

## Partnerships that work for wildlife

Celebrating 30 years of Bromley's Countryside Volunteers

Everyone knows there's a climate emergency, but the loss of biodiversity is just as catastrophic. In the last 50 years, we've destroyed well over half the UK's biodiversity; many birds, insects and wild flowers that once gave our green and pleasant land such richness have simply disappeared.

But no one organisation, whether public, private or charity, can save the UK's biodiversity on its own. Instead, we must all work together: individuals, organised groups of volunteers, local authorities, the private sector, government bodies and politicians.

'Biodiversity' is the term scientists use to describe all the amazing variety of life on Earth, and how plants and animals interact with each other. Humans need a rich biodiversity to supply us with food, clean air and clean water, to help us adjust to climate change, and for health, culture and recreation.

After years of ignoring this crisis, governments around the world are finally waking up to the fact that we urgently need a new approach to managing nature. A worldwide inter-governmental panel for biodiversity and ecosystem services has been set up, and the UK government launched a 25-year environment plan.

But in the background, quietly and determinedly, and without making a fuss, groups of volunteers have been working for decades all around the UK to 'do their bit' and protect what little biodiversity is left.

### Bromley Countryside Volunteers

One such group is the Bromley Countryside Volunteers (BCV), who celebrate their 30th year in October 2019.

60%

of the UK's

most important wildlife

LOST

in the last

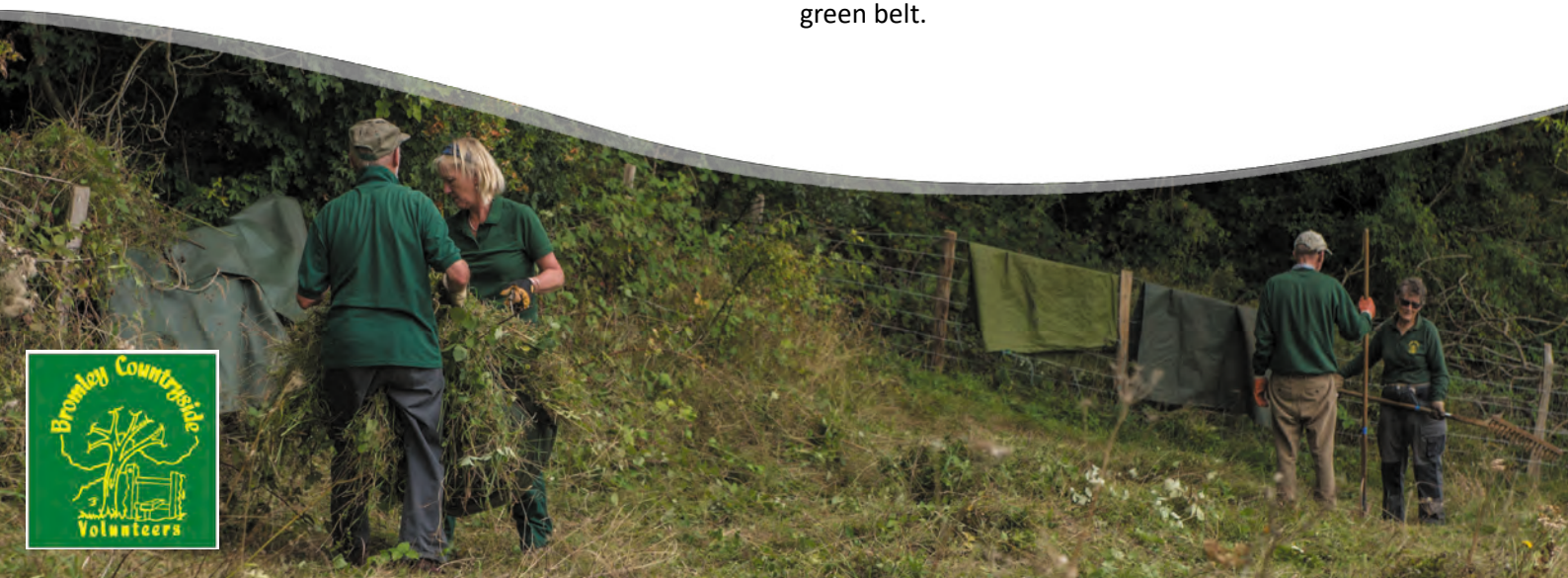
50

years

Every Wednesday and Thursday, come rain or shine, this dedicated group collects their tools from Den Barn and heads out into the countryside. Their work spans heathland, wildflower meadows, ancient woodland and wetland. Some of the volunteers are highly skilled in the use of chainsaws and mowers, and all are adept with loppers, saws, rakes and forks.

