

**An independent review of wildlife and conservation  
at Asker Meadows nature reserves in relation to the  
2024 Management Plan Review**

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## Summary

1. The Bridport area is important for wildlife yet is subject to ongoing loss of wildlife habitat and greenspace due to housing developments both within and on the fringes of the town.
2. It is therefore vitally important that remaining nature areas are managed to maximize their biodiversity value.
3. Asker Meadows comprises two adjoining nature reserves totally 9.75 Ha - Asker Meadows Local Nature Reserve Nature (9.16 Ha) designated in 2004 and the New Zealand site (0.59 Ha) established in 2007.
4. Though now completely engulfed by urban development, these reserves remain an oasis for nature in an urban setting, with high potential as an outlet for urban nature learning.
5. Features of importance include a riverine habitat that supports a number of protected/priority species including Water Vole, Otter, Kingfisher, Brook Lamprey, Bullhead, European Eel and Brown/Sea Trout.
6. The mosaic of grassland, scrub, thick hedgerows and traditionally managed meadows is a valuable foraging area for local breeding birds and likely bats, the latter for which the Bridport area supports a high number of protected species. The meadows are botanically moderately-rich in places and have considered potential to be restored to a much higher standard.
7. Asker Meadows is owned and managed by Bridport Town Council in association with Asker Meadows Nature Reserve Group (AMNRG) and is subject to a management plan (2019-2025), which is currently being reviewed.
8. This report has been produced, to independently feed into the Management Plan review process, chiefly from a nature conservation perspective.
9. The area is subject to multiple environmental pressures which are compromising conservation progress, the most substantive of which are (1) *Pollution and extreme weather events* –affecting the integrity and ecological quality of the riverine environment and associated protected species (2) *High levels of dog walking* leading to a wide range of biological impacts including disturbance to species leading to reduced populations, habitat degradation and disruption of the tranquil enjoyment of nature by other users of the area. (3) *Encroachment by the invasive non-native species Himalayan Balsam* (4) *Habitat neglect* along the river and in some grassland areas.
10. Other concerns include the introduction of Hives of selectively bred and hybridised Honey Bees and predation of mammals and birds by feral cats and non-native mammals.
11. A review of the management plans core objectives show mixed progress.
12. Provision for public access, access to outdoor space and running events has seen good to excellent progress. There are now, for example, a dozen picnic benches and the area is a favoured destination for dog-walkers due to the high levels of access.
13. In terms of promoting awareness and appreciation of wildlife, a nature trail and nature reserve boards have been positive developments, as are the well-maintained and informative Facebook and a websites rub by AMNRG volunteers and Bridport Town Council

promotional work of activity. Younger people, have been engaged through events, adults less so.

14. The potential for nature-based study, and using LNRs as outdoor laboratories as originally perceived, is largely prohibited (aside from some river activities) by free-roaming dogs in all areas.
15. In contrast to recreational and educational progress, progress in delivering effective conservation for the key features – lowland meadow and riverine habitats has been less successful. However, there have been some positive developments including tree planting, hedge planting and meadow restoration. Overgrowth of Water Vole habitat is a concern.
16. Redressing this balance should be a key objective in the next management plan.
17. Key recommendations include maintaining and improving the valuable riverine habitats of this stretch of the River Asker, improving the botanical value of meadows (most of which have changed little since 2004 and remain in unfavourable condition) and setting aside some undisturbed areas where wildlife can thrive and citizen science can be undertaken
18. The main additional enhancement suggested are:
19. Provision of winter food resources for resident and wintering bird species – the Bridport area is important as breeding site for seed-eating bird species (e.g. the Bridport area supported the largest Greenfinch flock in the county in Autumn 2022 prior to food sources drying up and there is relatively large breeding population), yet winter food sources are insufficient and net emigration occurs.
20. Investigate the feasibility and where possible deliver new wetland habitat in alignment with wider aspirations across the Brit Catchment to restore wetlands for wildlife and ecosystem services. Interventions could potentially include the creation of ponds, ditches and restoration/creation a water meadow system, fen and marsh.
21. Creation of pollinator resources for bees and other insects (e.g. cultivated flower-rich strips), especially as few summer nectar sources are apparent on the reserve (following hay cutting) and to mitigate any impacts of the Honey Bee Hives. Other measures for invertebrates could include creating small earth banks along the eastern perimeter for mining bees, solitary wasps and rove beetles.
22. The Key to successful delivery is to develop a zoning approach and restricting dog access from some parts of the nature reserve. As mitigation, this may need the creation of additional dog walking areas on low value wildlife land off site.
23. It is recommended conservation enhancements should go alongside other activities including
24. Adding the New Zealand site to the existing LNR to a form single enlarged nature reserve.
25. Emphasising the areas designation as nature reserve in all communications
26. Creation of facilities for naturalists to observe and study nature
27. An effective programme of survey, monitoring and data management to inform and communicate future conservation progress.
28. Funding sources are highlighted which could potentially help deliver these recommendations

## Introduction

The Bridport area is important for wildlife yet subject to ongoing loss of wildlife habitat and greenspace due to housing developments both within and on the fringes of the town. It is therefore vitally important that remaining nature areas are managed to maximize their biodiversity value.

Lying close to the town centre, 'Asker Meadows' contains one of three Local Nature Reserves within the area of the Bridport Area Neighbourhood Plan (BANP) and the Bridport Local Area Partnership (an independent community planning partnership). The BANP area is a little under-represented in terms of access to nature reserves as recommended by Natural England as part of their Accessible Natural Green Space Standards in Towns and Cities. The area supports less than the recommended 1 hectare of statutory Local Nature Reserves per 1,000 population, outlining the importance of managing the existing resource effectively for biodiversity.

Due to a high level of urban development over the last 100 years Asker Meadows is now completely surrounded by developed land.

In July and August 2024 Bridport Town Council (BTC) worked with the Asker Meadows Local Nature Reserve Group to undertake a review of the 2019-2025 Asker Meadows Management Plan.

