

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 11 January 2023

Period - 3 November 2022 – 7 January 2023

Winter work in the Marlot is fully underway and is very much dictated by the weather conditions. Several Marlot volunteer days have had to be cancelled or shortened due to rain, which has meant that the brush cutting of the front and back meadows has taken longer than anticipated. The wet weather has also meant that we have been unable to burn the grass arisings and have had to deposit a considerable amount in our compost heap compound. There is still a considerable amount of arisings on the meadows, currently heaped in piles, that still need to be transferred to the compost heaps. We have also decided to lay some of the arisings in the numerous ground depressions and holes around the meadows, this is an attempt to try and level out the ground in numerous areas. Brush cutting around the ponds and reed mace removal is the next big task for the team, but on a recent inspection of the Marlot on 3 January it was found that the pond area is completely flooded with the ponds now merged into one large “lake”. Work in the pond area is now dependant on waiting for the flood water to subside and is also heavily dependent on future weather. Martin has also conducted a recent check of the bird boxes in the woodland area – cleaning out boxes as required for new occupants.

We also received and constructed the new all-weather recycled plastic picnic bench and 2 seater bench. These were built on site and are now in situ in the back meadow (picnic table) and woodland cut (2 seater bench) – they make a great addition to the facilities at the Marlot. The old wooden picnic benches have been dismantled and are currently stored at Martin’s house with the idea that we will look at the possibility of some sort of refurbishment during the summer months. They are in a bit of a state, but we may be able to salvage some of the wood to enable us to reconstruct one bench – watch this space! Unfortunately, our newest member to the team, Steve Manning, has had to stop working at the Marlot due to the reoccurrence of an old shoulder injury. He anticipates being back in the late spring/early summer. His short contribution was greatly appreciated and the MCG is still actively trying to recruit new volunteers from friends and other contacts.

The MCG carried out another review and update of the A5 Marlot information 8 page booklet that we have developed. The festive period put any further work in abeyance, however it is anticipated that the MCG will be able to submit the finished A5 information booklet to the Parish Council in February for final approval and consideration for funding the printing. We have sourced from Natural England two leaflet boxes – one for the front gate and one for the side gate. We would also appreciate any update from Councillor Rawlinson on any progress of the “wish list” of infrastructure requirements (directional finger posts and notice board backing board) as discussed at the WPC/MCG Marlot meeting last year.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group

7 January 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 8 February 2023

Period - 8 January 2023 – 2 February 2023

Once again, this month's work has been dependant of weather and availability of volunteers. It was decided to cordon off the pond area from both the main entrance side and the woodland side. This was done to avoid any safety issues with visitors due to the extensive flooding in the pond area and also to avoid any further damage to the muddy pathways. Unfortunately it was found that the cordon tape had been broken and there was evidence of bicycle tracks along the pond pathways which has caused muddy ruts along the length of these paths. Whilst most of the flood water has now rescinded it has been decided to keep the ponds cordoned off until the ground has time to recover and to avoid further damage to the paths.

The water level along the road ditch has remained high along the pond side and is considerably lower on the meadow side with only a trickle of water flowing through. It was thought that this was caused by a blockage of the drainpipe underneath the main entrance bridge and therefore work commenced on clearing the silt and blockage in the pipe. Rod pipes were used to clear the silt and mud from the main drain pipe, however it was found that there was a still a blockage on the pond side of the drain. Due to the high level of water on this side it was difficult to ascertain what the blockage was but it is thought that it is due to numerous willow roots that have grown across the ditch from willows situated on the bankside that are obstructing the drainpipe entrance. Further work to clear any obstruction could not be done until the water level on this side of the ditch reduces. Whilst working on clearing the pipe we noticed that the side of the bank, on both sides, has started to crumble away and that the water has found its own route through the side of the bank, which is reducing the integrity of the bank that the bridge is laid on. Furthermore, we have found that the concrete base of the bridge has a large crack along its centre line, on both sides, which is a cause for concern. Please see the photographs with this report to see the extent of damage. Having seen this damage, it has been decided to stop any vehicular access into the Marlot via the main entrance; it is however still considered safe for pedestrian traffic, but weekly assessments will be conducted to check any further damage. The MCG considers this damage a possible major issue to health and safety on the Marlot and recommends that the Parish Council bring in a professional to properly survey the bank and bridge structure in order to recommend any action for repair as necessary.

