



Inner Forth Futures Wetland Habitat Network

Biodiversity Challenge Fund 2020-2021- End of Project Report

Summary

The project has delivered:

7 new ponds covering approx. 0.7ha

2.8 ha of willow cut and removed from site to maintain open wetland habitat

7.7ha of reedbed managed

2ha of lagoon edge managed

0.5 ha of wildflower meadow created

0.1ha of buffer vegetation planted

4 newt hibernacula created

50 bird boxes installed

20 bat boxes installed

830m of hedge planted

1050 new trees planted

4 gates installed to manage conservation grazing

1.4km of fencing installed to manage conservation grazing

Improved management of over 110ha of wetland habitat

Aims and outcomes achieved

The Inner Forth Futures Wetland Habitat Network was a partnership project with the overarching aim of increasing the connectivity, quality and resilience of wetland habitats in the Inner Forth. The projects have only just been completed, so it is difficult to evaluate how the habitats and species are responding to the work, however, with the exception of RSPB's Black Devon Wetlands and a couple of small amendments, all the project activities were completed on time. As below, the sites where work took place will be both improved and more resilient as habitats, and serve as key nodes in the Inner Forth Habitat Network. For three out of the four sites this was the only or most significant habitat work that had been undertaken in recent years and so has been extremely valuable in understanding how conservation contractors could operate on the sites, how long it would take to deliver work etc, and this will benefit future management.

The partnership functioned well, with regular updates and sharing of information between partners, such as contact details for local contractors.

Funded activity described in this report was managed by Falkirk Council (Bothkennar Pools); Fife Council (Bluther Wetlands); RSPB Scotland (Black Devon Wetlands); Scottish Wildlife

Trust (Carron Dams Local Nature Reserve); Stirling Council (Kildean). Reporting was carried out by RSPB Scotland. Financial reporting was carried out by Inner Forth Futures.

Outcomes for habitat improvement and resilience

At Bluther Wetlands the removal of the willow scrub prevented its continued encroachment on the priority open-wetland habitat, whilst the creation of the new pond, hedging and habitat features will add to the diversity of the site and provide a refuge from disturbance for a range of species.

At Bothkennar Pools, the installation of the gates and fencing will enable important conservation grazing to take place, which in combination with the edge management will help to keep the pools open for wintering wildfowl and waders. The buffer planting will reduce diffuse pollution entering the pools and benefit them ecologically. The pools are an important part of the Firth of Forth SSSI/ SPA and improving them also benefits the wider designated site. The reed management will benefit species such as bearded tit and possibly marsh harriers, and help with the establishment of both species on the Inner Forth.

At Carrons Dams, the 2.5 ha of willow cut and removed from site has enabled Scottish Wildlife Trust to complete an ambitious project to reduce the extent of scrub on the drained reservoir. The removal of the scrub is a major milestone in helping with the recovery of the SSSI notified feature.

At Kildean, the creation of the pools and planting of trees and hedges, enhances and diversifies the habitat, whilst providing some screening from disturbance, which occurs as the site is well used by the community and will be increasingly so, due to the large number of new houses being built adjacent to it. The habitats extend the influence of the wetland edge of the River Teith SSSI/ SAC, benefitting species such as otters, which are likely to forage at the new pools.

Significant challenges encountered and actions taken to address them

The most significant challenge has been to deliver the work at RSPB's Black Devon Wetland reserve, where there were issues over the lease of the site. Unfortunately, despite significant effort, it proved impossible to resolve them and the work was not delivered. Some of the resulting underspend was reallocated to other projects in the overall programme of work.

At Bluther Wetlands continued lockdown meant that it was not possible to undertake some of the volunteer activities originally intended e.g. creation of newt hibernacula through a Fife Amphibian & Reptile Group event, tree planting, installation of bird/bat boxes. Alternative means of delivery were identified, including the use of a proportion of underspend to appoint a contractor to plant trees and install bird and bat boxes, and working with Cairneyhill Explorers scout group to create hibernacula within the Covid guidelines and with the supervision of a member of Fife Amphibian & Reptile Group and two members of West Fife Woodlands. There was also delay in being able to meet contractors on site and start works due to Covid restrictions and the lockdown situation. The contractors were very committed to the project and remained flexible to ensure the works could be undertaken as soon as possible and by the end of March.

At Bluther Wetlands and Bothkennar Pools local ground conditions meant that some work took more time or was harder to achieve. The contractors at Bluther Wetlands have offered

to return when conditions are drier to create some deeper areas. This was challenging during the contract due to the level of the water table. At Bothkennar Pools, some of the work was moved to focus on the lagoon shore, where it was easier to work.

