

Committee	Dated:
Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood & Queen's Park Committee	23 May 2018
Subject: Model Boating Pond Island Future Access Arrangements	Public
Report of: Superintendent of Hampstead Heath	For Decision
Report author: Meg Game, Senior Ecologist – Open Spaces Department	

Summary

As part of the Hampstead Heath Ponds Project the Model Boating Pond underwent major landscape changes, which involved the creation of a small peninsular. Locally the peninsular is referred to as the Model Boating Pond Island. The construction phase of the Ponds Project was completed in October 2016.

The Island was originally designed to facilitate public access, however following a decision by the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood & Queen's Park Committee in March 2017, the Island has remained closed to the public for 14 months while an ecological survey was undertaken to determine its value as a sanctuary, principally for birds.

The results of this survey show that the Island is well used by a number of bird species and is already providing an important refuge. This report sets out the options for future management of the Island. It is recommended that the Island be designated as a wildlife sanctuary and be fenced off to the public.

The future management of the Island will form part of the Hampstead Heath Ponds and Wetlands Strategy. A draft outline of this document is attached to this report as Appendix 2.

Recommendation(s)

It is recommended that

- Members views are sought in relation to the approach and content covered in the draft Ponds and Wetlands Strategy appended to this report (see Appendix 2).
- Members agree the preferred option for the future management of the Island as set out in paragraph 14.

Main Report

Monitoring the wildlife on the Model Boating Pond Island

1. Since the end of January 2017, the Heath's Ecology Team have monitored the birds on the Model Boating Pond Island on a weekly basis. Any birds perching on the Island, in the aquatic vegetation around the Island or in the trees on the Island were included in the monitoring. However, the numerous gulls perched on the tops of the fence posts around the Island were not included.
2. The results of the monitoring showed that the number of waterfowl increased over the spring, when 29 were sighted, the maximum number seen on any one occasion. However, numbers of waterfowl then declined to around 5-10 in the summer months and around five or fewer in the winter (see Appendix 1, figure 1). The birds observed were mostly coot, moorhen, mallard, and Egyptian and Canada geese; and herons, which were seen on 15 occasions. A great crested grebe nested at the edge of the fence but was unsuccessful in raising young. No swans were noted.
3. Few numbers of non-aquatic birds, such as crows, pigeons and magpies, were noted (see Appendix 1, figure 2). Gulls on the ground were included, and were commonly sighted at the start of the monitoring, when the ground was still bare. For the latter part of the monitoring sightings rarely exceeded a couple of birds.
4. A trail camera was placed on the Island over a two-week period in February and March 2017 with the primary aim of assessing usage of the new access points through the fencing created to the north of the Island. The camera was also positioned to the south to look at the use by wildlife there, as well as recording any nocturnal wildlife activity on the Island.
5. The access points to the north were heavily used, with coots, moorhens and Egyptian and Canada geese regularly going to and from the pond from these points. Although, activity was largely confined to the morning, black-headed gulls were also recorded in moderate numbers (up to 10) feeding on the bank edge, as well as a few recordings of crow, mallard, feral pigeon and a single recording of a heron.
6. One or more foxes visited the Island on most nights, being recorded on nine of the 13 nights the camera was in position. On a number of nights, a fox was seen to spend several hours seemingly feeding off worms and on other occasions was merely seen searching around. The regular presence of a fox will probably prevent the Island from being used for any nesting by wetland bird species.
7. Dogs were recorded running around the Island on four mornings and are thought to have swum across to the access bays. On all occasions the dogs were wet and once a dog was recorded emerging from the water.
8. Humans were recorded on the Island on three occasions with all these visits taking place in the evening, after dark.

