

Notes from visit to Sandpits Pond, Gosling Grove, Downley 12th October 2021

The willow island was created by Chiltern Rangers. Discussion with current officers suggests that they were unable to do more extensive work requiring heavy machinery as this was beyond the type of activity they would normally undertake. As I also noted on my site visit, Chiltern Rangers staff who had previously visited the site felt that the larger trees around the pond were contributing to its drying out. This is also suggested in the 1991 Management Plan. As the plan also notes, there is no recommendation here to remove these trees.

The 1991 Management Plan outlines sensible proposals to continue to look after the pond and I don't recommend anything significantly different from this. The pond will always be subject to fluctuating water levels and without extensive clearing and relandscaping, this is unlikely to change. Careful, planned clearance of vegetation and some management of silt build up should be enough to maintain a healthy wildlife pond. This of course needs to be monitored.

It is also important to determine annual budgets for maintenance, although none of the work outlined here or in the previous Management Plan is costly.

Problems:

The depth of the clay lining and its integrity are unknown. If the pond is dug, particularly with heavy machinery, there is a risk of causing damage.

It's not clear if the pond can be reinstated to hold a significant amount of water without extensive engineering.

Inflow appears to be from rain and surface water runoff.

There is some encroachment by willow (*Salix* sp.), flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), and a small amount of reed mace (*Typha latifolia*).

The lower bank on the southern edge of the pond has potential for flooding if water levels rise.

There are known to be Great Crested newts in the pond, so any work needs to have minimal disturbance to this population.

Possible Actions

Now

- Check local records for species
- Monitor the water level through the winter months
- Speak to residents about doing some habitat work on the pond
- Agree a project plan for the next year to restart work on the pond
- Decide an area of grass to cut less frequently

With regard to this last point, the 1991 Plan outlines well the reasons for this and suggests an area that could be left to flower before cutting later in the year.

I would also recommend assessing the trees around the pond for any dead branch removal.

Otherwise the mature trees should be left as they are.

Winter (Dec-January)

- Coppice or remove some of the smaller willows in the eastern end
- Coppice willow on island and use cut material to add to hurdles
- Create habitat piles around pond edge to enhance existing habitat for amphibians

Coppicing will keep willow regrowth at a manageable height. Don't cut everything in one year. I suggest cutting about a third of the trees every 2 years to give a short rotation and variation in height.

Spring (March-May)

- Carry out amphibian and reptile survey
- Early grass cut around edges if needed
- (Plant edges with wetland plants, for example, purple loosestrife, meadowsweet, - although see cautions in 1991 management plan. For planting suggestions)

Summer (July/August)

- Cut long grass area and remove the cuttings
- Remove some vegetation from up to 25% of the pond area. Repeat this every 1-3 years, depending on how quickly vegetation returns.

Autumn (Oct-Nov) before pond is too wet

Carefully remove some of the muddy silt layer near southern end to increase potential water holding area. This needs to be carried out with care. If you are digging into clay, do not go any deeper as this will be lining the pond. The removed material could be used to slightly build up the bank on the eastern end. Otherwise a solution for disposal of anything removed should be sought.

Other

Install one or two new benches

Install an information board about pond wildlife, how it is managed and perhaps some suggestions for how to look after it (see again 1991 Management Plan)

Make and put up bird boxes

Community Engagement

The Parish Council and local residents have previously had pond work parties and are keen to continue this.

There is also the opportunity to do something on Downley Day (18 June 2022), or another event focused on the pond and looking after it could also be organised.

Groups such as the local scouts would also be interested in helping out.

Rough Around the Edges

Although the pond management is an ongoing cycle of work, Rough Around the Edges can support residents and the Council by funding some of the survey work, offering training in first aid, how to lead work parties and carry out pond maintenance. The project would also be able to purchase any tools or equipment needed.