are urban areas' special contribution to the natural environment. They bring together unique assemblages of plants and animals which develop their own characteristic ecosystems.

Brownfield sites, often disregarded as 'wasteland', can provide sometimes short-lived, but wildlife-rich habitats that frequently establish themselves on previously developed land. Such places rapidly acquire a mosaic of vegetation supporting a variety of birds and invertebrates. If they are not developed, and depending on the substrate, natural succession means that they often transform from bare ground to annual grasses and wild flowers, through tall herb and scrub to woodland.



Photo by Erik Karits

In a generation across Birmingham and the Black Country we will be internationally recognised for the quality and quantity of the conurbation's wildlife, as famous for our thriving natural environment as we are for our high quality manufacturing, enterprise and innovation. We will lead the way in demonstrating nature's essential contribution to the health, prosperity and well-being of everyone who lives and works here with all of us playing a role in protecting and improving our wild spaces.

1. Space for nature is protected, restored, created and valued.

- Our ecological network is a thriving Living Landscape, home to a wide variety of species with biodiversity restored to pre-1970's levels in core and corridor sites.
- Everyone (individuals, communities, businesses, health bodies, local and national government) recognises and celebrates the benefits they gain from a healthy natural environment and actively work to protect and restore it.
- Resources to protect, manage and improve natural spaces comes from everyone who benefits.
- Gardens and green spaces are celebrated and valued for their contribution to our health, well-being and happiness.
- The relationship between climate change and the natural world is understood by all: healthy, resilient ecosystems are recognised as an essential part of the solution.

2. Everyone is connected to nature and we are healthier and happier as a result.

- We have demonstrated the need for nature to be an integral part of the school curriculum.
- All pupils experience nature daily.
- All children benefit from the experience of regular wild play.
- Every person living and working here has access to high quality natural space within five minutes of their home or workplace and makes frequent use of this.
- People choose to move here because of the abundance of nature and the daily opportunities to connect with the natural world.

3. The natural environment is at the heart of planning, policy- and decision-making.

- All new developments have to contribute a net gain to natural capital to achieve planning permission.
- Existing and new parks, green spaces and wildlife sites are protected, and remain at the heart of our urban areas.
- All opportunities are taken to create new wildlife sites.

4. We are an effective organisation.

- We have inspired, supported and engaged everyone who benefits from a healthy natural environment to protect and improve it.
- We have sufficiently achieved our aims to integrate nature into planning, policy, education and people's lives that we no longer need to exist.

What do we mean by wildlife?

"All species including birds, mammals, invertebrates, flora, and fungi that live wild in an area."

How is that different from nature?

Nature is defined as: "Living organisms and their environment" and includes all species whether plants, fungi, or animals, including humans.

What do we mean by biodiversity?

Biodiversity means the variety and genetic make-up of plant and animal life in the world or in a particular habitat, a high level of which is usually considered to be important and desirable.

What is an ecosystem?

An ecosystem is all the living things, from plants and animals to microscopic organisms, that share an environment. Everything in an ecosystem has an important role.

What are ecosystem services?

The many services provided by the natural world – from our food and raw materials to recreation and climate regulation.

200,000 visitors a year



We welcome more than 200,000 visitors each year to the nature reserves we manage.

photo by Tom Hartland Smith

About our Wildlife Trust

The West Midlands led the country in the development of 20th Century urban nature conservation with the creation of the first Urban Wildlife Group in 1980. This group later became The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country. We have continued to develop and lead innovative projects that benefit wildlife, improve biodiversity and connect people with nature wherever they live or work in this region.

Each year, we work with more than 2,000 volunteers who donate over 40,000 hours to improving the area for people and wildlife. We engage with more than 50 schools and well over 8,000 children on our reserves and through the Nature Improvement Area. We also welcome more than 200,000 visitors each year to the nature reserves we manage. Examples of our work across Birmingham and the Black Country include the following:

The Centre of the Earth

The Trust opened Britain's first purpose-designed and built environmental education centre – surrounded by new wildlife habitats - in Winson Green in 1991. Situated between City Hospital and Winson Green Prison, and next to the Soho Loop of the Birmingham canal, the once-derelict, half-hectare site was transformed with the help of the local community into an attractive and exciting natural landscape to be used for learning and play.

