Friends Of Otterhead Estate

Spring 2021

Otterhead Estate Trust

Winter seems to have been a long and difficult one for obvious reasons but with the easing of lockdown, plants blooming, birds singing and butterflies flying hopefully everyone's spirits are lifting.

It's been a busy spring at Otterhead and we've continued to get lots of visitors. Maintenance works, litter picking, restoration of the House leat, underwater wildlife surveys and beaver activity training days are just some of the activities that have taken place by various organisations and individuals here.

We have also been working on a new website so please take a look: https://otterheadestate.org

Micro Hydro-electric Project

Good news – significant funding towards the micro hydro-electric project has been awarded from SCC's Climate Emergency Fund from a bid submitted jointly last year through Churchstanton and Otterford Parish Councils. We are still awaiting final approval from our landlords (Wessex Water) but it is hoped that the micro- hydro electric system will provide a quiet, clean and sustainable source of free electricity to the Coach House, helping the Forest School that currently rely on a diesel generator which is noisy and polluting. A permanent power supply would also allow the building to be used for a wider range of community activities. The project is also restoring an important heritage feature of the site as well as improving the ecology by providing more open water for plants and animals

The water power will be generated by restoring the ''House Leat'' which is essentially a ditch which runs along the western edge of the House Lake, then underground to the Coach House. This leat originally powered a mill in medieval times and later on was used to pump drinking water for Otterhead House. Up until last autumn the leat was barely recognisable as a watercourse but local volunteer David Jackson has been working hard over the winter and early spring clearing woody vegetation and silt along the entire length to allow water to flow again. Some of the cut timber has been used to construct a bank above the leat to stop the mud and silt being washed back in. Devon Wildlife Trust installed some electric fencing alongside part of the leat to stop the beavers building a dam here!

Forest School

Forest school have been busy keeping the reserve tidy and safe for visitors by repairing rails and kissing gates and carrying out litter picks. Unfortunately dog waste bags have been a problem and they picked up 25 bags in a single sweep! Some polite notices were consequently put up around the site and this has helped.

The cobbles within the Coach House courtyard are being exposed by washing away the build up of mud. This will add to the aesthetics and also compliment the three smart new raised flower beds that were made as part of the Reminiscence Learning Project and are being planted with flowers, herbs, vegetables and fruits

Wildlife

As the snowdrops finish flowering, Otterhead becomes a haven of yellow - the cultivated daffodils growing along the banks of the main track and around the terraces of House Lake were planted within the gardens of the original estate.

Lesser celandines are another yellow flower of spring, growing in the damp areas of woodland alongside the paths. These plants, along with the marsh marigolds (also known as King Cups) growing alongside the river and leat edges are both members of the buttercup family.

Marsh marigolds

Lesser celandines

The bank beneath the walled garden cleared of bramble by volunteers before Christmas is now covered in dogs mercury, primroses and bluebells.

All these spring flowers are really important to provide early food sources to insects in the form of nectar for bees, hoverflies and early butterflies such as brimstones.

As well as acting as pollinators and being important in their own right, these early insects also provide food for animals higher up the food chain including many birds, amphibians and reptiles.

The spring newsletter wouldn't be complete without a photo of the bluebells! Though common within woodlands and hedgerows here, at a global level they are relatively rare, with the UK having nearly half of the world's population and we need to protect them (the leaves are very sensitive to trampling). There are many folklore myths surrounding these flowers – if you hear one ring, you'll be visited by an evil fairy and will die not long after!

This is the time of year when the birds are setting up territories and nest building and bird song is at its loudest – chiffchaffs, great tits, wrens, blue tits, nuthatches, blackcaps and willow warblers are just a few of the many bird songs that can be heard. With the birds often hidden within the growing leaf cover they are often most easily identified through their distinctive songs. Many birds nest in low growing shrubs and long grass and are therefore easily disturbed so please keep to the paths at this time of year.

A pair of more easily recognisable birds – the mute swans has set up a nest on Royston Lake within the clumps of the greater tussock sedge

The mysterious world beneath some of Otterhead's lakes and ponds were explored this spring by underwater photographer Henley Spiers and we've included just a few of his stunning photographs.

Some of the species encountered by Henley were brown trout fry, bullhead, frogs, tadpoles, ear pond snails, caddisfly and mayfly larvae, brook lamprey and 3-spined sticklebacks and are an indicator of good water quality.

There are 51 species of mayfly in the UK , the larvae spending all their lives under the water feeding on algae and plants. In the summer the adults hatch out sometimes simultaneously and in massive numbers. The mayflies only live a short length of time and die once they've bred.

This eel-like fish is a brook lamprey, one of 3 lamprey species found in the UK. It belongs to a very ancient order of vertebrates called Agnatha (jawless fish). They have a round sucker-like mouth which carries rasping teeth.

Between April and June the lamprey spawn in a ball of up to 50 individuals. After hatching, the larvae known as ammocoetes will live in the soft silt feeding on algae and bacteria for up to 5 years before transforming into pre-adults.

The small fish to the right is a male 3-spined stickleback, a common resident of lakes and ponds and very familiar to any children that have done pond dipping!

At this time of year the males develop a red/orange belly to attract a mate. The male fish will also build a 'nest' out of vegetation under which the female lays her eggs. He'll also guard the eggs and the newly hatched fish which is unusual as most other fish species have no parental care once the eggs are laid.

Events

Nature walk – Saturday 7th August – 2pm. Further details and how to book will be provided on the noticeboard and website nearer the time

We hope to run some more events including a Friends BBQ and practical habitat tasks this summer and will put these onto the website when dates have been decided.

Friends Of Otterhead

The Otterhead Estate Trust is a not-for-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers. Whether you use the reserve regularly or appreciate it from afar (!) we would love to have more Friends Of members. It costs £10 a year, the money helps with the upkeep of the site and also means you have say in how the site is run and can attend up to two events a year free of charge.

Very shortly you will be able to join up directly via our website – we're just finalising this process.

If you'd like to know more about the Friends Of group please contact Jackie Gage.

07966 402391 Friendsofotterhead@gmail.com