

Message from the Chair

October saw our latest member of staff take up the new Ranger post. So, it's a warm welcome to El Biggs. El is from Richmond and grew up enjoying regular visits to Foxglove and later ringing with the Swaledale Ringing Group. A graduate in Ecology and Environmental Biology El has worked in practical conservation, public engagement, and species monitoring at various reserves, most recently on the islands of Skokholm and Skomer. El has experience engaging with visitors and working with enthusiastic and dedicated volunteer groups which is just what the new Ranger post is all about and why the changes have been made to give this emphasis.



The last 9 months have seen a hiatus with our staffing. Inevitably with staff changes, it has not been able to make the progress we would have liked whilst posts have been vacant, and we have thought about the roles.

We are now past that and as we have wished Sophie, Gerry and Hayley all the best with their decisions to move on, we now need to look to the future with Carl and El.

Carl has been tasked with working on a Management Plan for the Reserve. This will be an important document to guide how we are able to maintain the Reserve. There is no doubt that past work has created a fantastic Reserve, second to none. The problem for us is continuing that legacy in exactly the same way, particularly in an era when our funding base will be different. One of our principal funding sources has come to an end, as it was no longer possible to keep up with the obligations to maintain and renew assets provided under the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. So, there will have to be some changes so that the Management Plan is both affordable and sustainable whilst continuing to have a premiere facility. We are not second-guessing what the changes might be at this stage, but hope to have a draft plan available in the early part of 2024 for consultation with our stakeholders and volunteers and we can take it from there.

Our lease for the Reserve runs until 2027. We have started the process of renewal and will be in discussions with the MOD from here. This is likely to be a lengthy process. One thing that comes with the current lease is a level of funding to support some of our staffing costs and on-the-ground works.

This funding has been static for a few years and does not cover costs. We are making the case for an increase but are not expecting any significant increase from the feedback so far. This is an issue for us as we will not be able to sign a new lease without an agreement on the level of funding. We know this will not meet our full costs so we will have to make a judgment on this at some point in the future against the likelihood of being able to secure funds from other sources and our own income potential.

Apart from the lease itself, the one ask that the MOD make is for the relevance of the Reserve to the military community to be demonstrated. This has always been a feature of the work in ways as varied as general volunteering and working with the Personnel Recovery Centre. Carl is working on a wider engagement plan which we think will be linked to any future funding agreement.

There is a project underway to look at signage to help visitors access the site from the guardroom gate through to the Reserve. Ideally, we would like better signage and something that is eye-catching. If you have any views on this please let Carl know.

We cannot be a 24/7 operation. Whilst the Reserve is accessible at all reasonable times we have had to make some choices about the opening of the Field Centre itself. This is now closed on Saturdays as even with the volunteer support we have had, it has not been possible to keep the Centre open every day. This will be reviewed again in early 2024. Whilst the situation is as it is, we are open to discussions with interested groups who might be affected by this about how their needs can be supported.



Last but not least we wish you all a very happy festive season, with our grateful thanks to our supporters and for all the hard work that is put into managing and maintaining the Reserve. Here's to a successful 2024.

Peter Simpson, Chair of the Trustees

Another New Arrival

Hello everyone! I'm El, another new member of the Foxglove Covert Team. I'm glad to be here, as I grew up in the area and enjoyed many visits to Foxglove Covert (FGC) as a child. I also spent some of my teenage years ringing at FGC with the Swaledale Ringing Group. After leaving the area for university and spending a couple of years working and volunteering on reserves around the UK, I am happy to be back!

In my previous roles I have enjoyed being involved in practical conservation and habitat management tasks. I'm excited to get stuck in at FGC and really appreciate all the varied habitats here; they will make for some interesting work. As someone who loves wetlands and wading birds, I am especially interested in all the various water features at FGC.

I'm happy to say I've already had the chance to get into Spigot Mere, to help pull up vegetation starting to encroach on the open water. I'm really looking forward to helping maintain and improve wetlands and other habitats in FGC for the benefit of wildlife and people both.



In my first couple of months at Foxglove I have already met many familiar and new faces. I have been re-familiarising myself with the Reserve, exploring the many paths, hides and habitats it has to offer. I've also experienced the arrival of winter visitors, including Fieldfare, Redwing, and Brambling. I have a lot of love for this Reserve and am really looking forward to what the future holds.

El Biggs, Ranger

Reserve Manager's Update

Those of you who have recently visited the Field Centre will know only too well that I could write pages and pages about drainage problems – but I'm not going to fall into that trap...

Firstly, I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the volunteers who helped me to get through a couple of months single-staffing the reserve.

