



Watchtree Nature Reserve Ltd – Annual Report for 2010/11 (April 1st 2009 to March 31st 2010)

On behalf of the Directors of WNR LTD I am pleased to present my fifth annual report on the work and progress of Watchtree Nature Reserve Ltd.

Thank you everyone who has contributed to another successful year, especially our two members of staff Tim Lawrence (Nature Reserve Manager) and Ryan Dobson (Access and Development Officer) and our Volunteers whose hard work and commitment is highly valued. Special mention is deserved for Wendy Woof and Chris Ball for their contribution to the Watchtree Wheelers project.

There have been a number of changes during the year with Ryan Dobson commencing his two year contract as Access and Development Officer, Clive Tinker taking over as our Treasurer, DTZ taking over the role of our Defra liaison through Ben Hunter and Interserve taking over the site as Defra facilities managers. We were pleased that Joan Markwell decided to become a Director and then Sam Griffin agreed to join us; both bring a range of new skills to the table. Generally the changes have gone smoothly, the Interserve changeover did not involve any change of site staff and we are steadily getting to know how DTZ and Ben Hunter wish to work. Clive and Ryan quickly settled into their roles and part of Ryan's work is to help Clive with the financial administration.

We made significant progress during the year creating Marsh Fritillary habitat in the small meadows and later in the year we joined the Natural England/Butterfly Conservation Marsh Fritillary captive breeding programme.

Watchtree Wheelers and our new Lottery funded cycle way was launched on July 11th and has been a great success.

Site opening hours were extended to 7 days a week from April to September.

The membership scheme was developed and ready for enrolling members by February.

We fulfilled our commitment to Defra by completing the work programme, increasing the use of the site by local schools and attracting more visitors.

We had aimed to enhance the site by creating a further 1.5 km of new hedgerow, convert field 4d into semi-natural grassland, offer our broadband facility to the local community and develop some sources of alternative energy. Whilst we have spent much time researching these features it has taken time to complete grant application forms and to conduct the research. However, we hope that we shall reap the rewards of our efforts next year.

The Directors remain enthusiastic and committed to Watchtree and this is the keystone of our continued success. However, as the years pass it is vitally important that we plan for the future by developing a succession plan and commence planning for 2011/12 when the Defra funding is lower and then for 2016/17 when it ends. Our current business plan is 5 years old and needs a thorough review to take account of the progress to date and plan for the future. The directors manage the executive functions between us and it is workload that equates to at least a half time paid employee.

Staff.

Our Nature Reserve Manager, Tim Lawrence, has been with us for 4 years and his enthusiasm and commitment continues to be a key element of our success. Tim commences the final year of a 5 year contract in June 2010 and we have alerted Ben Hunter to this situation and the need to secure Defra consent to continue using an element of our budget to extend his contract for a further 5 years.

He was joined by Ryan Dobson, Access and Development Officer in June on a 2 year contract. The job remit includes financial administration, developing and launching the membership scheme, working most weekends to achieve longer opening hours, managing the Watchtree Wheelers programme and developing various fund raising initiatives.

Ryan has brought his local knowledge and contacts to the site and made a significant impact on our success this year.

Membership Scheme.

We feel this is an important move in developing WNR Ltd and our long term future.

The membership scheme opened in February and in the first two months we had 18 individual members, 16 Family Members and 3 group memberships. Three family memberships were given 'free of charge' two in lieu of considerable donations of cycles and one as a prize in the Prize Draw.

Summary of Nature Reserve Management work required by Defra under LMFA**Grassland habitat development and management.**

Another wet July and August made it almost impossible for haymaking. We eventually had a very small window and managed to get good hay from the best fields but the hay from other areas was not the best quality. Fortunately we found customers for all of it. The problem we face on such a large area is getting it all cut and prepared in changeable weather. After three very nervous years we decided that a change was required and after much discussion we agreed that the haymaking should be let with the grazing, thus making three farmers responsible for making and taking the hay to our nature conservation specification. Whilst we lose the income from the sale of the hay we shall have the grassland management budget for work necessary to develop the Marsh Fritillary habitat and trying to resolve some of the problems of trying to create semi-natural wild flower meadows.

