

Habitat Action Plan

Parks, Squares & Amenity Grassland



“ ‘It’s so green...You can walk right across the centre of town through the three royal parks – St James’s Park, Green Park, Hyde Park – and your shoes never touch anything but green, green grass. Do you know how far that is?’ ‘A mile or so’, I guessed. ‘It’s four miles’, she said. ‘Four miles of flowers, trees and green! In the heart of one of the biggest cities on the planet!’” (Parsons, 1999)

1. Aims

- To raise awareness of the importance of parks, squares and amenity grassland in the conservation of London’s biodiversity.
- To encourage good conservation practice in parks, squares and amenity grassland across London, working alongside and through existing cultures and traditions.
- To encourage the enjoyment of wildlife and landscape in parks squares and amenity grassland by all Londoners.

2. Introduction

2.1 General

Parks, squares and other public green spaces are immensely important to city dwellers, in providing an opportunity to spend time out of doors, but near their homes or place of

work, in contact with the natural world. This includes both the broader aspects such as landscape, skyline, fresh air and open water, and nature itself as represented by birds, trees, butterflies and wild flowers.

Parks are, by definition, open spaces that are managed primarily for human enjoyment rather than specifically for nature conservation. Nonetheless, in an increasingly urbanised society, where the expansion of the city means that true countryside becomes ever more distant, and what little countryside remains around the urban fringe has often lost much of its wildlife interest, parks increasingly symbolise pockets of countryside in town. Thus they can help to meet the need for the psychological and even spiritual fulfillment which can be gained by contact with nature. For most park users this will fit alongside other benefits such as meeting friends, taking children to a playground, playing sports, exercising the dog, attending social or cultural activities, or simply enjoying a health-giving walk in pleasant surroundings.

However, parks also serve as an ecological resource in their own right. For example, they help to sustain populations of birds such as robin, chaffinch, and great spotted woodpecker in London. Two Priority Species for Action in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan – song thrush and spotted flycatcher – breed in some parks and squares and similar historic gardens. Bats such as pipistrelle and noctule occur in some parks, especially those with a wide expanse of open water. Hedgehogs survive in some parks even close to the city centre.

The range of wildlife in any park depends partly on how it is managed. How far this resource is enjoyed by Londoners depends partly on the efforts of the parks staff and others in promoting the natural interest, and also on issues such as accessibility, i.e. whether people feel safe enough or welcome to explore what is on offer.

This Habitat Action Plan is being developed at a time when increasing concern is being expressed at the state of Britain's public parks, following financial cut backs over many years. In the Urban White Paper *'Our towns and cities'* the Government has expressed a commitment to the value of parks in urban communities and the need for improved management, increased funding and new ideas to meet life styles in the 21st century society. It has set up an Urban Green Spaces Task Force to investigate the important issues. The Greater London Authority's Green Spaces Investigative Committee has produced a *'Scrutiny of Green Spaces in London.'* The Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy seeks to protect and improve green spaces and wildlife habitat in London and to promote access to nature, especially in parts of London which have least on offer. It is appropriate for this Habitat Action Plan to play its part in ensuring that ecology, nature conservation and opportunities for people to enjoy the natural world are on the agenda for London's parks.

2.2. Scope of plan

This Action Plan is concerned with parks, squares and amenity grassland. It also includes the south London Metropolitan Commons, Clapham, Wandsworth and Tooting Bec. It does not cover the older, former wood pasture parks on the outskirts of London, for example Richmond Park, or those which contain special habitats such as the acid grassland on Wimbledon Common, or the recently created country parks. It ranges from large parks such as Regent's Park (102 ha) down to small local parks and 'pocket parks'

which may be less than 0.1 ha in area. It includes both private and public garden squares, but not paved squares such as Trafalgar Square. Also included open green spaces around housing estates and hospitals. It aims to work in a holistic way, looking at the whole range of management, from landscape design, planting schemes, pest control and security issues, through to the creation and management of specific wildlife areas. It seeks to facilitate improvements in habitat for wildlife whilst also enhancing the experience for people.

3. Current Status

A sample of aerial photographs of Greater London in 1981, analysed by the former London Ecology Unit, suggested that parks comprise about 8% (12,000 ha) of London's land area; with sports pitches making up 3% (5 000 ha) and grounds of schools and other institutions 1.5% (2 500 ha). However, some sports land has been lost since that time.

