

Wildlife Gardening in Action

CASE STUDY: North Hill Well Wood Project, Headingley

The North Hill Well Wood Project is a partnership comprising Groundwork Yorkshire, Unite Students, and the University of Leeds.

Describe your garden/outdoor space before you started gardening with wildlife in mind:

North Hill Well Wood is located on Headingley Hill, which is part of the sandstone Woodhouse Ridge which is found in North-West Leeds. North Hill House was originally built for William Walker, a cloth manufacturer, in 1846, and then extended in 1881. North Hill Court was then constructed within the grounds in 1923, with two tennis courts provided for use by its residents. Both North Hill House and North Hill Court were purchased by the University of Leeds in 1962. The University built James Baillie Flats in the grounds in 1978, which was redeveloped by Unite Students as James Baillie Park in 2003. In 2019 the University and Unite Students agreed to transform the then overgrown tennis court area into a communal green amenity space for the benefit of students, staff, local residents and wildlife. Groundwork Yorkshire was appointed as project delivery partner, with funding provided from both DEFRA's Green Recovery Challenge Fund and partner contributions.

How did you get started on your wildlife gardening journey?

The University of Leeds became a corporate member of Yorkshire Wildlife Trust in 2012, and student and staff volunteers have enjoyed working alongside staff from the Trust on fifty-four Wild Work Days so far, that have taken place around Leeds and the Aire Valley catchment area. Residential Services has also had a Blueprint Action Plan since 2018 that promotes sustainability improvements across its residential portfolio, including the creation of inclusive and welcoming outdoor environments that provide health and well-being benefits for students, staff, visitors and local residents. Consequently, it was felt that the



North Hill Well Wood before 2021



Guelder rose berries

overgrown area located at the rear of North Hill House and North Hill Court offered an opportunity to create a 'stepping stone' for wildlife in the residential area of Headingley Hill, and that the biodiversity on site could be improved with the creation of a glade habitat where existing trees prevented other species from prospering.

What actions have you taken for wildlife in your garden/outdoor space and why?

Initially we commissioned topographical, tree and ecological surveys of the site to establish what was present on site and the potential in the local area. It was found that the trees were predominantly self-seeded sycamore, with a number of ash trees suffering from ash die-back. The lofty tree canopy also prevented smaller species from thriving, so there was a significant lack of middle height cover, made worse by the old netting around the tennis courts. The lack of flowering plants meant that fruit, nuts and seeds were also in limited supply that could potentially attract further wildlife species to the site. Consequently, a number of sycamore and ash trees were felled to create a woodland glade habitat, whilst leaving established trees to act as a screen on the edges of the site. Paths and steps were introduced to improve access, and asphalt was recycled and re-used from the tennis courts for dressing the steps to



New footpath, 2022

provide a non-slip surface. The felled timber was then cut into sections to provide timber stacks to help attract invertebrates on the site, and which would subsequently provide an opportunity for various species of fungi to establish themselves.

The felled trees have been replaced by a broader range of species that will vary in height and potential food sources, thereby helping to create a viable understorey in the canopy. The single-species hawthorn hedge has also been supplemented and extended by additional hedge species. Existing ferns have been supplemented likewise and raised planting beds of pollinator-friendly woodland wildflowers have been added to enhance existing species found on site.

Bird, bug and hedgehog nesting boxes have been installed, with hedgehog access points created in existing fencing. Water features have been introduced in the form of a sandstone bird bath on the lower level, and a recycled Victorian sandstone food prep sink on the upper level where hedgehogs and other species can walk in and out for a drink without fear of getting trapped by steep sides. Finally, an interpretation board has been installed providing information on the history and rationale of the project, together with perimeter signage highlighting that dogs are not allowed on the site, to protect ground-nesting birds and other species.

The nest boxes installed on the site were occupied by blue tits within the first year, and both speckled wood and orange tip butterflies have been observed competing for territory across the site each year since.



What resources or support have you used?

The site surveys have been conducted by University appointed surveyors, and tree works by local tree surgeon contractors. Groundwork Yorkshire provided landscape design and planting input; sourced the initial DEFRA funding; and provide subsequent project management and engagement services in the following years. Funding has allowed for the installation of two pairs of gates to help secure the site out of hours and at weekends when staff are not present in the site office nearby; plus both the signage and water features mentioned previously. Five student and staff volunteering events are held each year November – March, supervised by staff from Groundwork Yorkshire. Additional trees and hedging have subsequently been planted to replace any lost over the year, or to enhance the site where required, with the emphasis now switching to the planting of woodland plant species during the next year.

What differences have you noticed as a result of your actions?

