

Crook of Baldoon Nature Reserve Project

RSPB Scotland

Introduction

This is an interim report to Dumfries & Galloway LEADER Programme in respect of their funding support for the above project, which began in December 2010 and is projected to be completed in November 2012 (in respect of LEADER funding). The overall aim of this project is to transform the recently acquired Crook of Baldoon nature reserve into an exciting new nature reserve, community amenity and visitor destination. This essentially involves habitat restoration, employment of reserve and community based staff and provision of interpretation and other visitor facilities.

Summary

Paul Tarling was employed in December 2010 as warden for the Crook of Baldoon. One of his first tasks was to erect signage to let visitors know that they've arrived at the new RSPB Crook of Baldoon nature reserve.

An interpretation board has been erected in the car parking area. Three picnic benches have been purchased and installed; one has been modified to accommodate wheelchair access.

January to March saw the start of the data collection on the hydrology of the three fields at the northern end of the reserve as well as salinity tests on the Lane burn running to the west of the site. This work was essential for informing RSPB about the wetness of the site, drainage patterns and so on, ahead of making key decisions on habitat restoration. As a result of this monitoring work a detailed topographic survey was commissioned to provide finer detail. This survey, together with the other data collected by Paul, has enabled us to draw up a plan of field drains to be blocked and outlets to be upgraded to stop saline water entering the field drainage system.

Work to block drains and insert water management controls started in October; this is at eleven points around these three fields and was completed by the end of November. Examples of this are shown in the photos below



Plans to plant hedgerows were postponed due to the severe cold weather during the planned planting period and this will now take place in 2012.

In 2011, grazing of the saltmarsh and grassland was reduced to encourage a greater biodiversity in plants and insects utilising the site whilst maintaining the saltmarsh for geese roost and grazing. This had an immediate improvement in the flowering of many plants. Thrift, in particular, flowered in profusion this year (as shown below) and gave great delight to our visitors.



A meeting was held with the company who are contracted to harvest the short rotation willow coppice on the reserve and agreement is likely that this can be removed in August 2012 and these fields also restored to wet grassland for waders thereafter.

The work to improve the car parking has been delayed since the existing hard standing will be used by the harvesters of the willow biomass and it is felt that the collection and loading of the biomass from this area could damage any works that we carry out beforehand.

The reserve was monitored for wader and songbird breeding through April to July. 12 lapwing chicks were produced from 6 pairs of lapwings. We were not able to monitor redshank properly, but it is believed that 2 pairs breed on land adjacent to the reserve. Two oystercatchers bred on the tip of the reserve opposite the Wigtown Harbour car park and gave noisy displays.

The songbird counts proved interesting with 22 singing skylark males across the reserve and 10 pairs of linnets. Both of these birds are red list species of high conservation concern. Also recorded were reed bunting, sedge warbler, willow warbler, garden warbler, spotted flycatcher, blue and great tit, swallow, robin, meadow and rock pipit and pied wagtail.

The tree sparrow colony increased, in terms of the number of nest boxes used, from 16 out of 24 boxes (2010) to in 22 out of 27 boxes (2011). These boxes were monitored by volunteers this year after guidance from Paul. The number of boxes has been increased by another 6 to enable further expansion of the population. Another area to the north of this site has been established as well with 12 boxes erected, to see if a second colony can be established.

Paul established a regular programme of guided walks and talks for people in Wigtown and the local area to inform them about the new reserve, encourage them to visit and, through providing information about species and habitats, help them to learn about and feel a connection and sense of ownership of the reserve. 22 walks have been undertaken in the year, with over 100 participants. Paul has also visited the local primary school in Wigtown to talk to children about the new nature reserve and the Big School Garden Birdwatch.

Ian Brown, the Community & Wildlife Officer, did not start in his new position until April 2011. This was due to the person who was initially offered the post declining to take up the offer and a second round of interviews being required. Ian then broke his ankle and was off work for 6 weeks during most of May. However, temporary cover was found, though this post was not supported by LEADER funding.

Ian ran three family events through the summer holidays. He took part in the Wigtown Festival working with local children to build a demonstration osprey nest and was also involved in the Wigtown Book Festival delivering information about ospreys and running 2 events making bird feeders. In October Ian ran three events called Gaggles of Geese to coincide with the school half term and ran a further children's event to make bird feeders.

Much of Ian's work has involved talking to the 10,000 or so visitors to the osprey viewing room in the Wigtown County Building and telling them about the life of these birds and the other wildlife found on the Crook of Baldoon and, more widely, Wigtown Bay. He has also been liaising with other osprey viewing sites across Dumfries & Galloway to investigate a more co-ordinated approach to this and the possible development of an osprey festival in the future.

Volunteers have been very helpful to the project both in the osprey viewing room and out on the reserve. In the osprey viewing room they have been inducted into the life cycle of the osprey and the wider area of the LNR and Crook of Baldoon giving them confidence to deal with most questions from the general public. They were also involved every day of the Wigtown Book Festival. This amounts to 29 man days from April to September.

On the reserve they have been involved with fence repair, fence removal, construction of visitor hand gate and kissing gate construction, litter picking, monitoring lapwing and tree sparrow nesting. This totals 44 man days from April to December.

Conclusion

RSPB Scotland's Crook of Baldoon Nature Reserve project is progressing very well, with a number of targets and outputs achieved and exceeded. The above summary outlines the range of work underway on and off the reserve. We are extremely grateful to LEADER and our other partners for support in this work.

Andrew Bielinski, Area Reserves Manager Dumfries & Galloway; December 2011.