



1. A Vision for Wildlife in Swindon

What is Biodiversity?

Biodiversity, or biological diversity, is a term used to describe the variety of living things. It is estimated that there could be as many as 50 million species of organism on the Earth, including insects, plants, fungi, fish, birds, mammals and many other lesser-known groups. This variety is not evenly spread. Tropical rainforests and coral reefs for example have exceptionally high levels of biodiversity. Closer to home, chalk downland and ancient woodland habitats are particularly varied by UK standards.

Variety is distinct from mere quantity. By conserving natural variety in an ancient woodland, for example, we are concerned with protecting the butterflies, beetles, fungi, mosses, lichens and soil organisms as well as the trees. This is crucial because in many cases the different species cannot live without each other.

Despite centuries of interest and research in the UK, we still know little about many of the species that inhabit our island. This is particularly true of the huge numbers of tiny organisms that play a vital role in processes such as soil formation. We know still less about their distribution and trends – where they are found, how healthy their populations are, and whether they are declining or increasing.

Why does Biodiversity Matter?

Biodiversity matters for many different reasons. Today we all ate biodiversity, wore biodiversity, sat in buildings built and furnished with biodiversity, breathed air produced by biodiversity processes and drank water cleansed by biodiversity.

But what does this mean for Swindon? First, without biodiversity, many of our natural life support systems would cease to function. Living organisms are responsible for regulating the air

we breathe, the climate we live in and the quality of the water we drink. Without them we would not have soil, food or many other essentials for life, as we know it.

Second, biodiversity has a marked impact on our quality of life. The concerns expressed by the general public, and the growing membership of wildlife organisations, reflects this. But biodiversity impacts on our lives to a degree that science is only just beginning to realise. For instance, every day contact with wildlife has been shown to improve people's mental well being, aid recovery from illness and help reduce crime.

Finally, biodiversity provides us with huge economic benefits. A large proportion of our medicines, food, raw materials for manufacturing and energy sources come from biodiversity. Every year new discoveries are made relating to the benefits wild species could provide humanity, whether it be in treating fatal illnesses, treating toxic waste or reclaiming degraded agricultural land.

In each of these cases, maintaining natural variety (biodiversity) is crucial. If biodiversity levels fall, the ability of natural systems to adapt to change, or the potential resource available for humans to make use of, declines. Protecting and enhancing biodiversity is in all our interests.

What are we Trying to Achieve?

Swindon is an exciting place to be at the beginning of the 21st century. It is a rapidly growing place - somewhere that is making its mark not just locally but regionally and nationally. The centre of Swindon is the focus for a lot of rebuilding and improvements and there are significant developments planned for the fringes. There is a Community Forest initiative and a wide range of other bodies working for wildlife in the area. Taken together these present

a marvellous opportunity to be really visionary about the future of the area and to make Swindon an exemplar of modern sustainable living. The Swindon BAP presents a vision of Swindon as a place where wildlife and development exist side by side and where wildlife is not just in the places where development doesn't go. This will require the creation of a "green infrastructure", where development fits in amongst interlinking open spaces and habitats, presenting an exciting place in which to live, work and play.

Through the Swindon Biodiversity Action Plan we aim to achieve four fundamental aims:

- **Protection of the best existing areas for wildlife:** this includes all nationally protected sites, locally designated sites and strategic green corridors
- **Enhancement of wildlife in the wider landscape:** we need to focus activities in key areas where there is potential to achieve real and lasting gain
- **Protection and enhancement of populations of particularly important species, such as water voles, great crested newts and bats**
- **Involvement of people in the process of wildlife conservation wherever possible.**

Like many BAPs, the Swindon BAP focuses mainly on habitats rather than species. This is because in the majority of cases the main threats to wildlife are associated with the loss, degradation or fragmentation of the places in which it lives. If we can conserve the habitats, we have taken a vitally important step towards conserving the individual species.