Both meadows have now been completely cleared of all the grass and brash cuttings and these have been re-distributed in the numerous depressions and holes situated within the meadow treeline, out of sight of the meadow pathways. A large pile of willow cuttings still remains on the front meadow and this will be burnt later on when the weather improves as the willow will re-grow if we place this in the depressions and holes. Martin has also carried out more cleaning and repair of the birdboxes in the woodland area.

The review and update of the A5 Marlot information 8 page booklet is still continuing but has been slightly delayed and it is hoped that we can submit a finished A5 information booklet to the Parish Council for the March parish meeting for approval and subsequent printing considerations and decision.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group

2 February 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 8 March 2023

Period - 3 February – 2 March 2023

On 6 February the MCG, together with Peter Bowyer +2 from Natural England and Nicky Hunter (Newt Surveyor/Ecologist) inspected the pond area in order to consider work to re-scape several of the ponds. The issue of the strength and stability of the main entrance bridge was looked at and agreed by all that it was unsafe for any large mechanical digger machinery to use. Any vehicular access to the Marlot would have to be via the lower NE field and up the main pathway. However, on further inspection and a walkthrough to the middle ponds it was found that the main pond, being the only access through to the other ponds, was too deep and the banks too steep to safely get the digger safely across. There was no other viable access to the central and back ponds and therefore it was agreed that mechanical digger clearing of the ponds was not currently achievable. The conclusion by all was that unless a further access crossing point from the main roadway to the centre and back ponds is constructed that further pond clearing will have to be carried out by hand only. This is an issue which will need further consideration at a later date.

After the extensive flooding of the pond area reconstruction work was required on the willow hedge around the viewing area. The side supports had collapsed and willow brash had spilled out onto the pathway. New hedge posts from woodland willow were cut and staked around the hedge and the willow brash re-stacked. A temporary covering of cut willow was laid across the muddy pathway at the steps to the woodland area. It is intended to strengthen the pond paths with a further trellis of cut willow and then covered by wood chippings – but this needs to be done when the ground has had time to dry out. We also cleared and dug out reed mace from the edges of several of the ponds in order to open them up for the breeding newts. The reeds were left on the side for a week to enable any wildlife to return to the ponds. The overgrown pathways and pond surrounds were also cut back and all arisings raked up into piles. We were lucky to have an additional workday this month as we received an offer of help from 3 volunteers from Natural England. Their assistance enabled us to quickly remove the cuttings, rake and clear pathways and place all the arisings in our compost heaps. No further work will be conducted in the ponds themselves due to newt breeding, however the pathways will undergo regular cutting for visitor access during the rest of the year.

We are currently focussing work on clearing silt and vegetation from the meadow-side ditch, starting at the James' farm end. This is a thankless and dirty task which will take a considerable amount of time and effort to complete. We are still waiting for some clear and dry weather in order to burn the cut and dug willow from our winter efforts – this will take place as and when.

After receiving Councillor Rawlinson's report on the main bridge, the MCG took the opportunity over a weekend to carry out a further assessment of the bridge/culvert. The MCG response has been submitted in a separate report.

The final review and update of the A5 Marlot information 8 page booklet was conducted by myself and my daughter, Alice. It was passed around the MCG who all agreed that it will provide visitors with an informative and useful guide to the Marlot. It has been passed to the Parish Council separately for approval and subsequent printing considerations.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
2 March 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 12 April 2023

Period – 3 March – 11 April 2023

There has been limited work during this period due to volunteer illness, holidays and bad weather. The early part of March saw work continuing on the meadow ditch. This was a case of getting right into the ditch and clearing vegetation and silt using hand tools.

Approximately three quarters of the meadow side ditch has now been cleared. There were also numerous clumps of willow along the sides and bank of the ditch that had to be cut down and cleared. This willow has been cut up into batons and will be used to line the pond pathways with a lattice of willow before wood shreds are laid over to form a more substantial pathway. Unfortunately, the weather has been so wet that the willow arisings in the front meadow are still yet to be burned off and this will have to wait until we have a longer period of dry weather.

