

DRAFT

Friends of Oakley Wood

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

HELD ON MONDAY 31 MARCH 2025

AT THE BARFORD MEMORIAL HALL

AT 7.30 PM

<u>Present</u> Chairman)	Liz Sheehen (Chairman)	Wendy Barlow (Vice
Membership)	Rod Scott (Treasurer)	Chris Wood (Web Manager and
	Judy Cooper (Secretary)	Graham Leeke
	Susan Watt	Keith Wellsted

Jan Matecki, Warwickshire County Councillor
Matt Collins, Warwick District Councillor
Penny-Anne O'Donnell, Stratford District Councillor
Nick Martin, WWT
and 7 members of the public

Apologies Matt Western, MP Deb Merrick, WWT

Adoption of the Minutes of the AGM held on 18.3.24: The Minutes were taken as an accurate record of proceedings and proposed for adoption by Graham Leeke, seconded by Susan Watt.

Chairman's report:

Good evening, may I welcome all of you to the AGM of Friends of Oakley Wood and thank you for coming. I will briefly summarise our activities during the past year which are planned during our quarterly meetings.

We have a close association with both WDC and WWT. Tonight I would like to than Jon Holmes from the Council for his support and assistance over the years particularly in establishing the hard pathways which so many now enjoy. He was rewarded when Oakley was awarded the Green Flag Award for the past 4 years. We wish him a very happy retirement. We now welcome Deb Merrick and Craig Mundy from WDC. Members of the committee enjoyed a walk with Deb and Nick Martin from WWT where various developing ideas were suggested and discussed, including repair to paths, tree planting and felling of

conifers and damaged trees. We also welcome Nick Martin and George Green from WWT and look forward to Nick's talk later.

On the subject of gratitude, may I on behalf of the committee thank our retiring Treasurer Rod Scot for his many years in that bean counter's role. He is usually reporting rather a lack of beans. Rod has also been invaluable in helping to set up awnings and stalls for the woodland days, and for the AGMs he sets up projectors and most importantly the bar. He will be greatly missed. Please come up Rod so we can give you a memento from all of us (presentation of inscribed beer tankard). Thanks Rod.

Special thanks go to our scribe Judy to whom no suggestion goes uninvestigated and for the accurate Minutes which are always keenly awaited.

Thank you to Chris Wood who positions the trail camera, produces and directs the website with its pictures, and encouragement of public participation and his occasional ladder climbing when needs must. He is the Mastermind of the BioBlitz which The Friends held in Oakley Wood last June. This has been reported fully on the website so I will only give a brief summary. The observations for the 2024 BioBlitz showed 368 separate species. These were confirmed by knowledgeable people. We set up basecamp showing wild life samples, books, spotter sheets, magnifying glasses and children's packs including bug boxes and reward stickers. We placed a large board with a sheet to record sightings. We received a very generous donation from WDC of £750. We found 6 specialists who led walks. Tim Jenkins whose expertise is in amphibians and reptiles and did pond dipping. Nick Martin set moth traps and fungi and bat specialists were present. Chris Wood analysed the day's findings which are available to view on i.naturalist. Results were similar to the species recorded during a comparable activity held in 2014.

Now back to our regular meetings which were dominated at the beginning of the year by the planning and division of tasks in order to stage the BioBlitz. The rest of the time we have discussed the provision of a few simple benches at intersections of the Wood.

We have investigated receiving donations electronically to fund our activities and to reward specialists who give talks and lead walks. Both these subjects are still to be resolved.

Keith Wellsted has devised a simple questionnaire to be given to casual walkers so we can be more aware of public opinion relating to the Wood and guide us towards further popular activities.

In conclusion I would like to emphasise that we would welcome new members on to the committee. There is very little time commitment, just attending the meetings. These are usually in the Leopard pub in Bishops Tachbrook for approximately an hour every 3 or 4 months and doing as much or as little as you like when we have woodland events. Thanks again to the committee: Graham, Chris, Keith, Rod, Susan, Wendy and Judy.

Treasurer's report and adoption of Accounts:

Rod presented the accounts for the year showing payments made and monies received. WDC grant of £750 was paid to WWT and after invoicing WWT for expenses, the residual amount was paid to The Friends. There remains a closing balance of £441.84. Adoption of the Accounts was proposed by Keith Wellsted and seconded by Wendy Barlow.

Web Manager's report (including Membership):

Chris showed the meeting the page views for the last 6 years and, ignoring the spike during Covid when people were looking for outside spaces, the general trend is a gradual increase to around 6000 a year. Non-search engine referrers (i.e. Google etc) came from Dog Friendly Warwickshire with an increase of 80% on last year. WWT and WDC also directed users to our website.

Membership: 523 signed up, an increase of 16 on last year. Of those, 341 subscribe for website updates. Membership is still free but we are looking for easier ways to donate electronically with our bank details going on the website possibly. This is yet to be finalized. FOW has a Facebook site which has 417 members.

