

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Management Committee	26 th November 2012
Subject: Results of the Sparrows Project	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Hampstead Heath	For Decision

Summary

The Sparrows Project, led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), finished this year. The aims of the project were to elucidate both whether changes in grassland management in parks could benefit wildlife as well as help reduce the decline in house sparrow numbers in London. This report summarises the findings of the project.

A perennial wild flower meadow was created on the Heath above the Paddling Pool at Parliament Hill as part of the project. The biodiversity value of such meadows was found to be significantly greater than the species-poor long grass which it replaced.

No sparrows were seen using the perennial wild flower meadow at Hampstead Heath or elsewhere. As part of the project, areas of annual wild flowers were established in eight other open spaces, although not at the Heath. Sparrows were seen feeding in four of these. However, there was no statistically significant correlation between sparrow numbers and management of the area, so that no definitive conclusion can be reached on whether annual meadows benefit sparrows.

The creation and maintenance of the wildflower meadow has been well received by the public.

Recommendations

That the Committee:

- note the findings of the Sparrows Project.
- approves the retention of the 'Sparrow Site' as a wild flower meadow.

Main Report

Background

1. In 2008 the City joined seven other open space managers in London in a project led by RSPB. The project aimed to test the effectiveness of changes in land management in stemming the decline in house sparrow numbers in London, estimated as 68% between 1994 and 2009. It was largely funded

by SITA Trust through the Landfill Communities Fund, and the work on the Hampstead Heath was carried out at little expense to the City.

2. House sparrows predominantly eat seeds in winter and invertebrates in summer, supplemented by food scraps. However, chicks require a protein diet from invertebrates in the early stages of their growth to ensure adequate development. Research has shown that survival of young house sparrows in urban areas is often low, and it has been postulated that this is due to lack of invertebrates.
3. The project assessed the benefits to invertebrates and birds, especially house sparrows, of three different types of habitat management. These were: an area of long grass; a meadow of perennial wild flowers; and an area of specially selected annuals, for example those with seeds attractive to birds. These three were compared with grass which was mown regularly.
4. In 2009, a quarter of a hectare of low-diversity grassland above the paddling pool at Parliament Hill - the 'Sparrows Site' - was stripped and then sown with a seed mix of perennial wild flowers. By 2010 the flowers had established very well, and the meadow looked extremely attractive, and continues to do so. The area was chosen to be as close as possible to established colonies of sparrows near the Lido and the gardens of houses near Nassington Road.
5. The meadow was initially protected with wire mesh fencing, but this was later changed to a rope. The barrier was removed entirely in 2011, to the annoyance of local ornithologists, who had enjoyed watching interesting birds alighting on the fence posts. (Several fence posts were left in place for this purpose, but they were continually removed.) Nearby areas of amenity and of long grass provided two of the other management regimes.
6. The City opted not to sow an area of annual plants as part of the project. However, two small plots of annuals were sown elsewhere, one near Duke's Field (Parliament Hill) and one on the Heath Extension. The species mix used for these was of plants which have disappeared from our cornfields, such as corn marigold, corn chamomile and poppy, rather than the mix designed specifically for bird seed and containing species such as millet and sun flower which was used for the project. However, many of the plants used do produce copious quantities of seeds likely to benefit birds.



The Sparrows site

7. All areas were monitored by a volunteer, students, or by RSPB or City of London staff. Bob Gillam from the Conservation Team monitored the long grass and amenity grass plots monthly for 2½ years, patiently watching each for three quarters of an hour, but usually seeing no more than pigeons, gulls and crows. The RSPB carried out invertebrate sampling, using sweep nets and a special machine like a vacuum cleaner which hoovered them up from near the ground. 139,446 invertebrates were captured during monitoring of all the plots in London. Those over 2mm in length were identified to group, or family where possible.

Current Position

8. The project ended this year and this report summarises the main findings.

Results

9. No house sparrows were seen on any of the study areas on Hampstead Heath.
10. In four other open spaces, sparrows were seen on the areas of annual wildlife seed plants. These areas were used by the birds for gathering invertebrates, mainly during the breeding season: the time at which invertebrates are needed for feeding young. It is postulated that the wildlife

seed plots may have been used most because the varied structure of the vegetation allowed birds easier access to the invertebrates. However, the results were not statistically significant, so no firm conclusion can be made.

11. The perennial wild flower meadows were used more often by seed-eating birds in general, such as goldfinches, than the long grass plots. Migrating birds have also used the wild flower meadow on the Heath, and ornithologists have enjoyed sighting them, as witnessed by a outcry on the London birdwatchers' website occasioned by the City cutting the meadow in September 2012 as part of normal management.
12. Significantly more invertebrates were found in the wild flower meadows than in the long grass plots or wildlife seed plots.
13. The results of the study show that meadows of perennial wild flowers and wildlife seed plots both benefit biodiversity. The former add to the diversity and abundance of native plants on the Heath and are particularly beneficial to invertebrates. The latter may be most beneficial to seed-eating birds. Both are very attractive, especially if a cornfield mix is used for the annual plots, and both have been admired on the Heath.

Proposal

14. It is proposed that the 'Sparrows Site' be maintained as an unfenced wild flower meadow, with an annual cut. This proposal was supported by the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee at its meeting in early November 2012.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

15. The City has a legal duty under the Hampstead Heath Act 1871 to preserve, as far as may be, the natural aspect and state of the Heath.

Strategic Implications

16. The proposal links to the theme in the Community Strategy to protect, promote and enhance our environment.
17. It also links to the Open Spaces Department Plan through the Strategic Aim to 'adopt sustainable working practices, promote the variety of life (biodiversity) and protect the Open Spaces for the enjoyment of future generations', and the Improvement Objective to 'ensure that measures to promote sustainability and biodiversity are embedded in the Department's work'.

18. The proposal also fulfils a number of Essential Actions in the Part 1 Management Plan, including:

Retain and enhance the Heath's habitats and natural resources to enable continued quiet enjoyment and appreciation of the natural world by its visitors

Manage the Heath's grasslands to enhance their nature conservation and aesthetic value.

Financial Implications

19. Management of the wild flower meadow can be undertaken as part of the normal management of the grasslands on Hampstead Heath. No extra cost will be incurred since the area would need to be cut in any case, the costs of maintenance are met from the Superintendents local risk budget.

Key risks

20. Creeping thistle is likely to become more common in the plot. Options for the control of thistle will be presented to Committee in 2013.
21. It is possible that people and dogs may damage the area, making it look unattractive in summer due to vegetation being trodden down. However, this did not occur in 2012, when the area was unfenced. Should it happen seriously, the meadow could be cut, although this would reduce its value for wildlife.

Conclusion

22. The results of the study show that meadows of perennial wild flowers and wildlife seed plots both benefit biodiversity. The former add to the diversity and abundance of native plants on the Heath and both benefit invertebrates. The latter may also provide for seed-eating birds. Both are very attractive, especially if a cornfield mix is used for the annual plots, and both have been admired on the Heath.
23. The area should continue to be maintained as a wild flower meadow.

Contacts:

Meg Game

Ecologist

Hampstead Heath

Meg.Game@cityoflondon.gov.uk

Jonathan Meares
Highgate Wood & Conservation Manager
Jonathan.Meares@cityoflondon.gov.uk