The aftermath grazing was again let to Mr Bowe, Mr Irving and Mr Pattinson and achieved our objectives. However, as the Marsh Fritillary habitat develops on the 10 small meadows we shall require cattle grazing on these fields. We discussed this in detail and with Mr Pattinson and Matthew Tower our Land Agent from Smiths Gore and have budgeted for the changes and management work required during next year, which include new fencing and a water supply.

Docks, Thistles and Ragwort

We seem to have these species under control by hand weeding and hope that we can finally dispense with chemical control over our grasslands. Thank you to our volunteers for sticking to this chore.

Meadow diversity

The grassland monitoring, contracted out by Defra, continues to show that plant diversity is decreasing in most fields and we continued to evaluate the situation. This is most obvious on the areas heavily disturbed by the burials. The problem seems to revolve around soil structure. The large scale disturbance has left a soil prone to compaction and anaerobic conditions at the surface in which only a few adaptable grasses and flowers survive. The fields to the south, not

affected by site operations, where the problem is residual agricultural nutrients, are showing signs that the nutrients are being depleted and a more diverse plant community is developing, especially in the area of the 'Covey Pasture' immediately to the east of 'The Sticks' (the small strip of woodland by the 'Wetlands').

Our small trial plots on area 11a, (one of the areas of top-soiled former runway) where we are scarifying the soil and sowing seeds harvested from other Cumbrian wildflower meadows, is showing interesting results. The three plots so far treated are all showing different results despite the fact that the seed came from the same source each year. We aim to extend this habitat improvement to other similar areas of topsoil runway.

Marsh Fritillary habitat development was delayed by the wet summer in 2008 and it was not until April 2009 that we were finally able to sow small meadows 5.6 to 5.9. Germination was slow but eventually the fields greened up. Our volunteers planted over 4500 Devils-bit Scabious plugs to get the food plant going. The 2009 summer was also very wet but a window of dry weather in September enabled us to plough and sow meadows 5.2 to 5.5 on schedule and another few hundred Scabious plugs were planted. Seed germination was very slow and the fields were still looking rather bleak at the end of March.

Our consultant Marek Nowakowski made a visit in June and was reassuring about the site saying the slow germination seemed to be happening nationwide. However, he was most concerned about the demonstration plots and recommended that we scarify and re-sow three of them. The wild bird food plot was not especially good either but that was left as was the natural regeneration plot. We had planted a number of Scabious plants in this plot and also sown seed. These plants did extremely well and in September we harvested much of the seed to sow in the small meadows and in March we harvested leaves to feed the captive Marsh Fritillary caterpillars.

The plan to 'sub-soil' these fields was put on hold again because of another very wet summer.

We commissioned additional vegetation monitoring on the small meadows to follow the progress of the re-sowing. The report will be available on our web site in due course.

The additional monitoring will continue.

We believe that research and field trials are the only way forward with this project and we again discussed this with the University of Cumbria and a potential post graduate student. However, at the end of the year we are still waiting for this to come to fruition and are disappointed that the project has not got off the ground.

Hedgerows.

The new hedgerows are generally making good progress, although some localised sections remain poor. The drainage was improved alongside two short sections on the 'Wetlands' boundary that were obviously suffering from waterlogging.

We commenced laying a short section of new hedge that was showing good growth as a trial to see how it responds.

A request was received to plant a disease resistant elm as a memorial to a deceased family member. The elm was planted as a hedgerow tree in the hedge on the SE corner of small meadow 5.10.

The hedgerows and landscape generally would be enhanced with a few trees of typical species.

We made slow progress with our project to plant 1.5 km of new hedgerow round field 4d and the southern boundaries after an application to SITA was ruled out of time Tim eventually managed to get an application into BIFFA and at the time of writing we await the outcome.

Woodlands

The new plantations continue to make a significant impact on the site and its wildlife.

