

## Transcript

### Ideas about living sustainably

#### *Biodiversity with The Parks Trust*

**Jodi:** Hi everybody welcome to our Go Green Workshop – Biodiversity with The Parks Trust. We have Carla Boswell here who is going to be explaining to you all about biodiversity, what it is and how we can get involved so over to you Carla.

**Carla:** Thank you Jodi. Thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Carla Boswell. I'm the Biodiversity Officer at The Parks Trust in Milton Keynes. I hope today I can inspire you in how to make your own gardens biodiversity great for all the wildlife in and around Milton Keynes.

I have worked for The Parks Trust for about 5 years now doing lots of things around the city with our volunteers creating wonderful habitats for wildlife.

So what am I talking about today? Just briefly I'll talk about The Parks Trust because The Parks Trust is very unique to Milton Keynes and I know not all of the staff work locally and talk about what is biodiversity and our commitment to it and we'll save the questions and answers for the end. There are lots of different species that we can look at in Milton Keynes.

So who are The Parks Trust? So we will be 30 next year. We are a very unique charity formed when Milton Keynes was developed and built. We are an independent charity so we are not funded through the Council Tax and we are here to look after the parks forever.

Our vision is to create beautiful and inspirational parks that will be loved by the people of Milton Keynes forever. A bit cheesy but the parks are in our safe hands.

Our mission is to expertly safeguard and look after the parks. We have got a great team of staff here who have been working for The Parks Trust for a long time and they've seen it grow and develop through the city as Milton Keynes has developed. So it is in good hands.

Why do we do it? We believe that the communities have a better life with a close connection to the natural world and in Milton Keynes we have a fifth of the city that is green and we want to connect people to it. We try to get them while they are young through our Outdoor Learning Team.

So just to give you a brief overview, I'm not saying that you all know Milton Keynes that well, but it's about 6000 acres that we look after here. So this map shows that the dark green areas are the parkland and grid roads that we manage. As you can see it's pretty well connected which is good for people and wildlife.

So how are we looking after the biodiversity in Milton Keynes? So biodiversity is all about the diversity of life, it is genetic, it's about the species and the ecosystem and basically how that all interacts together. It's very complex but I'll try to keep it brief, but everyone loves nature. So we all just need to look after it a little bit. It goes back to the Rio Summit in 1992, if anyone remembers that which led on to Agenda 21 -Sustainable Development and how the world's been trying to come together and look after biodiversity.

So with the European Habitats Directive we've set up the Action Plans across the UK that filter down.

So we have our own Biodiversity Action Plan at The Parks Trust which has 12 Habitat Action Plans and 15 Species Action Plans and what we're doing in Milton Keynes to look after those specific habitats. Unfortunately biodiversity isn't doing great.

As you can see in some of these headlines here. The UK State of Nature Report from two years ago now, most of our wildflower meadows have been lost since the Second World War.

Biodiversity is in decline unfortunately, but it's not all bad news because I want here to encourage you all to look after it and make it better.

So what have we been doing in Milton Keynes? So here's a little summary about our key habitats that we look after. We have three ancient woodlands in Milton Keynes and wildflower meadows that we're developing all around and our grazing succession and we've done lots of hedgerow management and hedge laying and looking after our ponds and we mainly do this a lot with our lovely volunteers as you can see in the slide. We've done lots of building hibernaculums and little bug hotels and sunken log piles to help all the little critters, invertebrates, all the small stuff help look after the big stuff.

Starting with some key species that we look after in Milton Keynes. I don't know if any of you have seen kingfishers, you can see them across the Ouse valley up in the north of Milton Keynes. The sand martins have just started to arrive back this spring. Our sparrowhawks are doing quite well in Milton Keynes. Then we also have lapwings that love our wetlands from the Floodplain Forest and the Linford Nature Reserve. Our skylarks are the birds that are very much on the peripheral at the moment in Milton Keynes. All these birds are actually priority species by the RSPB.

So we have about five of seven Raptors and owls in Milton Keynes so we are quite lucky.

These are some barn owl chicks that were ringed a couple of years ago. We have two pairs of peregrine falcons nesting in Milton Keynes since the reintroduction, and that's two out of five in Buckinghamshire, so I think we're quite lucky.

We have barn owl boxes up and around the parks. So we try to monitor where we can and a couple of years ago we had tawny owls nesting and breeding in Howe Park Wood which is a lovely success. I am hoping you will all see some of this wildlife around Milton Keynes.