The Asker Meadows Management Plan covers two nature reserve areas, both of which were originally set aside for wildlife conservation, Asker Meadows Local Nature Reserve (9.16 Ha) and the New Zealand site (0.59 Ha). In 2004, Asker Meadows, owned by West Dorset District Council and Bridport Town Council, was declared a Local Nature Reserve (LNR), whilst in 2007 Bridport Environment Group secured funding for a nature reserve on the New Zealand site. Both areas are now owned and managed by Bridport Town Council.

A Task and Finish Group including site users, local and regional specialists and town councillors has been set up to oversee the 2024 management plan review. The review is collecting data on site condition and opinion from dog walkers and other residents on management of the area and to identify improvements.

This report was produced at the suggestion of local resident Nicola Dennis who is an active member of the Asker Meadows Nature Reserve Group (AMNRG), to independently feed into the Management Plan review process, chiefly from a nature conservation perspective.

The work involved a field survey in summer 2024 of the wildlife interest, plus data collation on past management activity and wildlife sightings (e.g. from the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) Atlas, Dorset Environmental Records Centre (DERC), Environment Agency and Bridport Bird Club), plus production of this report with evaluation of wildlife interest, conservation progress and recommendations to inform the next management plan..



Key:

Area A - River corridor  
 Area B - New Zealand  
 Area C - Morrison's Fields  
 Area D - Weir Field/ Show Field  
 Area E - Wildflower Meadow restoration areas inc Coronation Meadow/ Boot Fields



**Figure 1:** Map of Asker Meadows Management Plan areas (LHS) and Botanical survey compartments from surveys in 2012 and 2024 (note C contains two sub-compartments) (RHS). Note the coding used in the two reports do not correspond.

### Local Nature Reserve Status – reasons for designation

A Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is a category of natural greenspace that is managed primarily for nature conservation, education and the enjoyment of nature by local communities.

It isn't a formal requirement that LNRs are open to the public but a strong steer is to make at least part of them publicly accessible for enjoyment and contact with nature -and to give people special opportunities to study and learn about them.

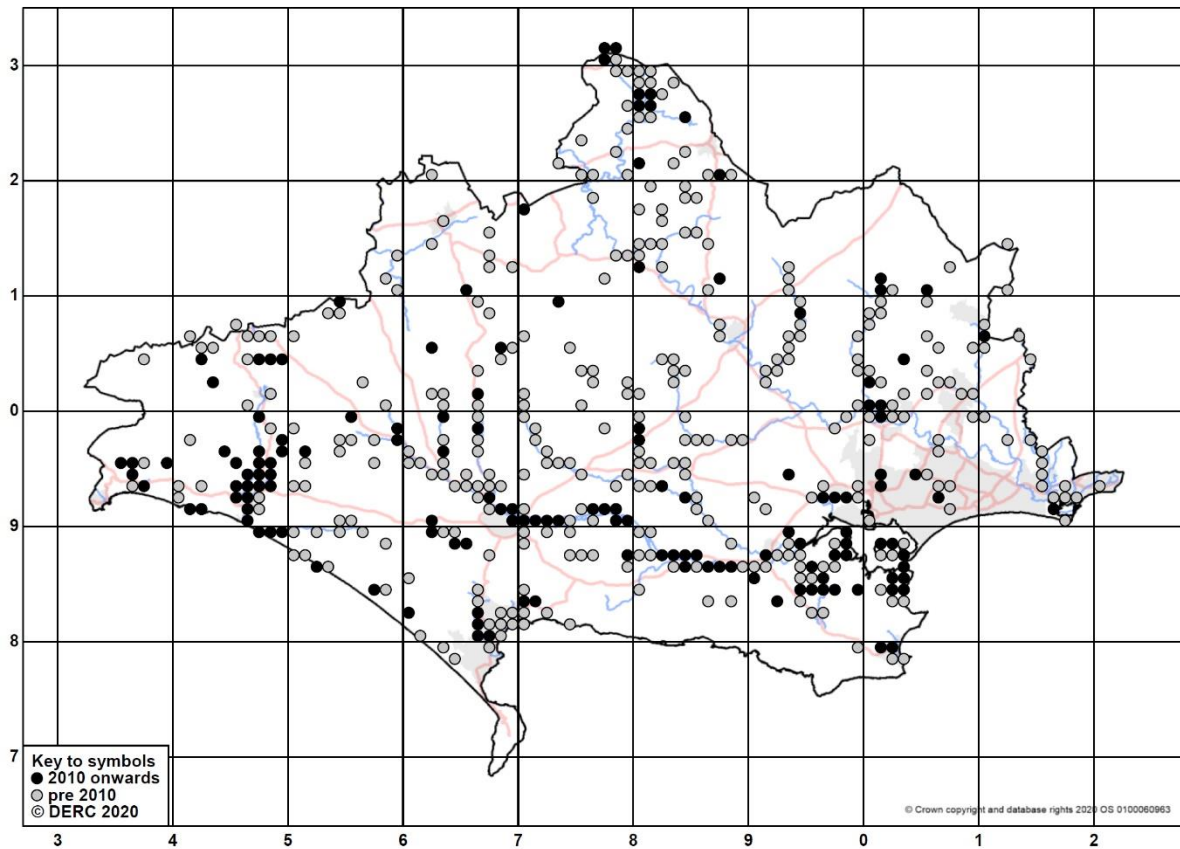
Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are a statutory designation made under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 by principal local authorities

**To qualify for LNR status a site needs to be locally important for wildlife/geology, with educational potential and can be used for recreation (without disturbing wildlife).**

Though there is some national guidance, the qualifying criteria and definition of 'local importance' is interpreted differently across England according to the 'local area', which could be a county, Unitary Authority, neighbourhood plan or a district. In Dorset, eligibility criteria on local (county) importance at the county scale is available through the Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs) guidance compiled by DERC (2011) [https://derc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/snci\\_manual\\_v11.pdf](https://derc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/snci_manual_v11.pdf)

Looking at these criteria Asker Meadows LNR may possibly qualify for Water Vole under this criteria, "3.18 - Sites supporting strong populations of mammals listed in Schedule 5 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981)" though there is insufficient data to fully assess this. None the less, looking at

the latest distribution map for Water Vole in [Dorset in the Dorset Mammal Atlas \(2020\)](#), Bridport does seem a key area for the species (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Distribution of Water Vole in Dorset

It is also possible that Asker Meadows meets local importance using criteria adopted in other areas. For example, in “Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in North Yorkshire - Guidelines for Site Selection

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c1bc13f1aef1d17f2594774/t/5dad81ed218aa17443c8c9c1/1571652081533/SINC+Guidelines+V3.0+-+December+2017.pdf> the criteria include for mammals

“M2 Any site that regularly supports a population of a native mammal species listed in Annex 2 of the Habitats Directive and protected by section 9(1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).” Using this criteria, the Asker Meadows may possibly qualify due to the regular occurrence of foraging Otters.

