

Wildlife Monitoring

In Heddon Valley with the National Trust



Interview with: Kate, volunteer ranger for the National Trust

Name of project: wildlife monitoring project

Location: Heddon Valley

By who: National Trust rangers

How: Jointly funded by the National Trust and Heart of Exmoor Scheme

Aims:

To set up easy repeatable surveys to monitor changes brought about by habitat management; broaden volunteering opportunities and to engage with the public; contribute to wildlife monitoring on Exmoor and gain records of key species such as high brown fritillary; build relationships with other organisations



Main considerations:

- Deliverable: simple techniques
- Ensuring surveys can fit into the wider national databases, ie. The high brown fritillary records feeds into the Butterfly Conservation dataset
- Attract volunteers
- Funding



Partnership and sources of advice:

- A lot of support given by the Heart of Exmoor Scheme and ENPA through training courses as part of the New Ecologists Project and staff time (extra to funding)
- Butterfly Conservation gave support and advice
- National Trust specialists



How was it undertaken:

The project started in April 2015 and in that time Kate has set up and undertaken surveys of otters, dippers, vegetation surveys on High Brown Fritillary habitat, timed butterfly counts, building and erection of dormouse nest boxes, mammal tunnel surveys and regular blogging on the work that has been carried out.



Constraints and limitations:

Money and time: there are always more opportunities to expand and more surveys of interest to do.

Outcomes and recommendations:

- Still in progress...
- Regular surveys including: breeding dipper survey(6 pairs identified in 2015); Dormouse monitoring project in Heale Wood consisting of 50 nest boxes; woodland, to assess light levels in thinned areas; thorough vegetation monitoring and butterfly survey for High Brown Fritillary Project; otters; riverflies (pending); wildflowers.
- “Wildlife sightings board” and social media encourages visitors to engage with wildlife
- New volunteers getting involved in National Trust wildlife projects
- A film will be made and shown at talks

Key considerations when managing volunteers:

- Making sure that everyone feels useful and are gaining something from the experience. Often recruiting too many volunteers can be detrimental to the activity.
- Getting to know your volunteers, why they are volunteering and what they want to gain from the experience is always useful as you can invite them to activities accordingly.
- Plenty of encouragement and feeling useful is key to the enjoyment of the experience
- Making sure that people have a defined task

Example of something you’re pleased with:

I worked with a couple of teenagers as part of their school work experience. They helped me put up dormouse nest boxes and we carried out an otter survey, they were both brilliant to work with. I received a letter from one of them a few weeks afterwards telling me that after working with me on the project she had decided she wanted to pursue a career in wildlife conservation, that was really rewarding to hear.

When something didn’t go to plan:

I took three volunteers out to do an otter survey on one of our rivers but didn’t find a thing all day. They were all really keen to see otter spraint and I felt it had been a disappointing day for them. When we arrived back at the office I took them to a spot where I knew we would find spraint, that was all it took to get the day back on track for them.

Advice for anyone looking to set up a project:

- Making it achievable is paramount - it is easy to get carried away and plan too much.
- Working with other organisations helps with the setup, productivity, value and continuation of the project.

Other comments:

The project has made real steps in adding to the character and visitor offer of our property. It also takes small, property specific steps in moving towards the National Trust’s revised strategy of making conservation the centre of our work.

To get involved with this project or to find out more about it, please phone 01598 763 556