Some helped by giving time at weekends to keep the Field Centre open when it would otherwise have been closed. Others by adapting to different arrangements on volunteering days. Some gave sage advice based on their experience of Foxglove over the years. Some were just a valuable listening ear in times of need. We've managed to cope and even introduce a few innovations (just think of Brian's Bailer!) during the time since Gerry and Hayley departed for pastures new – and that's down to you. Thank you.



I'm delighted to welcome El Biggs to the Reserve team. Many of you will have met El and know how quickly El's settled in, becoming a real asset for Foxglove already. Things are moving forward!

Whilst I'm still in the phase of getting to know the Reserve better with each month that passes, every day is helping to inform the new Management Plan. Many of our volunteers are unknowingly helping to write it, with their knowledge, enthusiasm and insights about Foxglove.

Our continued emphasis on engaging with the local community – especially our MOD neighbours – is happily bearing fruit.

Habitat work at Spigot Mere progressed in October and was dependent upon 44 members of 4 SCOTS (The Royal Scottish Regiment) getting exceedingly wet and somewhat chilly to boot. By ripping out the common reed and other encroaching vegetation, plenty of open water will be retained next year. We've hosted the Military Police too, who were glad to muck in and help rake a section of the meadow.

With the severe shortage of staff, there have been fewer public events than ideal, but volunteers have again done a brilliant job in keeping families coming along – the fabulous Autumn Craft Day at the start of November was busy and vibrant. Thanks to everyone who gave their time so generously.



We're planning ahead for next year's events right now, so if you would like to lead one, or have an idea for an event, then please let us know.

We've managed to attract new visitors by hosting events for external groups too. The Badger Trust held a training event in early October, just a couple of weeks before the appearance of the British Earthworm Society, whose survey unveiled the fact that our site holds a genuinely rare species – *Aporrectodea limicola*. A new species for Foxglove, but also for Vice County 65.

Further new species were added to the impressive site tally during our Waxcap identification session, led by the North and East Yorkshire Ecological Data Centre – including Earthy and Oily Waxcaps (lovely names, eh..?).

We are making progress on some of Foxglove's long running issues – so the original dam, dating back to around 1915, has had an initial fix and we are starting to increase water levels once more. Introducing an additional shutter-board each month, then monitoring the effect should mean we will hopefully have the lake back up to an acceptable level by the breeding season. Our contact with the MOD has started investigating the next phase of the work, where piling is likely to be necessary to reinforce the badly eroded dam face. Hopefully, we are heading to a permanent fix at last.

Finally, I hope that all of you have a smashing Christmas and make the most of what mid-winter has to offer. For me, the best Christmas present would be a sighting of this year's eruption of Waxwings – fingers crossed!

Carl Watts, Reserve Manger

‘Only connect’ an appreciation of the John Muir Trust and its eponymous award

‘Only connect’ is the much-quoted plea of Margaret Schlegel in E.M. Forster's famous novel ‘Howards End’. In the novel her injunction calls for the unity of heart and mind, a guidance toward emotional synchronicity with a validity that **reaches-out**, beyond the merely personal. For surely, connections lie at the heart of all that we are and everything we do? Connections are the basic units of **our** lives.

They provide the nurturing structure of our families and the framework of our civil affairs and just as important, they connect us with the overarching architecture of the natural world within which we live and hope to prosper. So, what has this to do with the John Muir Trust (JMT)? And how are we connected?

First and foremost, we strive for a common goal in our concerns for the natural world, best demonstrated by a quick review of who they are, and what they do. See if you can spot connections!

JMT takes its name and inspiration from John Muir who was born in the small Scottish town of Dunbar in 1838. At the age of eleven years his family emigrated to Wisconsin in the United States of America. John Muir's interest in botany took him on hiking adventures where he discovered his life's work as an advocate for the preservation of wilderness places, especially the forests and glaciers of California.

His activism brought him influential friends and some enemies, his writings brought him **an independence that opened doors**, he became a close friend of President Teddy Roosevelt. In May 1893 POTUS and Muir spent three days camping in what would become the Yosemite National Park in California. Teddy Roosevelt was a believer, and three years later his administration passed the American Antiquities Act establishing America's first National Parks, the Sequoia National Park— home to the Giant Redwoods, the largest trees in the world and the Yosemite National Park, both in the Sierra Nevada mountains in central California. There are now **63 National Parks in the USA and over 7,000 worldwide**. Because of this legacy, John Muir is hailed throughout the United States as 'The Father of the National Parks'.

