



SOUTH EAST DEVON  
HABITAT REGULATIONS  
PARTNERSHIP

# South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee

*Habitat mitigation team updates.*

*Wildlife Wardens and Devon Loves Dogs  
Growth, Development & Prosperity,  
East Devon District Council  
January 2024*



**Exeter**  
City Council



The purpose of this report is to provide a regular update from the habitat mitigation delivery team. This enables the Executive Committee to maintain a good understanding of the initiatives, partnership working and day to day activities of public-facing staff. Continued and effective delivery of the Strategy and the development this enables remains of very high importance to all partners.

## **1 Wildlife Wardens**

1.1 Between September and December, wardens focused a large part of their work on Exe Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) overwintering waterbirds, with Exmouth Wildlife Refuge as peak pressure location.

1.2 As always, the team split their time between Dawlish Warren NNR, Exe estuary boat patrols, RSPB Exminster & Bowling Green Marsh, and the Pebblebed Heaths NNR, but were predominantly at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge during this quarter.

1.3 It is encouraging to report that we have thus far, had no negative engagements this refuge season – with almost all conversations positive and understanding.

1.4 The concept of the Wildlife Refuge as a voluntary ‘no go’ area is being championed by local watersports enthusiasts and both Exmouth Watersports and Edge Watersports (the predominant providers of watersports lessons in area) have both been seen on the water re-directing people who have entered the Refuge. Wardens have not seen any mass flight disturbance caused by watersports this season (and just one report of) and have had hundreds of positive engagements with this user group.

1.5 Dog walking on the foreshore remains a challenge, with dog walkers still entering the Wildlife Refuge from both the slipway and by hopping over the tidal defence at the other end of site. Lots of chats with dog walkers about the importance of giving overwintering species the space to rest and feed. Sadly, this group is difficult to engage with en-mass and more numerous than any other visitor to site. Warden presence has prevented disturbance from this group numerous times over the season and this still proves to be the most effective response.

1.6 Vantage point counts (to monitor disturbance) are undertaken weekly at all 3 estuary locations during the winter period: Cockwood steps (overlooking Dawlish Warren Wildlife Refuge), Lympstone (with views across river and down toward Exmouth Wildlife Refuge) & Exmouth Wildlife Refuge.



Figure 1. Vantage point count and social media post combined.

1.7 This year, there have been greater numbers of birds and species diversity in the Exmouth Refuge than any year previous. Initial Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) counts of young Dark Bellied Brent Geese were concerning, at around 1.5% of flock size – nowhere near the 15% required to maintain a viable population. However, a second, more recent, WeBS survey resulted in a more reassuring count of approximately 19% young birds present.

## 2. Warden diary of operations.

### 2.1 September

Thurs 21<sup>st</sup> Sept: Exmouth Wildlife Refuge pop-up. Great to open the season with (Pale-bellied) Brent geese feeding in the Refuge.



Figure 2. "A" frame signage, Exmouth Imperial Recreation Ground slipway.

Fri 22<sup>nd</sup> Sept: Heaths patrol ~7 interactions inc. dog fouling to heathland habitat management and adder conservation.

Sat 23<sup>rd</sup> Sept: Water patrol by paddleboard at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge.

Prompted lots of interaction on site - and with it, the opportunity to promote our messaging. Viewing stats on this item +1.3k on Facebook, showing it's definitely worth taking the time to make targeted content.

This was a busy weekend at the Duck Pond with the temperatures still feeling summer warmth and lots of watersports enthusiasts launching from Imperial slip way – lots of interactions and spent the whole day at this site working from the gazebo.



Figure 2. Social media post – paddleboard refuge patrol.

Sun 24<sup>th</sup> Sept: Dawlish Loves Dogs Festival – a really busy day, attended by predominantly local dog owners, so an ideal demographic for our messaging: Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, dog fouling, walks in locations alternative to SPA adjacent nature reserves, sharing the space without impacting wildlife or habitat.

Tues 26<sup>th</sup> Sept: Pop-up Exmouth Wildlife Refuge

Weds 27<sup>th</sup> Sept: Pop-up Exmouth Wildlife Refuge

Thurs 28<sup>th</sup> Sept: Dawlish Warren NNR and Vantage Point Count (VPC) at Cockwood

Fri 29<sup>th</sup> Sept: Pop-up Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, admin & meetings at Exmouth Town Hall.

## 2.2 October

At the start of October, Imo and Katie met with Stephen Farmer, Head of Campus at Cranbrook Education Campus to discuss the possibility of providing education sessions for the school.