Results of the monitoring

9. The data recorded shows that the Island provides a valuable refuge to waterfowl, especially in the spring and early summer. The occurrence of herons and a great crested grebe is encouraging. If the Island is designated as a wildlife refuge much of the outer fencing on the eastern side of the Island would be removed, and duck-sized holes made in the inner fencing. This would provide suitable nesting and feeding habitat for waterfowl and better access to the Island. Ground nesting and nocturnal roosting and feeding on the island itself would probably be restricted due to visits by foxes and the occasional dog and human.
10. The near absence of non-aquatic birds was not surprising given the lack of shrubby habitat; establishing some groups of shrubs, especially hawthorn, and erecting bird boxes should attract more non-aquatic birds.
11. If public access were to be allowed, it would severely restrict the use of the Island by bird life, to the extent that there would be almost no use by waterfowl except perhaps a few coots and moorhens in the vegetation. Even if only half the Island were to be made accessible and dogs were prohibited few birds would use the half where public access was restricted, especially the less common species such as grebes and herons.

Public feedback

12. Over the course of the last year, comments have been received from members of the public in writing (email) and verbally via calls to the Superintendent's Office at Heathfield House. The feedback from members of the public has been to keep the Island closed to people, and to make the Island a wildlife sanctuary.
13. The Marylebone Bird Watchers made a representation at the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee Meeting on 13 March 2017, in relation to the Island to becoming a Wildlife Sanctuary with no public access. A petition was received at the time of the same meeting signed by 5,333 supporters calling of the Island to become a wildlife sanctuary.

Options presented in the report to Committee

14. The following options have been considered by Officers, following 14 months of monitoring.
 - A. Restrict public access to the Island and install a timber fence to the western side of the Island. In addition, further low-level planting to be carried out. This option will facilitate and encourage a greater variety of bird species to use the Island and will improve the nesting habitat on the Island. **This option is recommended by Officers.**
 - B. Open the Island fully to allow public access. This option will result in the Island no longer being utilised by bird species due to the presence of humans and dog during the day and possibly night time hours, along with

other wildlife such as foxes. **This option is not recommended by Officers.**

- C. Allow public access on half the Island, by removing the current fence line and installing a post and rail fence to create a section of the Island that can only be accessed by wildlife. Although, part of the Island will remain closed to members of the public, the results of the monitoring have shown that close proximity to members of the public and dogs will result in the Island being underutilised by bird species, and it is likely that few bird species will continue to use the Island, including herons and grebes. **This option is not recommended by Officers.**

Future management of the Island and Ponds on Hampstead Heath

15. A draft Hampstead Heath Ponds and Wetlands Strategy is being prepared, which will set out the future long-term management programme for the ponds on Hampstead Heath. The draft strategy contains a desilting schedule, and considers wildlife, aquatic planting, recreation and alternative sustainable technologies for managing water quality. It is also proposed to create improved nesting habitat on the Model Boating Pond Island by planting native hedging species and also hazel.
16. The Island will be included in the Strategy, which is due to be completed in spring 2019.
17. Members views are sought in relation to the layout and topics/areas covered in the draft strategy appended to this report (see Appendix 2).

Corporate & Strategic Implications

18. The City of London Corporation's Corporate Plan (2015-2019) states under Key Policy Priority 5 '*Developing and improving the physical environment around our key cultural attractions; and providing safe, secure, and accessible Open Spaces*'.
19. It will also help fulfil the Open Space's Department's Business Plan 2016-2019 Vision to '*Preserve and protect our world class green spaces for the benefit of our local communities and the environment*'. The content of this report also has a direct impact on the five core values of Quality, Inclusion, Environment, Promotion and People, and contributes to all four of the Department's key objectives.

Conclusion

20. The Model Boating Pond Island presents an opportunity to create another wildlife sanctuary on the Heath and following on from the ecological and landscape improvements which were incorporated into the engineering works during the Ponds Project it seems appropriate to secure the Island as a refuge.

