



Fighting for nature



30-minute Birder **Amanda Tuke** visits a nature reserve under threat in south-east London, and investigates controversial plans

On a grey, but mild, January morning, I stand with birders Brenda and Ralph Todd on the Thames Path in south-east London. To the east of us are the vast grey buildings and chimneys of a waste incinerator, with an army of orange-jacketed workers constructing a second incinerator. To the west is the Crossness sewage treatment works, with another imposing silver-grey building, which I'm told houses a non-operational sludge-powered generator.

Squeezed between these buildings, and stretching away to the south, is one of the last slivers of Erith grazing marshes, which once

lined the southern side of the Thames from Woolwich to Erith. But this remnant, a mosaic of marsh, rough grassland, reedbeds, pools and watercourses, is under threat, too.

This precious green space is made up of fields owned either by Cory, the waste incineration company, or Peabody Group, plus Thames Water's Crossness Nature Reserve. It's a site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation and treasured by birders. And, aside from a golf course to the west of the sewage treatment works, the rest of the Erith grazing marsh has already disappeared under development. As Brenda and Ralph explain the complex ownership, a Buzzard flies across the

fields and nature reserve towards Lesnes Abbey Woods, which we can see in the distance.

Thames Water was required to develop the 25-hectare nature reserve under a 1994 legal agreement with the London Borough of Bexley, designed to mitigate the impact of the sludge-powered generator it was seeking to build. The nature reserve is in two parts – some areas are generally accessible via a public footpath, while a section to the west can only be accessed by the free-to-join Friends of Crossness Nature Reserve. Leaving the Thames path, the three of us follow a track to reach the gate into the Friends' area. As we walk, a flock of Linnets takes flight from the edge of a water course, and

Barn Owls at the reserve still excite its steward, Karen Sutton

10% of the nature reserve in their proposal, to add to the land they already own.

As part of the required consultation process, Cory delivered a carefully controlled online presentation back in November 2023. The general message was that losing 10% of the nature reserve would ultimately be good news for nature as proposed mitigation included bringing areas outside the current reserve – including the Peabody fields – under nature reserve designation.

No matter that wildlife already makes good use of these areas and crosses, like the Buzzard, freely from one side to the other. There's no escaping the fact that, despite the poor arithmetic and questionable ecology, another 2.3 hectares of Erith grazing marshes would be built over, and a further one hectare stretch would be blighted with additional duct piping.

Reserve manager Karen tells me that Thames Water have objected to the proposal. In the water company's opinion, the loss of 10% of the reserve will not be adequately compensated for by the proposed mitigation. "If

the mitigation was returning a car park or something like that to green space it might be more convincing", she says. "But the proposal is to develop habitat owned by Peabody which already exists for nature".

Further into the Friends' area, Brenda, Ralph and I hear a Song Thrush warming up, and watch some Redwings fly over. The reedbeds and pools are noisy with Cetti's Warblers, and I'm told that Kingfishers are seen regularly and that Water Rail bred here last year. We pass beneath a Barn Owl box which seems to be in use: leaves underneath the box are splashed with white, and I find a fresh owl pellet on the path. Leaving the protected area, we hear a Little Grebe call from a water channel edging a field where Sky Larks have nested. Ralph and I wade further south along a flooded

path, to one of the Peabody fields, and spend a few magical minutes watching a flock of 25-plus Pied Wagtails flitting around over the flooded grass.

Ralph tells me that he's learned the hard way, from unsuccessful efforts in 2020 to protect the fields surrounding the reserve from the development of the second incinerator. "There were good records of birds, other animals and plants for the nature reserve, but records from the neighbouring grazing marsh fields had been absorbed into these." He believes that the lack of field-specific records made it easier for the developers to grab those fields to expand the

Crossness has a small – but two-storey – hide



then resettles on the rough grass. I hear that the reserve is a London hotspot for Water Voles, and rare Shriill Carder Bees are found here, too.

Thames Water's Karen Sutton has looked after Crossness Nature Reserve for 20 years. She told me on the phone that the all-time birding highlight was the Squacco Heron which hung around for a while in 2007: "It was the first record in London for 140 years." More recently, a Penduline Tit also caused a flutter of excitement in 2018, followed by a Great Reed Warbler in 2019. "And I still get a thrill from seeing the Barn Owl around the reserve", she said.

