

Defending the patch



It was one of the best breeding sites in Britain for the rapidly vanishing Tree Sparrow, a wildlife oasis in the suburban sprawl of south London and temporary home to a fine cast of rarities including Britain's first Glaucous-winged Gull. So what's going wrong at Beddington? **Peter Alfrey** reports.

ROGER BROWNE



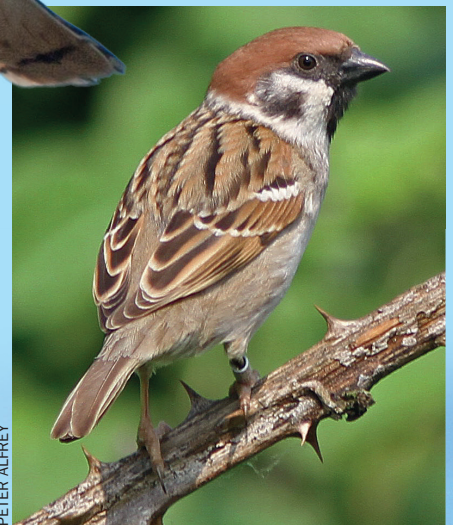
Short-eared Owl is the Beddington Farmlands NR 'mascot' – if this species returns to the site it will be an indicator of the success of the restoration.

Beddington Farmlands is my local patch. A 400-acre expanse of south London currently used for waste management, it is also being restored as a public nature reserve. The area hosts significant wildlife populations and 256 bird species have been recorded, among them important breeding birds including up to 25 pairs of Northern Lapwing and, until recently, one of Britain's largest Tree Sparrow populations. It's ironic that a refugium for farmland birds has sprung up within built-up south London, but the site has been spared from agricultural chemicals, allowing once-common arable weeds to flourish along with invertebrates and the birds that rely on them.

Perhaps the most important thing about Beddington is its potential to act as a major urban nature sanctuary,

connecting thousands of Londoners directly to nature. The benefits of such a resource are huge, replicating the success of reserves like the London Wetland Centre WWT in Barnes and Rainham Marshes RSPB on the Thames.

Beddington Farmlands has significance in other ways too, with many well-known British birders having 'graduated' there. The list of birding alumni is impressive; one of modern birding's founding fathers, Peter Grant, spent his early days there, as did Richard Porter, Dick Filby and much-missed conservationists Bob Scott and Simon Aspinall. There are also local heroes who deserve greater acknowledgement: Derek Coleman, Brian Milne, Gary Messenbird, Johnny Allan, Mike Netherwood, Ken Parsley and many more over the years.



PETER ALFREY

Tree Sparrow has suffered an estimated 93 per cent national decline between 1970 and 2008. Beddington once held one of the biggest populations in Britain.

Beddington Farmlands is a 400-acre site incorporating lakes, reedbed, scrubland, shallow pools and meadow. It is home to a huge variety of animal and plant species, including many that are endangered.



The threat

Industrial use means that Beddington has endured a lot, but though in steady decline the important bird populations have somehow managed to hang in there. That might not last much longer, however – the Tree Sparrows, Beddington’s iconic species and one of the last remaining large populations in Britain, have almost completely disappeared. In 2007 nearly 1,000 were present; alarmingly, that has reduced to only a handful.

The greatest threat of all, though, has emerged in the form of a new incinerator, planned by landowner Viridor. If built, the site as we know it will be permanently blighted. This proposal is a serious reflection of the landowner’s environmental and social attitudes, and also highlights the perils of a passive local community and an impotent local authority with a planning system that is failing wildlife.

Yet Beddington Farmlands should be well protected. It is Metropolitan Open Land (the equivalent of green belt in an urban area), a Special Site of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINC), a Site of



The local bird group is spreading the word by campaigning at local environmental fairs (above), while the publication of the *Beddington Farmlands Bird and Wildlife Report* has proved to be a useful tool in producing a detailed picture of wildlife on the patch.



Metropolitan Importance for Bats, and it hosts eight Red Data List breeding bird species, numerous Biodiversity Action Plan species and three ‘1 per cent winter threshold’ species. There are more than 60 species of moths of conservation concern, including probably the only British resident population of Dewick’s Plusia, a population of Common Lizard and even a fly species *Litophasia hyalipennis* that was considered extinct and has only recently been rediscovered. The area is a central part of the London Plan to create the Wandle Valley Regional Park, and part of the local Core Planning Strategy to create an area

for people and nature which is guided by a Conservation Management Plan.

