



Birmingham & Black Country Nature Improvement Area

NIA grant awarded: £794,738

“To achieve long-term environmental gains for the wildlife and people of Birmingham & the Black Country by delivering targeted, on-the-ground, biodiversity projects at a landscape scale.”

The B&BC NIA is a partnership of over 50 organisations that have come together to deliver significant improvements to the natural environment of Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall & Wolverhampton. Our vision is an urban landscape permeated by a network of high quality greenspace which is rich in wildlife and enjoyed by the people who live and work here.

Woodland – *management & enhancement of recently established woodland*

The aim of our Woodland Delivery Theme is to re-establish a network of high quality woodlands across the NIA through the enrichment and diversification of our young plantation and degraded woodlands. This is being achieved through thinning, coppicing, under-planting and the introduction of native field-layer species sourced from our remaining old woodlands.

In Year 2 of the NIA we launched the Woodlands from Plantations initiative which invited partners and local groups to come forward with suitable sites and work with the Birmingham & Black Country Nature Improvement Area Partnership to ‘make real improvements to young woodlands in local open spaces’. The initiative has been very successful and 22 projects have been delivered with the involvement of friends groups, allotment associations, schools and voluntary sector organisations.

Examples include Cannon Hill Park in central Birmingham where 4 hectares of dense plantation woodland have been thinned, coppiced, under-planted and sown with locally sourced woodland flora by the Friends of Cannon Hill Park under the guidance of The Wildlife Trust. Twelve community volunteering and training events were delivered as part of the project, helping to build-in project sustainability. As well as the Friends and other adult volunteers a home schooling group and other school-age volunteers attended several of the events and took part in the project delivery. In Wolverhampton a similar project was started at the Barley Field Plantation where 40 Year 9 and 10 students from two local secondary schools were trained in woodland management techniques including felling and planting whilst improvements were delivered on the first part of a 3 hectare site that will be completed in 2015.

In January 2014 an additional £199,988 was awarded to the B&BC NIA for the delivery of further woodland improvement projects at six sites. Each of these projects has delivered the ecological outcomes of the community-led projects but at a much larger scale. These include Milking Bank in Dudley where 14 hectares of young planted woodland that form part of a corridor of open space through a 1980s residential development have been thinned by contractors. Following on from this underplanting and field-layer introduction has been carried out through community and school volunteer days led by The Wildlife Trust.

In Year 1 we launched our NIA-funded Growing Local Flora project which is sourcing, supplying and introducing native field-layer seed and plants of local provenance to the NIA’s woodland projects. This project has grown in Year 2 and has been involved with the delivery of all the woodland projects.

Grassland – *restoration & linking of long-established grassland*

The aim of our grassland work is to form a network of species-rich grasslands across Birmingham & the Black Country by creating new meadows and restoring old grassland by re-introducing traditional management. There is a recent history in the Nature Improvement Area of pioneering work to create diverse grassland of native species - techniques which have since been adopted nation-wide – and we are building on this success.

In Year 2 of the NIA we launched our Urban Meadows initiative which created 18 new meadows in public open space through the strewing of green hay which was sourced from four local orchid-rich ancient meadows. Each project was undertaken in conjunction with a local community group and volunteers helped spread the hay onto the variously prepared sites. The projects are linked with research being undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton which is investigating the rates of successful species establishment using various ground preparation methods and the timings of donor site harvest.

An example of a Year 2 project is Castle Vale Meadows in Birmingham where over 5 hectares of new meadow were created on a capped landfill site which was once part of a Spitfire testing airfield. Here two separate meadows were created from two different SSSI donor sites which are separated by a 'control' area of spontaneous grassland. This project was undertaken in conjunction with a local community environmental charity and volunteers from across Birmingham.

Heathland – *restoration & linking of long-established heathland*

Birmingham & the Black Country was once rich in heathland, much of which has been lost or is suffering neglect. The focus of our Heathland Delivery Theme is to restore existing heathland through the clearance of undesirable vegetation and the re-introduction of appropriate management; and to recreate heathland using locally sourced seed on former heathland or other suitable sites.

In Year 2 of the NIA partners have continued to undertake restoration projects at key sites in Walsall and Birmingham through Higher Level Stewardship schemes. These include Sutton Park National Nature Reserve and Brownhills Common SSSI. Scrub, bramble, bracken and tall herb have been cleared whilst traditional management has been re-introduced.

In Year 1 experimental turf stripping was carried out at Rubery Hill and this has been monitored through Year 2, with a view to expanding the area in autumn 2014. Further heathland creation opportunities have been identified at two key stepping stone locations in Walsall and these projects are being developed with the Friends of Pelsall Commons for delivery in Year 3.

Corridors – *improving quality, linkage & bridging gaps*

Birmingham & the Black Country comprises a deeply fragmented landscape and therefore our blue (wetland) and green (terrestrial) habitat corridors are often key to species movement, site colonisation and population expansion. The focus of our Corridors Delivery Theme is therefore to improve the quality of our corridors and create links where gaps have been identified.

In Year 2 examples of projects include working with the Environment Agency and Wolverhampton Council on the naturalisation of a section of the River Penk. Here a heavily engineered part-culverted and part-channelised stretch of the river which runs through an area of public open space has been de-culverted, widened and meandered in conjunction with the local community. Working with the Canal & River Trust the NIA have continued the ecological improvement of key linking sections of the Birmingham & Black Country canal network through the introduction of planted-up coir rolls to the hard bankside and the planting of nectar-rich shrubs and perennial herbs along towpath edges.

Geology & Geomorphology – *linking Geodiversity and biodiversity*

Birmingham & the Black Country is world renowned for the diverse rocks which fed both the Industrial Revolution and the early science of geology. The focus of our geological Delivery Theme is to enhance geological sites whilst combining these with gains for wildlife, and to work towards the creation of a network of accessible geological sites which tell the story of Birmingham & the Black Country's millions of years of history.

In Year 2 we have concentrated on the development and design of a project linked to the proposed Black Country Geopark which, working with the Black Country Geological Society and Dudley Museum, aims to enhance key representative sites of the conurbation's geology for education, whilst also increasing their ecological value. As part of the project a 10 year management plan that will be delivered by Black Country Geological Society volunteers is being produced so as to ensure that these gains are sustained into the future.

Community Engagement – *involving people*

Birmingham & the Black Country has a population of over 2 million people, and it is key to the success of the Nature Improvement Area that there is widespread public awareness, engagement and involvement in the work of the partnership. The focus of the Community Engagement Delivery Theme is to ensure as many people as possible get involved with and benefit from the NIA, whether that's helping to design a project, volunteering to make it happen, or simply visiting a project with their community group or school class.

In Year 2 the communication of the NIA's aims and achievements to the residents of the conurbation has been building with significant traditional and digital media coverage throughout the year. This has helped the partners actively involve hundreds of volunteers in the design and delivery of the Nature Improvement Area priority projects across the NIA's delivery themes.