

Riverside Miniature Railway. Natural habitat management proposals – October 2020

1. Current site



This area of land was formerly a Pitch and Putt course. The site is semi-circular, with a ditch around most of it, apart from on the west side. It is mostly flat, with some raised areas.

There are many large ornamental trees which were planted when the original Pitch and Putt course was developed in 1975. In-between are trees and shrubs which have arrived naturally, via wind blown seed or birds. These include at least one rose and three or four large evergreen shrubs, Pyracantha, on the southern side of the site.

Prior to RMR taking over management of the site, what was once regularly mown grass had been left untouched for about 7-8 years. Native flora has spread rapidly, in particular nettles (*Urtica dioica*) and Cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*). There are still some areas which have predominately grass species.

The ditch around the RMR site was meant to drain the site and has a link to the adjacent lake and then the river. However, HDC has not maintained it for around 15 years. In 2009 after the Environment Agency carried out flood defence work, part of the ditch on the west side was filled in. The result is that most of the ditch is silting up and does not drain the RMR site as well as it used to.

2. Surveys

To assist with long-term habitat management, it is recommend that at the site be surveyed for birds, plants and insects, such as butterflies. This will help determine the best areas for the proposed habitat management in the next section. There are a number of people locally who might be willing to help. Hunts Fauna and Flora Society covers the old county of Huntingdonshire and has several county recorders living in St Neots who might be able to help. See its website - <http://www.hffs.org.uk/>. Friends of Sudbury Meadow have contacts with bird watchers and insect enthusiasts who may also be willing to help.

3. Habitat proposals

3.1 Wildflowers

The presence of large areas of nettles indicates that the site is high in nitrogen, which is not surprising, due to regular flooding from the river and a general increase of nitrogen in the air. It is therefore not feasible to create any annual wildflower areas, which depend on low soil fertility and regular disturbance of the soil. It might be possible in time to encourage more perennial wildflowers amongst the grasses, but again the high fertility of the site will always encourage grass rather than flowers. One way around this might be to try to establish the annual plant, Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*). This is a parasitic plant on grasses and weakens their growth. However, it requires open sunny sites and low grass growth both at sowing time (September) and germination (Feb/March). It may well be that the RMR site is too shady, but we could trial some planting. Seed can be bought from reliable sources, such as Emorsgate Seeds - <http://wildseed.co.uk/home>. Yellow Rattle seed does not store so needs to be bought at the correct time of year and sown straight away. Other wild flowers that can thrive in acidic soil include foxglove, oxeye daisy and cowslip, amongst others. A multi-purpose seed mix can be purchased from <https://www.barenbrug.co.uk/landscaping/wildflowers/wildflowers-acidic-soils>. Again perhaps a small quantity should be trialled first.

3.2 Grassland

The site is largely a wet meadow, much the same as nearby Sudbury Meadow in Crosshall Road. It is therefore suggested that grassland management should be along the same lines as at Sudbury Meadow.

The site should be split up into areas of different cutting regimes as follows.

- Weekly/fortnightly cuts

Alongside the track (to prevent foliage from falling onto users); the lawn area (to encourage feeding Green Woodpeckers and other short grass feeding birds.); the grassed area alongside the path through the site.

Cuttings can be left on the ground as they will be short, but it will add to soil fertility.

- Annual cut - October/November cut

1m around perimeter of central 'wild' area

Central areas where the coarse vegetation, such as nettles and willowherb will help discourage people from walking all over the site should not be mown. This will also help later flowering plants. Nettles are the breeding plant for a number of butterflies, such as Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock, but both prefer young growth, in a sunny open position to lay their eggs on. A late cut to the edges of the wild area will ensure that the caterpillars have pupated and hidden themselves away from predators.

All these cuttings should be raked up and composted to prevent re-rooting.

3.3 Shrub and trees

Some of the native small trees and shrubs are seeding in reasonable quantities, creating thickets. Evidence from nearby sites would suggest that this will then encourage both bramble and ivy to take hold. Whilst native, these two plants are currently smothering more desirable native plants throughout the country. It is also impossible to prevent wind blown litter from gathering in such thickets. It is therefore strongly suggested that they are not allowed to take hold in the first place. As there are so many mature trees on the site already, it is not necessary to have more, but to manage what is already there. Cuttings from thickets should be gathered into piles and left in wooded part of wild area to encourage hedgehogs, reptiles and insects.

- Cut down and/or dig out saplings of Cherry Plum / Sloe. These are particularly noticeable on the south side of the site, close to where the track runs.

- Pyracantha (a non-native garden plant) grows on the south side of the site. This should be managed. The very long, sharp thorns could make it a bit of a health and safety hazard, however it also acts as a barrier to prevent intruders to the site.
- Try to ensure an annual tree safety inspection is carried out each year by HDC. A number of trees have already been reported and identified as needing work. Particular attention should be paid to the willow trees on the lawn area.



3.4 Nest boxes

HDC are very supportive of bird and bat boxes being put up around the site.

It is recommended that a variety of bird nest boxes could be put on suitable mature trees in accordance with RSPB guidelines (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/read-and-learn/helping-birds/nestboxes/index.aspx>), avoiding the use of nails.

Suggested species to cater for would be Blue Tit, Great Tit, Starling and possibly owls (if there is a suitable tree).

Bat boxes could also be put up. More information can be found at the Bat Conservation Trust website - <http://www.bats.org.uk/>

The Rangers and volunteers at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve have a wealth of experience of managing bird and bat boxes so we could ask for their help and advice. Some of the boxes could be bought from the Visitor centre to support another community project.

Alternatively we could ask some of our members to build suitable Boxes

3.5 Reptiles

Grass snakes are known to live onsite. These could be encouraged by providing basking areas in the summer and hibernation cover in the winter. A basking area can be provided by placing a corrugated metal or Onduline sheet in a sunny position, close to a log pile. Corrugations allow space for the reptiles to crawl under if predators appear.

Reptiles like to hibernate in log piles or undisturbed 'compost' piles. These can be made from piles of leaves and end of year grass clippings, placed in sheltered areas.

The creation of a small pond could help encourage wildlife further.