Though not part of the DERC guidance, a number of protected riverine species alongside the mammals occur include Brook Lamprey, Brown and Sea Trout, European Eel and Kingfisher and the site may be considered ‘locally important’ based on this assemblage.

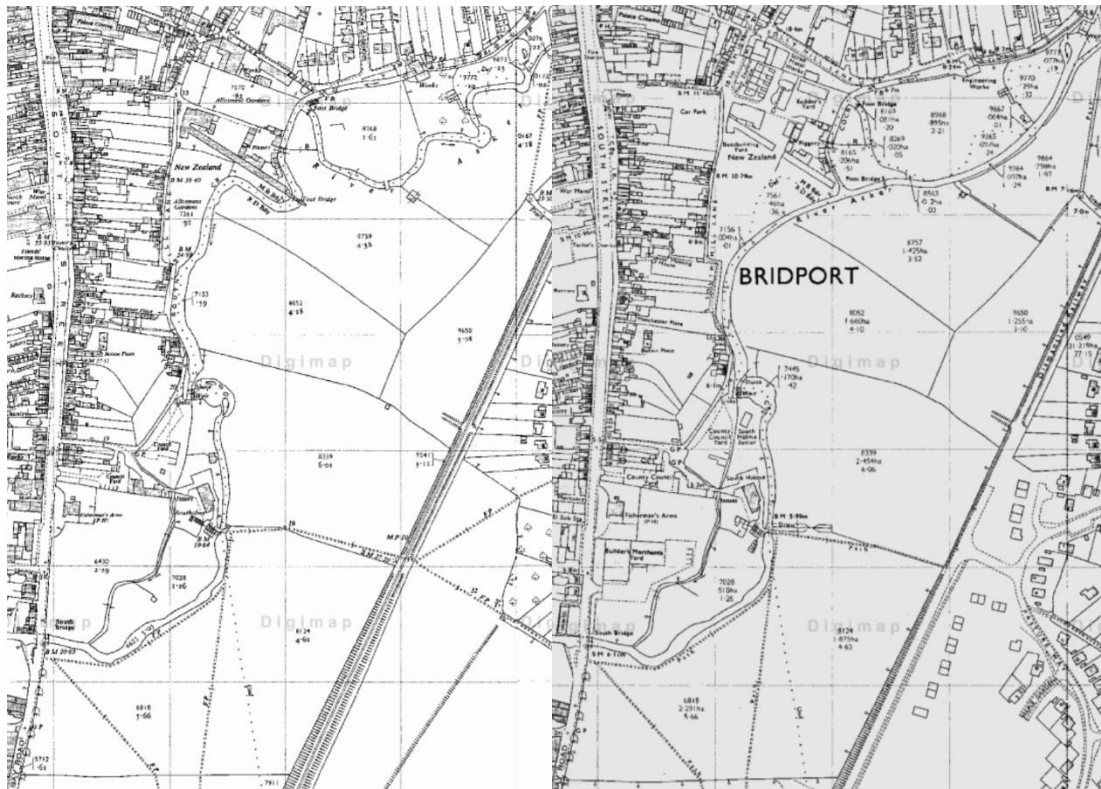
In summary, even though the definition of local importance is somewhat subjective and inconsistently interpreted across differing parts of the UK, it seems that Asker Meadows may only marginally qualify as an LNR on biodiversity grounds at a County Level, **hence the need to ensure that existing features of interest are enhanced as much as possible.**

# 1. Historical changes

Inspection of old Ordnance Survey maps from 1900 show some interesting changes.

In 1900 the land east of the river was farmland, the west side was a mixture of industry and allotments and a small amount of housing. The river had two additional sections associated with two corn mills, comprising mill streams and mill races, with islands of land in between and two mill ponds.

There were not too many changes for the next 50 years. By the 1960s housing had been developed along Crock Lane. Big changes occurred between the 1960s and 1970s, when the river was simplified (moved and partially canalized) and additional stream sections were lost. Housing east of the now disused Bridport to West Bay railway line was further developed (Figure 3). By the 1980s all bordering farmland east of the railway line had been converted to housing and the railway line itself had become a busy trunk road - the diverted A35 (Sea Road North). There were also extensive new housing developments west of the river. Safeway supermarket was built on land to the south in the early 1990s whilst further housing was built west of the river at New Zealand in the late 2000s.



