

Pay up, or Mr Prickles gets it, along with other park wildlife...



Wildlife in Britain's city parks and green spaces faces the chop amid a severe funding crisis, and it is already happening, warn campaigners...

Comment piece by Alex Morss, December 2017.

Much of our valuable urban wildlife is under threat unless we start to properly fund our public parks, warn campaigners.

Some conservationists claim species and habitats are already suffering, with councils forced to pull the money out of parks, green spaces and local nature reserves. I have witnessed examples of the accidental, illegal and avoidable carving up of our local hedgehogs by over-stretched grounds staff, the loss of grasslands to save cash, the loss of other wildlife habitat, and I'm hearing many claims that trees are being felled unnecessarily to save on maintenance.

Conservation groups say we are at a critical time and need to safeguard and invest more in our public green spaces. Our nation's favourite wild animal, the hedgehog, is just one of many species now in the firing line, as cash-starved councils rev up their efforts to dump the burden of managing parks and green spaces onto someone else.

Some bat species, other mammals, birds, reptiles and many pollinators that depend upon grassland habitats also stand to lose out if these vital urban areas continue to be neglected in funding.

The problem stems from a national cash crisis for parks and green spaces that is about to get even worse. At least 92 per cent of park managers in Britain's roughly 27,000 parks have suffered budget cuts in the last 4 years. Several city councils are crying out that they are not legally obliged to provide parks, and looking for ways to offload them.

Although councils are required to 'conserve and enhance' biodiversity on land they own, there is no money left to do it. And wildlife management is a soft, easy, subtle target of austerity cuts.

CARNAGE

Take this example. In mid-November, council mowers in a Bristol park accidentally carved up two hedgehogs. The remains were found strewn across a city park wildlife meadow by horrified dog walkers and children, on their way to school. Ironically, many local residents had recently joined a campaign to make this neighbourhood, in Victoria Park, better to support more hedgehogs.

They are legally protected – in fact a Bristol City Council priority species, with their own special Species Action Plan in place, with a promise to manage parks in a hedgehog-friendly way. Although hedgehogs are often caught in garden mowing accidents, careful checking and timing minimises the risk.

Members of Victoria Park Action Group, including myself, complained to the council about the hedgehog deaths. Surely it is reasonable to ask them to be more careful with a legally protected, priority species? I know the staff care, and are trying hard, involving community groups in

difficult parks management decisions, but they are thwarted by impossible policies. They were three months behind with parks hay cutting. This was meant to be done around August, not mid-November, by which time the grass was long and dense, and hogs were hiding in it. They are short of mowers, and the department recently laid off lots of staff among 1,000 council redundancies.

More savage cuts are coming - a consultation is open until January on how to slash another £2.9million from the parks budget.

How many more hibernating hedgehogs have been mown off, and where else is this going on, unchecked? Bristol City Council has apologised and pointed out they already get training and stickers reminding them to check areas for hogs before cutting. This follows a campaign by the British Hedgehog Preservation Society and the People's Trust For Endangered Species asking them to do this.

But PTES spokesperson Kerry Marshall, pointed out: "In the UK, a small number of people are responsible for the management of large areas of land. It's vital that land managers, councils and ecological consultants responsible for our green spaces understand the particular needs of hedgehogs. Numbers have declined by a third in the last decade. Small management changes can dramatically improve areas of land for this UK conservation priority species, potentially reversing its decline."

Several community groups have seen their voluntary-created wildflower pollinator areas mown off by mistake too, including some I have personally been involved in, and sometimes repeatedly, and not just in our city. It is a symptom of the same problem of over-stretched staff.

Now many cities including Bristol, Newcastle, Liverpool, Stockport and London are devising ways to offload the burden of running parks, in all sorts of ways – to businesses, developers, golf clubs, volunteers or charities. The crucial questions for wildlife will be whom, and how.

FEATURES AT RISK

At stake are thousands of acres of good habitat, including vast areas created with goodwill by conservation volunteers: pollinator areas,

hedgerows, species-rich or wildflower-sown grassland, willow tunnels, ponds, bird boxes and bat boxes. Those people may not wish to give their free time so willingly to a private parks board, or even be accommodated by one, and the new managers might decide wildlife features are not a priority that fits with the need to make a profit.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has already warned the condition and health of Britain's public parks is endangered by funding cuts, with the threat of parks closing or being sold off to developers, and more than half of parks already in a bad condition.

