

Ash Biodiversity Audit

Introduction

The audit is being put together as a starting point to help focus community action for wildlife. By starting to bring together knowledge of the natural assets of the Parish, it may go some way to achieving its aim of contributing to, and stimulating ideas for, local action.

It should be emphasised that it is just a beginning. It does not represent a comprehensive account of the Parish and is based very largely on existing records held by the various bodies. There will be a wealth of local knowledge that can be used to build upon and improve this report. Indeed, it is important that it is seen as a 'living document' and one that belongs to the Parish. It is hoped that it will be added to and refined by the people of Ash in future years.

Did you know...?

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) 2006 places the following biodiversity duty on all public bodies, including Parish Councils:

'Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity'

The purpose of the duty is to raise the profile of biodiversity and make it a 'natural and integral' part of policy and decision making.

Methodology

The initial part of the audit is based on a desk-top exercise using existing records. The primary source for these is the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC). Another source will be the DEFRA "MAGIC" database.

There will be a need to supplement such sources with survey work and local knowledge in order to fill in gaps and create a comprehensive and up to date set of information.

Why bother with biodiversity...?

The 2016 'State of Nature' report shows the UK's wildlife to be under considerable pressure with the negative pressures - primarily habitat loss, climate change and a reduction in funding for conservation - significantly outweighing the positive resulting in a net loss of nature.

<https://theecologist.org/2016/sep/14/state-nature-2016-report-shows-continued-loss-britains-biodiversity>

Over half (56%) of UK species studied have declined since 1970, while more than one in ten of the nearly 8000 species assessed in the UK are under threat of disappearing from our shores altogether. Between 1970 and 2013, 56% of species declined, with 40% showing strong or moderate declines. 44% of species increased, with 29% showing strong or moderate increases. Of the nearly 8,000 species assessed using modern Red List criteria, 15% are threatened with extinction from Great Britain.

A new measure that assesses how intact a country's biodiversity is, suggests that the UK has lost significantly more nature over the long term than the global average. The index suggests that we are amongst the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

Simon Nash, CEO of Somerset Wildlife Trust, in commenting on the report, added: *"There are vulnerable species in Somerset that are struggling to overcome the impacts of climate change and fragile habitats that desperately need dedicated year-round support, so we look to the people of Somerset to put nature back in their lives, rediscover its value within our communities and do what they can to help us reverse the decline of Somerset's wildlife for the benefit of our next generations."*

In 2018, the government published the **25 year Environment Plan** to *"ensure we leave our environment in a better state for future generations"*. The Agriculture Bill before Parliament is aimed at *"transforming our farming system for the first time in 50 years to reward farmers for protecting and enhancing the environment"*.

The government's **"National Planning Policy Framework 2019"** has been aligned with the Environment Plan. The environmental test of sustainable development requires planning policy and planning decisions to help to 'improve biodiversity' (paragraph 8c). Net gain for biodiversity is far more prominent than in previous policy, and closely tied to sustainable development so, in theory at least, the NPPF should help deliver net gain.

The Plan also announced a **Year of Green Action** in 2019 to draw together targeted actions to make it easier for communities to get involved in improving the natural world and spread the word about environmental issues.

What is the relevance to Ash?

Our Parish is not isolated from these trends. An understanding of the condition of our natural environment will help to guide us in:

- how the Parish Council responds to applications for development;
- how public open space is managed;
- what landowners can do to restore the natural environment;
- what the community can do to enhance biodiversity.

Document structure

The currently anticipated (subject to change) documents are:

- Introduction (this document)
- Biodiversity Action Plans
- Landscape
- Habitats
- Species
- Designated sites
- Woodland, trees and hedgerows
- Water and wetlands
- Native wildflowers
- Access to the countryside