So we have six of the common species of bat in Milton Keynes you'll be pleased to see, we are very lucky, all along our river valleys and parklands and we do lots of bat walks in the spring and summer. So if you want to get involved come along and book on one of those.

So we have the two pipistrelles on the left hand side of the screen and we've got the brown long-eared in the middle and the Daubenton's bat and noctules and the natterers. So they are doing quite well in Milton Keynes so we're not worried about those species but out of 17 species in the UK these ones are pretty good, but we don't have all of them unfortunately due to their habitats.

So do people recognise their toads from their frogs? As we can see they've been out spawning in the ponds over the last few weeks which is great to see. We've got a good population of toads and amphibians in Milton Keynes.

Of course the most protected species, and a bit controversial some might say, is the Great Crested Newts. We have a very healthy population in Milton Keynes although they're very rare in Europe, hence why they're a priority protected species. But we have lots in Milton Keynes. The Great Crested ones are the big black ones or you've got the smaller smooth newts as well. So they are all out breeding at the moment in the ponds. We just need the

weather to warm up a little bit. To make your ponds really great for newts you want lots of leafy vegetation because as can see from that image they lay single eggs that are wrapped and folded on a leaf in half like that.

So as with all amphibians they don't live in the ponds all year round, they just come to the ponds to breed. So April/May is the time to see them in and around the ponds.

Looking at our reptiles we have a good population of grass snakes especially around Walton Lake.

They love all the reed beds down there and at Linford Lakes Nature Reserve. We have one site for slow worms which is Elfield Nature Park which is our locked away park. It is quite a secret space for nature. Then we've got some lizards as well. The slow worms are quite rare across most of the cities in the UK but we have a small population at Elfield Park.

So moving on to mammals, we have badgers. I've done the badger surveys this year around the setts. We have about 10-12 active setts from the 20 we've been monitoring over the last five years which is great to see. Obviously they're nocturnal. We don't often see them around but there's a good population around especially in the north of Milton Keynes around the Ouse Valley. We also have the European otter.

I've not been lucky enough to see an otter in the wild as I say, but I'm hoping this year, fingers crossed, 2021 will be my year to see the otter. It is quite rare to see an otter. You have to get up really early in the morning because they are nocturnal as well. But they are quite widespread around the country and in Milton Keynes and you do often see them.

You have more chance of seeing them in the wintertime when the rivers are higher and there's more water around because it makes them move out from their other regular dens because they get flooded out. So I have some fabulous trail footage for you all to watch here.

So this is some trail cam footage of a badger. This was taken earlier this year in February. So although badgers do hibernate they do come in and out of hibernation, it's not like they are asleep all the way through. So depending on how warm it is and the weather they'll come in and out of hibernation over the winter.

That was just a quick flash of the badger but we've got the otters coming next. Again a similar patch on Linford Lakes Nature Reserve. This is why it's so special. So you can see there's an adult and the cub there.

Obviously you don't often see the otters because they're very elusive and nocturnal but we know they're around from surveying the sights and seeing footprints and shells from oysters, but it's great to actually get some footage on screen as well. That was taken I think February/March time. It's great to see a baby otter as well too. They are obviously doing well.

We have a great team of volunteers that help come and put up trail cameras around Linford Lakes to help us monitor the mammals and species that are there.

I've got one final footage which is in the daytime. The fox and something else you might find. You'll probably notice that is the same as where the otter was, the same spot.

We have a lovely resident fox. You can probably just make out there's a muntjac deer in the back as it hops out.

So moving on to our beloved hedgehogs. So unfortunately hedgehogs are in a bit of a dire position and we've lost a lot over the last 20 years. So they're in a catastrophic decline. So I wanted to put a bit about hedgehogs in because we can all improve our gardens to help the plight of the hedgehogs. So just importantly listing out there what hedgehogs actually eat, lots of insects, worms and beetles. They should be a gardener's best friend eating all your slugs and caterpillars. So

they are classed as vulnerable now. I think we should all be trying to do our best to look after our local hedgehogs.

We have launched our hedgehog surveying MK Hogwatch programme recently and we're encouraging people to do some citizen science and take home hedgehog monitoring tunnels, to put them out in their schools and gardens and help us monitor the local populations.

So we're eagerly awaiting some results coming in, looking at their footprint tunnels to see what else you get. There's a great website called Hedgehog Street and you can go on that and click on the Garden Challenge to see if your garden is hedgehog friendly. I won't go on too much about that now but I'll come on to it a bit later. But yes we cannot do too much to save the hedgehogs.