Birmingham EcoPark

We have also developed EcoPark in Small Heath. This is a remarkable wildlife site, hidden amongst the houses of east Birmingham. Boasting an amazing array of habitats including wetlands, woodlands and meadows, EcoPark provides thousands of schoolchildren with the opportunity to connect with nature every year, and is the base for the Trust's Growing Local Flora project.

Nature Improvement Area/ Black Country Living Landscape

We played a pivotal role in Birmingham and the Black Country being designated as one of twelve (and the only urban) Nature Improvement Areas in 2012. Uniquely, our NIA is wholly urban and provides the opportunity to engage all of the 2.2 million people who live and work here. There are opportunities for volunteering, taking part in biological recording and monitoring, engaging with the work of the many partners, and better enjoying the area's green spaces and wildlife. The Trust leads more than 60 partners in delivering the NIA vision, and in 2015 secured continuation funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, following the first three-year period funded by DEFRA.

Paving the way for this successful initiative, we previously led the Black Country Living Landscape project. In partnership with local people and communities, we transformed access to natural green spaces and local nature reserves across this area. More than 6,000 people including schoolchildren, families and businesses were involved with nature conservation, environmental education and volunteering.

The NIA's successes include improving:

- **250** sites for nature
- **111** hectares of woodland
- **74** hectares of grassland
- **6** hectares of heathland
- **12** kilometres of wildlife corridors

Freshwater Invertebrate Network

We have established a network of 'stream champions', including teams of volunteers who monitor the quality of their local watercourse by carrying out regular freshwater wildlife surveys. This has led to them identifying major pollution incidents and engaging the polluters to restore the watercourse. Through the NIA partnership, they have been provided with training, support and mentoring.

Growing Local Flora

One of our most successful engagement projects, this has provided millions of seeds and thousands of plants to our NIA projects. Groups of volunteers visited our best ancient woodlands, collecting seeds and cuttings of species including bluebell, primrose, yellow-archangel and greater stitchwort. These once regionally common species are now restricted to the remnants of our ancient woodland network, and as poor colonisers many of them are unlikely to reach new woodlands which are isolated by the built environment. Growing Local Flora is overcoming this isolation by sowing and planting these locally sourced wild flowers that bring life to the young woodland.

Policy and advocacy

As the only nature conservation organisation solely focused on Birmingham and the Black Country, we are the local experts. We act as nature's advocate – making the case for the natural environment to be at the heart of decision-making and policy-making.

Previous achievements include producing nature conservation strategies for all the local authorities in our area. Today the Trust provides the secretariat for the Birmingham and Black Country Local Nature Partnership (LNP), which covers the same geographical area as the NIA. The LNP brings together different sectors to achieve benefits for nature and for people living and working here. One key target is that every person living and working in Birmingham and the Black Country will have access to natural green space within five minutes (300 m) of their home and workplace.

We also help to host the Tame, Anker and Mease Catchment Partnership which, at a catchment level, explores better ways of engaging with people and organisations in ways that can make a difference to the health of all our waters and habitats.



The Global Context

In addition to our national role through the Wildlife Trust movement, our work contributes to regional, national and international plans for the restoration and protection of nature. The delivery of this strategy will support global efforts to achieving the 'Aichi Biodiversity Targets' (from the UN Secretariat on Biological Diversity) which are the basis for 'The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011 – 2020: A ten-year framework for action by all countries and stakeholders to save biodiversity and enhance its benefits for people:

- Addressing the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.
- Reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use.
- Improve the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity.
- Enhance the benefits to all from biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- Enhance implementation through participatory planning, knowledge management and capacity building.