The recent BioBlitz: we made a concerted effort over a 24-hour time period to find as many species as possible. The use of iNaturalist to record the results was a great success. A total of 220 species found was a similar figure to that in 2014 but it was a different time of year so the species make-up was quite different as expected. As well as the BioBlitz, we encouraged users to record throughout the year. There was a fungi walk in September when Oakley Wood proved to be a very good site. We achieved a year-end total of 380 species, which was made up of 152 plants, 110 insects, 62 fungi, 34 birds, 22 others. It would be interesting to know how these results compare with other woods managed by WWT.

Wildlife camera: following the theft of one of the wildlife cameras, the remaining one is mobile and moved around the Wood. The recordings show a decrease overall in wildlife other than muntjacs and some rats, and a noticeable lack of foxes and badgers. Up to 50% of the recordings are dogs, which is an increase on last year. The wood as an amenity and a nature reserve are clearly at odds. This begs the question whether it is time to encourage dog walkers to keep their dogs on leads.

AI bird identification: Merlin is a great app for walkabouts. Offline analysis of recordings can be done through the BirdNET AI. Commercial recorders are expensive but good. Chris has created a cheap home-grown experimental recording device and he showed the meeting graphs of the recordings which had been analysed using BirdNET. Preliminary analysis shows the expected birds (for example song thrush, wren, blue tit, great tit, robin etc). Unexpected birds need further investigation before they can be accepted. Interestingly the normal human hearing range is up to around 20 KHz which drops significantly with age. Older people may well be unable to hear some bird song. For example, Chris cannot hear a goldcrest and only some parts of the robin's call

Nominations for the post of Treasurer:

None

Election of Officers:

The list of nominations as presented to the meeting was voted en bloc. Proposed by Sean Deeley and seconded by Rod Scott.

Any other business:

None

Meeting ended at 7.25 pm. Refreshments.

Nick Martin, Nature Reserves Manager at Warwickshire Wildlife Trust gave a very interesting talk on Woodland Wildlife as follows: Woodland is the natural habitat in most of the UK and would have once covered much of the landscape. It's no surprise then that woodland wildlife such as woodpeckers, warblers, woodland flowers and insects would have thrived. Indeed many species such as the purple hairstreak are totally dependant on certain species of tree to complete their life cycle.

However, in the last couple of thousand years successive human civilisations had reduced the cover to less than 5% by the early 1900s. Less than half of this was ancient woodland that can be traced back at least 400 years. In this time many forests and woodlands were lost and fragmented and species such as the red squirrel became rare and vulnerable. Indeed, in many parts of Scotland and England the red squirrel became extinct (this before the arrival of the grey squirrel who has often been blamed for the demise of the reds).

Woodland remains the dominant habitat in the UK and many open landscapes such as heathland, moorland and sheep pastures would return to woodland if left unmanaged. In the last century woodland cover has expanded again with now around 15% cover, however much of this is non-native conifer plantation. Escaped species such as muntjac and grey squirrel have also grown in number in the woodlands putting pressure on young trees.

Many beautiful woodland scenes with carpets of bluebells under towering beech trees are in fact only a shadow of what a true thriving woodland should look like with a lack of understory and variety in the age and structure of the flora. Predators are missing to move and control deer. Wild boar would have turned the soils and created new opportunities for seeds to grow. A healthy woodland would include a rich soil with decaying leaves and wood, animal remains and dung. This would be full of invertebrates and be stitched together by the mycorrhizae of fungi whose fruiting bodies would erupt in the autumn.

A biodiversity rich woodland would include open glades and rides with lots of edge habitats. These sunny areas are where early purple orchids, bluebells and red campion race to flower before the canopy casts them in shade. This is also where butterflies will be found, warming, nectaring and mating. The white admiral being one of the woodland specialists found at Oakley wood.

The wallowing of boar and the work of beavers would have created more wet areas (which have been replicated at Oakley) and would support many invertebrates and amphibians. These in turn supporting birds and bats and other mammals. The wild wood would include lots of understory specialists such as nettles, thistles, bracken, honeysuckle, holly and most importantly bramble whose flowers thorns and berries provide food and nesting for a myriad of species including silver washed fritillaries and dormice.

Oaks grow for three hundred years, live for three hundred years and die for three hundred years. The dead wood during the final phase is vital for many beetles, fungi and mosses. Fallen trees, broken branches and other 'damage and decay' provide nest holes for nuthatches and tits. Nuthatches will use mud to enclose their holes which they may have found at boar wallows in dry springs.

Great woodland management needs to consider all the natural processes that would have occurred. Let them happen (be less tidy!), stimulate them or use proxies such as other species or activities. Reintroductions such as pine marten have been hugely successful and lost species should be welcomed back.

Much is said about biodiversity but in fact bio-abundance is the true key for a thriving ecosystem supporting soils, plants, insects, birds and mammals. We may not see boar or wolves in Oakley Wood any time soon but hopefully the work that we are all doing to improve the Wood for wildlife and people will see dividends now and for future generations.

Chris followed on by testing our hearing with sounds ranging from 6 KHz upwards which proved to the assembled gathering the quality of their own hearing with greatly differing results.

Chris then tested us on our knowledge of birds with a 'Bird Smash' – very difficult for some but manageable for a few – which was very entertaining.