**Figure 3:** River modifications (straightening) along the Asker between the 1960s (LHS) and 1970s (RHS)

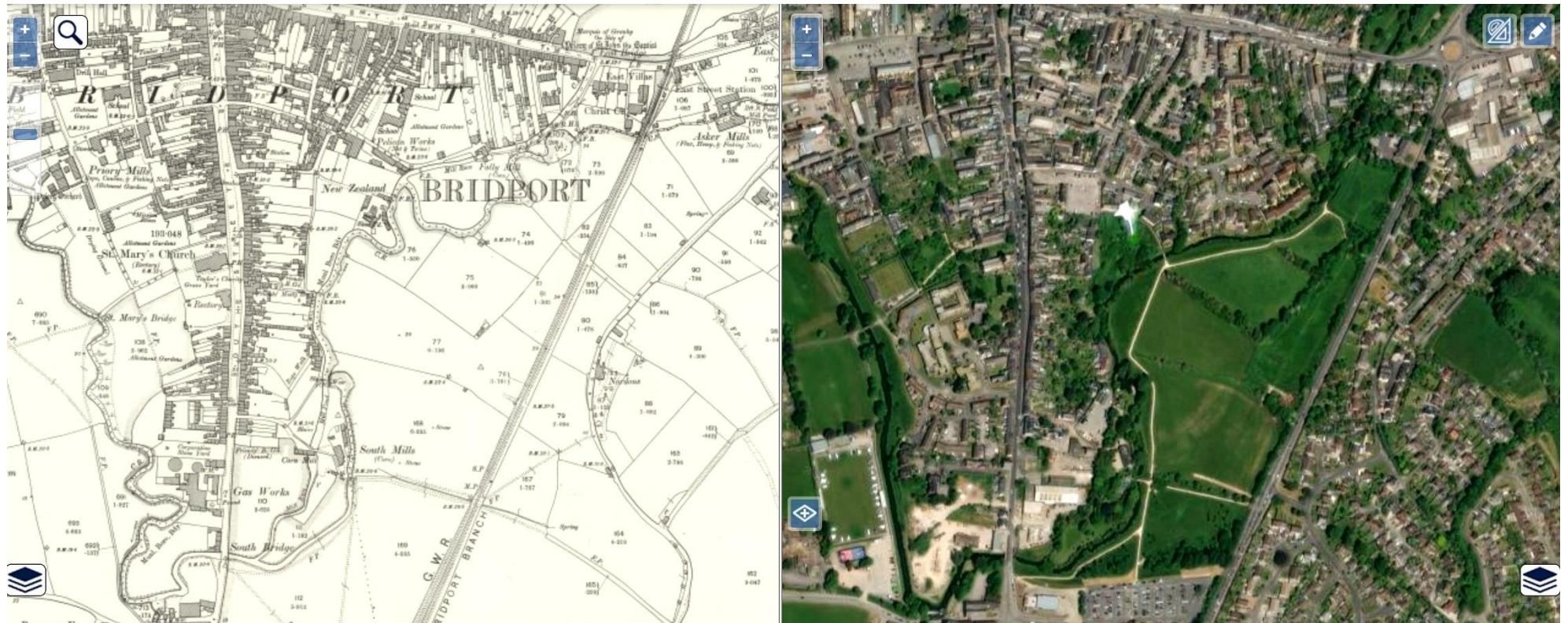
The reserve is now completely surrounded by developed land (Figure 4).

The fields east of the river have remained grazed meadows throughout, whilst the scrubland that is now New Zealand has a more chequered history. In 1900s it was a mixture of allotment, part of the where the river used to run and the edge of a hide and skin yard. In the 1920s there was not too much change, other than the yard had changes to a rope and twine works. By the 1940s, the rope works was replaced by a piggery. In the 1970s with river modification works, New Zealand became an isolated patch of waste ground and the edge of a boat yard.

Inspection of 1m resolution LIDAR data provides some evidence that Compartment C was previously a water meadow, as series of parallel lines (former ditches) appear evident, though no main or tail drains are apparent (Figure 5) and some of the lines also occur in area of part of the river meander (Figure 4). Ridge and furrow is another possibility (unlikely on flood plain) or even some form of allotment work. Water meadows were grassland fields subject to controlled irrigation to increase grass growth. Water-meadows were mainly used in Europe from the 16th to the early 20th century in England, Italy and Switzerland. In Dorset they were typically located in valley bottoms along chalk streams (as the River Asker is), associated with sheep folding and arable systems.



**Figure 5:** 1m resolution LIDAR data, with the area bounded by the red box containing parallel lines (former drainage ditches?) possibly indicative of a former water meadow, though no main or tail drains are apparent.



**Figure 4:** Asker Meadows ca1900 versus today. It is now enveloped by urban development and an oasis for urban wildlife. Data source: National Library of Scotland.

<https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side/#zoom=16.2&lat=50.73024&lon=-2.75522&layers=168&right=ESRIWorld>

## 2. Wildlife importance

### Habitats

The reserve contains the final section of the River Asker before it's confluence with the River Brit above Palmers Brewery. The river is ecologically significant because it is the most westerly end of the most westerly chalk stream in the UK.

### Species

Species are described in relation to Protected and Priority Species policy. Protected species in the UK are listed under schedules of the [amended Wildlife and Countryside Act \(1981\)](#). European protected species are described in the [Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations \(2017\)](#). Priority species for England are listed under [Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities \(NERC\) Act 2006](#)

### Mammals

Four Protected/Priority Species occur - including Otter (UK and European Protected), Badger, European Hedgehog and Water Vole (UK Protected). Population size, occurrence and trends for these species are uncertain due to data deficiencies.

Water Vole breeds along this stretch of the River Asker. Environment Agency surveys in July 2021 yielded 21 records (Figure 6).



*Otter feeding on European Eel by Morrison's field in 2020*



**Figure 6:** Location of Environment Agency Water Vole records in 2011, 2019 (yellow circles) and 2021 (blue circles)

Surveys (Nicola Dennis unpublished data, 2024) suggest a population of around 5-10 breeding pairs. Habitat suitability is thought to be declining due to increased shading of the river banks, river bank erosion, over topping and disturbance.

There are two records for European Hedgehog (source: DERC) from 2008 and 2017.

Otter is occasionally recorded and has been observed feeding on European Eels (Tom Brereton pers. obs. 2020). A dead Otter was found in October 2023 along Sea Road North by Morrison's (Tom Brereton)

There are several Badger records (source DERC), with a sett reported to be present at New Zealand in the late 200s. No setts are currently present and due to it being small in extent and enclosed by housing, a busy road and a river, the species is now presumed to be an infrequent visitor.

Dorset is an extremely important county for bats. Bats recorded in the Bridport area since 2010 and which may possibly use the area for foraging include Greater Horseshoe, Lesser Horseshoe, Daubenton's, Natterer's, Noctule, Leisler's, Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Nathusius Pipistrelle, Serotine, Barbastrelle and Brown Long-eared.

Other mammals recorded include Brown Rat, European Mole, European Rabbit (present in small numbers), Grey Squirrel, American Mink and Red Fox.