A number of species of birds are now breeding in or amongst the new trees and shrubs. The woodland work has principally focussed on removing trees tubes. The wide variation in the tree growth relates directly to the soil condition and other site factors. Woodland management is now a low input with the main work being maintaining sunny glades and rides for woodland butterflies and insects around the pond in pond wood and along the paths. Letting daylight onto the pond caused a dramatic growth in the pond vegetation and rotational clearing commenced to maintain areas of open water.

Paths and tracks.

The paths were kept well maintained by strimming the encroaching vegetation and spraying invading plant growth on the paths in late July. Some paths proved difficult for wheelchair users and were scraped clear of excess gravel and then rolled.

The new sections of cycleway constructed using the 'Consolid' system was rather disappointing in places and we had to provide additional drainage to drain standing water. Following discussions with the Contractor he has agreed to return and deal with the problem. The white lines and bitumen sealing in the concrete joints has not been very durable and again the Contractor has agreed to rectify the situation when weather conditions allow.

Our volunteers commenced the widening of the path round the SW side of pond wood as part of our Cycleway extension plan. The remainder of the proposed extension requires additional funding to fund a contract and we began this process late in the year.

Management Plan Review.

This is now in progress.

Educational & Schools

Under 16's: Total 720 including 42 separate school visits including Caldew Secondary (Dalston), Limehouse (Boarding and day school), Burgh-by-Sands Infants, Wiggonby Pre School, Wiggonby Juniors, Great Orton Juniors, Holme Cultram Abbey, Nelson Tomlinson Secondary, Beaconside infants, Bowness on Solway Juniors, James Rennie Specialist School. Youth Visits: Wigton Cubs, Ayers Explorer Scouts (100 miles sponsored cycle at Watchtree), Wigton Youth Station and Sunbeams.

Under 16's 2007-08 = 580, 2008-09 = 620, 2009-10 = 730

Our 'school holiday' activity days are very popular, especially with local parents and to the extent that we do not need to advertise them widely.

Further Education

University of Cumbria Newton Rigg campus visited with Dr Roy Armstrong (6 students who then did a day volunteering on hedge laying and path construction).

Lucy Turnbull Newton Rigg student placement. Very successful

Hadlow College, Kent visited in July they have been bringing a group to Watchtree since 2003

John Muir Award Scheme.

10 persons successfully obtained the John Muir Award. (Caldew COPE x 3 and Caldew Secondary x 7. 2 additional John Muir Awards in progress (James Rennie School and Caldew School.

Public Access

Visitor total 2009-10 = 3364.

Group visits to Watchtree include: Keswick Natural History Society, Appleby Field Group, Underbarrow W.I., Pooley Bridge W.I., Brampton Ladies Circle, Carlisle Ramblers, Soulby W.I, Rosley W.I., Gosforth 49 Club, Chrysalis, Mencap, Kirby Thore WI, Ethnic Minorities

visit with Cumbria County Council, Drumburgh & Glasson WI, Maryport Natural History Society, Age Concern, 3rd Wigton Sea Scouts, CN Group, Lakes Vintage Car Club, Carlisle U3A.

Talks - Offsite

Prospect Lunch Club (Frank Mawby)

South Lakes RSPB Group at Ulverston (Frank Mawby)

Keswick Horticultural Society (Frank Mawby)

Gamblesby WI (Tim Lawrence)

Rotary Wigton (Tim Lawrence)

Carlisle Methodist Church (William Little and Ryan Dobson -3 visits regarding the Wheelers fundraising)

Greystoke Social Club (William Little and Ryan Dobson)

Dalston Methodists (William Little and Ryan Dobson)

Milnthorpe 'Widening Horizons' (William Little & Ryan Dobson)

St Cuthberts Church Carlisle (William Little)

Mungrisdale WI (William Little)

Crosby Ravensworth WI (Bob Timmins and William Little)

Kirby Thore WI (Bob Timmins and William Little)

Watchtree Wheelers.

Watchtree Wheelers has been a great success with Chrysalis, Impact Housing, James Rennie School, Mencap, Cumbria Care, People First, Action for Blind People, Cumbria Cerebral Palsy, MS Cumbria, Autism Group, John Wilson (private carers), Age Concern, Laura Davidson (private group), Young People First, Different Strokes, Glenmore Trust and several families who have taken advantage of the 'Drop in' days.