Whilst some recording was done at Bluther Wetlands and the records added to the NBN, Covid restrictions meant that unfortunately it was not possible to undertake surveys of the other sites and so any data inputted onto the NBN was limited and ad hoc.

Additional or unintended benefits as a result of the project

The overall programme of work strengthened the Inner Forth Futures Partnership, creating new contacts and encouraging partners to work together in the future.

Bluther Wetlands had a training element, as a young employee through Rural Skills Scotland helped to install bird and bat boxes. There was also the involvement of 10 Cairneyhill Explorers scouts in the creation of hibernacula. The scout session was supervised by two scout leaders, one member of Fife Amphibian & Reptile Group and two members of West Fife Woodlands group. The work introduced these groups and other volunteers to the reserve and it is hoped that this involvement will continue in the future.

At Bothkennar Pools Falkirk Council funded additional native hedge planting (c.200m) along part of the new livestock fencing. Further hedge planting will be completed along this fence as resources allow. Positive contact was made with a neighboring tenant farmer, which will help with future management of the site.

At Carron Dams the additional funding has enabled vital work to be completed pushing back scrub to the historical reservoir edge in the north of the site. The work has attracted favourable attention from the local community, who feel that it has increased the aesthetic value of the urban greenspace.

At Kildean there has been interest in the project from residents in the nearby housing. All have been very supportive of the project. This project has been delivered alongside a separate BCF funded project, Froglife's Come Forth for Wildlife, so overall there have been 11 lined ponds created. These have all been sympathetically located to make the most of the surrounding habitat and create a network of wetlands suitable for wildlife.

Maintenance plans, including funding, for the 10 year compliance period

At Bluther Wetlands, Fife Council will check for mortality of tree planting and 'beat-up' as required, and also undertake management of willow regeneration on a biannual basis in future years by cutting back regrowth and using for projects or donating to schools and groups. Local volunteers, such as West Fife Woodlands, will be encouraged to undertake ongoing management work

At Bothkennar Pools, a maintenance plan will be put in place to ensure the site continues to be managed appropriately for the next 10 years and the works carried out are properly maintained. Discussions with the tenant grazier are well advanced to secure appropriate grazing of the newly fenced area of the site. Consideration will be given to further reedbed enhancement works over the next couple of years.

At Carron Dams, site maintenance will be as outlined in the Reserve Management Plan. In summary, manipulation of the water levels to ensure cut stumps are covered will inhibit

scrub regrowth leading to an increased ecological condition of rich fen habitat. This current project will be the final large area to be cleared of scrub at Carron Dams. There will be an area of willow scrub retained as a foraging for a nearby solitary bee colony.

At Kildean the Council and contractors will check for mortality of tree planting and 'beat-up' as required. Giant hogweed control will occur in summer 2021 as the project started too late for it to occur in 2020. Otherwise the site should need minimum maintenance.

Any further works/new projects planned as a result of the BCF project

At Bluther Wetlands a further event is planned in autumn/winter 2021 led by Fife Amphibian & Reptile Group in partnership with West Fife Woodlands to extend by hand a small pond to the northwest of the site.

Through the Inner Forth Future Natural Heritage Working Group, the project partners will seek future opportunities to collaborate.

Acknowledgement of BCF funding

A press release went out at the beginning of the programme of work, which acknowledged the BCF funding. It was well picked up, with articles in:

Stirling News

(<https://www.stirlingnews.co.uk/news/18759066.funding-boost-project-improve-forth-valley-wetlands/>)

Alloa Advertiser

(https://www.alloaadvertiser.com/news/forth_valley/18759063.funding-boost-project-improve-forth-valley-wetlands/)

Stirling Observer

(<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/stirling-observer/20201002/281625307754138>)

The BCF funding is also mentioned on the Inner Forth Futures website

(<https://www.innerforthlandscape.co.uk/news/372-better-connections-will-help-protect-local-wildlife>)

A final press release, acknowledging the BCF funding, will be prepared to mark the end of the programme of work. It is intended that this will go out at the end of April 2021.



This project is supported by the NatureScot Biodiversity Challenge Fund.



Images

Bluther Wetlands, courtesy of Fife Council

Before



After



Bothkennar Pools, courtesy of Falkirk Council

Reedbeds before



Reedbeds after work



Rushes before



Rushes after



Carrons Dams, courtesy of Scottish Wildlife Trust

Before



After



Kildean, courtesy of Stirling Council and RSPB Scotland

Before



After