## **Birds**

The most important bird species - Red Listed (rapidly declining and most threatened), and Amber Listed (declining, less threatened) [Species of Conservation Concern](#) were surveyed across the Bridport area by Bridport Bird Club in 2021 and 2022 (excluding Woodpigeon and House Sparrow) with House Sparrow Roosts in late winter 2022 (Brereton et al. 2022). The distribution of territories and roosts detected is shown in Figure 7. Asker Meadows was not found to be especially important for breeding birds relative to elsewhere within the Bridport area, supporting only a few breeding pairs of Wren and Dunnock, plus one Greenfinch territory. Other breeding birds recorded by the survey include Woodpigeon, Long-tailed Tit, Robin, Blackbird and Chiffchaff.



**Figure 7:** Distribution of breeding Red and Amber Listed breeding bird territory locations in the Bridport area in 2021 and 2022 (excluding Woodpigeon and House Sparrow) and House Sparrow roosts in late winter 2022 (yellow circles). Asker Meadows is shaded in red.

A House Sparrow roost survey of the Bridport area in 2022 (Brereton 2024 unpublished) located several House Sparrow roosts in hedgerows and dense scrub

Casual recording has detected a range of other species.

Regular visitors include Carrion Crow, Magpie, Blue Tit, Great Tit and Goldfinch.

Starlings roost from time to time in New Zealand scrub.

The reserve is of value as a foraging habitat for local Red Listed breeding birds including Herring Gull, Starling, Swift, House Martin and House Sparrow, plus a range of other species including Song Thrush and Swallow.

River birds using the area for feeding periodically include Cormorant, Little Egret, Kingfisher (specially Protected under the WLCA 1981), Dipper and Grey Wagtail (Amber Listed, breed locally), and Goosander (2-3 birds have occurred the last two winters). A pair each of Moorhen and Mallard (Amber Listed) bred in 2024.

Small numbers of birds pass through on migration, with sightings including Willow Warbler, Meadow Pipit and Grasshopper Warbler. Scarce records have included Red Kite, Osprey, White Stork, Black Redstart, Firecrest and Yellow-browed Warbler.

### **Fish**

Four Protected/Priority Species occur - Brook Lamprey (UK and European Protected), European Eel and Brown/Sea Trout (UK Protected) and Bullhead (European Protected), all of which were recorded in recent surveys by the EA in 2021 (Source NBN Atlas). No information was found on abundance, frequency of occurrence or changing status of these species.



*Compartment E is a stronghold for the Small Tortoiseshell butterfly which feeds on nettles*

### **Invertebrates**

Over 130 species of invertebrate have been recorded (DERC), though the total number of species occurring is likely to be far higher.

Beautiful and Banded Demoiselle dragonflies breed along the river.

Breeding butterflies include Small Skipper, Common Blue, Holly Blue, Orange-tip, Green-veined White, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Ringlet (New Zealand and hedges by Compartment C1), Peacock, Comma and Small Tortoiseshell with compartment E being a favoured breeding locality).

Resident moths include Jersey Tiger and Scarlet Tiger (a Comfrey-feeder)

Of the other insects, noteworthy species include the Yellow-shouldered Nomad Bee, a parasite of solitary bees which is rare in the UK and classed as Endangered in the Red Data Book; and two nationally scarce beetles *Riolus subviolaceus* and *Dorytomus filirostris*.

Wasp Spider is recent colonist.

### **Higher Plants**

Over 260 species of higher plant have been recorded since 2000, though a substantial number of these are (temporary) annuals associated with ground disturbance or non-native garden escapes. However, there are number of Dorset Notable present, associated Lowland Meadow and riverside habitats.

A varied selection of ferns associated with old walls occurs amongst them Black Spleenwort, Wall-rue, Maidenhair Spleenwort, Rustyback, Hart's-tongue, Intermediate Polypody and Polypody.

In 2021, Toothwort was found at New Zealand. This was an exciting discovery, as the plant in scare in Dorset, with the nearest known location being in ancient woodland at Netherbury.

The presence of old records of Adder's-tongue Fern (ca1900) strongly suggest the area previously supported unimproved grassland.

### **Fungi**

Fungi are extremely under-recorded. Species recorded include Red Cage (DERC) and Chicken of the Woods (Tom Brereton)

## **3. Environmental pressures**

Though somewhat speculative due to a lack of hard evidence of impact, environmental pressure on the site are thought to be considerable (see example in Figure @) and include:

**Pollution and extreme weather events** - Asker Meadows forms part of the River Brit floodplain and is subject to periodic flooding. Flooding is not annual but appears to be increasing, with for example, 4-5 flooding events in the winter 2024/25, this being consistent with climate change predictions of an increase in the probability of extreme events, including drought and flooding. Increased periods of extreme rainfall have led to an increasing numbers of sewage discharges. This may be negatively impacting on river quality and the biodiversity of the riverine environment, plus leading to contamination on land following flooding. The increased water flow associated with extreme rainfall events is likely to be increasing the rate of erosion of bankside vegetation, important for Water Voles and other species.

**High levels of dog walking** leading to a range of biological impacts on (1) **species** including disturbance, stress, reduced fitness disease and in some cases mortality leading to population declines and (2) **broader environmental impacts and habitat degradation**, including spoiling of cut hay through fouling, nutrient enrichment through fouling and water pollution from flea sprays. The presence of noisy and out of control dogs can also disrupt the primary cultural service of nature reserves – tranquil observation of undisturbed wildlife.

Loss of semi-natural vegetation through **encroachment by invasive non-native species**, specifically Himalayan Balsam.

**Abandonment/reduction of meadow management** (grazing and mowing) in Area C (Morrison's Fields) and Area B (New Zealand) leading to the spread of classified injurious weeds (especially docks), ruderal tall herbs, coarse grasses and subsequent loss of meadow habitat.

**Likely predation by feral and non-native species** namely cats, Mink and Brown Rat

The **introduction of Hives of selectively bred and hybridised Honey Bees** in May 2020, potentially leading to increased competition for the relatively low numbers of floral resources present, which in turn could possibly reduce the diversity of native bee populations present. [See the paper](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666515822000154) and <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666515822000154>

**Increased recreational access through new 'unofficial' pathways** leading to wildlife disturbance and minor habitat loss.

**Increased shading of the river bank through a lack of management**, reducing habitat suitability for Water Vole and fen/riverside wetland plants.

