

The theme of this month's Newsletter is biodiversity along the Loop. How to ensure the most favourable habitat for wild flowers and plants, trees, birds and other wild creatures has been a regular subject of discussion among the Friends' committee and other members, as well as with Sustrans who own and manage the Loop. Our starting point is the recognition that the Loop constitutes a vital green corridor running across the whole width of south Manchester, and a site of both common and unusual species. Ensuring up-to-date records of these habitats is one of our current aims. The last full tree survey was conducted by former MCC tree officer Ben Greenaway in 2004, and needs updating and expanding, for example including species that he encouraged us to plant. Updating is also needed for the bird survey which was conducted by Dave Evans in the same year, recording a total of 27 species in the summer months. We are fortunate to have a recent comprehensive record of plants along the Loop compiled by botanist Dave Bishop, which details over four hundred separate plant identifications (some of these being duplicate sightings). Anyone who would like a copy of Dave's list can contact the secretary or contact Dave directly. Dave will be giving an illustrated talk on his findings at our members' meeting on January 17, so please make a note of this if you are interested.

Over the years we have found that not everyone's interests in the Loop and its habitats are consistent, and some compromises have to be made between different species and the interests of different users. Here are some of the issues:

- *Trees or wild flowers?* Too much tree cover can hinder flower growth, and the work days we organise with the Sale and Altrincham Conservation Volunteers have moved over recent years from tree planting to cutting back willow saplings and clearing undergrowth. Sustrans have their own programme of pruning trees where these have become dangerous or overhanging. However, there are some very bare stretches towards the east end of the Loop where a modest amount of tree and shrub planting is still in order. And some members are keen to see more fruit trees along the Loop to add to the few established apple and plum trees and the pear, cherry and quince more recently planted.
- *Wild or garden flowers?* It is generally agreed that the Loop should remain a haven for wild flowers, and many kinds have been planted to add to those that have grown naturally. The limestone under-surface of the old railway track enables species to grow that are not found in the Manchester clay, though the soil is very thin. There is a case, however, for brightening up some of the entrances with bulbs and flowering shrubs to make them more attractive, and a supervised group of university students will be working on this at the Sherwood Street entrance this Friday 12 November. Of course there are also garden flowers and shrubs that have colonised the Loop from neighbouring houses.

- *Mowing the grass.* Flowers grow and seed more effectively when the verges are left uncut till late August. However, dog walkers and some other users prefer the verges to be cut sooner. The current compromise is for a narrow strip of verge to be mown earlier in the season in advance of the more substantial mowing towards the end of the summer.
- *Bramble cutting.* Brambles provide good cover for a variety of wild life, and the Loop provides the best blackberry picking in south Manchester. However nothing else will grow under them, so there is a case for some limited cutting back where they encroach onto the verges themselves. As to the dreaded Japanese knotweed, the Sustrans staff are now trained in herbicide treatment, and a rolling programme of knotweed removal has been started.

Sustrans now has its own Biodiversity Action Plan for the national cycle network, and this provides a useful reference point for our own activities. It can be downloaded at: www.sustrans.org.uk/webfiles/general/biodiversity_action_plan.pdf. In recognition of the environmental work of the Friends over the years, one of our members, Vincent Walsh, has nominated us for a MCC Environment Award. We will know shortly whether we have been short-listed.

Future events

Monday 15 November: Members' meeting, 7.30 pm, at the Union Chapel, Wellington Road, Fallowfield. Peter Green, the Sustrans area manager, will be discussing a range of current issues with us, and all members are welcome to bring ideas and any concerns they have to this discussion. We also hope to hear from Paul O'Sullivan, who has been supervising the work group of unemployed young people from the Future Jobs Programme. Some tasting from this season's blackberry picking will be provided by way of refreshment.

Saturday 27 November: We will be having a clean-up day on the section east of Sainsbury's. Details of times and precise location will be circulated by email and posted on our website nearer the date. All assistance will be welcome.

Monday January 3: New Year Ride along the length of the Loop, starting at Chorlton Park (Beechwood Avenue entrance), 11 am; Sainsbury's car park, 11.30; Highfield Country Park entrance, 11.45. From there we will ride to a lunch and refreshment stop at the Vale Cottage Inn in Gorton, before returning to the starting point. Families are welcome to join the ride.