Our strategy for nature's recovery: 2017 – 2022

Our vision is for Birmingham and the Black Country to have more wildlife, more wild places and more people with a strong connection to the natural world every year.

Our mission is that, recognising the importance of our unique natural heritage, shaped by local history, we will protect and restore the natural environment by:

- leading by example, demonstrating what is possible in an urban area to protect and create wildlife-rich accessible natural spaces.
- connecting everyone with nature, recognising that we all - individuals, communities, local authorities and businesses - have a vital role to play in nature's recovery.
- championing the natural environment, inspiring, challenging and influencing people to stand up for nature.
- working in partnerships to achieve the best results for nature.
- using data, monitoring and evidence to inform our priorities and decision-making, and to measure our impact.

Our values

- We believe that human beings are part of nature.
- Contact with the natural world is a universal right.
- Our well-being depends on nature.
- Wildlife and wild places are valuable in their own right.
- We believe that we must all work together to enable the natural world to recover on land and at sea.
- Change for the better starts at home.
- United we stand, divided we fall.

Goals

1. **Space for nature is protected, restored, created and valued.**
2. **Everyone is connected to nature.**
3. **The natural environment is at the heart of planning, policy- and decision-making.**
4. **We are an effective organisation.**

Goal 1: Space for nature is protected, restored, created and valued

Context

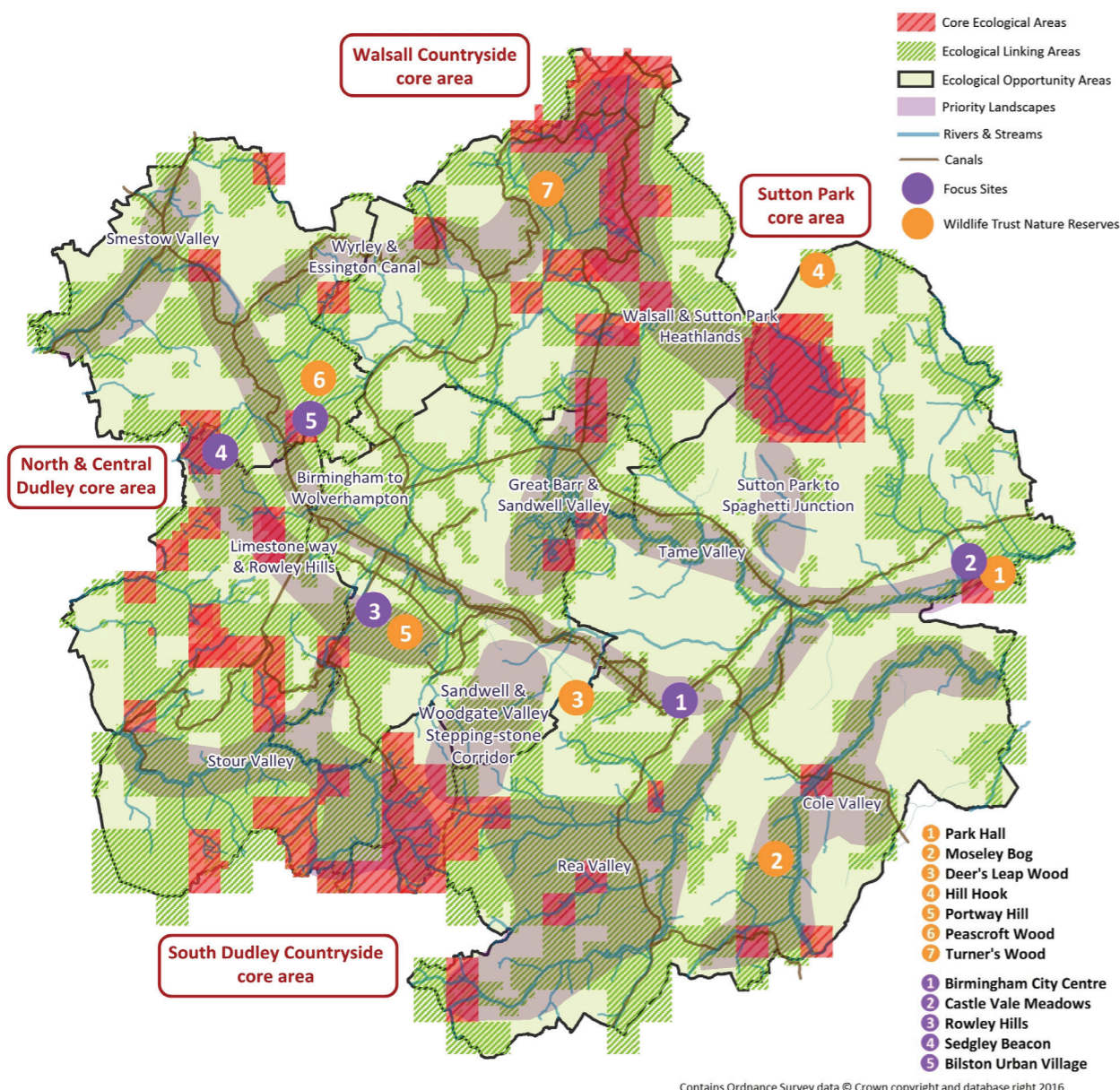
Wildlife is in trouble – globally animal populations are roughly half the size they were 40 years agoⁱⁱ, 56% of all UK species are in declineⁱⁱⁱ and precious habitats such as wildflower meadows have been nearly wiped out, with only 3% remaining of those we had in the 1930s^{iv}.

