

Waterlow Park Biodiversity Progress Report 2022

The original brief was a report by two Friends of Waterlow Park members, Ginnie and John Cumming (decd) in January 2020, suggesting that there should be 'some sort of biodiversity strategy in Waterlow Park'. They suggested several potential areas for investigation:

1. Changes to mowing patterns on grass banks and other marginal areas.
2. Doing an inventory of the biodiversity of the shrubberies and other planted areas.
3. Investigating the potential of the wilder western side of the park including the new meadowland and the Upper Pond Nature reserve.
4. Investigating the construction of new water and bog gardening to take advantage of the park's hydrology.

Following presentation of the report the Friends of Waterlow Park (FoWP) Committee formed a Biodiversity sub-committee (subsequently called the Biodiversity Group) with members from Camden, the Conservation Volunteers TCV, idverde and the Friends to carry forward the investigation.

The formation of the Biodiversity Group was also encouraged by the Friends' Park User Survey 2020. Park users named trees, fresh air and the ponds and wildlife as the most appreciated features of the park. For future projects biodiversity improvements featured in the top three suggestions by the park users.

Short term aims:

A summary report in June 2021 mapped out progress after the first year. The Biodiversity Group had agreed to intensify the biodiversity surveys of the park to ascertain the current situation, and enable positive and practical measures to improve biodiversity in the park.

The biodiversity surveying initiative got under way in 2021, with a view to mapping areas of the park most in need of biodiverse management. Some early botanical surveying was done on the Eastern side of the park; more needed to be done on the north and western sides of the park. Maps had to be produced to indicate survey areas, which would provide data for the London GiGL database (Greenspace information for Greater London). These maps and templates had been produced by December 2021.

Plant Surveys completed in 2021 included Spring Bulbs, the Sparrow Meadow, the Lux Rockery, the North Shelter Bed, Marvells Walk, the Wildflower Bed at Lauderdale House, the Upper Woods and many areas in the east of the park.

Some fauna has also been surveyed, and the results were recorded and reported to Big Butterfly Count and Greenspace information for Greater London (GiGL), where appropriate. Butterfly Counts 2020 and 2021 covered selected areas (the Rockery and Central Meadow), to be repeated in 2022. Bird lists were supplied by park volunteers in 2020 and 2021.

The Biodiversity Group also proposed to repeat bat surveys in the park, and bat walks for the public.

It was agreed that the following measures to improve biodiversity did not need to wait until biodiversity surveys are completed:

1. Grass and Meadow management: The current mowing designations and maintenance schedules for the lawns and meadows needed to be obtained and discussed.
2. Potential Bog Gardens areas needed to be identified. One suggestion is the creation of a meandering stream, where a line of willows had been planted along the gully between Upper and Middle Pond. This could slow the water course and enlarge the damp areas for marsh and water plants. Thorough investigation needs to ensure that any alteration to the current water flow will not create other issues.
3. The Upper Pond Nature Area was in urgent need of attention and renovation. It was agreed to propose the closure of the area for restoration and planting. The Biodiversity Group agreed to identify alternative areas in the park for nature exploration and nature education, to which users of the Upper Pond Nature Area could be redirected during closure.

Around this time, Camden Council was in the process of developing a borough-wide Biodiversity Policy. It was agreed to hold off on writing a specific biodiversity strategy for Waterlow Park, as it was thought sensible to align a park policy/strategy as far as possible with that of Camden.

Progress since then, in 2022:

1. We have yet to explore where a relaxed mowing regime in more areas can give rise to an increase in biodiversity and wild flowers.
2. Plant surveying has been started on the western side, and data is slowly building up for uploading onto the GiGL database. A request for volunteers was put out resulting in a dozen volunteers, six of whom have turned up for surveying. A schedule of surveying every other Saturday until November 2022 has been set up. Another appeal has just gone out via the FoWP website.
3. Prior to the closure of the Upper Pond Nature Area in October 2020 the Biodiversity Group identified an alternative site for nature exploration and education in the Upper Woods. A proposal was forwarded to FoWP committee and TAG. Owing to insufficient support in the public consultation in February 2022, the proposal for the alternative nature education area for formal and informal groups was not taken forward. Habitat improvement and further log seating were recommended for the Upper Woods and biodiversity measures in the Upper Woods are ongoing.
4. Investigation into the park's hydrology and its potential for bog gardening have not been progressed, yet.
5. The Upper Pond had two sycamore trees removed at its western end, which has brought much needed light onto the pond. A third young sycamore, which has seeded itself close to the Eastern pond edge will be removed this autumn. Work on pond dredging and

tree cover reduction has been carried out by a Camden appointed contractor under the guidance of Camden's Biodiversity Officer. TCV/Green Gym volunteers who have a remit from Camden to work in this area are undertaking habitat restoration and planting. The Friends funded the purchase of appropriate wildflower seed for the meadow area.

6. Further biodiversity studies are also progressing: Pond Water surveying in the three ponds – taking pH, looking at turbidity and water levels since 2021; and a Genepools Water Biodiversity survey by the Natural History Museum (results awaited).
7. In March 2022 Camden Council published the borough-wide Biodiversity Strategy 'Creating Space for Nature in Camden'. The Biodiversity Group can now go ahead with drafting a specific biodiversity strategy for Waterlow Park which is aligned to the borough-wide plan.

How the group makes park users aware of what they are doing

Early in 2022 the appeal for biodiversity survey volunteers was put out widely in the local press, to community gardening and other groups in Highgate and surrounding areas, explaining what we were hoping to do, and why. Another appeal for volunteers has been put onto the FoWP website in May 2022.

In February 2022 the Biodiversity Group proposal for a Nature Education Area in the Upper Woods went out for a public consultation through the FoWP Committee and Camden. Unfortunately, misinformation was put out by a local resident, alleging privatisation in a change.org petition. This triggered a debate with further allegations of hidden agendas, confounding the consultation process.

Press releases were put out by FoWP, the Trust Advisory Group (TAG) and Camden council, setting the record straight and pointing out the incorrect assumptions.

Conclusion:

It is hoped that this report will make the ongoing work of the group more visible and give park users an idea of some of the considerations for the drafting of a local biodiversity strategy. A park-specific policy can be taken forward to the FoWP committee and the Trust Advisory Group.

Appropriate recommendations can be made to Camden Green Spaces team and if adopted measures incorporated into future maintenance contracts for Waterlow Park.

In the meantime, park users are welcome and will be invited to join us for surveys, on bat walks and nature exploration activities.

Input and suggestions for biodiversity improvements are welcomed by the group.

Ginnie Cumming and Rita Drobner for the Biodiversity sub-committee (June 2022)