Finally I'm going to talk about urban areas becoming increasingly important for supporting levels of biodiversity. We are developing a pollinator strategy to really look after the green spaces and all the road verges in Milton Keynes. So it's about looking at our cutting regimes, sowing wildflower areas for the invertebrates, but also by planting yellow rattle, that's a parasitic grass species so it helps keep the grass down and gives way for more wildflowers to grow.

So what can you do to help save the wildlife and the planet? I go in to all these things in a bit more detail. But basically the quick and easy things you can do that don't cost any money is just to kind of let your garden grow a bit wild really. We are coming up to No Mow May next month. I haven't cut my grass this year yet at all. So I shall not be doing that in the next couple of months. Where you can to reduce your pesticides because if we think about the poor hedgehog, obviously it's the accumulation of the pesticides through the food chain that is really disastrous for the hedgehogs unfortunately, but also creating holes in your fences and gaps where hedgehogs can come into your garden and your neighbours.

So if you're on good terms with your neighbours you can create a 'hedgehog highway' all the way down your street and just put water dishes out in the garden for hedgehogs and wildlife, all sorts of things will appreciate that. Composting and creating mini habitats.

You don't have to spend a lot of money on your garden, it's just making smaller little improvements and the wildlife will definitely benefit for it. But if you want some proper tips for being eco-friendly there's 10 tips here, but my main priorities are 'go native and get wild'. So it's great. It's the lazy gardeners guide to gardening as I call it because you want those scruffy little edges around the edge.

Think about all of the nice plants that you spend loads of money on that the slugs come and eat. If you stick to trying to plant native plants then they're less susceptible to the pests and hopefully they won't get munched as much, so then you won't have to use any insecticides or pesticides. So it all goes around in a big loop. These pictures here demonstrate creating little bug hotels or little log piles. Look after your ladybirds because they will feed on the aphids that are eating your roses. Everything's there and connected to look after itself so we don't need chemicals really. Make homes for wildlife.

When I say grow your own food I'm not saying you have to grow everything but even if you have a balcony, you don't have to have a big garden, you can try growing tomatoes and strawberries plants in pots. Rhubarb does really well in my garden because nothing eats it so I've got both of those in mine. Just trying to create a wildlife friendly garden as much as possible.

So what habitat improvements can you make?

As I mentioned have a few log piles, even putting water baths down so it's not just for hedgehogs it's for birds and all wildlife appreciates bird baths. There's quite an extravagant one in the corner there and examples of what you can do. You can make it into a feature

or you can just have a small corner in the garden, it really doesn't matter and you don't necessarily have to spend lots of money, just use all sorts of odd bits and pieces you find lying around. I try to use slug pubs in my garden instead of using chemicals. You can either just dig a little hole and put a margarine tub or there's a bottle there with some holes in it with supermarket value friendly beer or lager and the slugs love it. They are attracted to the beer and come to their demise unfortunately in there. But it is better than using chemicals in your garden if you're inclined to.

So to tidy or not to tidy. I think now the weather is just about warming up so I'll let you be released onto your gardens and set you free. Really it is just trying not to clear up too much of that winter debris from your garden too soon. So this spring has been quite cold. We've had a few really cold nights in the last couple of weeks.

The sun is out today and it's lovely but you really need to wait until the temperatures get stable, above 10 degrees before you can start tidying up from the winter. Because when we think about the insect lifecycles there's lots of different insects that hibernate or stay through the winter as larval or egg stages, so if you tidy up too much in your garden before the warmer temperatures you're unfortunately tidying away the next year's generation of butterflies or bees and the lovely moths and insects that really appreciate all those little untidy corners in your garden.

So we've got three butterflies here on the screen. So we've got the Brimstone, the Small Tortoiseshell and the beautiful Peacock butterfly.

Hopefully they are all recognisable to you and they're the first flying butterflies that we get from March. I've seen a lot of them out already. So they overwinter as butterflies which is why you see them, the first butterflies of the season, because they're hibernating in your shed or underground somewhere wherever they find. Others go as caterpillars or larvae so they'll be in the hollow stems of the old plants. So that's why you can't cut any stems down until it's above 10 degrees. Then just to show you, you can make a feature in the garden.