Evidence from the UK shows that while there have been some successes, such as the recovery of otters, peregrine falcons and some bat species, there continues to be a dramatic decline in biodiversity, the quality of habitats, the population and status of many species, and the overall 'health' of the natural environment.

To reverse this decline, we need to think differently. Nationally, The Wildlife Trusts' collective response has been to enlarge the focus from individual sites and 'biodiversity hotspots' to the more comprehensive 'Living Landscapes' approach, which evidence shows is essential for nature's recovery. The ambition is to create strong, resilient and ecologically diverse landscapes where people live their everyday lives. Our Living Landscape is the NIA, and this ambition will be delivered through its ecological strategy, built on evidence collected over the last 15 years^v.

Informed by this strategy, we have a plan for Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton to support a healthy population of people and wildlife.

Our Nature Improvement Area Ecological Strategy



Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2016

The map represents the Ecological Strategy for Birmingham and the Black Country and allocates all parts of the landscape to one of three broad categories:

- The **'Core Ecological Areas'** are the places that are richest in wildlife. As might be expected, these include the parts of our landscape least affected by urban development – such as Sutton Park and the countryside in Walsall and Dudley - but it also includes areas where wildlife has reclaimed sites that were once at the heart of industry.
- Joining together the Core Areas and the wider landscape are **'Ecological Linking Areas'**. These include the majority of our remaining natural and semi-natural open spaces where many of the more frequently encountered species and habitats exist - often very close to people. Much of this part of the network is concentrated around key wildlife corridors including the extensive system of rivers, streams and canals.
- Outside of the Core areas and Ecological Linking Areas lie the **'Ecological Opportunity Areas'**. These are the most intensively used parts of the landscape where the green space is dominated by formal parks, public open spaces, gardens, road verges and productive farmland.

Using the mapping to prioritise action, for each broad category a priority for targeting biodiversity action has been identified:

1. Protect Core Ecological Areas through engagement with the planning system, advocacy, supporting land-owners to manage land sympathetically, and encouraging sustainable land-use.
2. Enhance Ecological Linking Areas by restoring habitats and improving existing sites.
3. Create new sites in Ecological Opportunity Areas that together form networks of sites that allow wildlife to move through the most developed parts of the conurbation.