Most parks were created primarily as ornamental gardens offering opportunities for public recreation, including a range of outdoor activities. Some have an earlier history as Royal Deer parks, for example Hyde Park, others as common land such as Clapham Common and some were acquired by local authorities from former country estates. Many were created during the Victorian era to counteract the effects of overcrowding and poor environment in an ever-expanding city.

In the past, landscape management tended to have a formal quality, often featuring elaborate flower planting, immaculate lawns and built features such as summer houses, fountains and bandstands. Cost-cutting has led to deterioration in the quality and detail of formal landscapes. Over a similar period greater public interest has developed in the natural aspects of parks together with their associated wildlife.

This Action Plan seeks to enhance the wildlife habitat in parks alongside other initiatives to restore parks to a better condition for the benefit of wildlife and people.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Cost

Parks have long been subject to severe financial constraints, especially since the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) and more recently Best Value. This has major implications for all aspects of management, including ecology. For example, funds may not be available for new mowing machinery suitable for wildflower meadows; cost cutting on flowerbed management may involve use of herbicides which in turn affect wildlife. Cost-cutting on staff reduces the opportunity for new ideas.

4.2 Contract specification problems

These are a key issue, for example how to define shrubbery management which maintains tidiness where necessary but allows accumulation of leaf litter, plus associated invertebrates and cover for hedgehogs. The time scale for contracts may be

a disincentive for introducing new ideas. It may be difficult to incorporate flexibility to enable fine-scale 'tweaking' as habitats evolve, or to accommodate the needs of nesting birds.

4.3 Training

There is a need for training in ecologically sensitive management, including the impact of traditional gardening on wildlife, as well as habitat creation and management. For example, to design a mowing regime for wild flower meadows which encourages butterflies, it is necessary to have detailed knowledge of butterfly life cycles. Equally important is the need for training of operative staff employed by contractors: much practical work is currently carried out by people with little or no training in horticulture let alone nature conservation. High staff turnover can exacerbate this problem.

4.4 Pressure for increased use

Parks are under pressure to increase levels of use. To the extent that this means more people benefiting from the natural world, this is to be applauded. Nonetheless, there are implications for wildlife, for example disturbance to nesting birds and the need to take account of the requirements of ground feeding birds. Major events, which may include loud music and fireworks, are likely to have ecological implications, but scientific data is generally lacking.

4.5 Pesticides

There is a lack of adequate information about these chemicals. For example, we do not yet have results of research into whether molluscicides are involved in the recent decline in the song thrush. Effects may be complex, for example herbicides may reduce the supply of weed seeds for house sparrow and chaffinch, and they may also affect soil organisms.

4.6 The need for tidiness and desire for formal landscapes

A potential conflict exists between management of historic landscapes and formal flower displays and the needs of wildlife. A balanced approach is needed, which provides more natural areas away from the most important locations for formal design. Even within formal areas, appropriate structure planting can provide good habitat for birds.

4.7 Public perception of natural habitats

Natural areas of woodland and scrub may be associated in the public eye with feelings of insecurity, especially for women and people on their own. Long grass may appear to be uncared for and may accumulate litter. Introducing new ideas incrementally, with good consultation and interpretation at each stage can help to gain public support.

4.8 Sports developments

Modernisation of sports facilities can change the character of parks. For example, a change to all weather pitches removes feeding habitat for blackbirds and thrushes. Floodlighting may also affect wildlife: whilst some birds make use of lit up areas to extend their feeding day, other species may be adversely affected, including certain bats. The

issue is complex and not fully understood. Conversely, by increasing the capacity of dedicated sports pitches, the pressure of games elsewhere may be reduced.

There is also pressure for built development on sports fields. Loss of outdoor facilities to sports halls, health clubs and other indoor facilities inevitably impacts on landscape and biodiversity. Private under-used sites are particularly at risk.

4.9 Dogs

Dog waste is a public health issue, and can also affect the flora through its effect on soil chemistry. People who exercise dogs can increase disturbance to birds. Conversely, dog walkers help to ensure a park is well occupied, hence improving security.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

None of the parks covered in this plan is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. However, several of them include areas which have been designated as Local Nature Reserves.