**Littering**, especially around picnic benches, after events and in scrubby areas (drug paraphernalia and temporary homeless shelters).

**Loss of part of the LNR (0.06 Ha) as a yard/dumping area**



*New Zealand in 2005 (lhs) and in 2024 (rhs). Note scrub invasion, abandonment of meadow cutting (Other than path edges) and spread of Himalayan Balsam*

#### **4. Progress in relation to wildlife conservation objectives as set out in the current management plan (2019-2025)**

##### **1. Maintain and enhance the grazing meadows for their wildlife interests.**

In terms of conservation the end goal for cut and grazed grasslands on neutral soils is to restore to Lowland Meadow, a Priority Habitat in England under Section 41 of the NERC Act, which has declined in extent by 97% since the 1930s.

A baseline survey of the botanical interest of the meadows (Figure 2) was undertaken in 2012 (Gray 2012) and repeated in 2024 through this study. In both surveys, abundance was assessed by eye using the DAFOR scale (see Table @). Given the subjectivity of the DAFOR scale and the rapidity of both surveys, the results between years should be treated with a degree of caution. Progress

(through a condition assessment) towards the restoration of Lowland Meadow is summarized in Table 1, whilst the detailed results from the surveys are given in Table 2.

Fields B to E have continued to be managed as meadows, whilst Field A has been diversified with shrub and tree planting and abandonment of grazing and whole-field cutting. For this an impressive 70 volunteers turned out to plant trees in December 2019 and there have been further efforts subsequently.

New Zealand remains an ungrazed scrub habitat, with cutting only to maintain paths. A management plan was produced here a number of year ago, but this was not fully delivered. Hand scythes have been provided for AMNRG by BTC, for ongoing annual management but this has not always been possible (Nick Gray pers. comm.).

Table 2 shows that most fields show little or no improvements since 2012 in relation to restoration to Lowland Meadow, whilst field A has deteriorated in condition (though may have improved in overall biodiversity terms through greater biomass and structural diversity).

There have been improvements in the condition of grassland towards Lowland meadow in Field C. In particular, compartment C1 was subject to wildflower enhancement works in 2014 as part of the Coronation Meadows Project including plug planting by volunteers. Further seeding with Yellow Rattle and other flowers was carried out October 2020. Compartment C1 is now classed as Good quality semi-improved grassland of moderate species-richness, as it contains five semi-improved grassland wildflower indicators and/or priority grassland indicator species that are occasional in frequency in the sward. Indicator species of Lowland Meadow present are Knapweed, Corky-fruited Water-dropwort, Bird's-foot Trefoil and Common Sedge, and there is a mean herb cover of 20%.

Though compartment C2 is classed as Improved grassland, there are also signs of improvement as it supports small patches of marshy grassland dominated by Hard Rush with Fleabane and Meadow Vetchling and total of three semi-improved grassland wildflower indicators and two indicators of Lowland Meadow, along with Hemp-Agrimony, an indicator of Rush Pasture (a Priority Habitat type).

**Table 1:** Changes in Lowland Meadow habitat condition of management units at Asker Meadows 2012-24

Area	Changes since 2012	Main current habitat	Progress in condition towards Lowland Meadow
A	Converted from meadow to rank grassland, ruderal tall herbs and scrub an stands of trees (through tree planting). Slight decline in botanical interest, with some reductions in the abundance of indicators of semi-improve neutral meadows e.g. Ribwort Plantain and an increase in ruderal tall herbs and injurious weeds. On the positive side the development of scrub is attractive to a different assemblage of wildlife.	Scrub and improved grassland	Unfavourable - declining
B	Little change - managed as amenity grassland for events. There have been a small reduction in botanical interest, with a lower abundance of semi-improve neutral meadow indicator species e.g. Sorrel and Meadow Buttercup	Improved grassland	Unfavourable - no change
C	No management change in the main field.	Improved grassland	Unfavourable - no change
C1	Wildflower enhancements undertaken in 2014 as part of the Coronation Meadows project with subsequent mowing and grazing	Good quality semi-improved grassland of moderate species-richness	Unfavourable - improving
C2	Cessation of stock grazing and more regular flooding, cut annually.	Improved grassland	Unfavourable - improving
D	No management change in the main field. Some evidence of slightly fewer injurious weeds	Improved grassland	Unfavourable - no change
E	No management change in the main field.	Improved grassland	Unfavourable - no change
New Zealand	Little management change.	Scrub and improved grassland	Unfavourable - no change



## **2. Safeguard wildlife interest along the river corridor, including non- intervention/sanctuary areas.**

Little progress here set against some increasing pressures (see Section 3), though in a wider ecological context surveys by the Environment Agency showed the River Asker improved in ecological condition from [Poor to Good between 2019 and 2022](#).

The main positive has been no cutting towards the edge of the river (4m band) in some areas, as a no disturbance zone.

No non-intervention sanctuary areas established.

Signage to reduce Water Vole disturbance by dogs (e.g. jumping into and swimming in the river) north of the New Zealand bridge is considered to have only limited success (Nicole Dennis pers. comm.), whilst signage north of the South Mill Lane bridge has been removed due to dog owner concerns

There are concerns over the current condition of the river habitat for Water Voles, despite a good number of records in the 2021 EA survey. Currently this highly endangered species is being threatened here by bank erosion, overtopping of the river on a regular basis during the winter, bank scrub and tree shading, and disturbance from dogs off leads.

Riverine breeding birds (Mallard, Moorhen) are at below average densities (compared to surrounding less disturbed stretches in the local area), most likely due to disturbance and a lack of unshaded bankside vegetation for breeding.



*Water Vole by New Zealand Bridge, April 2020*

### **3. Undertake tree planting and hedge management to provide wildlife interest and structure.**

At least one new hedge has been planted, though no hedge laying/maintenance has been undertaken over the current management plan period.

### **4. Maintain surfaced paths as shared spaces for walkers and cyclists.**

Actions successfully delivered.

### **5. Run education events to promote awareness and appreciation of wildlife and encourage responsible behaviours**

A number of wildlife-related events have been run for Bournemouth University, Mountjoy and Bridport Primary schools and Bridport Cubs/Beavers. No adult activities have been organised.

