

2020 Friends of Weir Wood Society Annual General Meeting

Minutes of the AGM held at Forest Row Community Centre on 13th March 2020.

The Chairman opened the meeting at 19:15 by welcoming members to the 23rd AGM of the Society. Attendee members were asked to sign a sheet so we had a record of those present. 38 Members attended the AGM meeting.

1. Apologies for absence

Doug Roberts (Auditor), Michael & Nora Wreatham, Alan & Maureen Caulkett.

2. Approval of the 2019 AGM minutes

Copies of the AGM minutes were available on the website, plus printed copies were available for members at the meeting.

These minutes were accepted by a majority vote.

3. Matters Arising from the Previous 2019 AGM minutes.

An outstanding matter had been the poor condition of the hide Car Park. The Chairman advised that he had repeatedly spoken to the Parish Clerk for Forest Row Parish Council, who were responsible for the Car Park's maintenance, to arrange for the numerous potholes to be repaired. But they had failed to carry out or organise any repairs, and not even satisfactorily replied and communicated with him regarding this matter. We had therefore, now in desperation, started to undertake some repairs to the deepest holes ourselves using our volunteers, which would at least improve the situation for our members and visitors.

4. Chairman's Report

by Bob Johnson

The Chairman advised that East Sussex County Council had kept their word and renewed their Ranger contract with Southern Water for another 12 months which confirmed we will have Ranger assistance to the 31st March 2021.

He then thanked the following: the many volunteers and our ESCC Rangers Matthew & Michael for all their hard work, also the East Grinstead Rotary Club who kindly help us by maintaining the picnic area along North Bank. He then thanked the bird feeder helpers and all those involved in wildlife recording, such as our bird ringers. The Chairman reminded the members about the never ending maintenance and repair tasks, and winter flooding & gales that the volunteers had to deal with, plus all the routine work of checking nest boxes, refugia etc, and the general site management that kept them all busy.

The Chairman went on to mention some of the new habitat and site improvements and an update on the position regarding the new Southern Water proposed reed bed on South bank opposite the picnic area. He advised that the treatment to the Willow tree stumps by contractors to kill them off had failed and there had been some regrowth. In the late summer of 2019 the regrowth had been cut back and the stumps retreated. We were now waiting to confirm the stumps were dead when water levels drop. So very little had moved forward in 2019.

The Pintail Bank wader scrape, had been fully completed. This had been a success for waterfowl, but we needed water levels to drop slightly to see if it would attract more waders.

A new nature reserve access gate had been fitted at North bank and we had carried out path clearance with the intention of making it possible to drive a tractor to the North Bank meadow directly opposite the viewing area. There we intended to improve the habitat by better control of the bracken and bramble and to make it into another more attractive open type habitat for wildlife similar to Pintail bank.

We have been cutting back Willow & scrub growth around the reservoir in several areas. In particular a new path, and Willow clearance along the back of Whillet's Pool had been completed which will allow further reed bed expansion at the back.

The Chairman then moved on to say a little about some of our nesting wildlife at the reserve. Starting with Whillet's Pool which had been notable for its unexpected Starling roost counts of 500+ in November but this had risen until 2500 were being seen by late December before they eventually moved on. The Reed Bunting numbers went the other way with 150+ in mid-November but had dropped to around 60 by early January. There had also been a pair of Water Rails over that period.

The heronry had a less productive year in 2019 only 18 nests produced just 27 young, 10 less than 2018 and he gave some reasons to explain the number drop.

This year we had up to 46 nests that were currently active which was a good number, but it was still too early in the season to yet see any young.

In 2019 there was an increase of 5 in successful Cormorants nests to 13 nests which produced 28 young an increase of 12 over 2018.

In 2019 we had 10 pairs of nesting Common Terns within the reserve. Another new raft meant we had 4 rafts in 2019, Only 8 pairs raised young all on rafts – 19 young hatched, 5 more than in 2018, but 3 were lost at fledging stage, making 16 successfully fledged.

As one of the rafts was now quite old and the wood was decaying it was to be replaced with another new raft which we intended to build very soon. We had found that with more young on rafts we were getting problems with nearly fledged young terns falling into the water while exercising wings and then unable to get back onto the raft and becoming water logged. We intended to carry out a modification to all the rafts and add a perching bar at water level so it would be possible for the young to climb clear of the water and be able to dry their wings so they could fly back onto the raft.

In 2019 virtually no Great Crested Grebe nests were seen, although a pair fledged one young seen at West End in August, but that nest location remains unknown. Grebe numbers were well down on previous years and the latest WeBS count found only 9 individuals with just 2 pairs at the West End.

The Chairman ended by reminding the members of dates for some forthcoming events.

5. Membership Secretary & Website Editor Report. By Tom Howard-Jones

Membership: The Membership Secretary invited members to come to him if they had any questions, concerns or suggestions as he would love to hear them.

He went on to advise we currently had 157 paid up members, but there were some 60 people who were members last year who had not yet re-joined. He asked them to see him later if they wished to re-join or wanted to check on their status. Tom said that these numbers were about the same as at the time of the last AGM.

Over 70% of our members had now agreed to communicate by email rather than post. That saved us time and costs. Tom said if any members were willing to change over to using email to please let him know.

We were now using electronic membership cards. In general, they seemed to be accepted. Using them saved us a lot of time and costs. Tom said he would be interested in any feedback.