Parks may also be designated as non-statutory Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. Those which carry the greatest ecological interest are Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation: examples include all the Central Royal Parks and Tooting Bec Common. Further down the scale many other parks and some squares are recognised as Sites of Borough or Local Importance for Nature Conservation. Some parks form part of Green Corridors or Green Chains.

The planning status of individual parks and squares is set out in the borough Unitary Development Plans. Most boroughs include policy statements for protecting the natural interest of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. However, a majority of parks and squares do not have this status and therefore do not carry such protection.

Many larger open spaces are protected from built development by Metropolitan Open Land or Green Belt status, and some boroughs include nature conservation as one of the purposes of Metropolitan Open Land. Many historic gardens and squares are listed in a register of historic landscapes maintained by English Heritage. Local Planning Authorities are required to consult English Heritage regarding developments which could affect these sites. In addition, most, but not all, London squares are also protected under the London Squares Act, 1931. Other planning designations which offer site protection through recognition of important landscapes include Conservation Areas or Areas of Special Character.

5.2 Mechanisms Targeting the Habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 A by-product of traditional management

Before the recent rise in interest in urban wildlife conservation, most of the natural history interest in parks and squares occurred largely as a by-product of traditional management. For example, tree planting and shrubbery designed for people also proved

to be attractive to birds; wide lawns provided feeding grounds for blackbird and mistle thrush, and corners of undisturbed undergrowth supported populations of hedgehog.

5.2.2 Management and habitat creation for wildlife

Over the past few years there has been an increase in practical initiatives to improve the wildlife habitat in parks. One of the first was in 1976 on Cannon Hill Common, where LB Merton allowed an area of amenity grass to grow into a wild flower meadow, resulting in the re-appearance of many interesting wild flowers and grasses. Westminster City Council has introduced a colourful cornfield annual display in place of bare amenity turf near the A40 flyover at Westbourne Green. Native tree and shrub planting has been undertaken by LB Hackney on Hackney Marshes, offering new habitat for birds. This Action Plan seeks to promote more such initiatives across London.

5.2.3 Interpretation and ranger service

Some boroughs, for example Ealing and Southwark, have well-developed ranger services, offering guided walks, leaflets, and public events. The service is popular with the public, since staff interact with visitors, improving both information and perceived security. Environmental education centres have been established in some parks, such as the Nature Study Centre on Wandsworth Common and the Look Out Centre in Hyde Park. However, provision varies greatly from borough to borough.

5.2.4 Survey and Monitoring

Most of London's parks and squares have been the subject to habitat survey, starting with the 1984 Wildlife Habitat Survey, and followed up by more detailed surveys in some boroughs.

Monitoring of specific animal groups has been undertaken in a few parks, particularly for birds. There is a long running record of bird life in the Central Royal Parks, and the Royal Parks Agency has recently embarked on a Biological Recording Programme to integrate all wildlife data into a Recorder-based system. Detailed surveys for many different kinds of animals and plants have been undertaken over many years in the adjoining gardens of Buckingham Palace. Bird monitoring through the Common Birds Census and more recently Standard Bird Walks has been undertaken in a few parks. Wandsworth and Southwark boroughs have begun to collect data on open spaces under their respective management. The British Trust for Ornithology's Birds in London's Parks survey will be starting in spring 2002. The rolling programme of habitat survey under the Mayor of London's Biodiversity Strategy will deliver statistics on the habitat resource and measure changes over time, but more work is needed to monitor species trends.

Another important aspect of monitoring is people's attitudes to parks, as in the 'Welcome Audits' promoted by University College of London. Since one of the aims of this Action Plan is to improve people's enjoyment of wildlife and landscape in parks, it is important not to lose sight of this issue.

5.2.5 "Friends of..." groups

Many Authorities now encourage the formation of 'Friends of...' groups. These can promote commitment to parks, campaign against threats, and encourage volunteer

participation. Potentially they could also be a source of volunteers for habitat enhancement, a sounding board for new proposals and a means to keep in touch with communities.

6. Flagship species

These special plants and animals are characteristic of parks, squares and/or amenity grassland in London.