Wildlife Trust priority landscapes and focus sites

Working with our partner organisations, the Wildlife Trust has used the Ecological Strategy mapping to identify locations where we will prioritise the development of new Nature Improvement Area projects. These Focus Sites and Priority Landscapes, along with our own nature reserves, are the current focus of our ecological improvement work.

“Over 40% of priority habitats and 30% of priority species were still declining in the most recent analysis. Eight priority species were lost entirely from the UK between 2002 and 2008.”

- Biodiversity 2020: A Strategy for England's Wildlife and Ecosystem Services, p.9



We have five aims for restoring nature across the entire ecological network. They are that:

1. Spaces for wildlife will be protected and managed to high standards. We will:

- manage our own sites as exemplars for nature conservation: our own nature reserves will be managed to a high standard for biodiversity, demonstrating the potential of urban sites. These sites will set quality standards for public access and engagement.
- work in partnership: maintaining current, and develop new, relationships, linking with the priorities and initiatives of others and working in partnership to deliver our vision of a Living Landscape.
- target where we work: continuing to prioritise activity and focus our efforts where they will have most impact. Projects will be selected for their contribution to the ecological network, current or potential biodiversity value, threats they face and benefit to people. Existing priority landscapes and sites are shown on the Ecological Strategy map.

2. More natural spaces will be created. We will:

- continue to work with landowners, community groups and businesses to identify opportunities and create natural spaces for people and wildlife. We will support our partners, developing their skills and knowledge with advice and training, to manage these spaces to high standards.
- influence planning decisions and new developments to secure the creation of natural spaces.

3. We will connect all wild spaces with wildlife corridors:

- by creating a Living Landscape through enhancing wildlife corridors and creating new 'stepping stone' corridors - joining up new and existing wildlife sites throughout our area.

4. We will take measures to reverse species decline:

- by creating a resilient ecological network. In Birmingham and the Black Country, there are 131 threatened species, including great crested newt, white-clawed crayfish, black redstart and water vole (see p6). Our habitat protection, enhancement and creation work is vital to the survival of these priority species.

5. Science and evidence will underpin all our work:

- a good evidence base is an essential element of delivering the strategy effectively. It helps us make sure we are doing the right thing in the right place, using our resources effectively and focusing on action that will have the most impact.

Climate change and sustainability

Climate change poses new challenges to wildlife. We need strong ecological networks which provide conditions to adapt, resilience to change and an opportunity to spread. Climate change is resulting in unpredictable weather with more storms, heavier rainfall, and longer dry periods. These conditions put more pressure on wildlife, habitats and people. Protecting special wildlife sites (core areas) is not enough, some species will be unable to adapt unless there are suitable habitats in the landscape for them to move into and fewer barriers. People need to adapt too, reducing our impact on the environment through sustainable living choices, and preparing for intense and unpredictable weather patterns. By creating strong, resilient ecosystems we can increase the ability of the environment to protect us from flooding and to soak up carbon dioxide, helping Birmingham and the Black Country adapt to the future.

Goal 2: Everyone is connected to nature

Context:

People are the key to nature's recovery. We need nature yet we are increasingly disconnected from our natural environment. At the end of the 20th century, almost 90% of the UK population lived in towns and cities. The pressures of urban living often mean that we pay little attention to the natural environment and have limited access to good quality natural space. As Sir David's quote below makes clear, we don't value things we haven't experienced. Despite the large body of evidence that proves healthy people and a healthy economy rely on a healthy natural environment, nature remains undervalued.

As nature becomes apparently less significant to our lives we value it less and do not look after it. As a result, the quality of our natural environment declines, and as it declines it becomes even less significant to us. It is vital that we reverse this disconnect with nature, both for our own sakes and to aid nature's recovery. This must start with the children of Birmingham and the Black Country.

We are part of the Wildlife Trusts' national campaign, Every Child Wild. We believe that every child has the right to:

- explore the natural world near where they live.
- develop a personal connection with nature from an early age.
- live within safe walking distance of a local green space.
- learn about our total reliance on nature at school.

