

Sharing our story: St Cuthbert's Lorton Wildlife Report



Tanya St. Pierre, a Lorton Resident, Parish Councillor and Cumbria Wildlife Trust 'Get Cumbria Buzzing!' Project Manager wrote to us about St Cuthbert's, Lorton:

"I first became involved in St Cuthbert's Church, Lorton in spring 2019, when Rosemary asked me to support her and the Eco Church team. We discussed how to develop areas of the church grounds to support wildlife better. We met up at the church grounds to identify areas that would be good nest sites for birds, bats and hedgehogs. We also looked at areas for wildflowers, and places where we could create wildlife corridors and refuges. Rosemary had already arranged surveys of birds and wildflowers undertaken by Lorton Primary School and also invited me along to an Eco Church picnic to hear about the project, to talk with parishioners about the various ideas we had, to lead a tour of the site and to install hedgehog boxes in various quiet and hidden places in the grounds.

After the school plant survey, we identified an area to the south side of the church to create a wildflower meadow. The site already had some species good for wildlife such as oxeye daisy and bistort, so the idea was to enhance this area with additional wildflowers and native grasses that would be found in a typical ancient Cumbrian hay meadow. This helped create a habitat that was fantastic for supporting insects and other wildlife, and also one that re-introduced native plant species back into the area. St Cuthbert's Church meadow would complement the wider village initiative being run by the Parish Council 'The Lorton Wildflower Project' which was being established at a similar time.

CASE STUDY



A short article was placed in the Parish Council and Melbreak Communities newsletters around this time, informing residents of plans for the green spaces, and inviting volunteers along to a meadow planting day. On Sunday 29 September 2019 we were joined by 15–20 hardy souls who braved the wet weather to help rake and scarify areas, to expose bare ground and add seed and wildflower plugs. An ongoing plan, to manage as a hay meadow, was shared with the grounds maintenance contractor Harvey. Despite the weather, we had fantastic feedback from the volunteers involved, who said they had enjoyed themselves doing something really worthwhile.

After securing funding, Rosemary arranged a tree planting day in early 2020. Native species of silver birch, rowan, guelder rose, dog rose, crab apple, honeysuckle, and hawthorn were planted around the perimeter of the grounds. All species are excellent sources of pollen, nectar, and hips or berries for wildlife, and add structural diversity to the site. Silver birch alone supports over 300 species of insects.

In order to allow safe access to regularly tended graves, many areas of the grounds were mown to keep the grass short. In addition, to create space for additional graves, an area of bramble and nettles had to be cleared. Native species such as these, are exceptionally good for a whole range of wildlife, providing a food source for the caterpillars of many species of moth and our most-loved butterflies such as small tortoiseshell, peacock, red admiral and comma. One of our future challenges is to educate people about the importance of such food plants for wildlife, and encourage a step change in attitude, so that rather than being seen as 'weeds', these species are valued. I am working with Rosemary to identify areas within the church grounds where we can have sunny patches of nettles, and some brambles, that will be sensitively managed and have signage to explain their purpose and importance. We will also encourage wildflowers and grasses to establish in the church grounds, away from tended graves.

CASE STUDY

During 2021, bird and bat boxes were installed, a bog garden was dug and planted, and a nettle nursery created. The trees planted by volunteers are looking very healthy, and the brambles are starting to scramble, which is all good news for wildlife!



We raised funds to get a new project 'Melbreak Swifts' off the ground, and, starting in June 2021, we distributed 26 swift boxes throughout the local communities. At the time of writing (July 2021) we are looking to add bespoke swift boxes to the belfry at St. Cuthbert's, ready for the swift's return next year. Since 2000, swift populations have been in steep decline in the UK; it's thought that a lack of nest sites is a major cause of their decline. Swifts are loyal to their place of birth, and we are very lucky to have them returning from Africa every summer to breed here. By creating more nest sites we hope to boost local returning populations.

The meadow within the church grounds is slowly taking shape, with a good show of bistort and pignut. More work is required, including collecting grass clippings from regularly mown areas, to encourage greater species diversity. Spotted flycatchers have been taking advantage of the insect life attracted to the tall meadow grasses and microhabitats, and we think they may be breeding here.

Due to the ongoing restrictions caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, we've not been able to work with volunteers, but we aim to organise volunteer events and activities in the near future. In the meantime, St. Cuthbert's church grounds provide a welcome space not just for the people of Lorton, but for nature too.

A great deal has been achieved over the last 18 months as a result of Rosemary's and everyone's hard work. The meadow is starting to mature, there are hedgehog boxes in place, healthy native trees are growing. Most of all, the parishioners and residents have been given a fantastic opportunity to help create a wildlife haven linking the Parish to the wider wildlife project. The Eco Church Gold Award which was awarded in November 2020 is really well deserved, as despite adversity and the setback of Covid, the Eco Church project has enabled St. Cuthbert's Church to go from strength to strength, reaching out to the wider community and encouraging everyone to get involved in a really worthy cause that truly benefits our local wildlife."