



# FRIENDS OF RISING SUN COUNTRY PARK

## Chairperson's Annual Report – 2023-2024

The Friends of Rising Sun Country Park objects as set out by the group's Constitution are:

- to promote conservation, protection and improvements to the park environment by promoting biodiversity and wildlife habitats and,
- to advance the education of the local community on these areas while working in partnership with the council, local businesses/organisations as well as members of the public.

This annual report will provide an overview of the activities and achievements of the Friends of Rising Sun Country Park over the past twelve months.

Since last year's review the Friends volunteer team has continued to grow. We have a core group of regular attendees at the weekly volunteer sessions. Having a committed crew has meant being able to participate in a wider range of activities, in addition to supporting the Council's park team with regular maintenance activities in the centre-grounds and the wider park.

### EVENTS

**Summer festival** – In August 2023 the Rising Sun Country Park held a Summer Festival in the centre-grounds. The Friends were active in supporting this family fun day, by helping with marshalling, holding a hook-a-duck stand and fundraising stall, as well as organising a Scarecrow trail for visitors to enjoy. It was a thoroughly enjoyable event and fantastic to have so many local groups and businesses contributing scarecrows to our trail. The scarecrow's remained in the centre-grounds for the last couple of weeks of the school holidays proving popular with visitors. Thank you to the following groups: 1<sup>st</sup> Rising Sun Brownies and Guides, Church of the Good Shephard's Beaver Scouts, The Dogs Trust, Falcon Explorer Scouts, Hartbeeps, St John's Church at Killingworth, St Mark's Church's Winged Lions Group, Zest Sports Massage and of course ASDA's Community Champions Lisa and Michelle for the brilliant 'George at ASDA' scarecrow complete with shopping trolley and for providing lots of prizes for the hook-a-duck stall!

**Euro bioblitz 2023** – The last weekend in September saw the Friends team up with the Outdoor Education Wardens to participate in Eurobioblitz 2023; a continent-wide race against the clock to identify and record as much wildlife as possible over a 48-hour period. As part of this event, we helped with pond dipping in the wildlife garden, and supported a combined heritage and nature discovery walk in the wider park. The pond dipping was very popular, with several families discovering the aquatic life thriving under

the surface of Lily-Rose pond. A total 63941 wildlife observations of 8330 different species were made by 8661 observers across Europe as part of this event. The Friends Group made 176 observations of 145 species, ranking 28<sup>th</sup> overall! Thank you to everyone who took part in the Euro bioblitz and to the Outdoor Wardens for the time they gave towards planning and running the event at the Rising Sun.

**20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Countryside Centre** – On October 9<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Countryside Centre. To mark this milestone the Friends had been researching the history of Scaffold Hill Hospital which had previously occupied the site. Our research was pulled together to produce a ‘mini exhibition’ of the development of the hospital from its inception in 1903 by Earsdon Joint Hospital Board through to its closure in 1985/6 (renamed Holystone Hospital by this time) and eventual evolution to the Country Parks visitor centre. Thank you to Amanda Williams and the Outdoor Education Wardens whose detailed research resulted in the group being able to pull together such an informative display to coincide with this event.

As part of the celebrations, the Friends presented the Countryside Centre staff with a felted model of the famous ‘Rising Sun Stag’. Jan Casson, a member of the Friends committee, is an extremely talented needle felt artist and she suggested creating a model of the Stag as a way of memorialising his time at the country park. The model, lovingly created by Jan was based on the many photographs of the Stag that had been shared on the Friends Facebook Group. Thank you to everyone involved this project, particularly Jan for her dedication in producing this magnificent piece of art and for keeping the project on track, to the many photographers who allowed their photographs to be used, and to Rodge Hartley for fixing the model to its backplate. Sadly, during the summer of 2023 the Stag “left” the park as mysteriously as he arrived, he will be missed.

**Christmas** – Once again the run up Christmas was very busy! As Santa’s helpers we helped prepare the Countryside Centre for the seasons festivities and turned the Outdoor Education Spaces into a magical Christmassy workshop for the School’s Santa Grotto events.