“No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.”

— Sir David Attenborough

What is the Wild Schools Network?

Collectively, The 47 Wildlife Trusts in the UK are the biggest provider of environmental education in the country. In Birmingham and the Black Country, we work with more than 8,000 pupils each year.

The Wild Schools Network will build on this success while recognising that schools are a major landowner in our urban areas. We will continue to deliver fun, engaging, inspiring environmental education at our sites, and in school groups basing our work on the NIA principles, with the result that pupils are able to develop projects that improve their own school sites for the benefit of wildlife.



The thrill of finding a worm at Peascroft Wood!

The benefits of experiencing nature aren't just felt by children, access to wild spaces is essential for health and happiness in general. Research shows that living within a kilometre of a green space reduces the risk of 15 major illnesses, particularly anxiety and depression^{vi} (one in four people will develop a mental illness at some point in their life).

For every £1 spent on establishing healthy walking schemes, the NHS could save £7.18 from the cost of treating conditions such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

If every household in England were provided with good access to high quality green space it could save an estimated £2.1 billion in health care costs.

— *Our Natural Health Service: The Role of the Natural Environment in Maintaining Healthy Lives, Natural England 2009.*

Engaging with the 2.2 million people who live in our area will help to achieve our aim of creating a healthy, resilient ecological network supporting a healthy population of people and wildlife. To succeed we must raise the profile of nature and wildlife, communicate with diverse communities and accept the challenge of engaging with people who feel less connected to nature. We must listen to people to find out how they value the natural environment, and find ways to involve everyone in their local wild spaces.

We need to understand, and help to overcome, the barriers people face in accessing nature. We have to find ways to connect people and nature, recognising the interdependence between ourselves and the natural world.



Four ways of valuing nature

1. Intrinsic value that appeals to people's morals and ethics, and the sense that nature has value in and of itself, which humans have a duty to recognise and champion.
2. Emotional value that stems from people's emotional response either to nature as a whole, or to individual aspects of it (such as particular places, trees, forests, dormice, seabird colonies, badgers or water voles), or to its various cultural manifestations (art, music, literature and folk tales).
3. Societal value that stems from the practical benefits that nature brings to people in their daily lives – through improved health and well-being, increased pleasure and enjoyment, enhanced personal development and education, protection from flood, drought and famine, strengthened local communities, cultural expression and cohesion.
4. Financial value and economic worth, stemming from the other values and manifesting itself in goods and services, such as food, timber and tourism, with a monetary value, many of which (though not all) can be traded, either directly or indirectly.

We have five aims for connecting people with nature. They are that:

1. Every child regularly experiences nature: we will work with families and schools to make sure the next generation grows up connected to the natural world. We will identify barriers to a natural childhood and work to remove these by providing a wide range of opportunities for children, including through the development of the Wild Schools Network. In addition, we will provide events, activities, wild play days and Wildlife Watch groups. We will maintain and develop our environmental education programmes and centres, and work with education providers to integrate wildlife and nature into mainstream learning.

2. More people will take action for nature and sustainable living: we will inspire and provide opportunities for people to enjoy, learn about and take action to sustain nature. These will include opportunities for everyone to be involved with us through volunteering, membership, championing the natural world and sustainable living, monitoring and surveying, and events and activities. We will provide advice, for example on wildlife gardening, and how to make everyday choices that benefit the natural environment.

3. There will be an increase in visitors to natural spaces: we will encourage visits to high quality, wildlife-rich areas and green spaces. People will be inspired and encouraged to visit them, and benefit from experiencing nature at first hand. To help with this, we will offer a wide ranging programme of events for both members and the general public.

4. Everyone will have the skills to care for nature: we will enable communities, businesses, schools and individuals to create and manage their own natural spaces by offering skills training, information and support.

5. We will share nature's stories: through sharing engaging stories our communications will inspire and involve people with the natural world. We will use all appropriate media and social networks, and continue to be inclusive and interactive.