Most of their work is by hand, working in places where big machinery cannot access, and this makes it incredibly resource-intensive.

The BCV was formed in 1989, when the Council was awarded a grant by the then Countryside Commission to improve 'urban fringe' and make better use of Bromley's green belt.





The grant was initially aimed at encouraging landowners to make more biodiversity-aware land management choices, but also covered the council-owned land that the BCV still work on today. The BCV was one of the first green space volunteer groups to have appeared in Bromley, with many of the later Friends groups not appearing for a further 15 years.

The group's current volunteers range from 20-something to >80 years of age, with a majority of volunteers of retirement age and 25% of them female. The team comprises people from a wide variety of mainly professional backgrounds but the common ground all have is a passion for nature and interest in countryside matters - some are recognised experts in fields such as lichen or fungi.

There are a number of long-serving volunteers who have served continuously with BCV since the early 1990s, and



*Some of BCV's longest serving volunteers*

their experience and knowledge of the local countryside means that the volunteers' activities are as productive and impactful as possible.

## Bromley Council

Bromley's Council is rightly proud of its custodianship of 7,000 acres of greenspace on behalf of the Borough's 300,000 residents, and for over 25 years, the Council has supported and encouraged communities to collaborate in the management of their green space.



Bromley is London's largest and greenest London Borough, containing the landscape which helped inspire Charles Darwin. The Borough has a very strong connection to its natural environment, with 93 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs), six Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and five Local Nature Reserves (LNRs).

## idverde

In 2015, Bromley Council appointed *idverde* to look after its parks and countryside, and to provide support and management to all its volunteer groups.

It was abundantly clear that the work of the Countryside Volunteers was absolutely essential to protect and enhance the wide range of plants and animals on countryside sites, and to uphold their SSSI and SINC status.

Make no mistake, without the BCV, the wildlife that currently thrives across Bromley would have been severely impoverished. Heaths and commons would become scrub (a valuable habitat in itself, but not as biodiverse), species-rich wildflower meadows would be taken over by rank vegetation, and ancient woodland would fall into decline.



*Stripping bark for future use of timber for posts*



*idverde's* relationship with Bromley Council was recommissioned in April 2019, for a further 16 years, which gives *idverde* and all its partners a solid timeframe in which to make a real difference for wildlife.

## RSPB

In 2016, *idverde* and the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) began an exciting new business partnership. A dedicated member of the RSPB team is now based in Bromley, working with *idverde* and the Bromley Countryside Volunteers to help deliver the Council's Biodiversity strategy.



The meadow is within ½ mile of the home of Charles Darwin (Down House), and it's believed that in the 1850s, Darwin carried out research on the orchids, butterflies and ants that were inhabiting this very location.

With the task plan designed and led by Steven Lofting (the RSPB-*idverde* advisor), 10 Countryside Volunteers joined 11 *idverde* Directors, 5 *idverde* colleagues and 5 RSPB team members and set to work. Five hours later, and the job was completed amid much sweat, laughter and aching muscles.



Steven Lofting, Bromley's RSPB Biodiversity Advisor

Landscaping contractors like *idverde* work up close and personal with much of the UK's wildlife, especially in urban areas. We already make outdoor landscapes beautiful, let's focus now on making them beautifully biodiverse!

All of us wish the Bromley Countryside Volunteers a very happy 30th anniversary, and look forward to working with them for many years to come.



*Working together to protect Bromley's natural heritage*

## Partnerships in Action

To cement these local partnerships with a team-building day, *idverde's* Leadership Team donned company uniform and joined their operational colleagues, the Bromley Countryside Volunteers and the RSPB to work on a countryside project.

The site chosen was a very steep chalk grassland area (affectionately known as Bloody Steep Hill!) containing some rare and threatened species, including orchids and insects. The task was to mow and rake off most of the existing flora, so that the site remained nutrient-poor and therefore species-rich. One area was left unmown as a refuge for invertebrates and small mammals.



BCV, *idverde* leadership team and RSPB gather together to clear vegetation.