

## Five good reasons for not creating an access point into The Slade from Woodlands Country Park

1. To minimise habitat destruction caused by trampling.
2. To minimise fauna disturbance.
3. To prevent the rare wetland habitat becoming a village cut through.
4. To encourage local schools to use it as a species-rich educational resource.
5. To increase the biodiversity and work towards obtaining a higher level of statutory conservation protection.

### Habitat destruction

Trampling is an environmental impact that destroys ground vegetation as people or dogs walk across an area. With the exception of the railway line section, The Slade site is a wetland. The footpaths become boggy which encourages walkers to step onto the surrounding vegetation to avoid the mud. More visitors mean more feet avoiding the mud, which leads to loss of habitat in the wet woodland and wet meadow areas. Some of these areas have less common plant species such as common spotted orchid and ragged robin. In the 50 years since the site was first protected as a nature reserve visitor trampling has always been a threat:

“This site would make a good educational reserve provided that it is not visited too often by large parties. The small size of the reserve makes it especially vulnerable to trampling and over-collecting”. Humphry Bowen (ecologist), July 1970.

### Disturbance

Visitor disturbance is another environmental impact within The Slade. It is seasonal and affects some species of fauna more than others. During bird nesting season (March to October) nesting sites will not be chosen in areas near footpaths. In a site as small as The Slade nowhere is very far from a footpath. I usually spot Chiffchaffs nesting in the meadow, but I have not seen any this year. I also have not heard a single Willow Warbler which is very unusual. The Wildlife Trusts have discovered that people walking with dogs reduces bird species by 40% in small reserves.

### Cut through visitors

An access point from the Woodlands Country Park would create a lovely countryside cut through for walkers as it joins up with the circular walk public footpath and ultimately the recreation ground. Unfortunately the fragile nature of the wetland habitat simply will not be able to withstand the anticipated popularity of such a route. Whilst I completely agree that walking in nature offers huge mental and physical wellbeing advantages, these should not come at the detriment of the ecology of Bloxham's tiny nature reserve.

At present we allow informal access from the west via the disused railway line which is not a right of way. The railway in comparison to the meadow and woodland is more robust in terms of trampling and the hedgerow provides a screen from the other areas of the reserve. The majority of visitors entering from the informal railway access are local dog walkers who know the area and tend to continue along the railway towards the recreation ground, avoiding the wetland areas.

## Educational Resource

The Slade was initially purchased in 1969 by OCC as a resource for local schools. Local ornithologists recognised the ecological potential of the wetland site and as there was so much diversity in such a small area it was perfect for education. It was saved from being part of an agricultural drainage system. It has been used by local schools and youth groups and was managed by The Wildlife Trusts for 25 years as a youth education project. BBOWT management limited school parties to 2 per week to minimise environmental damage.

The educational value is linked to the ecological value, which is reliant upon careful management of the reserve to ensure that the diversity of habitat types is preserved and improved. Should the diversity be lost through lack of management or environmental damage by visitors the educational value will also be lost.

It has never been more important than now to educate the future generation about ecological processes.

## Statutory conservation designation

There are multiple levels of nature reserve designations. The Slade has 2 designations; Local Nature Reserve and Cherwell District Wildlife Site. When we were awarded the DWS designation we were very close to fulfilling the criteria for the next level up. This next status is called a Local Wildlife Site and would provide The Slade with an increased level of protection from future planning proposals. Most nature reserved such as RSPB's Otmoor have LWS status. TVERC (Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre) report to CDC in 2015 stated:

The Slade has "15 species typical of lowland fen communities and 14 species typical of woodland. This represents a good range of typical plant species for fen and a moderate number for woodland. This level of diversity is close to the level accepted as significant for LWS."

This implies that with thoughtful management it is within our capabilities to obtain this higher level of protection which will be beneficial to all of the village. Minimising the ecological impact of visitors is part of this management to increase biodiversity.

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