A total of 273 people used the cycles from the date of the launch to 31st March.

The track was completed early in the year and was officially opened on July 10th by Annie Mawson (The Sunbeam Trust) and Eileen McGlynn the paraplegic gold medal winning Olympian cyclist. The 'Wheelers' was also officially launched the same day.

In addition to the track we erected a double garage cycle store to house the many cycles we now have available.

We purchased a 'Veloplus' wheelchair carrying cycle as a result of fundraising from various sources including £1000 from a Prize Draw that featured the painting donated by Ray Nichol as first prize and several smaller prizes donated by local companies. £500 raised by the Ayers Venture Scouts on a sponsored cycle ride and £500 grant from the Cumberland News.

The remaining cash to make up the £5k cost came from donations and small events run by Ryan. Ayers Venture Scouts need a special mention for a fantastic effort on day of rain and high winds.

The Carlisle and District Methodist Church is also fund raising for cycles during this year. A grant of £1620 was raised by Ryan from the Cumbria County Council, 'Together we can Fund' grant funding. This money provided for 'drop in sessions' on alternate Sunday's and Thursdays. These sessions have proved very popular and will continue well into the next financial year. An additional benefit has been several people joining as Members.

Two Volunteers attended a Cycling Project training course, (Cycling Project is a registered Charity who have been our mentors since the very beginning of this project).

As mentioned earlier we are indebted to the time that Volunteers Wendy Woof and Chris Ball have dedicated to this project. Our aim is that with training and site familiarisation the project users can largely manage the cycling themselves with the minimum of input.

Our ambition now is to take the cycle track round the whole site including the woodland areas and enable users to enjoy more of the wildlife.

Publicity and PR.

Tim produced 3 Newsletters over the year and circulated over 500 copies to Friends of Watchtree and other contacts and requests for Newsletters. It is also available on our web site. Tim continues to write a full page Watchtree article for the local parish magazine (Eleven editions go out to about 2000 households in the parishes of Burgh, Moorhouse, Monkhill, Kirkandrews, Grinsdale, Kirkbampton, Thurstonefield, Great Orton, Little Bampton, Aikton and Longburgh). This year he also placed regular articles in the Bowness Parish Magazine.

The 2009 Calendar was well received; however we decided that the 2010 calendar complimentary circulation list should be significantly reduced and that we should aim to make a small profit on sales. The calendar was a sell out yet again and I would like to thank all of the photographers for their splendid photographs, especially Doug Welch for the splendid 'Barn Owl' cover photo.

We continue to use 'Big Story Media' run by Karen Morley as our publicity agent. Through Karen we have had regular articles in local newspapers and on TV and BBC Radio Cumbria to publicise our open days and events.

Our web site is now a key point of information and is kept regularly updated by Tim. There have been some problems though, which we hope our 'web designer' has now rectified. The weather station went 'offline' in September and again in January. We eventually discovered that the software needed upgrading. This was not possible on the old PC it is operating from and it will be unavailable until we acquire a replacement PC.

We entered for the CSEP (Cumbria Social Enterprise Partnership) Awards and attended the event held in Wigton in February. We won the award for the Community Enterprise of The Year and a prize worth £1250 of help and advice from the DTA (Development Trust's Association)

Shows.

We attended the Penrith, Cockermouth and Dalston agricultural shows. These Shows are worth the effort because of the interesting and worthwhile feedback we receive.

Friends of Watchtree

The Friends of Watchtree scheme was originally implemented to allow out of hours access to interested people. We were a little disappointed that so few people actually took advantage of the scheme. Longer opening hours, which commenced in July, has now made it much easier for people to visit. We shall phase out the 'Friends' scheme next year and out of hours access will become a member's privilege. We hope several friends will become members and they will remain on the Newsletter mailing list.

Watchtree Volunteers

Watchtree volunteer work parties are every Wednesday morning and the first Saturday of the month. We have fourteen regular Wednesday volunteers and another eight who help with admin and at weekends.