But this protection is not

working. Habitat has been managed in a way that has seen the majority of target species decline, the restoration programme has been delayed, and populations of up to 50 per cent of the bird species have fallen. On top of all that, an incinerator is now due to be built on the most important habitat type: wet grassland, which is home to most of the conservation target species.

DIY conservation

The local authority has not enforced planning conditions (apparently for cost reasons), and the Mayor of London and central government both referred the application back for local ruling rather than dealing with it at a higher level. Even the wildlife non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been restricted on what they can do, perhaps putting Beddington in the ‘too difficult’ category. Some also receive funding from Viridor, the incinerator applicant, and the relationships may be complex. In short, it seems that none of the powers that be are willing or capable of doing much.

This just leaves our local community groups to do whatever they can to defend the patch – essentially, it’s DIY conservation. Against the odds, we are trying several initiatives:

• **Producing a bird report.**

A good bird report can be a very



Up to 25 pairs of Northern Lapwing breed on the reserve. This farmland bird was once numerous but it has suffered catastrophic declines in recent years.

ALL PHOTOS: PETER ALFREY



Above left: a local community group project is planting a woodland glade at the entrance of Beddington Farmlands. **Above right:** Anti air-pollution demonstrators against the incinerator – maybe the local wildlife community should be doing this too?

“Failure to protect wildlife is a national problem”

useful tool in conservation, and ongoing systematic surveys at Beddington are helping produce a detailed picture of the bird populations on our patch. Such reports are also a great way to showcase local photographs and art, and members can contribute the results of their own projects in papers and articles. Ironically, our bird report is sponsored by the incinerator applicant, but overall it represents a good group effort.

• **Public engagement.** Our group is small, but nonetheless we organise regular walks and talks, run websites and use social media to publicise our efforts. As an industrial site, access to all areas is limited to a small group of birders, which is a big disadvantage when facing a challenge such as the incinerator – we are desperate to get more people involved. But if more visitors do use the site as a natural resource, and NGOs, green businesses, community groups and others get involved too, it is far less likely to become degraded.

• **Conservation work and habitat enhancement.** We sit in a management group with Viridor, the council, ecological consultants and others overseeing site restoration. However, the interests of the landowner seem to take priority over wildlife concerns – it’s a difficult position to be in because we want to have influence, but don’t want to be associated with further habitat degradation.

On the plus side, local community groups have teamed up to improve

access, and have managed grasslands around our hide, enhancing them for biodiversity by sowing yellow rattle and wildflower meadows. Saplings have been planted widely and have now grown into tall hedges, while hundreds of Tree Sparrow nestboxes have been erected and the birds have permanent feeding stations. We also have a ringing group that monitors the local birds and migrants.

• **NGO endorsement and support.** We have had help from the RSPB through a joint project – the London Tree Sparrow Partnership – and recently sown seeds were sourced from the London Wetland Centre WWT. The London Wildlife Trust has also been very helpful, especially through the hard work of Derek Coleman, who has won most of the conservation conditions attached to the site. Closer ties with all the NGOs in our region would be even more beneficial.

• **Legal options.** One of the biggest challenges we could face is getting involved in a judicial review of the incinerator application. But while it’s worth seeing what the courts make of local planning system failures, the costs to us will probably be prohibitive.

• **Direct action and protest.** The wildlife community hasn’t gone down this route yet, but others who oppose the incinerator have. Peaceful protest might at least help highlight the issues and generate publicity about the problems facing Beddington and its birds.

Beyond the patch

The Beddington incinerator may be a local issue, but failure to protect wildlife is a national problem. It’s a cliché, but acting locally really can change things on a bigger scale when all those local changes add up. *The State of Nature Report 2013* confirms a 60 per cent decline of the UK’s biodiversity over the last few decades. Wildlife is increasingly being concentrated in the protection network across the UK – nature reserves, green oases like Beddington and the wildlife corridors that connect them. We must protect these sanctuaries, and at a local level that means defending the patch. ■

HELPING TO SAVE BEDDINGTON

- You can contribute to the Stop the Incinerator campaign – visit www.stoptheincinerator.co.uk.
- You can also join in the work of the Beddington Farmlands group – birders, a botanist and other naturalists are needed to help with monitoring, and administration, legal and public engagement/PR skills would be useful. Please email Peter Alfrey at littleoakgroup@btinternet.com.
- If you want to become an associate member of the group, join the mailing list and keep up with developments and news on access and events, please also email.
- Visit the Beddington Farmlands website at www.bfnr.org.uk. ■