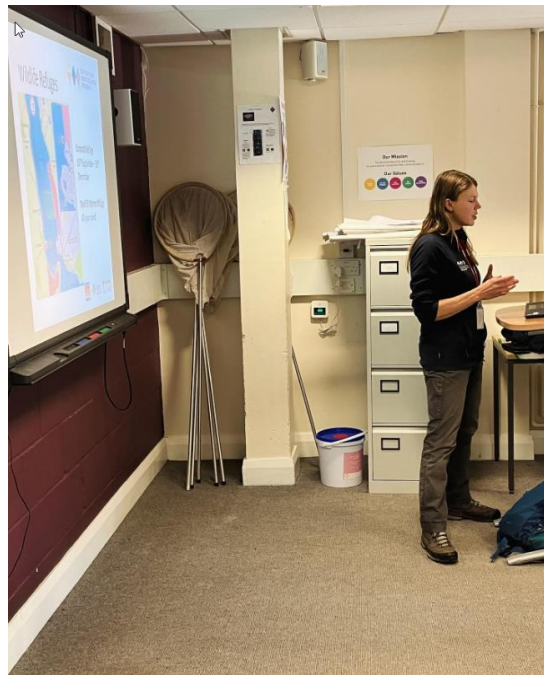


Figure 3. Warden Imo hosting a presentation to Bicton College.

Weds 4<sup>th</sup> Oct: Dawlish Warren NNR

Sama and Katie worked together at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge on the first weekend in Oct, joined by EDDC's Wild East Devon's, Fiona Coope. All three members of staff were needed as north-westerly wind direction is popular with kitesurfers for this location.

The Warden van has storage racking to ensure all engagement materials are stored without damage and easily accessible.

Weds 10<sup>th</sup> Oct: Dawlish Warren NNR

Katie and Imo attended RSPB training on performing bird counts at Bowling Green Marsh, while Sama spent the following day at the same nature reserve filming waterbirds through the scope to produce a series of clips for release on social media platforms.



Figure 4. Informative post about RSPB Bowling Green Marsh.

Sat 21<sup>st</sup> October was another busy weekend day at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, with 40 interactions recorded. Sama and Katie also managed to squeeze in a heathland patrol in the morning, walking out of Warren car park.



Figure 5. Heathland cattle (social media post raising awareness of management techniques).

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October delivered a sunny half-term morning and Sama & Imo completed a Pebblebed Heaths Pop up at Model Air car park. There were still plenty of red admiral butterflies on the wing and a lot of families out for dog walks to engage with. We had the 'match the poo' game out and used this as a tool to instigate nutrient enrichment conversations.

### 2.3 November

At the beginning of the month Katie & Neil provided an onsite talk to TDC planners about the Exe wildlife refuges and our wider work at Cockwood Steps, overlooking Dawlish Warren Wildlife Refuge.

Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov saw Sama and Imo working in partnership with the National Trust and Devon Harvest Mouse Project at Lower Halsdon Farm, Exmouth where they were providing a volunteer training session on harvest mouse surveying. This was a great opportunity for us to maintain important communication links between our project partners and introduce local volunteers to our messaging.



Figure 6. Harvest mouse survey, Exmouth.

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> Nov: Weekend patrol at Dawlish warren NNR, with numerous interactions regarding the erosion caused by Storm Ciaran and damage to tidal defences on site.



Figure 7. Storm damage/erosion at Dawlish Warren NNR.

Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> Nov: Katie gave a talk to Wonford Women's Institute, covering our work across the Exe and Pebblebed Heaths SPAs, funding for mitigation, threats to site and the mitigation measures that are currently carried out.

Weds 8<sup>th</sup> Nov: Imo and Katie accompanied Naomi and Neil on a site visit with EDDC planners to the new SANG at Broadclyst Station, nr Cranbrook.

Katie and Imo met up with David Price, WeBS (BTO Wetland Bird Survey) coordinator for the Exe, for help with bird identification and CPD.

Thurs 9<sup>th</sup> & Friday 10<sup>th</sup>: Imo & Sama attended the first inaugural Seagrass Symposium at the National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth.

Important contacts were made with delegates from the Environment Agency (EA) regarding Seagrass surveying on the Exe. Moving forward we'd like to know more about the condition of this priority habitat, how the Exe is mapped and monitored, and how we can support its protection. The seagrass bed that Exmouth Wildlife Refuge protects in part, is a critical food source for overwintering species such as Dark-bellied Brent Geese.

Weds 15<sup>th</sup> Nov: Dawlish Warren NNR patrols.