21. It is therefore recommended that public access to the Island is restricted to allow the Island to become a sanctuary for waterfowl and non-aquatic bird species. This recommendation is supported by ecological monitoring data, and local public opinion.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Monitoring results
- Appendix 2 – Draft outline for Hampstead Heath Ponds and Wetlands Strategy

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Appendix 1

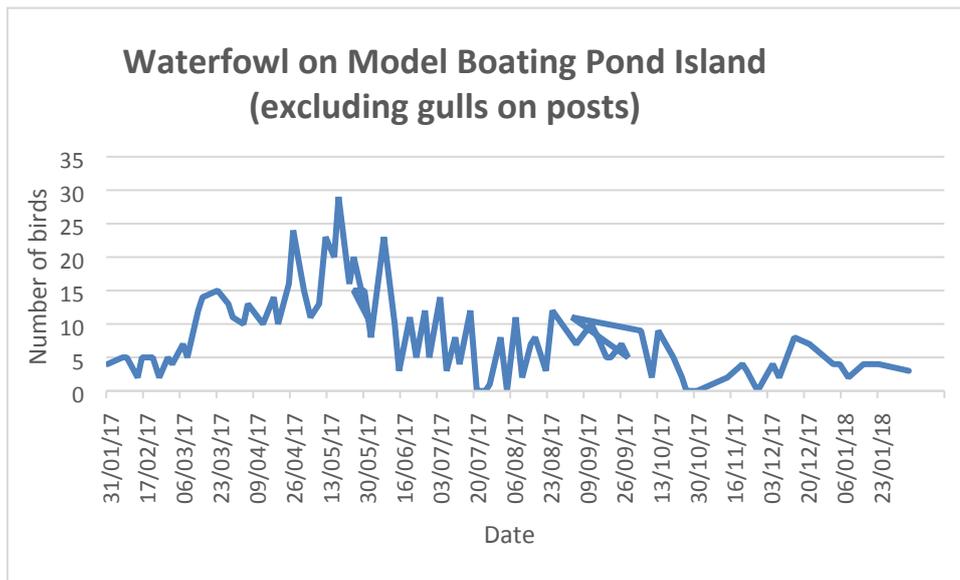


Figure 1 – Waterfowl, excluding gulls on posts, observed on the Model Boating Pond Island

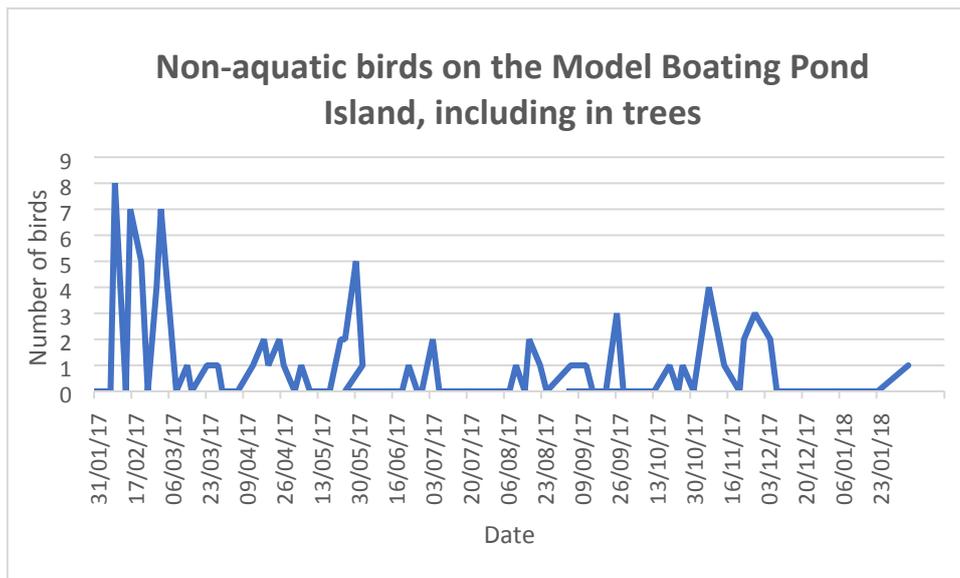


Figure 2 – Non-aquatic birds observed on the Model Boating Pond Island, including in trees