Whilst illness and volunteer availability has curtailed actual work down on the Marlot, Martin has been active at home working on things that will benefit the site. He has reconditioned a small electric water pump and has tested it down at the Marlot – this should prove useful should we need to redistribute excess water from the ditches or the ponds. He has also taken considerable time at home to build a wooden picnic table from the remnants of the two old wooden tables that had been removed from the Marlot in the winter. Using the good wood from both he has managed to reconstruct a new table and has painted it and it now is situated on the woodland pathway.

I have been contacted by two branches of Shropshire Wildlife Trust regarding visits and talks about the Marlot. The Oswestry branch has asked if I can give a presentation at one of their meetings in late May and the Market Drayton branch will be visiting the Marlot on 24th June and have asked that they are accompanied by a member of the MCG to give a more detailed and personal viewpoint of the site and its history. Hopefully we can encourage other groups to visit and take an interest in the Marlot, as this is what makes all the volunteer hours and work worthwhile.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
11 April 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 10 May 2023

Reporting Period 11 April – 3 May 2023

Activity during this reporting period has been mainly restricted to regular site inspections, particularly the pond area where flood water has still not fully receded. The ground remains wet around the bridge area and other pathways are still soft underfoot, however they are starting to dry out as better weather continues.

During the first week of this report, we found evidence of bicycle riding around the woodland and pond area. Numerous deep tyre tracks had caused extensive ruts along the pond pathways and the pathway willow batons that we had laid on the muddiest areas for ground stability had been disrupted and uprooted from their positions. We have carried out repair of the paths where we can. We also found evidence of a “jump ramp” in the woodland which had used batons that had been previously placed on the pathway – this has been dismantled. The bench at the top of the woodland cut had also been moved and toppled over. In order to stop bicycle riding in the Marlot we have made up and placed “Footpath Only, No Bicycle Riding” signs at the main entrance gate, the side path gate and the gate opposite James’ farm. Since the signs have been up, we have seen no further evidence of bicycle riding in the Marlot. I also took the opportunity to place a post on the local Whixall village Facebook sites to inform visitors of the wet conditions in the pond area and also to ask people to respect the site for what it is and not to ride bicycles around the paths. We will continue to monitor the situation each week.

The first newt survey of the year was conducted by Dr Nicky Hunter and her husband over 18/19 April. Due to the unsafe nature of access to several of the ponds only 20 traps were placed in ponds 1, 3 and 4. Four male Smooth Newts, 1 Female Smooth Newt, and 2 male Great Crested Newts were trapped in pond 1; 1 male Great Crested Newt and 1 female Great Crested Newt were trapped in ponds 3 and 4. These low numbers are probably due to the colder nights earlier in the month and it is expected that numbers will increase as the nights become warmer and access to ponds becomes easier for more trap laying. Dr Hunter informed the MCG that she was unable to conduct any further surveys until later in May due to other commitments.

In addition to the regular MCG site inspections, Tim Lamb has planted a hazel tree at the top of the woodland cut and has carried out regular watering to ensure it beds in. The MCG are now looking at the summer work programme, which will mainly entail pathway grass cutting and maintenance in the meadow and pond areas. We intend to chip and shred the willow cuttings from the front meadow and use this to cover the baton base in the pond pathways.

The Marlot A5 booklets have been received by the MCG and they are excellent. I know the individual who paid for the printing wished to remain anonymous but if you are able, please

pass on our thanks as they are a great addition to the Marlot. Two booklet boxes have been donated by Natural England and these will be placed at the main entrance gate access and also at the side path back gate in the next week. Several booklets have been taken for Wem library by the Parish Clerk and we have placed some down at The Mosses NNR HQ. We will look at other sites to place the booklets and will monitor the uptake from each site to see how much interest there has been. They will definitely add value to the visitor's Marlot experience.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
3 May 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 10 May 2023

Reporting Period 4 May – 4 July 2023

This reported work period has been disrupted by changeable and unpredictable weather, particularly in early May, which curtailed any useful work being done in and around the pond area due to flooding and also stopped us carrying out pathway cutting and maintenance in the meadows. We have also struggled to carry out our regular Tuesday work days due to the numerous personal and family commitments that we all have. This has resulted in a disjointed work programme; carrying out limited work when we can and with whomever is available and willing to carry out smaller tasks.