Thurs 16<sup>th</sup> Nov: Sama and Imo welcomed volunteer Bea for the day and spent the morning avoiding inclement weather at RSPB Bowling Green Marsh. The team filmed over overwintering birds roosting and feeding over the high tide to assist with ID clips for social media and use in presentations.



In the afternoon, a pop-up at Exmouth Wildlife Refuge included a beneficial chat with a bait digger who had entered the refuge (bait digging code distributed) and several dog walkers, with dogs causing minor flight disturbance.

Fri 17<sup>th</sup>: Sama and Imo took the patrol boat out on this cold and clear-skyed high-tide. Finger Point at Dawlish Warren Wildlife Refuge was full to bursting with Oystercatchers and a large flock of Dunlin in murmuration over the bight. Some filming done to share these views with the online community, perfectly demonstrating the requirement for the Wildlife Refuges as disturbance free areas.

We saw two seals during patrol, what appeared to be a juvenile, reclining on a moored boat near Dawlish Warren Wildlife Refuge and an adult fishing in the ski zone. Great to see larger marine animals thriving in the estuary.

We returned to Exmouth Wildlife Refuge over lunchtime as the tide receded, and again spoke to a number of dog walkers, whose dogs had entered the refuge causing disturbance to feeding ducks and geese.

Sat 18<sup>th</sup> Nov: Heath Patrol & Exmouth Wildlife Refuge

Sun 19<sup>th</sup> Nov: Dawlish Warren NNR patrols.

21<sup>st</sup> Nov: Imo and Katie met with Steph Harper-Cheung from the Exe Estuary Management Partnership to discuss partnership working over the coming year.

Tues 28<sup>th</sup>: Heath Patrol from Four Firs up to Warren car park. Several spaniels loose off the path, owners spoken to, and dog codes distributed.

Thursday 30<sup>th</sup>: Katie and Sama completed a vantage point count at Exmouth Duck pond in the snow! Large numbers of Brent geese (720) and wigeon (420) were recorded and the cold weather kept people off the refuge allowing the birds to feed in peace!

### 3. Devon Loves Dogs

3.1 I've had a busy autumn, dividing my time between a variety of different tasks both onsite and behind the scenes. The ongoing, successful programme of Waggy Walks has accounted for a large proportion of staff effort, especially as bookings are received by email until the new website (and booking system) is launched.

3.2 Since my last update in September, I've had walks at Four Firs, Mutters Moor and Wheathill with Kim Strawbridge (Site manager, Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (PHCT)) and a walk with TDC Ranger Matt Gare at Ridgetop SANG at the beginning of November. All walks have been fully booked, which is great, but this does come with extra work managing waiting lists and people's expectations.



Photo1: Waggy Walk at Ridgetop 1<sup>st</sup> November.

3.3 Currently we have a large pool of regular walkers who join us intermittently. It's great to have these people walk with us, as it helps newer members settle in and learn good behaviours from the wider group, which is just what we're after. We're also doing our best to make sure that new people are always encouraged and welcomed along, so that we can continue to spread our messaging as far and wide as possible.

3.4 I'm in the process of putting together the engagement programme for winter/spring 2024 and I'm pleased to have a new contact at Forestry England which means we can once again offer woodland walks in a range of locations across the region.

3.5 I'm also excited that I've been able to offer a Waggy Walk around the Otter Estuary with PHCT Ranger Rick Lockwood in December. Many of our members and the dog walkers that we speak to, have been following the Lower Otter Restoration Project (LORP) since the beginning. I'm often asked questions about it, so it's great to be able to offer a Waggy Walk now that the project has been completed. We enjoyed our last walk before Christmas with mince pies for humans and presents for dogs.



Photo 2: Waggy Walk around the Otter Estuary 6<sup>th</sup> December.

3.5 As well as walks, I've also been out with the gazebo doing pop ups, at the Exmouth Wildlife Refuge, Dawlish Countryside Park and on the Otter Estuary. Although the Otter isn't currently part of our remit, it was a hugely successful pop up as we were able to meet a high number of dog walkers in a short space of time, many of whom are also regular visitors to the Pebblebed Heaths. We were also able to easily share information about the Exe Estuary as the species that the Exe is protected for are similar to those expected to share the Otter now and in the future.



Photo 3: Pop up at Dawlish Countryside Park Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November.

3.6 Membership has continued to increase to 1257, with new member packs being sent out in November. Our newsletter sign-up figures have continued to rise gradually to 2414.