A Natural Heritage to be Proud of

Map 1 shows the best remaining areas for wildlife. We must focus first and foremost on protecting these. Swindon has nine nationally protected SSSIs (three of these are for geological interest), 88 locally designated County Wildlife Sites (CWS), three ecologically important rivers and four Local Nature Reserves. In addition, the Great Western Community Forest covers the whole of the Borough. Swindon is home to

numerous nationally rare and protected species, including water voles, otters, bats and great crested newts. See Appendix 5. Among the most important habitats found in the Borough are chalk downland - which hosts the greatest variety of wildflowers of any UK habitat - and neutral meadow, which is arguably the most threatened UK habitat. This is a natural heritage of which any part of the UK could be justly proud.

Pushing Forward the Frontiers

In recent years it has become increasingly clear that wildlife cannot survive in a small number of protected sites in the long term. Populations in most of these sites are too small, and species need to move around the landscape to adapt to constant change in their environment – wetter and drier years, warmer and cooler temperatures. The pressures of climate change are making the situation even more acute. Recent reports suggest that a quarter of all living things could become extinct within 50 years if we do not protect wildlife in larger areas.

Two maps are included within this section. Map 1 shows the known designated sites of wildlife interest within Swindon Borough and Map 2 shows a number of areas that have been highlighted as having potential for large-scale wildlife restoration. They have been identified because they contain clusters of high quality habitat and because of the potential to link existing sites together and create wildlife corridors or large, core habitat areas. Bringing wildlife back to the wider landscape within these areas is a long-term vision and may take 50 years. But it is only through setting out and supporting such a long term vision that we can succeed. Map 2 shows those areas in which landscape-scale wildlife restoration projects is possible; it does not mean that all other areas should be ignored.

The areas shown in Map 2 do not imply an ambition to create several huge nature reserves. The areas represent regions within which significant interconnected areas of habitat can be re-established. They include land adjacent to

existing built-up areas and land that may be subject to development in the future. This is deliberate. Biodiversity action should not simply be restricted to those areas that are not thought suitable for building houses or growing food. Biodiversity can and should be integrated with the landscape in which we live, work and travel. This is a particular challenge for a Borough with a predominantly urban population like Swindon.

The Challenge Ahead

The challenge for Swindon's biodiversity can be summarised in five key statements, or aspirations:

- Swindon's best remaining areas for wildlife to be protected and their quality enhanced
- Key habitats to be expanded, especially woodland, flower rich grassland and wetland, to create large areas of well-connected habitat in the wider landscape
- Populations of birds and other cherished species such as water voles to return in number throughout the Borough.
- Swindon should be a Borough that shows how human activity and wildlife conservation can exist hand in hand.
- Everyone in Swindon to appreciate the natural heritage they have, contributing to its future improvement and benefiting from its existence.

Working in Partnership: a Shared Challenge

The Swindon BAP will only succeed if we work together. There are challenges for all of us with responsibilities towards the environment – statutory bodies, private companies, landowners, individuals and community groups, as well as wildlife organisations. Statutory bodies must lead the way and ensure that wildlife is factored into all the key strategies and plans for the Borough. Private companies can do much to conserve the environment on land they own and indirectly through encouraging appropriate actions among their employees. For example, house builders can design wildlife rich green space into new development. Individuals have a critical role to

play, by protecting wildlife in their gardens as well as raising the issue with their councillors and MPs.

There are actions for every habitat in the following chapters. Each has a lead organisation, but none can be achieved without the co-operation of others.

The Swindon BAP partnership has no formal membership. There are a number of key supporting organisations that provide resources to enable co-ordination, monitoring and delivery. But all groups, organisations and individuals are welcome.

Two documents that have recently emerged from Swindon Borough Council emphasise the key role of partnership. One of six key themes in the Corporate Plan is:

***“AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PLACE -
Protect the environment for future generations and ensure environmental and ecological issues are at the heart of all decision making.”***

The second document, “Our Swindon, Our Community, Our Future: a Community Strategy for Swindon 2004–2010” continues this theme by describing Swindon as “A place which values its environment and safeguards it for future generations” with a priority of “protecting, maintaining and enhancing our natural environment and open spaces”. The strategy goes further, with the stated intention of:

“INSPIRING AND ENGAGING EVERYONE IN IMPROVING OUR ENVIRONMENT”

The Community Strategy notes that evidence of success will be the publication of a Biodiversity Action Plan in 2005 and the delivery of BAP actions and targets.