CASE STUDY: GATWICK AIRPORT

Gatwick Airport’s non-operational areas cover around 75ha comprising of a variety of woodland, grassland and wetlands habitats. The organisation recognised the value of these green areas, many of which have no specific legal conditions or requirements. It committed to the effective ecological management of the site and The Wildlife Trusts’ Biodiversity Benchmark has been great way to gain external accreditation from an experienced and respected organisation, alongside ensuring Gatwick has clear objectives, targets and controls in place for managing biodiversity.

While enhancing biodiversity on site, it is essential that Gatwick Airport meets the critical requirements to minimise the risk of bird strike to aircraft. This has involved close collaboration between departments to ensure both safeguarding and biodiversity aims are being met. Gatwick now has a full-time ecologist and a part-time ranger working on the site and engage over 280 volunteers a year.

Raising awareness of this project to the wider business required an innovative communications approach. Offering outdoor work volunteer programmes for staff to join in conservation days and wildlife educational events, led by Gatwick’s part-time conservation ranger, helped colleagues understand the importance of biodiversity. During June in 2016, as part of The Wildlife Trusts ‘30 Days Wild’, the organisation held a week of wildlife events aimed towards staff including a harvest mice display and talk by a British Wildlife Centre conservationist.

Before the action plans commenced, grasslands were becoming dominated by scrub and dense birch. The woodlands were unmanaged with little future canopy recruitment, ponds were densely shaded and the hedgerows becoming outgrown. Developing biodiversity action plans and undertaking active management has led to on-site habitats becoming more diverse with dynamic systems of open areas, regenerating growth and new features and structure. Initial survey results have shown an increase of use of habitats by protected species, such as the return of breeding great crested newts to an amphibian pond and confirmation of breeding dormice.

Regular wildlife recording events are held to engage the community and generate biodiversity data. The extra monitoring effort with the help of experts has led to the identification of further notable species, included long-horned bee, brown hairstreak butterfly and the Bechstein’s bat. More recently the site has been promoted for educational purposes including student placements, research projects, forest schools and ecology training, such as bumblebee identification and harvest mouse monitoring.
“These awards are fantastic recognition of the important partnership work taking place at Gatwick with a wide-range of valued partners and volunteers to enhance and protect the beauty of the natural biodiversity surrounding the airport.

Gatwick has shown that running a busy international airport is compatible with enhancing the unique biodiversity, ensuring local communities can continue to enjoy what is an important local asset.”

Steve Howells,
Director of Environment,
Health and Safety