3.7 In addition to the onsite work, autumn has been a very busy time for work behind the scenes, admin and training. A large proportion of my time has been spent on the design and content of the new Devon Loves Dogs website which I have been working on with Anne (Communications Officer) and Neil (Delivery Manager). The home page has been designed and I'm now working on the individual page content that will be refreshed and added to the new design. An example of the new design for the home page is below:

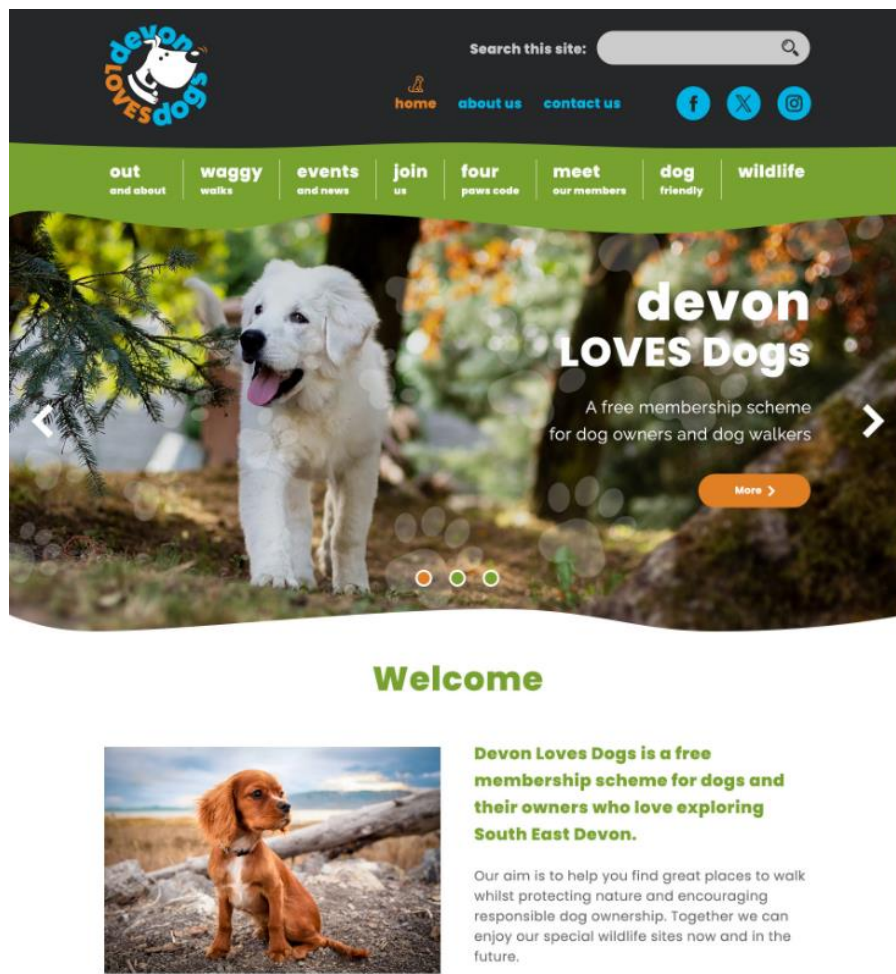


Figure 1: New website homepage design.

3.8 I've also attended the two mitigation strategy update workshops held by Footprint Ecology, a team session regarding EDDC's Service Plan and spent time refreshing my mandatory Health and Safety training.

3.9 I've taken part in a site visit with the East Devon Planning Team to Clyst Meadows SANG, which was very useful as we were able explain our roles. Additionally, our team have been providing input into the design of the new SANG based on our experiences of Dawlish Countryside Park and Ridgetop SANG.

3.10 Neil and I have also recently met with Anna Harrison, Nature Engagement Officer for the National Trust, Killerton. We discussed the mutual benefits of working in partnership together and have since arranged a Waggy Walk around Ashclyst Forest for February.

3.11 As we look forward to 2024, we have reviewed our 2023 operations and are considering future priorities and work programming for DLD. The project enters its 7<sup>th</sup> year and has grown and developed enormously since the beginning. Staff resource currently remains unchanged at 0.5 FTE and therefore it will be necessary to make some tough decisions as I am not able to attend all the events and opportunities that I am invited to.

3.12 Onsite measures continue to be both important and effective, whilst a whole range of back-office administration is required to maintain a professional, friendly brand for the project both onsite, online and via social media. I have no doubt that 2024 will be a busy, challenging time.

3.13 Finally, I'd like to thank my wider team and all of the partners who continue to give their support, time and expertise to grow and develop Devon Logs Dogs.

**South East Devon  
Habitat Regulations  
Executive Committee**