Well-maintained and informative [Facebook page](#) and a [website](#) are maintained by Asker Meadows Local Nature Reserve Group. Bridport Town Council regularly promotes nature reserve activity via its Facebook page and through press releases.

### **The reserve is not a destination for naturalists and biological recording for a nature reserve is under-represented.**

There is no formal biological monitoring of the reserve's terrestrial biodiversity (e.g. butterfly transect, condition and changing status of Protected/Priority species features), though some river quality and [riverfly monitoring](#) is undertaken as well as monthly surveys of river condition by volunteer Wessex Water/Dorset Wildlife Trust Water Guardians. Protected and alien species surveys have been undertaken by the Environment Agency.

A number of litter-picking events have been organised.

Stalls have been run at public events e.g. Bridport Food Festival

### **6. Create seating/ picnic areas to encourage people to enjoy and get to know the area.**

Strong progress has been made in terms of opening up the area for informal recreation, through four separate picnic benches in Morrison's Field and free and open access for dogs across all areas (other than temporary exclusion in some areas when cattle are grazing or during events).



*New nature reserve signs and a trail have been a welcome development in 2024.*

## 7. Manage the Show Field for a select number of community events.

Good progress. Cultural events have been maintained.

## 5. Evaluation of progress in relation to objectives

### *Recreation and education*

There have been some commendable recreational improvements that have substantially increased opportunities for local residents to access and enjoy open space on their doorstep.

There is a growing number of picnic benches and the southern part of the nature reserve, is now more akin to a recreational park/country park experience, with amenity grassland, the picnic benches and creation of temporary recreational space (e.g. a gathering space in 2024, as part of Bridport Town of Culture).



*There has been a growth in permanent facilities for informal recreation (new tracks, bridges, paths, 12 picnic benches), but there are no permanent facilities for nature-based recreation.*

The reserve is an exemplary destination for dog walking, with free and unlimited off lead roaming access (bar for some fields when there is cattle grazing or events), swimming opportunities, multiple paths, large open fields to play and meet other dogs/owners and numerous bins.

The development of a nature trail and nature reserve boards are extremely positive as are the nature-based activities with young people which are to be applauded, but more activities for adults should be considered. The Swift Walks in 2024, which included part of Asker Meadows were very well attended showing the potentially high level of interest there is for these activities.

The potential to develop formal nature-based biological recording (e.g. moth trapping, BioBlitzes, invertebrate sampling, mammal trapping) is prohibited by free-roaming dogs in all areas.

### ***Wildlife conservation***

In contrast to recreational and educational progress, progress in delivering effective conservation for the key features – lowland meadow and riverine habitats has been less successful.

Redressing this balance should be a key objective in the next management plan.

However there have been some notable successes including hedge planting, meadow restoration (mostly prior to the current management plan) and tree planting (though in terms of meadow restoration this is a negative development), whilst necessary grazing and cutting regimes to maintain meadow habitats have been maintained to varying degrees in most of the fields.

Key wildlife features of the site are River Asker and bordering riverine habitat and the Protected/Priority species associated with it including Water Vole, Otter, Kingfisher, Brook Lamprey, Bullhead, Brown Trout and European Eel.

In terms of extent, the main habitat of the nature reserve is degraded (through agricultural improvement) lowland meadow. The fields have considerable restoration potential, as has been demonstrated through efforts in Compartment C1.



*Some of the meadows are attractive in the Spring with abundant Meadow Buttercup and smaller quantities of Bulbous Buttercup and Lady's Smock*

## **6. Enhancement recommendations**

### ***Nature Reserve Status***

Seek to add New Zealand to the LNR designation

### ***Conservation of Habitats and species***

Key wildlife features of the site are River Asker and bordering riverine habitat and the Protected/Priority species associated with it including Water Vole, Otter, Kingfisher, Brook Lamprey, Bullhead, Brown Trout and European Eel.

In terms of extent, the main habitat of the nature reserve is degraded (through agricultural improvement) lowland meadow. The fields have considerable restoration potential, as has been demonstrated through efforts in Compartment C1.

Key recommendations include maintaining and improving the valuable riverine habitats of this stretch of the River Asker, improving the botanical value of meadows and setting aside some undisturbed areas where wildlife can thrive and citizen science can be undertaken.

