**Funded WAHGA Project - Wildlife Pond Plan**

**Why a pond?**

Freshwater ponds with native planting will attract many new species not currently found on Churchfields Allotment significantly increasing biodiversity. Surrey Wildlife Trust has recommended to WLC a pond be created at Churchfields Allotments and Surrey Bat Group has advised that adding a pond is the single best thing we could do to increase vital pollinators across our site. More amphibians, dragonflies and grass snakes will arrive within a year. It will also help increase the number of invertebrates on site, which is vital to improving bat numbers, and increase the diversity of pollinators. Honeybees from the existing hives on site will benefit from more nectar/food from the extra habitat created, ensuring a continuing healthy population. A healthy ecosystem with the right balance of insects will directly benefit plot holders by improving the soils, increasing yields and reducing pests across the site.

**Funding**

This project (along with two others) was given direct funding from the Greenspaces Team at EBC in December 2019. We are very grateful to WLC trustee, Vicki Macleod, for helping us frame our bid. We are also grateful to Cllrs Peter Harman and Tim Oliver and many other trustees for being so supportive during joint meeting discussions early this year. Thanks also to Carlye Case for taking time out to review wildlife ideas and for the support of the WAHGA committee and former WAHGA chair Tony Palmer in particular. Ian Gaton at Elmbridge has provided help and advice at every stage.

**Location**

This was quite restricted, as we had very few vacant plots let alone suitable ones for creating freshwater habitat. After many weeks of deliberation we settled on two narrow half plots (24A/25A) at the rear of the site that had a good southerly aspect with little shade, no large tree roots and next to a vacant greenhouse. It is one of the nearest plots to the original site of Weybridge village pond (now filled in) so has a good historical precedent for amphibian species with excellent proximity to the unlit tree line/hedgerow at the back of the plot where up to nine species of bat can be seen foraging at dusk.

**Design**

A lot of time and consideration has been spent planning these projects.
Our biodiversity and sustainability officer has attended a wildlife symposium at ZSL (where he is a Fellow) to discuss the biodiversity of allotments and obtained advice on the creation of freshwater habitat with many experienced conservation charities.

The plot will be home to two medium-sized ponds measuring 4 x 6 metres. One will be shallower with sloping sides and more floating plants (with a depth up to 60cm). The main pond will be deeper to attract amphibians, will also have gentle sloping sides, with more shelves for plant diversity. A small area right in the middle will be 100cm deep making it suitable for overwintering. A hibernaculum will provide frogs, toads and reptiles with a place of winter shelter, and a compost heap a place to hide. Water storage systems will collect rainwater for the pond. A large hut (with separate tool storage) will display wildlife information for members, volunteers and any community groups that visit and provide shelter from the elements.

**Safety**

This is paramount. The entire pond plot will be surrounded by a dense hedge on all sides with an additional fence for extra safety. A locked gate will be installed.

**Maintenance**

On the back of the projects approved for funding, the WAHGA Wildlife Team (WWT) was created in January 2020. Within a week we had over 20 members! This group of volunteers began to help implement the funded projects and to help promote sustainable and wildlife-friendly allotment gardening. During the middle of summer during very dry periods the pond may need topping up occasionally using the rainwater storage system from the hut. The WWT will strim the area in front of the shed occasionally and cut the hedge once a year in autumn. Although not strictly necessary, winter removal of surface leaves will improve the water quality in the spring.

**Project Update – November 2020**

It's been a frustrating year for most of us but even more so for the WWT. Lockdown has paused the great work the newly formed team began on all three wildlife projects and prevented further assistance from volunteers, the WAHGA maintenance team, the committee, community payback helpers and many others. We have still managed to clear the site of brambles, remove rubbish (oil drums/ lawnmowers/plastic etc) and ensure the weeds have been covered for most of the year.

**WAHGA Pond Project**

Site Dimensions: 21m x 8m
Pond Depths: 1-100cm
Location: 24A/25A (1 plot)

Number Key:

