



# FRIENDS OF RISING SUN COUNTRY PARK

## Chairperson's Annual Report – 2025-2026

**Vision and Purpose:** Our work this year has continued to follow the group's vision: to protect and improve the Rising Sun Country Park as a heritage asset, a place of ecological interest and natural beauty, and to support the conservation of its flora and fauna for everyone's benefit.

The group's objects are to promote the park's biodiversity and wildlife habitats, and to support public and community learning about conservation, working with local partners and the wider community.

This report gives an overview of the Friends' activities over the past twelve months in line with that vision.

**Thursday volunteering:** continues to form the core of our practical onsite work supporting the park team. Attendance has remained steady throughout the year, with a small but reliable group of regular volunteers at each session.

Activities have focused on routine maintenance across the Centre grounds and wider park, alongside several Friends-led projects.

### Friends-Led Projects Completed

- *Tree planting* - In November 2025 we received our second Woodland Trust 'Free Trees for Community Groups' pack. These trees were planted in early 2026 within the plantation woodland behind Asda, adding to previous community-led planting in this area.
- *Front entrance raised beds redesign* - In autumn 2025 we sought and received permission from the park team to redesign the raised beds at the front entrance. The existing planting had become tired, and many plants were poorly placed. A new scheme was developed to ensure the beds are low maintenance, drought tolerant, able to cope with variable light levels, and beneficial to pollinators. The refreshed beds are now healthier and more welcoming to visitors.
- *Invertebrate rubbing trail* - The Friends purchased a set of invertebrate-themed rubbing plaques to establish a permanent, self-led wildlife trail for younger visitors and families within the Centre grounds. A printed trail guide accompanies the plaques, encouraging curiosity, recognition and appreciation of invertebrates and their ecological roles. Work is underway to redesign an existing interpretation board to support and explain the trail.

**Events:** The Friends supported the Park Team with public events across the summer and Christmas holidays. In July, the Summer Festival had a superhero and princess theme and we ran our third Scarecrow Trail alongside it, with 15 scarecrows created by local groups, schools and businesses displayed in the centre-grounds through the summer.

To support school holiday engagement, we produced self-led activity and nature spotter sheets, including a Big 8 bumblebee trail with Outdoor Education in May 2025 and an autumn nature spotting sheet in October 2025.

**Swallow Field Woodland Management:** The Friends took part in two community volunteer sessions led by Living Woods CIC in partnership with the North East Community Forest, supporting early-stage woodland management at Swallow Field, adjacent to Swallow Pond.

Volunteers checked the condition of young trees planted approximately three years ago and replaced shorter tubes with longer ones on healthy saplings. They also removed any that had failed.

Across the two sessions, around 1,000 tree tubes were replaced to support continued growth and reduce grazing pressure.

**Litter Picking:** Throughout 2025–2026 we continued to run monthly litter picking sessions on the last Monday of each month, providing steady, practical care for the park. In March 2026 we added an extra Saturday session to take part in the Great British Spring Clean.

On Saturday 18 April 2026 we organised a Rubbish Nature Walk for the Community Planning Alliance Day of Action for Parks and Green Spaces. The event combined litter collection with nature observation along the Green Walking Trail. The Day of Action highlighted the wider planning, budget and funding pressures facing parks and green spaces. Although Rising Sun Country Park is not identified for development in the draft North Tyneside Local Plan, the loss of other green spaces increases pressure on the park and on already stretched parks services. Our participation added a local voice to the national call for planning that protects green spaces and supports nature recovery across the borough.

Litter picking activity has been logged throughout the year, with 148 bags recorded for 2025 and a cumulative total of 231.5 volunteer hours. These were recorded through Keep Britain Tidy's Collect and Count system until April 2026, when we moved over to LitterLink, which offers a clearer way to advertise sessions and record outcomes in one place.