Oxeye daisy	<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	Attractive brightly coloured daisy, attractive to insects.
Buttercups	<i>Ranunculus</i> spp.	Bulbous buttercup -An early flowering buttercup, grows in less intensively managed lawns. Meadow buttercup grows in areas of longer grass.
Lady's bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>	Occurs in old lawns in central London and is often a sign of a long history as a garden.
Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Found in parks and gardens with a diversity of small and large trees.
Robin	<i>Erithecus rubecula</i>	Popular with the public, associated with shrubberies and woodland areas of parks and squares.
Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomenos</i>	National BAP species, in serious decline both nationally and regionally.
House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	The Cockney sparrer was once a familiar sight in London's parks, but now is sadly in decline.
Bumble bees	<i>Bombus</i> spp	Found foraging for nectar in flowerbeds.
Holly blue butterfly	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	Small butterfly breeding mainly on holly and ivy, but also uses some other shrubs. Occurs in squares.
Meadow brown butterfly	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	Typical of areas of long grassland, provided mowing regime takes account of overwintering stages.
Six spot burnet moth	<i>Zygaena filipendula</i>	Colourful day-flying moth found in longer grassland.
Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Relict populations in suburban and a few central London parks, but thought to be declining.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section, which should be read in conjunction with this paper. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 To encourage exchange of ideas, experience and information on a holistic approach to parks management

Target: Establish a forum by 2002; Organise a parks conference by 2004

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Establish a 'London parks and nature conservation forum', linked to the recently proposed London Parks Forum	2002	GLA	LPF, LA, RPA, CoL
Organise a conference on biodiversity conservation in London's parks and squares	2004	GLA	LPF, RPA, EH, CoL, LA
Develop advice on contract specifications through workshops and website	2004	LHPGT	GLA, LA

Objective 2 To promote good management for nature conservation in parks, squares and amenity grassland

Target: Publish best practice guide by 2006

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Undertake a study of wildlife in squares to produce a best practice guide	2003	GLA	EH, LHPGT
Develop a best practice guide to include information on the following: Sport facilities and best practice management for biodiversity Pesticides and best practice management for biodiversity Sustainability issues in parks management.	2006	GLA	RPA, LA, EH, CoL
		EN	SP, LA, GLA
		GLA	PAN, EN, LWT
		LHPGT	

Objective 3 To improve knowledge of wildlife in London's parks

Target: Establish an agreed monitoring programme and provide training workshops by 2004

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Liaise with BTO birds in London parks survey and disseminate findings	2002	BTO	GLA, LNHS
Collate records from the Central Royal Parks	2004	RPA	LWT, GLA, LNHS
Provide workshops on simple monitoring techniques	2004	PNCF	

Objective 4 To promote and enhance the enjoyment of nature and landscape in parks, squares and amenity grassland by all Londoners

Target: Ensure welcome audit desk study is completed by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Review literature on Welcome Audits and collate existing information from park officers to investigate people's sense of security and welcome, in relation to landscape and 'wilderness' areas in parks	2003	UCL	GLA, EN
If appropriate, commission a 'Welcome Survey' for London's parks	2004	GLA	UCL, EN, GrCorP, GrChP, LA

Objective 5 To promote nature conservation in existing award schemes

Target: Ensure links have been established by 2002

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Establish links with existing Award schemes such as London in Bloom and Green Flag to promote awards for nature conservation and sustainability	2002	MPGA	GLA

Objective 6 Promote habitat enhancements in suitable parks or open spaces where accessible wildlife habitat is in short supply, through appropriate financial support

Target: Identify sources of funding for parks enhancement scheme by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Work with appropriate boroughs to identify parks or public open spaces where improvements could be made, subject to public consultation	ongoing	GLA	LA
Investigate possibility of establishing a fund (or identify suitable existing funds) for enhancements to appropriate parks	2003	GLA	LA

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Open Landscapes with Ancient/Old Trees; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Ponds Lakes and Reservoirs.

National Plans

Built Environment and Gardens.

Key References

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Abbreviations

BTO – British Trust for Ornithology

CoL – Corporation of London

EH – English Heritage

GLA – Greater London Authority

GrChP – Green Chain Partnership

GrCorP – Green Corridors Partnership

LHPGT – London Historic Parks & Gardens Trust

LA – Local Authorities

LPF – London parks forum

LNHS – London Natural History Society

LWT – London Wildlife Trust

MPGA – Metropolitan Public Gardens Association

PAN – Pesticides Action Network

PNCF – Parks and Nature Conservation Forum

RPA – Royal Parks Agency

SP – Sport England

UCL- University College London

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