1. Existing Holly hedge

2. Compost Heap

3. Wildlife hut/tool storage

4. Rainwater Storage

5.Gate with lock

6. Wire fencing with posts

7. Bench

8. Rockery

9. Hibernaculum

10. Shallow Pond

11. Native/Marginal Plants

12. Bog garden

13. Main Amphibian Pond

14-16. Pond plants

17. Grass path

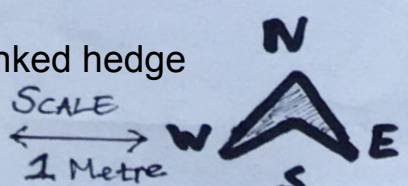
18. Unbanked Hornbeam

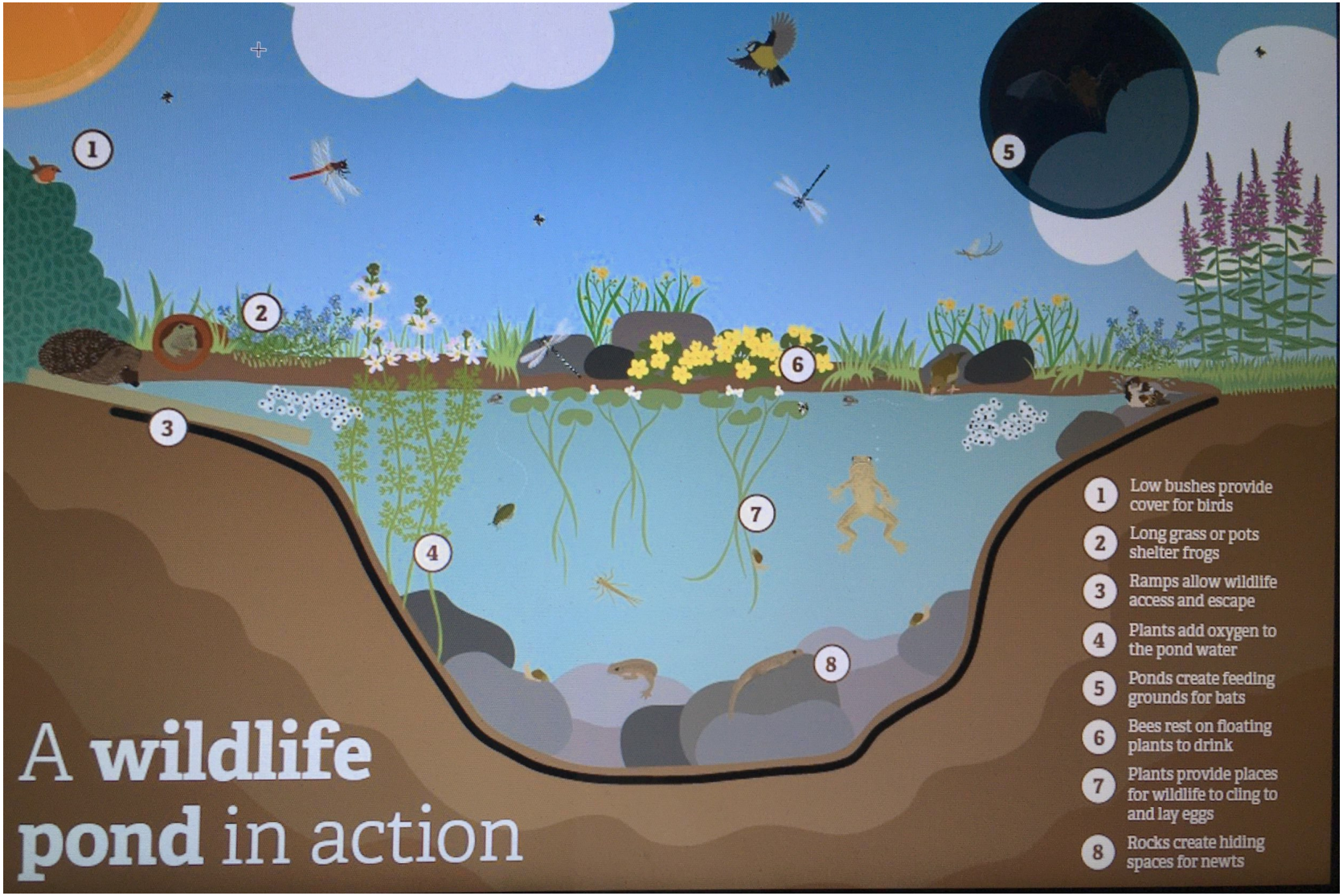
19. Banked Hornbeam hedge

20. Logpile

21. Existing Plum tree

22. Banked hedge




A wildlife pond in action
1 Low bushes provide cover for birds
2 Long grass or pots shelter frogs
3 Ramps allow wildlife access and escape
4 Plants add oxygen to the pond water
5 Ponds create feeding grounds for bats
6 Bees rest on floating plants to drink
7 Plants provide places for wildlife to cling to and lay eggs
8 Rocks create hiding spaces for newts

**Funded WAHGA Project – Hazelnut Orchard/Coppice**

**Why a hazel coppice?**

A hazel coppice, with native wildflowers, will create a new, unique habitat, attracting butterflies and providing more shelter for other species. Hazel flowers provide a vital source of early pollen as an important food source for bees. Regularly managed coppice stools will continue to regenerate more or less indefinitely and the change throughout the rotation within coppiced plants ensures habitat niches needed by most wildlife are always available - a great contrast to mono-cultural plantation crops of trees. The area in and around the space is already the best across our site for birds. To hear the wide range of birdsong is to be uplifted and that chorus will be joined by an even wider range of birdsong, as the coppice grows and flourishes. This will provide significant mental health benefits to those given access to this space for quiet reflection.

**Funding** Fully funded by EBC (See Pond Plan)

**Location**

Plot 2 was previously let as wildlife friendly gardening plot for many years as it was too shady for growing vegetables and already has fruit trees on it. This area was specifically chosen for the funding application as it wasn't cultivated and was very overgrown with brambles and tree roots. A digger was brought in to clear the plot and boundary in October 2019 with the help of WAHGA volunteers.