Goal 3: The natural environment is at the heart of planning, policy- and decision-making

Context

Whatever our values or connection with nature, the reality is that our natural spaces have to compete against the values placed by communities, politicians, planners, developers and businesses on housing, roads, employment, land, other infrastructure, and food production. As populations increase so do the pressures on land use: space for nature decreases along with its benefits, and habitats decline resulting in a loss of biodiversity. Unprecedented growth and development is forecast in the conurbation, with plans for this to continue for the next 25 years and more.

The population of Birmingham and the Black Country exceeds 2 million people and is expected to rise dramatically. Birmingham's population is forecast to grow at a rate of 12% until 2032, resulting in an increase of more than 150,000 people. To account for this, Birmingham City Council is planning to build in excess of 50,000 new homes. The Black Country expects a population growth of over 60,000 in the same period with a need for at least 40,000 new homes. The acute need for new houses and infrastructure brings increased pressure on nature and wildlife.

Both the Greater Birmingham and Solihull, and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnerships prioritise:

- growing the economy, encouraging investment and businesses to the area
- job creation and increasing the skills base
- building new homes
- physical connectivity through improved transport networks

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and the devolution deal for the West Midlands continue these four themes:

“All areas will benefit, be they areas for new employment, those that will benefit from new jobs or skills training, areas for new homes or places that will be better connected.”

While each of these focus areas has the potential to cause further decline in biodiversity, the contribution of the natural environment to each is integral to their success. In addition to providing physical resources, evidence shows that proximity to nature results in multiple benefits including:

- higher property values
- healthier environments in which to live and work
- natural solutions to water management and energy efficiency
- improved air quality
- a happier and more productive work force
- a reduction in maintenance costs
- a greater sense of community (with access to public spaces)
- increased physical activity reducing health risks
- reduced carbon emissions as people are able to move through a town or city more easily

“Homes that are adjacent to naturalistic parks and open spaces are valued at 8-20% higher than comparable properties, with the positive price effect declining to near zero about ½ mile away.”

- Evaluation of research compiled by University of Washington citing Crompton, J.L. 2001. Parks and Economic Development. PAS Report No. 502. American Planning Association, Chicago, Illinois.



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We will continue to protect our core ecological sites through our advocacy work and seek to gain new sites for biodiversity wherever possible. We know that development will happen. We plan to influence developments to achieve the best possible outcome for nature. To achieve this, we will campaign on behalf of wildlife and the natural capital benefits which underpin our entire existence.

We have five aims to ensure that the natural environment is at the heart of planning, policy- and decision-making. They are that:

- 1. We will be recognised as the primary advocate for biodiversity and the natural environment:** through our advocacy, strategy and policy engagement, and partnership and stakeholder working, we will achieve long term and landscape-scale gains for the natural environment, developing a natural capital approach and framework.
- 2. All new infrastructure and developments will provide a net gain for biodiversity:** we will work to ensure that space for nature is a vital part of all planning policies and practices. In particular, we will seek to influence developments to minimise loss to wildlife and achieve net gains for the natural environment.
- 3. We will successfully make the case for nature:** using evidence from research, case studies and monitoring, which demonstrates the importance of resilient ecological networks, and the contributions that natural assets make to people's lives and prosperity.
- 4. 'Nature champions' will be created to advocate for the natural environment at all levels of decision-making:** we will support people to develop their skills and confidence, and create the opportunities to influence the planning system and proposed developments. This will include our staff, trustees, volunteers, trainees and members.
- 5. The contribution of the natural environment and impacts on wildlife will be central to spatial planning and policy:** we will continue to lead the creation of a shared vision for the area's ecological network that will be integrated into planning and policy documents at all levels (Local Enterprise Partnerships, WMCA and local authorities). We will work in partnership to achieve maximum impact, supporting and leading, where appropriate, initiatives including the Local Nature Partnership, catchment management plans and Nature Improvement Area.