Over several individual days of work, Alan Lomas did a great job in separating willow branches from the previously cut willow piles and re-distributing them to the “ready to shred” pile in the front meadow and also disposing of the larger willow roots behind the front meadow tree line. The intention will be to shred the willow branches in the autumn and use this to spread around the pond area paths. We have also cut and strimmed the main pathways in the front and back meadow as well as the pathways in the pond area. This has turned out to be a two weekly exercise as the rate of growth seems to have increased due to the combination of sunny weather and rain. We also had a work day in which we carried out a full inventory of WPC equipment and also a full clean and maintenance of our mechanical equipment (brushcutters/chain saws). It was also a good time to re-assess our current risk assessments and also carry out some equipment training for Alan

The amount of growth in the ponds this year has surpassed anything that we have seen in previous years due to the weather conditions in the spring months. Even though we carried out a lot of pond clearing in the winter months the ponds are now very overgrown. The Mare’s Tail growth is particularly dense this year and the Reed Mace appears to be thicker. This has limited the number of newt surveys that have been conducted due to safety issues with laying the traps. Due to family commitments, Dr Nicky Hunter has only been able to carry out two surveys this year, however the results of those surveys still indicate that Great Crested Newts are in the ponds and are continuing to breed. This winter the MCG will be concentrating on pond clearance as best we can. The ponds are inaccessible to a heavy digger due to the depth of the main pond which is the main access point to all the others. We need to look at other options on how we can best clear the ponds of growth.

On a more pleasing note, in early May Tim Lamb noticed a barn owl in the vicinity of the barn owl box located at the back of the Marlot. This was reported to Bob Harris, who has since reported that the box has/is being occupied by barn owls and chicks have been observed and subsequently ringed. This is great news and has only taken about 3 years to be occupied since it was put up. We are not advertising the fact that the box is occupied.

We have put up two A5 Leaflet boxes (front gate and side gate) and the Marlot leaflets appear to be a success as we have to fill up the boxes on a weekly basis. We had an arranged visit to the Marlot by the Market Drayton branch of Shropshire Wildlife Trust. This was to be an accompanied guided tour by myself, however due to a family emergency I could not attend and the other volunteers were unable to take part. However, the Chair of the branch reported that his members had an excellent time at the Marlot and were impressed with the numerous wildflowers and particularly the variety of butterflies and damselflies. He said the leaflet was a great addition and gave them a better understanding of the Marlot as a whole – they will arrange another visit later on in the year. I have also posted an article about the Marlot on the local village Facebook pages, which received a favourable, if somewhat muted response.

The next work period will concentrate on path clearing, creeping willow enclosure and Queen's Jubilee Hedge weeding – again weather and volunteer availability dependant.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
4 July 2023

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG)

Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 13 September 2023

Reporting Period 4 July – 10 Sep 2023

Unfortunately this reporting period has seen limited work down at the Marlot. This has mainly been due to the unavailability of MCG members due to holidays, illness and other commitments and has not been helped by the variable and uncertain weather conditions which has made work days unviable.

In the sessions that we have managed we took the opportunity to weed and clear the creeping willow patches which had become very overgrown. They are now clear and work will start in the autumn to re-configure and re-new the fencing around this unique plant. We also cleared and weeded around the Queen's Jubilee hedge as it too had become overgrown – the hedge plants now have a chance to re-establish themselves and bush up.

At the request of Natural England we also cut back the willow that had encroached over the boundary fence along the access pathway down to the Mosses. The willow had grown so thick that it was obstructing much of the path. A simple task which morphed into a bigger task than expected due to the height and thickness of the overgrowth and also due to an unexpected downpour. Arising and cuttings were moved into the Marlot and placed beyond the front meadow tree line.

Also during this period we carried out two major path strims, both in the front and back meadows and also in the pond area. We would like to have carried out more paths strims but member availability and weather defeated us.

We have had a good flow of visitors to the Marlot over this period as evidenced by the amount of Marlot information leaflets that have been taken from both boxes. We have been re-filling the boxes every weekend (10 per box) and they have been disappearing fast. We are now down to the last 15 (as of 10 Sep) and the MCG will be requesting at the September Parish Council meeting that another print run of 200 leaflets be acquired from the printers from whatever funding is available. This is our only way to give visitors information about the Marlot and has been a great success and well received.

Graham Turnbull
Marlot Conservation Group
10 Sep 2023