

Rural Report

For LMEHA Committee meeting on 10.02.24

A meeting was held on 07.02.24 attended by Rob Squizzoni, Andrew Bonner, and Hilary Collins.

Grounds Maintenance Team

- 2023 Improvements. The focus was on making sure the team had all their tickets and licenses up to date and that correct PPE was being used. Alex Huges attended a IOSH Managing Safely course. A drying room was rented to stop PPE from perishing due to being stored wet. New PPE included life jackets, dry suits, and climbing gear. Another improvement was a cheaper lease for Club Cars instead of Cushman Kabotas, with the added benefit of faster repair and replacement. A woodchipper has been rented for the four months it is needed during the winter.
- Staffing. Hiring for Darren Hobb's replacement is in progress. The 2024 service charge budget includes funds for an additional GMT staff member and Rob will consult with LMEHA prior to filling. Apprentices may not work well as they tend to lead to FTE positions.
- Village walkthroughs. On-going. Items flagged are mostly housekeeping and maintenance rather than ecology.
- Tree felling and blow downs. Some large trees have come down due to a combination of wet weather and high winds. The fence to the beaver containment was damaged, and Alex Hughes worked on the repair independently at the landlord's expense.
- Damaged culvert at Farmhouse Lake. This was caused during installation of the otter fence. The landowner involved is uncooperative and Rob has asked the Environment Agency to help resolve.
- Bridge safety. Retrofits are on-going. Rob noted an anomaly, i.e. that repairs to property bridges in the Nines are funded though the service charge, as opposed to being paid for by the homeowner.
- Flooding. Over the winter blocked culverts across Minety Lane allowed polluted water (road run off) to go into Swillbrook Lakes and overwhelmed the estate's main sewage pumping station at Minety Lake. A bund was set up around the pump station and water had to be pumped offsite by tanker to Thames water treatment plant in Swindon.
- Upstream pollution. Nick Adams, who does wildlife monitoring for the estate, reported an early am bovine slurry pollution incident from a local farm. This has happened a second time and appears to be deliberate. The Environment Agency has been asked to investigate this illegal activity.
- Gate locks. Codes have been changed. Some gates need to be checked to make sure only new code is active.

- Avian Flu. Nothing new to report, Bird numbers are down.
- Goats. Doing well, now grazing on the closed area at Somerford Lagoon.
- Hides. A carpenter is being hired to do repairs and then Nick wood will repaint. If solar can be added then trace heating will be added to reduce mould and rot.
- Somerford Lagoon closure. Some damage due to people climbing over/around locked gates. Recently some canoeists had to be told to come off the lake.
- Fishing. The pH levels in Clearwater Lake are elevated and in response the estate is planning to install devices in to move and oxygenate the water. There are too many carp in Howells Mere and fish will be relocated to all the estate's other lakes.
- Weed spraying. This is focused on the gravel parking areas. The condition of private driveways has been added to the annual property inspection report.
- Allotment (poly tunnel and staff parking). The estate is reapplying to Planning for the poly-tunnel which will be used to grow plants and trees for the estate, not tomatoes. etc. for Ballihoo.
- Charge backs for work on Swillbrook lakes. Rob will provide 2023 report via email.
- Hedges along Swillbrook Lakes footpath. Rob will check the condition of this hedging. There are many gaps allowing dogs to get to sensitive lake edges.

The Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) and Wildlife Monitoring

- It was agreed that a separate meeting would be scheduled with Rob and James Ponting to discuss questions on the LEMP.
- Recently, there have been discussions between the estate and Lakeshore Reserve homeowners regarding pre-nesting season cut backs for views.
- Annual monitoring. The bat survey team will be coming soon to approve roof work at the spa. Rat bait boxes have been added to the boat stores.

Questions/topics

- Hilary will send the Nature Club member questions, below to James Ponting so that he can answer.
 - Is the requirement to have native plants only on the estate driven by the estate or Cotswold District Council? Scientists say that it is important to have a mix of native plants and (certain) non-native species. This is because it provides a longer flowering season which is beneficial for pollinators. Apparently, the speed of global warming also makes a wider spread of plants important because more animals are active all year

round because of the weather becoming warmer. The change is happening so quickly that native plants are unable to adapt fast enough. I would like to know whether the estate is considering this and responding accordingly to new evidence pls? Our planting list is very narrow.

- Could you ask about whether/what type of clover might be acceptable? The grass does not grow well at the bottom end of our plot because of the combination of trees and brambles, and I would like to consider a mix of grasses and clover as an alternative , with the added advantage that it is a great habitat for bees, butterflies, insects, and other pollinators.
- Flooded trails around wider estate (via Pikes Corner). Hilary passed on a homeowner suggestion to use using earth banks (perhaps interspersed raised walkways) to allow for access when the fields are flooded.
- Additional house martin nests. Rob will talk to James about providing ledges for interested homeowners.
- Ecology walks with James Ponting or Somerford Keynes residents. The first walk was successful and additional walks have been requested.