**Maintenance**

Occasional weeding needed. Bulbs/plugs planted in first Autumn and leaves spread as mulch in autumn. Coppice needs cutting every 7 years.

**Project update - March 2020**

Work on this plot was delayed due to Covid restrictions but 40 young hazels were planted in early 2020, and within three years we will have an annual hazelnut crop. Every 5-7 years the trees will be cut back hard to allow regeneration. These hazel poles will be sold in the shop as bean and pea sticks to plot holders, reducing the current reliance on imported bamboo canes and generating income.

## Funded WAHGA project - Native Hedge Planting and Boundary Management

Why Native Hedging? Churchfields' existing native boundary hedgerows are a Habitat of Principal Importance (HPI) that hugely improve biodiversity. They provide shelter for many Species of Principal Importance (SPIs) already found on site including amphibians and hedgehogs, which have declined rapidly due to loss of hedgerow habitat in recent years. Thick, dense vivid green hedges look stunning, add security to the boundary, produce flowers for pollinators, berries and nesting sites for birds. New hedges on the fringes of our site are easy to maintain and bring all the benefits of tree planting without any loss of cultivated land for growing.

### Funding

Partly funded by EBC but with some hedge plants donated by Woodland Trust/ TCV.

### Maintenance

The hedge will need water during drought/dry spells for the first two years while it establishes. After two years growth the top can be cut to the desired height. After this the hedge needs trimming every 2-3 years. A work party is planned into our WAHGA schedule to cut all hedges around the site.

### Project update - March 2020

Since 2019 the WAHGA team have planted over 1000 hedge plants along the boundary areas. In December 2020 SCC widened the new cycle path, cutting down young elms, holly, last year's newly planted hedge and screening bushes planted over the last decade by neighbouring plot holders. This has just been replanted with 150 new hedge plants by WAHGA volunteers at no cost to WAHGA, SCC or WLC.

## Ongoing management of the 'Wildlife Corridor'

The existing 'wildlife corridor' runs from the top gate crossroads to the churchyard. It is between 4 to 5 metres wide in places and provides an amazing habitat. It is essential to protect this space. However we need a long term plan for boundary management as it has been ignored for many years and is too dense in places. The first section from the top gate area up to the skate park consists mainly of suckered (growing from historic roots not self seeded) elms that only grow up to about 15 ft high before they die back. Healthy trees should mainly be left as they provide habitat and cause no harm to other species but thinning some of these would allow light in and encourage more wildflowers to thrive.

Clearing the first metre (adjoining the fence) of elms and any smaller trees that might be impeding the fence will be beneficial for ongoing management and will also allow space for new hedge planting far enough from the fence to avoid any future damage. After the skate-park corner the boundary turns to semi-mature holly which should be laid by trained hedgelayers to ensure vigour and more light for plotholders. This only needs doing once every 50 years. Eventually the fence becomes overrun with self-seeded sycamores many of which are growing too close together and could be thinned. Any established hedge plants here will be easy to maintain as shade and competition for nutrients from existing trees will ensure the growth is very slow.

**Existing wildlife, Habitats of Principal Importance (HPI) and Species of Principal Importance (SPI) found at Churchfields Allotments**

Our site already supports a wide range of local wildlife. A Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) survey (commissioned by WLC), local data from Surrey Bat Group (Weybridge-based) and observations from plot holders over many years have identified many important protected habitats and species on our site.

The NERC Act 2006 (Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006) places a duty on 'conserving biodiversity' which may include enhancing, restoring or protecting a population or a habitat.

The Secretary of State is required to publish a full list of habitat (HPI) and species (SPI) that are regarded as having "principal importance" for this purpose.

All those on the list are afforded an additional higher level of legal protection than some of the more common native species/habitats that are already covered under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. Established native hedgerow is an HPI (and cannot legally be removed).

The following SPI species are regularly seen across our site: hedgehog, slow worm, stag beetle, noctule bat, soprano pipistrelle bat, brown long-eared bat, song thrush, house sparrow, tree sparrow, common frog and toad.

Also observed: mason bee, reed bunting, wood warbler, yellow wagtail, reed bunting, lesser redpoll, grass snake, various butterflies and insects.

There are hundreds of other native species from robin to goldfinch, wren to blackbird and many different bumblebees, butterflies and wildlflowers. A further five species of bat are also present across site (serotine, daubenton's, leisler's, nathusius pipistrelle, natterer's).

Managed incorrectly there is a real risk that important habitat will be irreversibly damaged and the overall abundance of some very important protected species will decline. The critical ecological balance of our site will be lost.

Managed correctly and with careful long-term management it would be possible to have a fully cultivated site with enhanced biodiversity benefitting both local wildlife and subsequently plot holders.

Looking after our soil and the invertebrates in it will ensure fantastic growing conditions for future generations. Sustainable best practice for wildlife-friendly gardening and the biodiversity projects outlined in this paper will deliver better cultivation across the site with increased growing yields for our long-term future.