The Countryside Centre’s Christmas Fayre took place in early December, lots of snow arrived the day before the event, transforming the park into a Winter Wonderland! This added an extra challenge for the park team preparing to welcome visitors to the event, but Santas helpers were there to assist in shovelling snow to make sure the event went ahead safely. The Friends had a fundraising stall, organised a Christmas raffle, enlisted as elves in Santa’s Grotto, organised a nature themed ‘Christmas Traditions Trail’ and helped the park team with marshalling the event. Thanks go again to Lisa and Michelle, our fabulous ASDA community champions, for organising a very generous chocolate hamper for our raffle and to the supporters of the Friends who donated additional prizes. Thank-you to everyone involved in making this a magical, memorable event for all the families who attended.

**Litterpicking** – We have continued to hold regular community litter-picking sessions on the last Monday of each month. These are well supported. In February 2024 we held a #ShowTheLove litter-pick as part of our involvement in Climate Coalition's national 'ShowTheLove' campaign, which is all about raising awareness of the impact of climate change on nature. We invited local ward councillors to attend this event, disappointingly very few councillors (whose wards include the Country Park), responded to our invite. On a positive note, we were joined by North Tyneside Mayor Dame Norma Redfearn and Councillor Sandra Graham who is the Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency and ward councillor for Whitely Bay North.

NB. Since the Local elections on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, ward boundaries have changed, with the park now falling solely within the Battle Hill Ward, it is hoped the re-elected councillors will show interest in the Park which covers a large part of the ward.

March 2024 was the annual Great British Spring Clean event, and two litter-picks were held at the park to coincide with this national campaign. Our main event on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> March was well attended by the community, with staff from McDonalds and Asda attending as well as involvement from 1<sup>st</sup> Rising Sun Brownies and Guides.

Thank you to everyone who has come along to one of our litter-picking events over the last twelve months, particularly those hardy souls who have been brave enough to withstand some of the truly horrendous weather we have experienced during several of the events this year! #Litterheroes!

**Nature Discovery Walks** – Since the start of 2024 the Friends have joined forces with the Outdoor Education Wardens to run regular Nature Walks around the park. It is hoped these sessions will help increase awareness and value of nature recording in the local community, by provide opportunities for experienced and novice wildlife watchers to come together to learn and share knowledge about diversity of wildlife on our doorstep. The inaugural event was held in February and was attended by Rangers from the Natural History Society of Northumbria. These free walks are held on the third Thursday each month, with the potential of regular recording of the park's wildlife supporting and guiding action on improving biodiversity. Thank you to everyone who has supported this initiative so far.

## **CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECTS**

The Friends recognises the impact and benefits that citizen science projects can have in helping the environment and wildlife, and for these reasons we have been keen to raise awareness of various projects and campaigns local people can get involved with. We have shared information on park noticeboards and through our social media platforms, about the RSBP Big Garden Bird Watch, Bumblebee Conservations Trust's 'Bumbles on Blooms' project, RHS 'Hug-a-Slug' campaign and the Field Studies Council 'Signs of

Nature' survey to name a few. As a group we have also been actively involved in several projects this year:

**#SHOWTHELOVE** – this is a national campaign by the Climate Coalition that aims to raise awareness of the effect of climate change on nature. The Friends signed an open letter calling on leaders of the main political parties to commit to tackling climate change and protect nature. On Valentine's day volunteers gave out green, wildflower seed hearts to park visitors and started conversation about the changing climate and its effect on nature.

**Gene pools** – Summer 2023 was our second year of being involved in this project, which is run by Natural England, Cefas, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Natural History Museum. It involved recording observations relating to pond location, testing water quality, then collecting and filtering water samples before sending off for analysis of eDNA to see what organisms are using the pond as habitat. This provides scientists with more information about the biodiversity of urban ponds. Information gained via this project is used to support initiatives such as Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework and will hopefully help urban planners make decisions that benefit us and wildlife. We have just received the results back from the ponds we surveyed – LilyRose, Bomb Hole and Blister ponds and it has been interesting to see what DNA was captured during sampling. We have been invited to take part again this year. Thank you to the volunteers who were involved.

**City Nature Challenge 2024** – Once again we participated in this international citizen science project aimed to get people across the World observing and recording wildlife. Over 500 cities took part in this year's event! Across our North-East 'city' region 113 people took part making 2300 nature observations! 247 observations of 190 species were made by the Friends over the course of weekend, ranking us 4<sup>th</sup> within our region. Congratulation to one of NTC's education wardens who topped the leader board!