One urban ecologist who works for a conservation charity but asked not to be named, agreed the outlook for wildlife in green spaces will depend hugely on who manages them in the future, and their priorities: "Some councils want to remove the cost of managing grassland by removing hay cuts and allowing some areas to revert to scrub and woodland. But some of those grasslands have a rich diversity of flowers as a result of only having the one hay cut per year, for many years. This plan will result in winners and losers. Species of woodland will benefit, if they are created properly, but grassland species will lose out a lot."

He added: "In some ways it could be great if someone else manages parks and green spaces. Others might be able to do it more cheaply and efficiently, such as with the types of machinery used, but that is not guaranteed."

One typical example of how wildlife will suffer from funding shortcuts is at Stockwood Open Space, a local nature reserve in south Bristol, which has a mosaic of open meadows and woodland with a large range of species. The council had wanted to sell part of it. Instead, it is planting it up with trees to avoid expensive hay cuts. "If they continue to plant lots of trees in places like these good quality meadows and other long grassland, the habitats will be lost over time," one volunteer said.

POLLINATORS

Losers from poor management are likely to include urban pollinators that need nectar-rich flower areas found in grasslands, such as the browns, coppers and blue butterflies, moths, hoverflies, various bee species, for

which urban sites are crucial, and particularly those species that rely on urban areas as a result of intensive farming having eroded their traditional countryside habitats. My local park does not even have a management plan any more because the council has not had enough money to produce one since the previous - 2008 plan - expired in 2013. So where is the evidence that we are managing parks well for wildlife?

Other species that stand to lose from deterioration of city parkland and green spaces are likely to include tawny owls and other birds of prey, plus grassland foragers such as the linnet, goldfinch, fieldfare, redwing and song thrush, which thrive on grassland rich in seeds, insects and small mammals. Reptiles such as the slow-worm and common lizard; plus newts and toads, all rely heavily on grasslands being managed in the right way.

Less than 15,000 hectares of 'unimproved' (that means better for wildlife) neutral grassland remains in the UK. It's an area roughly the size of Bristol, and vital for many species. Such a shortage makes it even more important to welcome wildlife on Britain's estimated 27,000 council-run local nature reserves and urban green areas.

Like the council, many wildlife trusts and other conservation charities have hundreds of acres of grassland to manage and cut every year, but try to do it in wildlife-friendly way. They use volunteers with scythes, or bar mowers specially designed for long grass meadows. One conservation worker said: "I would not be surprised if there were occasional animal casualties during hay cuts, even in a hay cut done with scythes, but I have never heard of any. The frustrating thing is many casualties can be avoided or very much reduced by ensuring staff have proper training, check first and do the cutting at the correct time, so that species such as hedgehogs are less likely to find very long autumn grass to settle down in for hibernation. Obviously that comes with a cost."

"VERY CONCERNED"

Rob Acton-Campbell of Bristol Parks Forum has just presented a 4,400 name petition to Bristol City Council asking them to protect our parks, prompted by a £4.5m parks budget cut proposal put forward earlier in the year, as part of the council's £108m deficit reduction.

He said: "The Council has responded by reducing its proposed budget cuts to 'only' £2.9m and aims to raise more income to fill some of the gap, but this still represents a huge reduction in spending. The impacts of reduced management of areas for wildlife take longer to become apparent and therefore as resources become more stretched these are likely to be the first to suffer. We are very concerned with reduced funding and the push towards commercialisation. Many of Bristol's nature reserves and smaller wildlife areas will suffer to the point where their value for wildlife will be lost."

SHEFFIELD

Tree surgeons are worried. One freelance contractor who asked not to be named, said: "In many towns and cities, tree management contracts are awarded for ever-decreasing values, with a net loss of practical expertise and a reduction of tree inspections. Council departments have shrunk, so inspection regimes have become increasingly pressurised. There is a clear lean towards a reactionary stance that sees risk removal rather than management, leading to mature trees being felled outright to prevent future spending on long-term care."