We had kept our annual membership fee fixed at £3 per person. We very much appreciated the voluntary donations that so many of our members made. Most people rounded up their fees. Some members had done much more than that and were most generous. As an indication, so far this year we have received £429 in membership fees and £761 in donations. This money was essential for our conservation work, and Tom thanked all for their generosity.

Web Site: Tom advised the web site had been running OK all year.

He went on to give an idea of the traffic:- over the last 30 days there had been 281 visitors who had held 506 sessions and viewed 1335 pages. That was some 9 visitors each day.

Tom gave a big thank you to those who had sent in sightings and photos, but, advised he had just a handful of contributors who supplied most of the content. He would like to receive a wider range of inputs and would like to hear from more people. Sightings and photos should be sent to the email addresses given on our web site. That way sightings would be captured and included in our reports to the SOS and other bodies.

He hoped people found the web site useful. He wanted to know if anyone had any suggestions for new topics or better ways to cover people's interest.

He reminded members that the new version of the web site went live in March 2015, which was now 5 years ago.

Facebook Group: Tom reminded that our Facebook group was started in November 2016 - over 3 years ago, and there were now 192 members.

It seemed to be popular and a number of people had contributed to its content.

Tom asked if anyone who would like to learn more about it to please see him or contact him later.

He also reminded that Facebook would automatically let you know when anything happened in the group. In particular it was very good at letting you know about forthcoming events and reminding you when they were going to happen.

Final thanks: Tom gave a special thanks to Peter Johnson for his work in sorting out the issues that cropped up.

FOWW 25th Anniversary Book – Tom who is the Editor of the book we are creating to mark our 25th anniversary, gave an update on the progress. The goal was to finish the book by the end of this year so that it could go on sale at the start of our silver anniversary year in 2021. We have completed the outline design and selected a preferred printer and we have settled on the publishing software we are going to use. Our small team of writers have produced at least one draft for all the text and we are collecting the photographs we will use.

Tom confirmed it was not too late for the members to contribute with either words or pictures, and if they were interested to contact him, and he would be happy to give them more details and explore how they could add to our content.

There would be more feedback on our progress during the coming months.

6. Treasurers Report

by Bob Hastings

The Treasurer presented the audited accounts for 2019, with copies being available for those at the AGM.

He thanked the auditor Doug Roberts, a retired Tax Inspector for again doing a thorough audit in January. He was pleased that Mr Roberts had also agreed to stand as our auditor for the 2020 accounts, and this was accepted from the floor by a majority show of hands.

He then went on to explain where our money comes from. Noting that our bank balance stood at a fairly healthy £8534.08 and reminding that our lifeline was our members who have again responded superbly. Member's subs for last year brought in almost £600 which more than covered our admin costs, due to cost effective measures introduced by the Membership Secretary. Members donations added almost another £1000 which was all added to our conservation fund. Donations were used to fund the projects we undertake during the year.

He thanked Peter Erridge who gave presentation talks about Weir Wood and donated the monies towards a fund which was targeted at education.

The AGM & Open Day provided some income which helped offset the costs of staging those events.

We also had a donation from Southern Water of £790 which was held by ESCC that helped pay for our Public Liability Insurance and some grass cutting costs.

There was then an explanation of some of the expenditures. A new footbridge over Plaw Hatch Stream cost around £150. Materials for a bird ringing table in the study area was £70. New nets for pond dipping at our Open Day were £105. New floating mink raft with tracking & trap accessories was £140. Plus, some smaller items of expenditure covering the balance. Many others were obvious and needed no further explanation.

Summarising he concluded we were ready to move forward with confidence.

The Treasurer asked if there were any questions regarding the accounts from the members.

A suggestion was raised by member Jeremy Cornford who noticed that the Accounts did not include any comparison with the previous year and felt this would be useful

information, and was something that was becoming usual practice when presenting accounts.

The Treasurer agreed that this could be done and was a good idea, advising he would try and include this change on next year's accounts sheet.

The Accounts were then accepted by a majority show of hands.

7. Election of Committee and Officers

The Chairman thanked his Committee for their hard work in managing and running our Society. They all did an excellent job in their respective roles. Highlighting many were also volunteers involved in helping on Tuesday work parties, so carry out multiple roles.

No nominations had been put forward for any of the Officer or Committee Member roles, however all standing members had agreed to stand for re-election.

Officer Election Result

Chairman - Bob Johnson

Treasurer - Bob Hastings

Membership Secretary - Tom Howard-Jones

Website & Facebook Editor - Tom Howard-Jones

Minute & General Secretary – Vacant. (Bob Johnson currently covers this role)

All above were re-elected by a majority show of hands

Committee Member Election Result

Committee Members: Peter Johnson, Shaun Taylor, Alan Caulkett,
Phil Holland, Glenn Tocher.

All above were re-elected by a majority show of hands.

8. AOB - Question & Answer session:

There were no Questions, or Any Other Business raised.

9. Closure

The AGM meeting was formally closed at 19:45, with the Chairman thanking all who attended for giving their support.

At 20:00 An illustrated talk by our guest speaker followed. This year the Society were pleased to have Penny Green, Ecologist for the Knepp Estate, who gave us a very interesting talk about the recent "Re-Wilding Project at the Knepp Estate" for wildlife, where animals control the ground management. The results have been better than anyone expected and changing the ideas on how wildlife sites should be managed.

Minutes by Bob Johnson
18th March 2020