



Kent
Wildlife Trust

**65th Annual General Meeting of the
Members of Kent Wildlife Trust**

Company No: 00633098

Held in person at Tyland Barn, Chatham Road, Sandling ME14 3BD
and online via Zoom Webinar
on
Saturday 15 July 2023 at 1pm.

**Chair of Council's Report on the Year
Dr Chris West**

If I put 2022 in context, I think we are all aware of the climate crises we are facing and at the same time recognising there is a nature crisis as well. For those who have been long-term members these are really new and rapidly evolving threats to not just to wildlife but to people as well in many ways. These twin crises call for bold, imaginative and new ways of working to protect the environment in its widest sense. To that end, the Trust itself has been incredibly ambitious in a number of the things it did during 2022, of which a few I will highlight during this talk.

Briefly then, the first of these is the release of the bison in the Blean. The first three cows were released in July of 2022 with much press attention around the world. The calf was born unexpectedly soon after, then the bull was released in December just before Christmas. Apart from reintroducing these species which are 'ecological engineers' to essentially change the habitats in ways that would have been done by species that are no longer present in this country but also avoiding all the mechanical works that we would have had to do to recreate the vast diversity of habitats in that ancient woodland area. Hugely successful – enormous public attention around the world which just shows how you can galvanise people's attention in things related to nature and nature-based solutions in ways that are really innovative and engaging and therefore a terrific success story. Evan will talk about how things have progressed with the bison since then.

But it isn't just bison. For those who know, at Nashenden, we have introduced pigs there to churn up the earth in ways that would help recreate the agricultural weeds and therefore enable turtle doves to establish and build colonies there. Equally, we have got water buffalo down at Ham Fen, contained within that area doing a job what no machinery can do, breaking up that swamp and encouraging biodiversity on the site. So there has been use of ecological engineers in a number of sites across Kent.

A number of you will know that very soon, Chough will be released at Dover for the first time which was backed by an enormous consultation exercise with people living in the Dover area but it also builds on decades of work by the Trust and English heritage in trying to restore the chalk grassland around the Dover Castle area in ways which actually sustain the population of Chough itself so a tremendous culmination of a huge amount of work over many many years with an iconic species, for

those of you like me who come from Canterbury and who are residents with Canterbury City Arms.

We also, in being entrepreneurial, established Wilder Carbon Limited, an initiative which essentially restores habitats in ways which not only create biodiversity benefits but also lock up carbon. And to that end, we acquired a former golf course near Sevenoaks which is now being called Heather Corrie Vale, which is undergoing first efforts to restore biodiversity and lock up carbon. We also partnered with Somerset Wildlife Trust to help them acquire a farm in the Somerset Levels to manage that in ways that will lock up carbon through peatland re-wetting and also create enormous biodiversity benefits. So Wilder Carbon, as a Kent-based initiative, is not only supporting activities in Kent that have this dual carbon and biodiversity benefit, but is also extending that support mechanism outside of the county.

I don't want to just focus on iconic species. At the end of the day 70% of land in Kent, is managed and owned by people, many of whom are Farmers. Last October I took the trustees and senior management team to meet the Marden Farmer Cluster – a group of farmers working in the Marden area who are doing an enormous amount of activity in terms of not only enabling food production but doing it in ways that are entirely sympathetic with nature conservation. The Marden Wildlife Group, which is a local group, actually won a Radio Kent award for innovation of the year in terms of the environment so there's a tremendous citizen science going on that links to farmers whose very livelihood is dependent on the land. KWT has been playing an enormously important and valued support role to not only the cluster in Marden but clusters in the Darent Valley and the Pluckley area. So again, there is an emergence of a synergy between the work of the Trust and those who actually manage and make living off land proving the co-benefits of working in harmony with nature.

And finally, I would like to say thank you to those of you who joined me in the Defend Nature campaign last year. A number of you will be aware there was a risk at one point to us losing a significant number of laws that were set out to protect environment. That triggered a national campaign led by The Wildlife Trusts and a number of us and you joined me in writing, emailing or tweeting to MPs to alert them to the risks this would have. When I get on my 'challenges' I will equally refer to some of the political dimensions we still live with. Now, please enjoy this short video showing the impact of the bison at the Blean.

Bison Impact Video

I hope you enjoyed that small snapshot of how things have hanged in the Blean. I'm sure Evan will talk a bit more about what the monitoring and evaluation is showing up. Having been there myself you can certainly see the positive impact they're having.

To bring 2022 to a close from a Trust perspective, there were many excellent things that happened last year but, there were also some challenges - just to list a few. As you're all aware last year was, if not the hottest year on record, the equal hottest on record with 40 degrees recorded in UK. That has huge effects not just on the natural environment but also on our staff and volunteers working out in the heat, particularly on the livestock side. This is a taste of what's to come when you see reports that average temperatures might rise 3-6 degrees. We are looking at a radically different natural environment in the future which highlights why what we and others are doing to protect, defend and restore our environment is so vitally important.

As well as the external factors, the cost of living and energy crises have affected all of us in many different ways and on that note I particularly want to thank all of you as members because we didn't really see a drop in membership numbers at all. The membership core has remained consistent and committed, so on behalf of everyone in the Trust, a huge thank you for your continuing commitment

to what we're doing. It's an enormous vote of confidence.

We have unfortunately (and we have alluded to this before) had an increasing number of dog attacks on our reserves resulting in livestock being killed and in fact, volunteers being attacked as well. In 2022 we started efforts to provide training for people on how to go walking with their dogs on lead whilst still enjoying environment. That is probably going to be something we continue to do - one can't underestimate the damage dogs can do to sensitive wildlife.

Sadly, we had a break-in here at Tyland Barn and had other break-ins and vandalism. Staff are constantly dealing with fly-tipping on our reserves - we estimate the cost of that in 2022 was about £10,000 but this is a small amount in relation to people's time and energy in dealing with those problems. So again, unfortunately, anti-social behaviour on our land or sites that we manage is a continuing problem.

Finally, I mentioned the good news on the Environment Act 2021 which is intended to protect 30% of our wildlife by 2030 however the Retained EU Law Bill is still going through Parliament and there is real uncertainty as to how much law is to be retained that has the protection of the environment at its heart. The big fear is that once again we drop legislation such as will make us the 'dirty man of Europe', so we want to maintain efforts to protect laws that are not just about wildlife but the quality of our water (including the amount of sewage going into it) and the quality of our land. The environment is fundamental to us as people, not just for the enjoyment of watching wildlife. There will likely be further campaigns to try and motivate people to support the retention of those acts of laws that are essential to protect the environment and ultimately protect us.

So that was my snapshot of the many positive things about 2022 and some of the negative sides which are all captured in the report section of the Annual Report. I'm now going to hand over to our Treasurer, Rachel Hoey who will talk to the financial side. Thank you.