**Gosforth's Wild Web** - This is a two-year project being run by Natural History Society of Northumbria, to celebrate 100 years since the nature reserve at Gosforth Park was created. The projects aim is to encourage local people to notice, record and share what wildlife is observed around the 100 one-kilometre squares surrounding the Gosforth Nature Reserve. The Rising Sun Country Park falls within this catchment area. The Friends are participating with this project and have been sharing wildlife sightings with the rangers at NHSN and contributing to the creation of an A-Z of local wildlife. It is hoped that data will be used to help support the creation and management of more urban wildlife corridors which will enable wildlife to move safely around Tyneside.

## **THE BACKYARD ALLOTMENT**

I reported in last year's annual report that the Friends had been awarded a grant of £460 from the VODA Grow & Eat Community Fund. This was to help with our redevelopment of

the allotment area, known as 'The Backyard'. Over the summer of 2023 the grant was used to purchase compost and soil improvers for the raised beds, a garden shredder was bought to assist in the aim of making our own compost and mulch and several perennial vegetable plants and fruit bushes were purchased for the plot to create permanent growing areas.

A lot of hard work has gone into creating The Backyard and it is really starting to take shape. We have used our creative skills to recycle old pallets into compost and leaf mould bins, and well as upcycling old slate roof tiles into decorative plant markers. There has been a definite increase in beneficial insect and amphibian life around the whole garden since we established a 'wildlife area' which includes a five-star pallet bug hotel, various log piles, wildflowers and a small pond. Establishing the Backyard has also provided an area to support the gardening activities we do in the centre-grounds.

The produce grown at The Backyard is shared with park visitors via the '*Sharing Our Harvest*' table located by the café entrance, operating on a '*take what you need and give what you can*' concept. Donations received go towards fundraising efforts for Friends projects. We have also been able to support a local food bank The Cedarwood Trust with a very large donation of Jerusalem artichokes this autumn and have established links with other food network schemes in North Tyneside. The Friends group, thorough the development of the Backyard, have become part of the newly established North Tyneside Community Garden Network.

**As seen on TV!** -During the summer of 2023, Rising Sun Country Park was selected by Hello Halo Productions to be the location of an episode of *Ranger Hamza's Eco Quest* which was all about earthworms. The episode was filmed in the centre-grounds and included shots of the quarry, wildlife garden and The Backyard! Volunteers helped to prepare the Backyard for filming and provided worms as well as a wormery composter for the production team to use. The episode, featuring local school children, aired on CBeebies in December 2023. The park looked fabulous in the episode, and it was a proud moment for our volunteers to see all their hard work broadcast on TV! Well done all!

## **FUNDRAISING**

I have already touched on some of the fundraising activities the group has participated in during the various events held over the past year. In addition to these events, we have again produced the Friends Calendar which showcases some of the stunning scenery, flora and fauna the park has to offer residents and visitors to North Tyneside. We would not be able to do this without the continued support of the photographers who grant permission to use their photographs, we are extremely grateful. I would also like to thank the staff in the Countryside Centre café and at Earth & Fire Bakery for helping to facilitate sales. Providing duck food to visitors to purchase for a small donation, not only supports

a healthy diet for our waterfowl population but provides funds for the group. Thanks go to Eric for organising this and to everyone who has donated.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

We have continued to use our social media platforms to promote the events, activities and projects we are involved with. Thanks go to the volunteers who help to support this.

The development of a Friends Website has stalled somewhat, but is understandable given the numerous projects we've been involved in. Hopefully this will be something that can be picked up again, over the quieter winter months!

## **GOVERNANCE**

Earlier this year we took advantage of a 'small group health check' with the governance advisors based at VODA (North Tyneside Voluntary Organisations Development Agency). This highlighted some areas where we could strengthen the effectiveness of our group. We are extremely grateful to Amanda Williams (Friends committee member) for agreeing to take the lead on developing various policy documents that were suggested to us by the staff at VODA, along with those recommended by the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, the umbrella organisation that supports Friends Groups across the UK.

## **TO CONCLUDE**

Phew! What a busy year we've had! None of this would be achieved if it wasn't for the commitment and dedication of our volunteers, the direction provided by the committee, the partnership with the park team and ongoing support and encouragement from park visitors.

So, what does the next twelve months have instore? We already have the summer family festival in the diary, with a return of the scarecrow trail! We will be Genepool-ing in June, more nature walks and litter picks are planned over the summer, and we hope to be bulb planting in the autumn.

Claire Partleton

May 2024