We have recorded 2730 hours of Volunteer time compared to 1203 in 2008 and 2771 in 2009. In addition over 180 hours have been recorded doing work off-site, including shows 120 hours, talks 60 hours and other events.

Work programme tasks completed by volunteers, include; woodland ride management/coppicing, hedgerow maintenance, tree guard removal/tree straightening, fencing, pond creation, bird box maintenance, bird feeders, path clearance and path construction, hide maintenance, boardwalk maintenance, assisting with guided walks and open days, talks, Agricultural shows, database management, photography, newsletter mailing, and general administration.

Watchtree Ringing Group.

The group has five active licensed (BTO – British Trust for Ornithology) ringers and 5 helpers and other interested people. During 2009 we ringed 493 full grown birds, 277 nestlings and re-trapped 138 birds previously ringed of 33 different species, making a total of 908 birds handled and processed and reported to the BTO ringing scheme. Our special projects are colour ringing Willow Warblers and Skylarks, 134 Willow Warblers were ringed and 49 were re-sighted from colour rings or re-captured. We only fit colour rings to Skylark nestlings and 21 were found and ringed. We had our first sighting of an adult bird with a colour ring in May 2009 and it had been ringed as a nestling in May 2008. We carry out nest finding and recording for the BTO ‘Nest Records Scheme’ and completed 90 nest record cards. The majority were Great Tit, Blue Tit and Tree Sparrow and 16 other species.

The colour ringing of Willow Warblers reveals that the males are very site faithful and, if they survive more than one season, will return to the same territory. We recorded 31 territories on site in 2009 (a territory is held by a singing male not a pair).

The males arrive about two weeks earlier than the females and are much easier to detect than females. Numbers of females varies significantly and in 2009 it seemed that less than half the males actually attracted a female. We have much more difficulty locating females are fewer are re-sighted, they are secretive hard to detect until they are located bringing food to a nest or re-captured after breeding. In most populations of birds it is not unusual for males to outnumber females possibly because the combination of rearing young, then replacing feathers followed by migration is a severe strain causing more to die. This is one question our colour-ringing project may shed some light on.

We had a number of interesting ‘recoveries’ (ringed birds found dead) and ‘controls’ birds we ringed and which were caught again by another ringer or birds ringed elsewhere that we caught.

Lesser Redpoll ring no X666550 ringed at Watchtree on 1st October 2009 and controlled in Penrith on 7th February 2010.

Lesser Redpoll ring no X666644 ringed at Watchtree on 25th July 2009 and controlled at Blashford in Hampshire on 20th February 2010.

Lesser Redpoll ring no X666522 ringed at Watchtree on 1st October 2009 and controlled in Nassogne, Luxembourg, Belgium on 19th January 2010.

Wren ring no BLB949 ringed at Watchtree on 1 October 2009 and found dead as a road casualty at Milnthorpe on 6th March 2010.

Bullfinch ring no X666517 ringed at Watchtree on 1 Oct 2009 which was stunned when it hit a window in Kirkbampton on 4th January 2010 and recovered and released okay.

Lesser Black-backed Gull killed by one of the wind turbines on 28th September 2009 had been ringed as a nestling on Rockcliffe Marsh on 3rd July 2005 (this was the second wind turbine casualty in September)

Great Tit ring no TL53814 ringed as a nestling in box 34 at Watchtree on 13th May 2009 and died on 5th November 2009 when it flew into a window on a house in Moorhouse.

Training

The principal training event was the Defra 'community sites' annual meeting hosted this year by Durham Wildlife Trust who manages the Hedley Hope Fell FMD site in County Durham on July 4th. The meeting also provided an opportunity to say farewell and thank you to Grant Webberley, our Defra liaison man over the last 5 years.

Two Directors, two Staff and 15 Volunteers attended the event.

Viv Lewis ran a 2 hour session for Directors on Outcomes on January 28th. This was a follow up from the course Tim and I attended last February.

Tim Lawrence: Grazing for site conservation management at Plas Tan Y Bwlch (5 days).

Tim Lawrence: First Aid at Work re-qualification.

Ryan Dobson: First Aid at Work

Ryan Dobson: Database management – short on-line course.

