

EXPLORING ST GEORGE 6th SEPTEMBER 2015

INTRODUCTION

This brief report summarises the conclusions of a walk organised by Friends of Troopers Hill around several open spaces in St George, which had the aims of identifying areas of nature conservation value and identifying means by which these spaces could be enhanced.

None of the spaces was found to be of high nature conservation value, but all had some features of interest. In particular the grassland in all of the spaces was found to be species poor. This indicates that the underlying soil fertility in all cases is high and that measures to create species-rich grassland would not be possible without significant works. Other measures should therefore be considered.

In assessing the potential for enhancement it has been borne in mind that these sites do not exist in isolation: they form a significant network of open spaces that also form ecological connections with private gardens and other wildlife habitats. Perhaps the most significant contribution that they make, and can be enhanced, is towards ecological continuity in the wider area. There are, for example, important sites to the south along the River Avon and to the north along the River Frome. Maintenance of viable populations of many species in relatively small sites such as these requires movement between the different areas. Small sites that cannot sustain permanent populations of many species can be key to any such movement. By allowing animals to move through urban areas small public spaces also benefit wildlife in private gardens, for example by allowing more birds to visit feeders and more pollinating insects to exploit nectar sources.

Blocks of annual planting were viewed in several places. The success of these in attracting pollinating insects was obvious, with a variety of hoverflies, other flies, bees and wasps visiting flowers in large numbers. As a general rule these blocks might be even more useful if they are sited close to other features such as blocks of scrub, patches of tall grassland and log piles as some species of insect are unwilling to cross inhospitable habitat such as mown grassland.

At any of the sites provision of dead wood would be beneficial. Dead wood is valuable for a wide range of wildlife, notably insects and fungi. As a general rule the larger the size of the wood the better and provision in a variety of positions – shade, open sun, semi-buried – increases the diversity of microhabitats and species. The range of dead wood habitats that can be valuable includes tree trunks used as informal play equipment.

Another feature that can be valuable in most settings is tall grassland, even if this is not botanically diverse. The most valuable areas are close to other habitats, such as scrub or trees, and in sunlight.

Some site-specific notes are as follows:

Hudds Vale: The main features of note here were the standard trees planted into the grassland. The variety of lichens and mosses that these support and the difference between communities on different trees was explored. It was noted that although most of the trees are not native species they are mostly closely related to native species and support a similar range of invertebrates, specifically leaf-mining moths.

Plummers Hill: A variety of habitats is present here, including scrub and dead wood in an overgrown orchard, nectar meadows and tall grassland. Several native plant species are colonising the meadows; in future years these will need to be rotated in order to open up the bare soil upon which plants such as corn marigold depend. During the winter the seeds provided by these areas are likely to be attractive to birds such as goldfinch and greenfinch.

Meadow Vale: This is one of the sites where linking nectar meadows to other habitats such as the hedges on the edge of the site might be worthwhile.

Rodney Road: The large trees are impressive features here. There are opportunities for hedge planting on the site boundaries and allowing the existing hedges to expand would also be valuable. It would be beneficial to encourage greater public use of the space.

Primrose Lane: The nectar planting here is particularly impressive.

Colebrook Road: Relaxed management of the margins here has allowed large patches of bramble to grow. These provide habitat for birds and insects as well as a foraging opportunity for local people and security to adjacent properties. Bramble scrub is an under-rated habitat and most sites would benefit from tolerance of this species.