Those three days in May – a tent pitched among the giant Sequoias followed by a camp on the snowclad Sentinel Dome, and finally in the meadows at the base of the Bridalveil Fall, a torrent descending more than 600' to the valley – were seismic. Clearly, this was one of the most influential camping trips in the history of conservation.

Today the JMT is based in Scotland, but the Scots have always been keen on marching south and so the John Muir Award operates throughout the entire United Kingdom. The Trust also negotiates management and consultancy agreements for third party landowners. The picture is of your writer on a John Muir Trust tree planting work-party, on the upper slopes of Helvellyn in the Cumbrian Lake District.



The JMT mission is to conserve wild landscapes for the benefit of all, in pursuing this objective the Trust has purchased some of the most beautiful wild places in Scotland including the southern side and summit of Ben Nevis.

(The Trust is a leading member of the Ben Nevis Partnership). Sandwood Bay in Sutherland and the magnificent estates of Sconser, Strathaird and Torrin on the Isle of Skye, and others are included in an expanding JMT estate.

The JMT provides a leading voice for the UK's wilderness landscapes, whose purpose is to conserve, protect and restore wild places for the benefit of all. JMT strategic objectives include:

- **Connecting people to wild places**, so that practical experience empowers individuals to advocate for their enhanced protection.
- **Connecting with government**, its agencies, land managers, local communities, and stakeholders to support the economic case for wild places.
- **Connecting the John Muir award** through partnerships designed to provide bespoke engagements and learning opportunities for young people and all concerned with the loss of habitats and biodiversity.

FCLNR is currently exploring how we can engage with the JMT in becoming a **John Muir Trust Award Provider**. We share a common interest in helping to inform and bring young people to a **positive appreciation of the importance of the natural world**, without which, it is not too much to suggest, that the preservation of our own species becomes endangered too. In the next issue of Undergrowth, it is hoped to be able to set out a more detailed agenda for the specifics of the John Muir Award. In the meantime, let's have a parting word from Margaret Schlegel.

'What is the good of your stars and trees, your sunrise and the wind, if they do not enter into our daily lives?'

E. M. Forster 1897 – 1970.

Freddie Phillips

Volunteering at Foxglove

I started volunteering in April this year and still consider myself a 'newbie' (no guarantee I will find my own way back to the field-centre if abandoned with no map!).

Volunteering at Foxglove LNR appealed as I was keen to do some outdoor activities in my new state of retirement and was also keen to be involved with a team of like-minded folk doing 'acts of kindness for nature' and benefiting the environment. I spent my career trying to protect the environment but had ended up doing this from behind a desk and in front of a screen.



When I started, we had some great weather (which helped to break me in gently) but I have since realised how very committed and sturdy the volunteers are here – we continue to work in all weather and still have smiles at the end of each session and plenty banter during breaks.

I also feel as though I'm learning all the time – I'm volunteering alongside some very knowledgeable enthusiasts in all things nature, and I'm picking up new skills along the way.

Scything for instance – what a great opportunity! Carl, the Reserve Manager's enthusiasm has underpinned getting this underway and those of us that were interested have been trained on how to correctly set the scythe up from scratch. We were given it in bits and learnt how to build the body parts into a customised tool (learning some new terms along the way like 'Snath', upper and lower 'Nib' (handles), the 'heel', 'toe' 'rib' and 'beard' of the blade! – who knew it had so many body-parts!), and then how to keep it sharp and in good order.

I've only had a few goes out in the field so far but found it extremely therapeutic and satisfying working silently along a line of meadow. Even more satisfying to look back at a cleared area with some nice tidy windrows (lines of cut grass). No noisy motor, or smell of fuel. I'm looking forward to doing more in the future.

It's definitely the satisfaction of looking back on a job well done that makes the tasks we do at Foxglove so enjoyable, along with working together with such a great team of volunteers. No doubt it also contributes to a good night's sleep after the physical exertion.

Sue Horsfall

Upcoming Events:

For more information on any of our events or to book your place please visit our website; www.foxglovecovert.org.uk/events

14th January: Winter Worky Day, 10am – 3pm. Join staff and volunteers for a fun day of practical habitat management. Booking Essential. Free event.

15th January: Blue Monday Walk, 10am start. Join a guided walk around the reserve to shake off those winter blues. Donations welcome.

2nd February: Wetlands Day, 10am–12:30pm. Explore Foxglove's wetland habitats and spot wetland species. Donations welcome.

18th February: Build a Nest Box, 10am start. Join us to celebrate National Nest Box Week by building your own nest box. In association with Wild Washton. Booking essential. £5 per box.

3rd March: Winter Worky Day, 10am – 3pm. Join staff and volunteers for a fun day of practical habitat management. Booking Essential. Free event.

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