



Princess Royal returns to open new education and visitor centre at flagship Norfolk wildlife reserve

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HRH The Princess Royal today officially opened the Hawk and Owl Trust's new education and visitor centre at its Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve, near Fakenham, North Norfolk.

Among the guests there to greet her were two local children, one dressed as a marsh harrier - this special bird regularly breeds there - and the other a peregrine - the emblem of the Hawk and Owl Trust, Britain's leading national charity dedicated to conserving wild birds of prey and their habitats. Both children are members of the Trust's after-school Kestrel Club for eight to 12-year-olds that meets regularly at the reserve.

Inside the centre the Princess saw displays introducing visitors to the birds of prey and other wildlife of Sculthorpe Moor, as well as its fascinating history. The reserve has many different habitats and, as the restoration work continues, an increasing number and variety of plants, birds and other animals.

The centre's imaginative displays include a tactile textile panel depicting the 'web of life' on the reserve, from its characteristic reeds through the wildlife that feeds on them to the top predator, the marsh harrier. In the centre's new classroom, ready to welcome visiting schools, adult courses and conferences, the Princess watched other members of the Trust's Kestrel Club making homes for the insects which form such an important part of that 'web of life'.

On show in the centre were works of art inspired by the reserve, from a competition for under 14s and adults. The Trust organised the competition to celebrate the opening of the education and visitor centre. The exhibition will continue there until the end of October.

The completion of the centre, with its plasma screen linked to CCTV cameras for watching wildlife around the reserve, marks a major milestone in the £1 million second phase of development of the reserve which the Trust began to create in 2001. This second development phase has been made possible by the combined backing of the Heritage Lottery Fund and the European Regional Development Fund - Objective 2 Programme, together with other support - financial and in kind - from charitable trusts and other organisations and individuals.

As well as developing the education and visitor centre, which will generate its own sustainable energy from a wind turbine, this support is enabling the Hawk and Owl Trust to restore nationally important fen habitat at Sculthorpe Moor. The project also involves constructing more hides and boardwalks to allow visitors, including those in wheelchairs or pushchairs, to explore the reserve.

"We are so pleased that the Princess has been able to spare the time to return to the reserve - which she opened for us four years ago - to mark this latest achievement," said actor Liza Goddard, president of the Hawk and Owl Trust, who lives not far from the reserve and whose grand-daughter, Adelaide Morrachan (7) presented the Princess with a posy on her arrival.

"We are also extremely grateful to everyone who has made this super new education and visitor centre possible and we are very much looking forward to welcoming visitors of all ages to it. In particular, the centre will be a place where young people can be inspired by nature close at hand, discover its wonders, and become the all-important guardians of the future.

"Thanks to a great team, Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve is firmly on the map, and we hope even more people will be inspired to come and explore it."

After visiting the new centre with Leanne Thomas, the Trust's education and marketing manager based at Sculthorpe Moor, The Princess Royal walked to the reserve's newest hide - the Whitley Hide - along some very recently constructed boardwalk. Completed earlier this year, the elevated hide overlooks the reed bed, where marsh harriers regularly breed in spring and summer. On her way, Princess Anne was introduced by reserve warden Nigel Middleton, the Trust's conservation officer for East Anglia, to some of the staff and volunteers who have helped to create the reserve during the past six years.

Robyn Llewellyn, regional manager for Heritage Lottery Fund in the East of England said: "The natural environment is an important part of the heritage all around us. And every Lottery ticket has the potential to save landscapes, habitats and creatures. Thanks to more than £494,500 of Lottery players' money, this new visitor centre will transform the way visitors learn about this stunning reserve, and offer new opportunities for people from all walks of life to explore and learn about birds in Norfolk's remarkable countryside."

Geoff Thompson, North Norfolk Objective 2 facilitator, said: "The EU Objective 2 programme is pleased to support this development of the Hawk and Owl Trust's Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve as it is an excellent new visitor attraction adding another dimension to the local economy, with many ecological, environmental and economic benefits."

The Trust's Sculthorpe Moor reserve is part of the River Wensum Special Area of Conservation (SAC), designated by the European Union because of its international ecological importance. Some of the land is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Over the past six years the Trust, working with the local community, has turned this rare remnant of riverside fen into a haven for a whole range of wildlife, from barn owls, marsh harriers, willow tits, water voles and otters to butterflies and dragonflies and scarce plants such as the marsh fern.

Members of the public have their first chance to enjoy the new education and visitor centre at a special Open Afternoon between 2 and 6pm tomorrow (27 September). Admission is free.

o Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve lies just off the A148 (Cromer to King's Lynn), one mile west of Fakenham. It is open daily (except Monday). The winter opening times are 8am to 4pm (October to April), but the reserve closes later in the day in summer. Admission is free, although the Trust, as a registered charity, welcomes donations. Telephone: 01328 856788.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The two Fakenham children dressed as birds of prey are Bethany Ellis (10), marsh harrier, and Megan Smith (9), peregrine.

2. Hawk and Owl Trust

Founded in 1969 to help save the peregrine, the Hawk and Owl Trust is a national charity which now works for the conservation and appreciation of all wild birds of prey and their habitats - both in its growing number of nature reserves and in partnership with others. Working with other organisations, farmers, foresters and landowners, the Trust researches, restores and manages nesting, roosting and feeding habitats and encourages greater understanding of these very special birds. www.hawkandowl.org

3. The new, eco-friendly Education and Visitor Centre at Sculthorpe Moor Reserve

This new building, made from wood from sustainable sources, has many eco-friendly elements. These include sheep's wool and recycled newspaper as insulation, guttering formed from recycled aluminium, marmoleum - biodegradable flooring, sun tubes to allow extra daylight in and sensors to switch off lights when people are not in the room. As part of the next stage of the work, the Trust plans to put up a wind turbine which will provide sustainable energy.

4. Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve, near Fakenham

The reserve is a rare remnant of old riverside fen in the Upper Wensum Valley, rescued by the Hawk and Owl Trust and the local community and officially opened by the Princess Royal in September 2003. The Trust leases the core area of the reserve from a parish charity, which holds the land in perpetuity.

The land, some of which is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), consists of reed bed, valley fen, alder carr and woodland with a rich biodiversity of plants and animals. It is part of the River Wensum Special Area of Conservation (SAC), designated because of its international ecological importance, and is the only place in the Wensum Valley where saw sedge occurs, now a priority habitat for conservation in Europe.

The Trust is developing the reserve to benefit not only the birds of prey such as marsh harriers and barn owls that frequent the site, but also the ecosystem that supports these top predators and the traditional working practices that give life to that ecosystem. www.sculthorpemoor.co.uk

5. The Heritage Lottery Fund

The Heritage Lottery Fund enables communities to celebrate, look after and learn more about our diverse heritage. From our great museums and historic buildings to local parks and countryside or recording and celebrating traditions, customs and history, HLF grants open up our nation's heritage for everyone to enjoy. Grants totalling £4 billion have been awarded to more than 18,800 projects, including over £250 million to more than 2,500 projects in the East of England.

6. European Union Objective 2 Programme 2000-2006

This programme is designed to support economic regeneration activity in designated areas through funding from the European Structural Funds. For more information see the Government Office website: www.goeast.gov.uk/

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