

Reading Station Wild Flower Meadow

Reading

Network Rail and the University of Reading

BIG Challenge 2015 submission category: Pollinator

Project overview

20 volunteers from Network Rail and Reading University created a wild flower meadow on an overgrown strip of inner-city land between the station and a dual carriageway.

The 0.1 hectare site was once a siding for a biscuit factory and had become a magnet for rubbish, including hypodermics.

The new station management was keen to improve the site and had made provision to cut it once a year, which will now happen in late July, to suit the growing cycle of wild flowers.

The station's contractor cut the site, which was CAT scanned courtesy of Siemens Rail.

The volunteers cleared rubble, wood chip and dominant weeds, prepared the surface and sowed a mix of wild flower seed provided by Kew Gardens 'Grow Wild UK', chosen to attract pollinators.

Two months on, poppies, ox eye daisies, cornflowers and buttercups provide a



Photo: Before

blaze of colour amongst the brick, concrete and asphalt.

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

Apart from 8 pear trees, planted some years ago and now well-established, the site was urban scrub, dominated by brambles, thistles, and Buddleia.

On around 10% of the site very little grew, due to the poor quality soil. There was also dumped rubbish (including hypodermics)

Were there any specific conditions that led to you carrying out this work?

Network Rail had been approached by local groups wanting to see this area improved for pollinators. Its Great Western Route Modernisation project, with a base at Reading, has set itself the objective of piloting Biodiversity Offset, and this project seemed an ideal opportunity to further both these aims.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

This site is typical of redundant railway land and the project could be replicated at sites throughout the railway network, with volunteers from the railway industry and 'Community Rail' groups Long-term

management will be provided by the Station contractor strimming the area once a year in late July – effectively hay-making time, the availability of which was a major factor in the choice of this site.

Volunteers from Reading station and the Great Western project will control the dominant weeds on a regular basis for 1-2 years.

Although there would naturally be some flowers growing on this site, the objective was to substantially increase their number and diversity, with emphasis on flowers attracting pollinators.

We calculate a net gain in biodiversity of 0.33 units for the 0.1 hectare site. A spreadsheet of our calculations is attached.

The project contributes to the Reading Local Biodiversity Action Plan (2006) 'Local Action', to "establish and enhance wildlife habitats (...areas of wildflower grassland) on road verges and other public open spaces"

From the outset the decision was made to avoid using herbicides, relying instead on more traditional methods – pulling out thistles, brambles and bindweed, and raking the surface prior to sowing.



Photo: At work

This made the scheme more labour-intensive, but reduced the risk of adverse effects on other species from herbicides.

Students and staff from the University of Reading helped with the preparation and sowing, and will help with ongoing weeding. Network Rail volunteers came from Reading track maintenance depot, Reading station, and the Great Western project as far afield as Swindon.

Other industry volunteers came from contractors Siemens and Sisk Rail.

One volunteer has set up a blog for the wild flower area on the Great Western project intranet, enabling us to update staff on the progress of the site and attract new volunteers.

How would you best describe the project?

An enhancement.

Further information

1. First we met Grow Wild UK's England Coordinator on site, to confirm suitability, then jointly agreed a maintenance regime with the Station Manager.
2. The station's contractors cleared the heavier vegetation and strimmed the brambles and other dominant weeds.
3. Siemens Rail Automation provided a CAT scan of the site, as plans indicated a large number of buried cables
4. Over two days in April and May 20 volunteers from Network Rail Reading Station and Great Western project, plus students from the University of Reading

- a. Cleared chipped wood, rubble and other rubbish, then
- b. Raked the surface and sowed a mix of wild flower seeds provided by Grow Wild UK
5. Sisk Rail, Reading Station's maintenance contractor, took away 50 sacks of rubble, rubbish and vegetation
6. By July six varieties of wild flower were in evidence across the site, but particularly in the worst soils, where previously very little grew.
7. Using the Association of Local Government Ecologists biodiversity calculator, net gain for the 0.1 hectare site will be 0.33 biodiversity units.
8. Subsequently, the pre-existing weeds have re-established themselves, and we have started weekly weeding sessions to give the wild flowers more of a chance.
9. Lessons learnt concerned people and plants:
 - a. Although a good number of volunteers came forward, others were held back by a perceived lack of gardening knowledge.
 - b. A no-herbicide approach requires several days of



Photo: Wildflowers in bloom

weeding and raking to give the wild flowers a decent chance against the dominant weeds.

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

I wanted to do something practical for biodiversity. Several colleagues at Reading were keen to help, and the site was just crying out for wild flowers