**Nature Discovery Walks:** The Friends group continued to support nature recording and gentle outdoor activity during 2025–2026, though the format of the monthly walks

changed over the year. Originally co-run with the Outdoor Education Wardens since February 2024, the walks aimed to increase awareness of the Park's biodiversity and offer a low-pressure way for people to spend time outdoors. Attendance remained lower than hoped, but the sessions still contributed to citizen science projects and provided regular opportunities to notice seasonal change.

Staffing pressures within the Outdoor Education Team meant they were unable to continue collaborating during 2025–2026, and the walks reverted to Friends-only sessions. The group continued to meet, record wildlife and support year-round citizen science. With public liability insurance now in place, the Friends will reopen the walks to public participation from May 2026, strengthening community engagement and supporting the wellbeing benefits of time spent in nature.

**Citizen Science:** remains an important part of the Friends' work, contributing valuable data to national and local recording schemes and helping build a clearer picture of the park's wildlife through the seasons. We also use our noticeboard and social media to encourage wider community participation.

During 2025–2026, the Friends were involved in several initiatives:

*Gosforth's Wild Web:* Our involvement in this Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN) project strengthened links with NHSN and raised the profile of the Friends. During the initial two-year phase, we hosted Nature Rangers on two Nature Discovery Walks, contributed to the NHSN magazine and supported project evaluation. A celebration event at the Hancock Museum in June 2025 marked the end of this phase, where the Friends were invited to speak about our involvement in the project. The project has since developed into an ongoing community wildlife programme.

*City Nature Challenge 2026:* The Friends took part in the annual global bioblitz for the sixth consecutive year. We have taken part since 2021, building a consistent record of observations from the park. In 2026, 9,139 observations were made across the North-East England city region - the region's best involvement in this project to date. The Friends contributed 311 observations, recording 259 species - fewer observations than last year but a higher species count. Verified records are added to the ERIC North-East wildlife records, supporting regional conservation work.

In autumn, the Friends took part in Plantlife's *Waxcap Watch*, recording nine waxcap species along with corals, spindles, clubs and earthtongues during scheduled nature walks. These observations contribute to the national record of grassland fungi and highlight the importance of the park's grassland habitats.

In January, the Friends took part in the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland's *New Year Plant Hunt*, recording 29 species in flower during our walk. At this time of year, only around ten species are typically expected to be in bloom, so finding Alexanders, Broom,

Berberis and Bush Vetch - all rarely flowering in mid-winter - was a striking reminder of how mild winters are altering seasonal patterns. Recording these early blooms is important, as they help track long-term changes in flowering times and provide evidence of how climate and weather patterns are shifting locally and nationally. Nationally, the 2026 survey recorded 663 species in bloom, with native species making up 58% of records and naturalised species 42%.

Volunteers also took part in national seasonal surveys including the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, the Field Studies Council Signs of Spring Survey, Butterfly Conservation's Big Butterfly Count and the Bat Conservation Trust's Sunset Surveys. These long-running projects provide valuable annual indicators of species trends and help build a consistent picture of wildlife activity.

Alongside these national surveys, the Friends contribute to local initiatives such as the North-East Bee Hunt and the North-East Ladybird Spot.

Together, these projects create a detailed and growing record of the park's wildlife and seasonal patterns, strengthening local biodiversity knowledge year-round.

The **Backyard Allotment** continued to thrive throughout spring and summer. The fruit trees were increasingly productive, allowing volunteers to share substantial quantities of fruit with visitors and to supply some for use in the café. The site also supported a range of wildlife and provided a steady focus for volunteer activity.

In May 2025, a member of North Tyneside Council's Environmental Sustainability Team visited the site to look at our composting system ahead of International Compost Awareness Week. They asked the Friends to share some of our composting tips, both to highlight effective local practice and to encourage composting more widely in the community.

In autumn 2025, the Park Team confirmed that volunteer access to the allotment was being withdrawn indefinitely due to health and safety concerns relating to the condition of a nearby building. It is now unlikely that the Friends will be able to return.

The closure represents a significant loss for the group. The allotment had provided a consistent focus for practical volunteering and a shared project that strengthened teamwork and group identity. With access now closed, the project has come to an end, and no further updates from The Backyard Allotment will be possible.