"Councils could offload their mature tree populations and duty of care to private bodies, who may take the view that parks are safer and cost efficient without mature trees. The recent ongoing scenario in Sheffield should be ringing alarm bells for anyone who values shade, owls, autumn, climbing, conkers and softened healthy landscapes."

Yvonne Cox who runs a hedgehog rescue charity, said: "Council cuts cannot help our wildlife. Staff are stretched, demoralised and under paid. For example, one council's recycling box netting scheme has trapped at least 12 hedgehogs, which I have brought to their attention, but it has basically been ignored. I've seen hedge cutting along roadsides when birds are nesting in the spring. I had an oak tree planted in my mother's name with her ashes laid beneath, but the parks people cut it down!"

A Bristol City Council spokesperson said: "We don't believe that funding decisions so far have had an impact on biodiversity. In some cases, where grass is left to grow without maintenance, this can encourage more wildlife to our parks." He agreed hay cuts were being stopped on some

less species-rich sites, but said the majority of the city's hay cutting is currently "unchanged" - but that is only at present.

Changes are coming to tree management and lots of other aspects: "We still inspect trees on a four-year cycle with more inspections if they are likely to be a risk to public safety. However as Bristol has an extremely large portfolio of trees we sometimes need to prioritise work by order of risk. We have had incidences of branches of falling on to properties in the last year which has always been a risk but we believe our consistent style of management and database of local trees which has been built up over 12 years will protect against this happening frequently."

He added: "The council is currently facing a huge financial challenge with a predicted budget gap of around £108million in five years' time if substantial savings are not found. With further reductions in government revenue grants predicted we need to make sure our funding for things like parks is sustainable when nationally we are seeing a reduction in support for services like this.

PARKS FOR PROFIT?

Deputy Mayor Asher Craig said at a council meeting in November that the council 'will not be selling off any parks or green spaces.'" But it is looking at long term leases, private management and commercialisation.

My view is we need to be vigilant of the change that is coming, speak up, and fight for funding. We need to reply to public consultations on parks, wherever we live. In Bristol there is one going on right now (see next page). When you take part, you will be told this:

"Maintaining and investing in parks and green spaces is getting more and more difficult as council budgets become smaller.

Providing and maintaining parks and green spaces is not a statutory function of the council, i.e. the council does not have to do it."

Perhaps parks need to become a statutory service, safeguarded for future generations? That's what the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces has called for.

THE FUTURE OF PARKS

Here is a summary of the current Bristol Parks Consultation - to reduce annual spending by £2.86m. You can comment until 29 Jan 2018 by visiting: www.bristol.gov.uk/parksconsultation

Bristol City Council has a £108m deficit, so it wants to:

*** Reduce parks spending by a further £1.9m on top of a £963k cut this year.**

* Keep free access.

* Make money from parks.

*** Reduce parks services.**

*** More 'partnerships' i.e. get others including unpaid people to do the work.**

*** Communities manage some parks.**

* Ensure parks are attractive and accessible.

* Clear 'minimum standards.'

* 'Good, safe, clean, well-maintained parks.'

* Protect green space '**where it is needed**' and 'where it protects the city from high temperatures and local flooding.'

1. More income from cafes.

2. Advertising in parks.

3. Charge anyone running businesses in parks, e.g. dog walkers, fitness trainers, hot air balloon operators.

4. Let private businesses run leisure activities, e.g. boot sales, camping, golf, bouncy castles.

5. Host more big events in parks.

6. Cut grounds maintenance by 300k. E.g. less grass cutting, no grass cutting in some places, do not collect leaf fall, 'reduce the number of sites cut for hay'.

7. Let some grass turn to woodland.

8. Remove shrubs and hedges/ or reduce maintenance.

9. Review fees for sports facilities in parks.

10. Reduce changing rooms in parks. Ask clubs to manage facilities without council help.

11. Shut Hengrove Play Park 2 days per week.

12. Remove hanging baskets. Wild flower meadows instead of floral beds.

13. Reduce public toilet hours.

14. Remove - not repair - broken play areas.

15. Invite groups & businesses to 'manage, maintain and enhance' green spaces.