The nest boxes installed on the site were occupied by blue tits within the first year, and both speckled wood and orange tip butterflies have been observed competing for territory across the site each year since. The site now has a significant amount of wood pile habitat that is gradually being broken down by fungi and invertebrates, with a number of interesting fungi species being found around the site. Grounds maintenance contractors have been encouraged to allow the hedging to grow to provide extra cover and food sources for various species, and in preparation for hedge-laying in the future. Site staff have noticed an increase in the bird activity across the site and in the hedgerow outside their window, and local residents and school parties are welcome visitors. Unfortunately, certain species such as bramble, bindweed and stinging nettle have also thrived under the new conditions, but their impact is being controlled by our volunteers to ensure that they don't get too dominant on site, whilst leaving enough for the species who rely on these plants such as red admiral, comma, and small tortoiseshell butterflies.



How did it make you feel?

The project has been a real hit for students, staff and local residents in the area. It provides a quiet green space where visitors can relax and spend some time appreciating the value provided by varied localised habitats and their benefit for wildlife. Where once there was a gloomy derelict pair of old tennis courts, visitors can now see year-round interest from spring flowering bulbs through to various species of fungi during winter. The white umbels of guelder rose and wayfaring tree are just one aspect to watch out for in May, eventually giving way to vibrant red berries beloved by bullfinch and mistle thrush.

“ The creation of the wonderful North Hill Well Wood has brought pleasure and pride to our neighbourhood. The Well Wood supports local ambition to improve our environment; it reclaims neglected green space; and it offers a serene and lovely space for local people and wildlife – we love it!”

**Annie Faulder, Chair of North Hyde Park
Neighbourhood Association**

What have been your favourite nature moments or encounters with wildlife in your garden/ outdoor space?

Observing the enlarged pecked entrance holes in the nest boxes and realising that blue tits had taken up residence within the first year. Witnessing the spiralling ‘dogfights’ of male speckled wood butterflies around the site, competing for territory in the glade habitat that we have now created. Discovering and identifying crystal brain; earth star; jelly ear; King Alfred’s cakes; scarlet elf cup; turkey tail; and velvet shank fungi around the site – no foragers please!

Has receiving a Yorkshire Wildlife Trust Wildlife Gardening Award made you consider doing more for wildlife in your garden? If so, what will you do next?

The North Hill Well Wood is just one of twelve residential sites that the University currently manages in Central and North-West



Leeds, and so has really proved to be a pioneering project for all concerned. Collaboration with both Groundwork Yorkshire and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust’s Wildlife Gardening Award has provided us with a great insight into what it takes to help both habitat and wildlife to thrive in a relatively small site. The Award has provided us with the opportunity to demonstrate what has been achieved and has subsequently been highlighted within the University, and externally in this year’s Yorkshire in Bloom competition (2024) where we were awarded gold and category winner for Universities, Colleges and Further Education Establishments. The potential for rolling out similar projects across our residential portfolio is very clear, so hopefully more to come.





Conservation in action – hedgelaying

When the North Hill Well Wood Project was first started in 2021, the site had an established single species hawthorn hedge on the south side. The age and maintenance of the hedge was such that the hedge cover was being maintained by normal horticultural methods, resulting in a loss of the much-needed haw berries by winter pruning and the loss of lower cover as the hawthorn increased in age, resulting in gaps forming near the ground. The winter pruning was therefore stopped to allow the hawthorn to grow in excess of two metres high, and new species of hedging whips were also planted to help improve biodiversity and increase resilience to climate change.

“ Hedge-laying wisdom suggests that such rejuvenation creates a more dense habitat for wildlife, reducing opportunities for predators and improving shelter against the elements for various species.

We collaborated with Groundwork Yorkshire (GY) and Leeds Coppice Workers (LCW), and the hedge was deemed ready to lay in January 2025. Aled Jones (LCW) and Luke Humphrys (GY) took the volunteers through the various stages of creating a Midland bullock style hedge with: the removal of brash/small branches from one side; the diagonal cutting of the stem/pleacher three-quarters of the way through; the laying of the pleacher away from the clipped side; the removal of the resultant wedge-shaped stub to encourage new growth from the base; the insertion of hazel stakes to act as supports; the use of thinner hazel stems as weavers/binders woven across the top of the stakes; and knocking the weavers down to provide a tightly bound structure that would resist the stems springing back when the sap rises in March.

Hedge-laying wisdom suggests that such rejuvenation creates a more dense habitat for wildlife, reducing opportunities for predators and improving shelter against the elements for various



species. The hedge is then allowed to regenerate over the next 10 to 20 years with incremental pruning applied each year to allow the height to increase whilst encouraging lateral shoots to improve the density. The process can then be repeated again.

Hedgelaying can help to support 80 per cent of our woodland birds; 50 per cent of our mammals; and 30 per cent of our butterflies (RSPB 2003), so our hope is that this work will increase the biodiversity of North Hill Well Wood.