**Fundraising:** Funds were raised through sales of duck food, produce and plants from The Backyard Allotment, the 2026 Friends calendar, and our greeting cards. We also thank Michael at Earth & Fire Bakery for contributing towards this year's calendar costs, and all visitors who donate via the onsite boxes.

These funds supported small improvement projects, including replanting the entrance beds and purchasing the invertebrate rubbing plaques.

**Social Media and Website:** The Friends group continued to use social media throughout 2025–2026 to share updates, promote events, and report on the citizen science projects, and track the seasonal changes and nature we observe on site. We also contributed regularly to the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland's **#wildflowerhour**, alongside our own **#WildflowerWednesday** content.

Engagement remained modest but steady, with heritage-focused posts proving particularly popular. The committee will continue exploring ways to raise local awareness and improve communication with the wider community.

Development of the Friends website progressed further this year. Additional heritage material, committee minutes and recent activity updates were added, and events are now shared online to provide a consistent and accessible source of information. Work is ongoing to expand the site and establish it as a reliable reference point for the group and its projects.

**Heritage Research Group:** This year we established a small Heritage Research Group, working to agreed Terms of Reference. The decision followed strong engagement with heritage posts on our social media channels and clear interest from several members in researching the history of the Rising Sun area.

A request for information from a local student also highlighted the value of having verified material readily available. The group will continue to collate, check and share accessible heritage information for community and educational use, with relevant material added to the website as it is produced. The groups initial focus has been the centenary of the 1926 General Strike and its local impact.

**Governance:** This year the committee strengthened the group's governance by taking out public liability insurance for the first time. This ensures we meet our duty of care and can continue to run Friends-led volunteer sessions and public activities responsibly.

We have also formalised procedures and risk assessments for our regular activities, including the monthly litter pick and guided nature walks, to ensure these sessions are delivered safely, consistently and in line with best practice.

**Thank You:** The Friends of Rising Sun Country Park could not achieve any of this without the commitment and generosity of the people who give their time, skills and energy to the group. I would like to extend sincere thanks to:

- **Thursday volunteers**, whose steady practical work underpins so much of what we do.
- **Everyone who joins our monthly litter picks**, helping to keep the park welcoming and safe for wildlife and visitors.
- **All volunteers involved in citizen science**, whose records contribute to local and national datasets.

- **The Park Team and partner organisations** who have supported our activities throughout the year.
- **ASDA Community Champions**, for practical support, event prizes and materials that have helped us deliver successful community activities.
- **Michael at Earth & Fire Bakery**, for contributing to the 2026 calendar, and all visitors who support us through donations, duck food purchases and plant sales.

Thank you to every member of the Friends group. Your involvement strengthens our work and our voice in protecting the Rising Sun Country Park.

**Looking to the Year Ahead:** In the coming year, we will focus on maintaining and strengthening the activities we already deliver. With insurance and updated procedures now in place, we can continue offering safe, consistent volunteer sessions and public activities.

The Nature Discovery Walks will reopen to the public from May 2026, providing a steady and manageable way to support community engagement and wildlife recording.

The Heritage Research Group will continue developing accessible material for local people, schools and visitors.

Although the loss of The Backyard Allotment has been a setback, our regular volunteering sessions will remain the core of our practical conservation work. Fundraising will continue to support small, targeted improvements across the site.

Our priority is to remain sustainable, effective and true to our purpose: supporting the Rising Sun Country Park, its wildlife and its community.

**Conclusion:** This has been a year of steady progress and committed volunteer effort. Despite challenges, the Friends have continued to deliver practical improvements, contribute to wildlife recording and strengthen community connection to the park.

Thank you once again to everyone who has supported our work. Together, we will continue to champion the Rising Sun Country Park and ensure it remains a thriving landscape for wildlife and people.

Claire Partleton

Chair, Friends of Rising Sun Country Park

12<sup>th</sup> May 2026