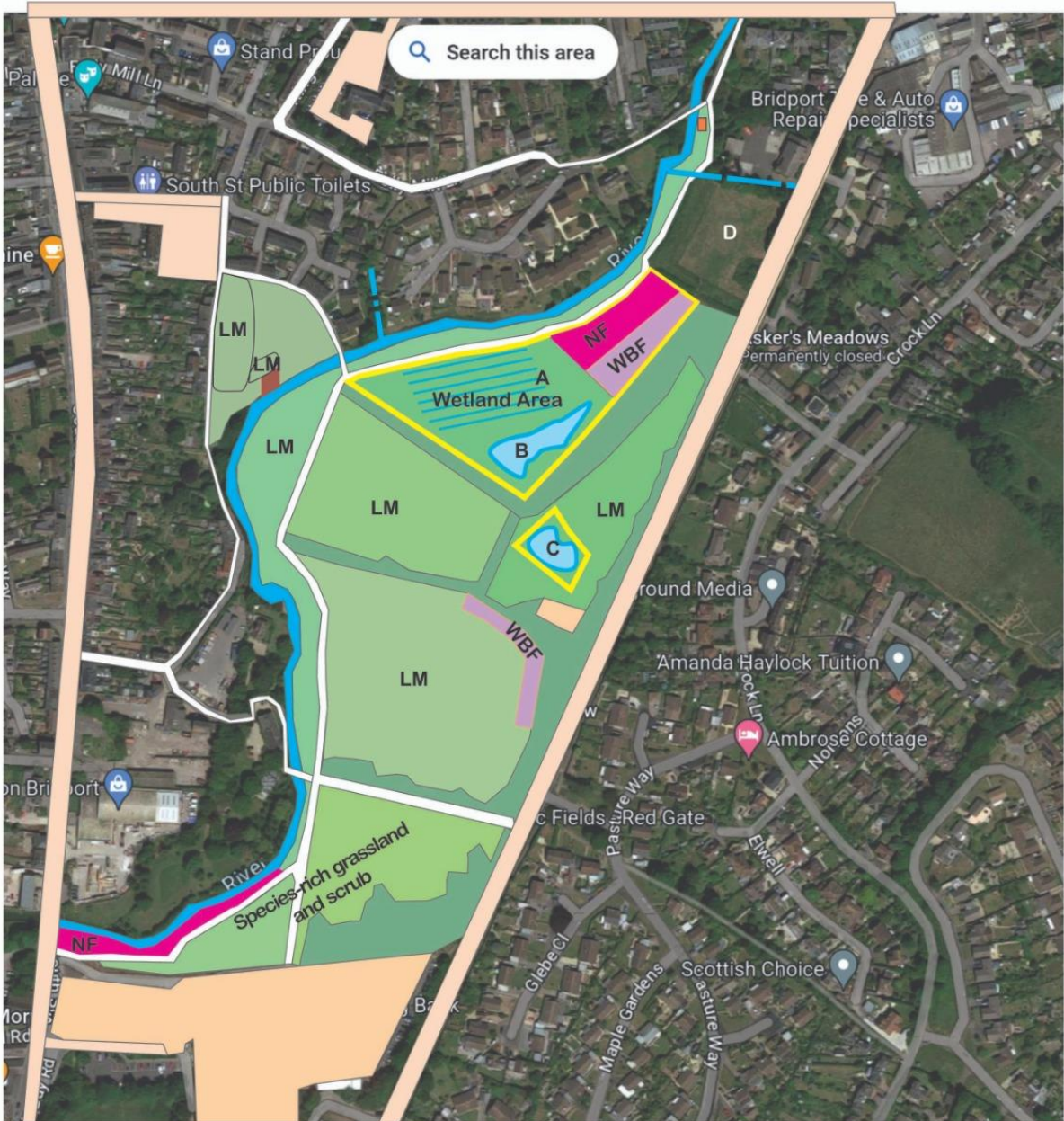
In addition, the reserve could be enhanced in further ways, relevant to local biodiversity, not in a generic way (*e.g.* not all tree planting is a good thing) but sensitive and relevant to the local areas existing ecological interest and in response to mitigating the negative impacts of environmental pressures.













The main additional enhancement suggested are:

- Provision of winter food resources for local resident and wintering bird species – the Bridport area is important as breeding site for seed-eating bird species (*e.g.* the Bridport area supported the largest Greenfinch flock in the county in Autumn 2022 prior to food sources drying up and there is relatively large breeding population), yet winter food sources are insufficient and net emigration occurs. Breeding resources including nest sites (nest boxes) could also be considered.
- Investigate the feasibility and where possible deliver new wetland habitat in alignment with wider aspirations across the Brit Catchment to restore wetlands for wildlife and ecosystem services. Interventions could potentially include the creation of ponds, ditches and restoration a water meadow system, fen and marsh.
- Creation of pollinator resources for bees and other insects (*e.g.* cultivated flower-rich strips), especially as few summer nectar sources are apparent on the reserve (following hay cutting) and to mitigate any impacts of the Honey Bee Hives. Other measures for invertebrates could include creating small earth banks along the eastern perimeter for mining bees, solitary wasps and rove beetles.

Key to successful delivery is to develop a zoning approach and restricting dog access from some parts of the nature reserve. As mitigation, this may need the creation of additional dog walking areas on low value wildlife land off site.

Suggested management interventions are illustrated in Figure 8.



-  EA Monitoring Station
-  Existing course of River Asker between East Road Bridge and South Street Bridge Bridport.
-  Tributary joining Asker from the east.
-  The old leat
- LM** Enhance to Lowland Meadow
- A**  Wetland Area
- B**  Create large pond/scrape. Use soil for bee banks
- C**  Create a smaller pond for educational access
- D**  Explore the possibility of a dog exercise compensation area
- NF**  Nectar flower mix
- WBF**  Winter bird food
-  Fenced area - no dogs
-  Water vole viewing platform

**Figure 8:** Suggested management interventions

### ***Marketing and publicity***

Rebrand the area from Asker Meadows to Asker Meadows Nature Reserve. Emphasizing the nature reserve aspect in the title of new management plan, signage and all other public communications, will help reinforce the message that this is first and foremost a nature reserve.

### ***Survey, monitoring and data collation***

Develop a programme of survey and monitoring (with associated Biodiversity Indicators) to better identify the status of key species (e.g. foraging bats) and measure conservation progress.

Ensure that value data collected e.g. EA Protected Species survey data and RMI data is fed into BTC and AMNRG and is used to inform site management where relevant.

Establish a database of biological records for the nature reserve. Creation of facilities for visiting naturalists to observe and study nature, including access restricted areas where citizen science (e.g. moth trapping, experimental work) can be carried out unhindered.

### ***Education***

Expand the programme of nature-based events to include adults and activities which promote awareness and appreciation of wildlife and encourage responsible behaviour.

Develop a training programme e.g. in Lowland Meadow habitat condition assessment, to enable volunteers to carry out future monitoring

Establish an annual citizen science/biological recording event *e.g.* a BioBlitz

### ***Potential funding sources***

Potential funding bodies (funding source) include Dorset National Landscape (FIPL), Defra (Countryside Stewardship/SFI, Capital Grants, Local Nature Recovery), Environment Agency/Defra (Natural flood management programme), Developers/Dorset Council (Biodiversity Net Gain), West Dorset Wilding (a partner in Landscape Recovery), Wessex Water (Wessex Water Environment Fund) and Bridport Town Council (using funding previously allocated for pond creation).

### ***Closing remarks***

It is important to remember that although Asker Meadows is a multi-functional space its core function as an LNR is making an important contribution to conserving England's biodiversity, by caring for and protecting its key natural features. Education and recreation, where it can be achieved without disturbing wildlife, are secondary objectives.

Given recreational value and challenges at Askers Meadows, consideration should be given to creating an additional LNR locally where the potential to limit recreational disturbance from the outset is high, so that the core objectives of an LNR can be fully realised.

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*Goosander, December 2022*