

Greenham & Crookham Commons Seasonal Warden Summary Report 2023

Every year from February to August, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) employ three seasonal wardens. The main focus of the role is to help reduce disturbance to ground-nesting bird species at Greenham & Crookham Commons through visitor engagement to educate and promote sensitive use of the commons by ensuring nesting areas remain undisturbed by visitor access.

The wardens help us gain a better understanding of how visitors use the common, with data being collected on visitor numbers, type of visitors and how visitor behaviour is changing from year to year. The data and findings are presented in the full Season Wardens Annual Report. Subsequently, the report is used to help inform and adapt our management to better engage and educate the public on and off site. The information they collect combined with their presence on site throughout the nesting season is integral to the management of the Commons. Seasonal wardens are an integral in helping BBOWT conserve and protect one of West Berkshire most important lowland heathland sites.

Ground nesting birds during 2023

- The ground nesting birds at Greenham were largely similar to last year. Good numbers of woodlark, Dartford warbler, stonechat and meadow pipit were reported. Similar numbers of nightjar were present from last year. Fewer nightingale were present, but there was notable success for select little ringed plover. Breeding skylark and lapwing were minimal to none. The broadly positive GNB results and trends to date highlight the successful management interventions being undertaken at Greenham by BBOWT. Furthermore, emphasising the need to continue to maintain wardening, and to continue to implement the annual access control measures during the ground nesting bird season.

Visitor numbers and profile

- Visitor numbers appear to have increased slightly from 2022, particularly at the Pyle Hill and Control Tower entrances. While there has been a decrease in weekday visitors, this has been replaced by an increase in weekend visitors.
- The most common types of visitors continue to be dog walkers, who regularly use the common more than weekly and have been doing so for the long-term (5+ years).
- Most respondents lived less than 10km from the entrance they were surveyed at (straight-line distance) and the average straight-line distance between their home postcode and their entrance onto the common was 5.53km.
- The most popular reason for visiting Greenham Common over other local green spaces was "Proximity to home".
- The majority of visitors continue to arrive by car.

Visitor behaviour

- Awareness of the ground nesting bird protection measures on the common has increased slightly from 2022
- The majority of respondents continue to feel that there is a suitable provision of circular walking routes of different lengths during the ground nesting bird season, and felt that it was clear which of the paths on Greenham Common were okay to use during the nesting season.
- Awareness of BBOWT managing the common has increased, as well as there being a slight increase in the percentage of survey respondents who are BBOWT members. There has been a decrease in the percentage of respondents aware of Greenham and Crookham Commons Commission.
- The percentage of groups entering Greenham Common with a dog has increased year-on-year since 2021 and based on visitor activity monitoring from next to the Control Tower, the majority of dogs are off-lead while on the common.
- The majority of off-path interactions involved dog walkers.
- The majority of off-path visitors that were spoken to willingly moved to the main path, however the majority of those that refused to move were regular visitors.

- The most common reason given for being off the main path was being unaware of ground nesting birds and/or the protection measures. This further emphasises the importance of having seasonal wardens to engage with and educate visitors about GNBs.

Interventions undertaken by wardens

- This year ground nesting bird signage on gates and posts were printed on better quality material to provide a more professional appearance. Content was virtually unchanged from 2022, apart from the removal of the Thames Valley Police logo (based on feedback from visitors).
- A new route was opened on one half of a firebreak to the runway path on Greenham Common this year, based on 2022 feedback. New signage to guide people to this new path (from other firebreaks) was made, and select signs updated with maps to help visitors orientate themselves on the Common.
- Log Lecterns ("logterns") continued to be placed in strategic areas to communicate the ground nesting bird protection measures.
- A number of warden-led events continued to be held across the Commons as per last year (five at Greenham), including fully-booked guided nightjar walks (16 people per walk), a bird walk, and family / child-oriented activities (bug hunt, butterfly and dragonfly walk).
- Warden interactions with visitors were overwhelmingly friendly and engaging, with only a few negative reactions and hostility. Vandalism of official signage on Greenham continues to be a significant challenge.

Key Recommendations

- The Greenham and Crookham Commons Commission approve the continuation of the 2023 ground nesting bird protection measures for 2024.
- BBOWT continue to employ seasonal wardens in 2024.
- Continue to collect data in the 2024 season through visitor activity monitoring, car park counts and visitor surveys. Review the data collection methods to ensure that the data being collected remains relevant and useful, and coordinate a data collection schedule.
- Standardise in-person and online surveys to allow combined analysis of both data sets.
- Use signage and other material, such as bird handouts and "business cards", to provide education to visitors on why certain areas are protected.

- Provide an appropriate range of additional interpretation to help people understand and care about the wildlife interests on Greenham Common.
- Continue to organise regular guided walks and events for visitors, particularly increasing the number of "pop-ups" undertaken throughout the season.
- Continue to develop methods to engage with dog owners about responsible dog owners and behaviour on sites, including specific events aimed at dog walkers and an event with a local dog trainer.
- Continue to use professionally printed GNB signage, with the addition of backing boards for each sign to protect against breakage. Develop a way to prevent logtern signage being ripped, as well as including additional signage underneath "problem" signs with contact details if visitors see a sign being vandalised.
- Promote and enhance accessibility in the Roam Zone as an area to explore off the main path with signage at main access points, using A3 signage where possible to ensure map is clear.
- Make more use of local social media channels and local contacts to promote the online visitor surveys to ensure a wider range of opinions is sought. Review 'Greenham Grapevine' Facebook page provision to ensure in line with internal BBOWT social media policy.
- Aligning with warden groups in neighbouring counties, develop a map of walking / dog walking alternatives available to local visitors in the surrounding Newbury area (liaising with WBC, Parish Council, National Trust, private estates, etc.).
- Continue to develop relations with the dog walking community (including neighbouring county warden groups and organisations).
- Conservation Management Committee to review provision of circular waymarked footpaths including reassessing firebreak path.