What is natural capital?

Natural capital is the stock of natural assets such as geology, soil, air, water and all living things. From this stock we derive a wide range of services, often called ecosystem services, which make human life possible.

“England's natural capital – the elements of the natural environment which provide valuable goods and services to people such as clean air, clean water, food and recreation – is in long-term decline. Successive “natural capital deficits” have built up a large natural capital debt and this is proving costly to our wellbeing and the economy. If economic growth is to be sustained, natural capital has to be safeguarded.”

- Natural Capital Committee, Second Report to the Economic Affairs Committee.



photo by Tom Hartland Smith



Goal 4: We are an effective organisation

Context

Our strategy is ambitious but considering the scale of the global decline in biodiversity, success is essential.

To achieve our goals, we must be an effective, robust and resilient organisation with an increased profile and a sustainable financial base. Our reputation, and the trust which our stakeholders invest in us, are essential to our success. We will be accountable, transparent and effective in all our work. We will continue to develop a culture where our staff, trustees and volunteers uphold our values.

We will invest in supporting and developing our staff and volunteers to grow our skills base, and create the environmental leaders of the future.

Our governance will ensure that we comply with all regulations, risk is effectively managed, and decisions are made in a timely and transparent manner. Our processes and policies will be fit for purpose and will comply with all relevant good practice measures. The Trust will be governed by a board of trustees recruited for their complementary mix of skills and experience. Robust financial systems will enable us to operate both efficiently and effectively.

We will build long-term mutually beneficial relationships with our supporters and communicate effectively with them. They are the lifeblood of the Trust.

We will continue to develop new and existing partnerships and provide support wherever we can to inspire, enable and engage communities, individuals, businesses and organisations to protect the natural environment. We will listen to them to ensure our work towards shared goals meets their needs and expectations. To increase our support, we must clearly evidence the impact of our work and raise the profile of the Trust.

We have six aims to ensure that we are an effective organisation. They are that:

- 1. We will be financially sustainable and independent:** we will reduce our reliance on grant funding, developing sustainable funding sources that support the achievement of this strategy. We seek to increase our profile, improve services to members, and build relationships to attract new supporters.
- 2. The home of our Wildlife Trust will be a home for wildlife:** we will move our main operations to a site where people can experience and connect with nature, and we showcase what is possible in an urban area.
- 3. We will be effective guardians of all our resources:** making the best use of all our resources by making careful choices regarding buildings and assets to get best value for money. We will seek to minimise our overheads to ensure our supporters' money is spent on achieving outcomes for nature.
- 4. We will be focused and effective:** our work will be targeted, evidence-based, and our impacts will be monitored. We will annually report on our key achievements and compare to previous years to demonstrate progress. The milestone report will be published along with our annual report. Our plans will be revised to achieve the best outcomes for nature and to achieve this strategy. Everyone will work to aligned and agreed objectives in the development plan that will be derived from this strategy.
- 5. Our people will feel valued:** all of our people will be supported, valued and developed to achieve the best outcomes for them and for nature. We will invest time and resources into supporting our staff, volunteers and the communities we work with, to increase their skills and connect people with each other.
- 6. Our membership of the national network of Wildlife Trusts will help us to achieve a greater impact for nature:** we will work with other trusts, locally and nationally, to achieve the best outcomes for our area's wildlife, to support the creation of Living Landscapes and Living Seas across the UK and contributing to the knowledge, learning and growth of The Wildlife Trusts movement.

To work with us or find out more about our approach, our strategy and how you can get involved please get in touch.

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Front cover – Broad-bodied chaser dragonfly by Vicky Nall • Two kingfishers by Jon Hawkins • Polecat by Elliott Neep.
Back page – Girl in bluebells by Tom Marshall • Kingfisher in flight by Malcolm Brown • Yellow rattle by Philip Precey • Oak bracket fungus by Andy Slater • Hedgehog by Tom Marshall

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