

## Survey of Open Access Land report

### General comments

The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust is the largest non-governmental organisation dedicated to nature conservation in the two counties. It currently has 26 nature reserves in Leicestershire covering about 757.5 hectares (1871 acres). The Trust has a positive policy towards access and we try to do as much as we can to encourage it while striving to maintain and enhance the nature conservation value of our estate to the highest possible standards. In recent years we have purposefully replaced nearly all of the stiles on Trust land with gates, to make access for the less able easier. We also maintain miles of paths and woodland rides, and numerous boardwalks, steps, information boards and other features. Clearly this is a massive job and we are sure that there is always room for improvement. However, it should be noted that the Trust has limited resources and cannot always do everything that it would wish to.

The nature reserves are managed on a day to day basis by just five members of staff, based in the Trust's Leicester offices. None of the reserves are visited as often as they really need to be. Loughborough Big Meadow, for example, is visited on average about once a week. Staff work hard to deal with issues other than habitat management ones, such as sadly increasing unsociable behaviour by a minority of people, e.g. removal of signs; loose dogs worrying wildlife, stock and other visitors; excessive dog mess; travellers' ponies; fly tipping; unauthorized access by horses, motor cycles and mountain bikes; glued up locks; damaged fences; people not keeping to paths (other than on Access land); damage to buildings.

Parts of three of the reserves were, of course, declared Open Access Land through the CRoW Act. Soon after the Act came in we worked with Leicestershire County Council to put up Open Access signs on Trust (and indeed other) sites. We also proposed new permissive paths at Charnwood Lodge to link up the separated parcels of Access Land, but it was accepted that there would be no direct link between the Warren Hills and The Rough. Since then we have received very little comment from the County Council, the public or others on the arrangements. They seem to have worked well.

We have read the reports you sent us on and discussed them with relevant staff. They contain much useful information, but we would have found it easier to respond if there had been numbered suggestions. Nevertheless, we offer our comments below and hope that we have addressed the main points:

### Altar Stones

1. We obviously have no objection to the installation of more Access signs.
2. We have tried to negotiate a lease on the Common Land owned by Markfield Parish Council, but they do not appear to want to proceed with that idea.
3. We will have another look at the stile mentioned, but we would have no objection to it being replaced.
4. Similarly, we would have no objection to the installation of a gate for the less able, provided that it did not admit horses or unauthorized vehicles.

### **Charnwood Lodge**

1. As the report indicates, this property was bequeathed to the Trust on the condition that it should be maintained with minimal disturbance, which has proved to be a challenge given the desire to promote access. In recent years the Trust's approach to access at Charnwood Lodge has become much more positive and relaxed. In practice there are few restrictions, but we obviously encourage people to keep to the paths to minimize disturbance to wildlife. We also ask people to keep dogs on leads during the bird breeding season, but you should be aware that loose dogs are a significant concern on the Warren Hills. Not only do they disturb wildlife, but they have led to the farmer withdrawing his stock at times. It is important that we confine this problem to as small an area as possible.
2. The barbed wire enclosure on the Warren Hills surrounds the covered reservoir owned by Severn Trent Water. The company insisted that the reservoir be fenced to prevent cattle from getting onto it. STW have also locked the gate and the Trust has no control over this situation.
3. As stated above, the issue of a link between the Warren Hills and The Rough was discussed when the CRoW Act was first introduced. Although the report author believes that only responsible people would walk to The Rough from the Warren Hills, we believe that the proposed link would be risky given the current level of anti-social behaviour on the Warren Hills. Furthermore, the field between is tenanted farmland and we know that the farmer would be against an access route through it. A route along the adjacent track would take people uncomfortably close to the farmyard, introducing a potential security threat.
4. We are not in favour of another access point through Bower Wood because it would result in more work for our hard-pressed staff.
5. The wall at point 1 has already been set back to provide a refuge for pedestrians. We recognize that the road is a hazard, however, and we suggest that the highways authority put up warning signs to alert motorists to the presence of pedestrians. We would be happy to contact them.
6. We will look at the Trust's website entry for Charnwood Lodge, but we have not said that CRoW Access degrades the NNR. The website is primarily aimed at Trust members and is not there to provide information on Open Access.
7. We recognize that the original way-marked path is not maintained as well as it ideally should be, but this is simply because of limited resources. We will consider whether we can improve the situation.
8. We do not have a policy of minimal signage. The original Access signs were removed by persons unknown quite quickly after installation. We would certainly not object to them being replaced.
9. Note that the less able are welcome to apply to have a permit so that they can park near the Bomb Rocks. We have recently put in a gate there suitable for wheelchair users. Similar gates have also been put in elsewhere, the cost having been borne by the Trust.

### **Loughborough Big Meadow**

1. Note that the suggested access point opposite point 7 is not on Wildlife Trust owned land.
2. The detached land at point 6 has only been purchased by the Trust quite recently. The gate there now was present when we purchased the land. We are aware that it is not ideal, but visitors can squeeze by it. Unfortunately we have been experiencing real problems on this land through unauthorized mini-motor cycle access, which we have notified the Police, Leicestershire County Council and Natural England of. The mini motor cycles are able to get

through kissing gates. This is a matter that could be resolved by installing more secure access structures by the road, that do not allow access by mini-motor cycles, but that is on land that the Trust has no control over. Note that it is also possible for these vehicles to gain access through the flimsy fence on this side of the road.

3. Car parking is an issue that we struggle with on a number of nature reserves. The benefits are clear, but car parks invite all sorts of problems such as fly-tipping, which we are unable to deal with. Their construction is often likely to necessitate the loss of valuable habitat, in this case legally protected SSSI land. We have considered the idea of constructing a car park at Loughborough Big Meadow ourselves, but we came to the conclusion that unfortunately it was not possible. Having said that, visitors can usually park on the side of the road where the fence is set back a little.
4. Some of the Access Land signs on this site have disappeared, but the Trust maintains the information boards on its land to the west of Meadow Lane.
5. A kissing gate at point 4 is no longer necessary following a recent land acquisition by the Trust which enabled us to remove the fence.
6. The shaded land on Map 2B is not Registered Common Land, which explains why it was not included in the Access Land designation. We cannot see any advantage to be gained from extending the designation.

This page is intentionally left blank