The reserve's compact two-storey hide is

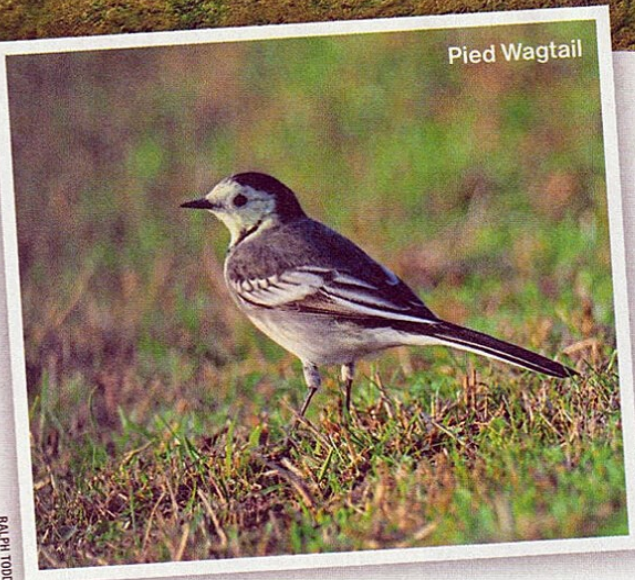
wallpapered with photos of birds and other wildlife from the reserve. I spot pictures of Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Bearded Tits and Cuckoos. As we look out over a shallow pool lined with reeds, Brenda and Ralph explain what's looming on the horizon.

Cory, the owner of the two incinerators, is proposing to build a carbon capture and storage facility to reduce the carbon emissions from waste incineration. In March 2024, the company will be seeking Secretary of State approval for this as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project. Well, surely that's a good thing, isn't it? I think, until Ralph explains that Cory is including the compulsory purchase of

Aerial view of Crossness Nature Reserve's incongruous locale



Pied Wagtail



RALPH TODD

incinerator infrastructure. "It's so important for birders, and other naturalists, to record species with precise location data", he says.


As well as watching Cory's consultation webinar, I've also skim-read its Preliminary Environmental Information Report. This 1,275-page document could be summarised as 'we don't really know whether the proposed mitigation for the loss of 10% of the nature reserve will offset biodiversity loss.' Ralph tells me that when concerns were raised about developments disrupting Sky Larks nesting, the alarming response was that surely the birds would just move to an adjacent field. Despite the strong objections from Thames Water and others, it is clearly possible that this development will go ahead. But even then there

would be work to be done by local conservationists to try to make sure that the appropriately expert organisations lead on any changes to the remaining grazing marshes. I'd noticed that the architect's visualisation of the expanded nature reserve in Cory's webinar looked suspiciously like a park.

The fate of this nature reserve in south-east London is, on a small scale, one which will likely resonate with birders, other naturalists and conservationists across the country. We do need to keep asking questions about land ownership, green space protection,

environmental assessment and mitigation plans, and we should not stop until we start getting answers that are credible. At the very least, this once again highlights the vital importance of dedicated local naturalists, like Brenda and Ralph, committed reserve managers like Karen, and the rest of us uploading bird and other wildlife records with location details.

Back at home, the Barn Owl pellet has been drying on my office radiator. Pulling it apart, I find the remains of what, to my inexpert eye, appear to be three small rodents. I wonder what I might expect to find in a Barn Owl pellet from Crossness Nature Reserve in five or so years' time?

That's if there are still Barn Owls hunting over the Erith Marshes at that point. 

Biodiversity Net Gain

Amanda investigates Biodiversity Net Gain requirements in planning and land management...

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is the requirement to make sure that a natural environment is in a measurably better state after development and/or land management. Since February 2024, developers and land managers have had to evidence 10% BNG secured for at least 30 years in planning applications for major projects in England. This will be extended to small projects (residential developments less than 0.5 hectares and commercial developments less than one hectare) from April 2024.

Exhaustively recording all of the organisms in a habitat clearly isn't practical, so a baseline 'biodiversity metric', combined with a 'biodiversity gain plan', has been designed by Natural England as a proxy for assessing changes in biodiversity value.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure projects, where planning is given by the Secretary of State, rather than local councils, will have to meet the 10% BNG requirements from November 2024.

The effectiveness of BNG requirements in protecting the natural environment will ultimately come down to planning authorities - whether local or central government departments - having the resources and expertise to assess and challenge BNG assessments and plans.

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