So you can have a compost heap and a log pile and a birdbath or something all together in one corner if you want to keep it in there. Or you can just let your grass grow a bit and just mow some paths through to make it easier to use and get around. But the idea is to try to have plants flowering throughout the spring and summer and into autumn then you've always got food for pollinators and different insects and you'll see lots of exciting things in your garden hopefully.

So if you don't want to do much or you haven't really got a big garden but there's one thing that you want to do then I cannot stress that building a pond is the single biggest improvement for biodiversity in your own garden. It doesn't have to be a massive pond. This is a picture of mine. It is literally just a storage box dug into the ground with a few bricks and a few plants.

I did that last year in lockdown and it's thriving now, although my cats do drink out of it. But if you want some advice on building a mini pond, it doesn't have to be massive it's just a mini pond, we have a video link on our website at The Parks Trust and there is a link there showing how to make a pond in your garden. So go online, watch our video and see if we can inspire you to create a pond in your garden.

I want to talk a bit more in depth about composting and what the benefits are. I know it's not for everybody but I started composting last year and it's just its own little ecosystem in its own right really and adds so many nutrients to the garden. It brings in all of the insects and my theory was that perhaps the slugs won't eat my plants because they'll be in the compost bin but I'm testing that theory this spring,

I'm not quite sure. But you know as you're learning about going green and sustainability, I think having a compost bin in your garden is probably one of the most sustainable things that you can do and it's great for the environment and it's free. But I understand not everyone has a garden, you can buy some home composting indoor kits for flats which are a bit expensive, but there are other options out there if you're that eager to get into it. But you can also have a little mini wormery as well, you can get them which is an alternative to massive compost bins. But also you can put your coffee grounds into your pot plants in the house as well, or use it as a body scrub, there's always reusing things around the house.

If you can compost I think that's a winner. But of course if you don't have a garden you can watch wildlife from your window and think about what you can attract to your window box or balcony that you have around. The London Wildlife Trust have great tips obviously aimed at people in cities to try and encourage people to have more plants on their balconies or window boxes.

As you can see you can get so many different hanging baskets and things to put on balconies. Even if it's just a kitchen window box, you can grow your own herbs, every little helps. You can also get these fabulous bird feeders that stick onto your windows.

I think that was a great help to people in lockdown who couldn't get out. You can encourage wildlife to come to your window which is great. But if you think about the benefits to pollinators, as I said before, urban areas are becoming increasingly important and we want to try and think about all of our gardens as potential spaces to improve biodiversity and encourage birds and pollinators into your garden. So even if you have just a window box or a balcony, think of it as being a pitstop for any sort of wildlife and insects that can come along and feed on your wonderful flowers because all together we can do a great job.

So I have a list of some things to think about if you want to get native and plant things in your garden. These are probably the lists of plants and shrubs and herbs for English pollinators. So lavender is obviously an easy win, it is always available to buy in various garden centres but also think about marjoram and thyme, they are really great for bees plus you can get to use them in your cooking if you so wish.

Different plants have different benefits for different insects really. So think about some ivy, that's great for moths and butterflies, some lay their eggs on it, others rest up during the day amongst the ivy. Honeysuckle is lovely, and that lovely scent and attracts all the insects to your garden which is great.

I've got a buddleia bush in my garden, also known as a butterfly bush, because that attracts all the butterflies which is lovely. It's always important to have fruit trees and think about things that are flowering at different times so you've always got a source of nectar and pollen for the insects. You can grab any kind of bee bombs from the internet these days or you can go and make your own seed bomb. Go online to our YouTube video and you can get messy and make your own little seed parcels to plant in your garden, you can do that now. Otherwise think about comfrey or catmint, they're really good for pollinators and any of the vetches, they are like a pea plant, sweet peas are really good for insects as well. If you're really into your wildlife gardening I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

I got it for my birthday last year and I've basically tried to implement everything. It's what I've been talking about today. But Dave Goulson founded the Bumblebee Conservation Trust and he's written lots of books actually but this is a fabulous one about looking at your garden in different sections and how to improve it. I recommend going and getting that. But also you can go to our website and we've got loads of activities that you can do at home encouraging wildlife into your garden. So do go online. I think we've come to the end of my talk now so any questions?

Thank you for listening. I hope I've inspired you to go home and get out in the garden. Thank you.



**Jodi:** Thank you for that Carla. Great to see so much good work being done and some brilliant ways for people to get involved. Thank you so much for sharing.

**Carla:** You're welcome.