Ryan Dobson, Derek Hetherington

Watchtree Wildlife.

The Defra commissioned surveys of Birds, Butterflies, Moths, Bats, Great Crested Newts and Vegetation continue to make an important contribution to the site development and our management plan.

Butterflies

The Dingy Skipper butterfly was seen on the north perimeter track this season, the first time it has shown any movement from the main site in the 'Scrubs'. This species and the Wall Brown had good seasons and they are both BAP species (Biodiversity Action Plan Species) Small Skipper was seen on site for the first time and Painted Ladies were abundant in line with the national trend when 2009 produced a remarkably large migration of this Mediterranean species. They produce broods in late autumn but are unable to survive our winter. Some remarkable footage on BBC TV 'Autumnwatch' was able to show that they do migrate back to the Med.

Our other butterflies include good numbers of Orange Tip, Green-veined White, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Small Copper, (a species that seems to have declined in recent years but showed a small recovery in 2009), Large Skipper, Common Blue, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Red Admiral and of course Small and Large White.

Moths

The Watchtree moth list now contains a total of 208 species. Twenty-three new species were added the Watchtree moth list in 2009.

Twenty-eight moth species which have been recorded at Watchtree are now included in the UK/CBAP list. Watchtree therefore holds 38% of the listed in the CBAP. (Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan)

Amphibians

Great Crested Newts continue to increase and were also found by Tim in the 'Dalston school' scrape. This small water body is transitional and dries out during dry spells. We may need to make an area deeper to retain some water through dry periods.

Palmate and Smooth Newt remain common as are large numbers of Frogs and Toads, especially in the pond in Pond Wood.

Birds

Sedge warbler and Stonechat were new confirmed breeding species, although Stonechats have previously bred just offsite. Stonechats often overwinter on Watchtree and a pair was still

present in February but disappeared in March and it will be interesting to see what effect the very cold winter has had on this species and other 'weather sensitive' species.

The surveys by Liz Still also located 31 Skylark and 31 Willow Warbler territories as well as 9 Reed Bunting; territories refers to singing males not a pair because there is often more males than females in these bird populations.

Our Mute Swans produced 7 cygnets which quickly reduced to 5, they were growing well until mid- July when they all took sick and died within the space of two weeks. A veterinary examination showed they were overwhelmed by a 'Schistosome' blood parasite, which has water snails as part of its life cycle as well as water birds. The Swans seemed to be the only ones affected. The lake water levels became very low in June and there were very large numbers of snails.

We were pleased to see three pair of Little Grebe nesting on the Lake and Wetlands.

At least 5 pair of Tree Sparrows used the boxes in 'The Sticks' and most reared three broods. We think the wild bird food crop and summer feeding is a playing key role in the success of this species that was very scarce in Cumbria until very recently.

Mammals

An Otter continues to pay visits from time to time, but especially when the Frogs and Toads are mating when it can eat large numbers. It only eats the hind legs and it can be a little gruesome seeing the corpses of half eaten frogs and toads left on the banks.

We sustain an abundance of Brown Hares and one day I discovered two recently born leverets within 20 metres of the back door of the office. Stoat, Fox, Hedgehog, Bank Vole, Field Mouse, Roe Deer, Common Shrew, Brown Rat, Mole and Rabbit were also recorded on site and regrettably two Grey Squirrels were seen in the autumn.

Odonata. (Dragon and Damselflies)

There was really nothing of interest to report - a poor summer and some of the larger dragonfly species were not recorded (Emperor Dragonfly, Migrant Hawker and Ruddy Darter not seen in 2009).

Wildlife garden

We began planning an 'elemental garden' that we hope to create near the office. The plan is to create raised beds and surround the area with a shelter hedge to enable us to grow flowers and grasses that we hope will become abundant in our meadows as they revert to a semi-natural state. Here school groups will be able to study the plants and insects and people less able to walk round the site can sit and enjoy our wildlife encapsulated in a tiny area. We wish to thank Birse Civils who have kindly agreed to donate the top soil for the raised beds and hedge bank from the Carlisle western ring road and we hope it will come early in the new financial year.

F J Mawby

Chairman

June 2010