Biodiversity Steering Group (SBMG)

Annual Report (2024 – 2025)

June 2025, Dr Kate Ashbrook (Chair)

Over the last year, we have made significant progress on several of our BAP priorities: creating new habitats and maintaining existing habitat; prioritising biological recording; and working with partner organisations to enhance biodiversity more widely.

Creating new habitats

- **Hedgerows:** A total of 450 metres of native hedgerow planting was completed at Lakeside Campus during the year, enhancing habitat connectivity and biodiversity. This brings our 2-year total to approximately 870 metres of new hedgerow across two campuses (2023-2025).
- **Grasslands:** Brought 1.49 hectares of species-rich grassland under conservation management; 1,500 m^2 of this is located at City Campus.
- **Wildflowers:** Created 0.34 hectares of wildflower-habitat on the grounds of the demolished Bredon building.
- **Native trees:** Added new native trees to sites around St John's Campus and Lakeside Campus.

Figure 1. Clockwise from top left: Staff, students, local volunteers, and RSPB members planting 450 metres of native hedgerow around the Lakeside Bird Ark; Bredon wildflower area; New Swift nest boxes on Chancellor's Halls of Residence.

Species-specific habitats:

- **Swifts:** In March 2025, twelve new Swift nest boxes were installed at Chancellor Halls of Residence, City Campus, by Speller Metcalfe as part of the Duke's Building development's social value requirement. Made from recycled, treated timber, the boxes complement existing Swift activity in the area and are expected to be taken up in future seasons. A Swift caller has also been installed above the main reception at St John's Campus to encourage use of currently unoccupied nest boxes.
- **Kestrels:** In April 2025, a new Kestrel nest box, built by the RSPB Worcester and Malvern Local Group, was installed in the treeline near the wild bird seed area at Lakeside Campus.

Monitoring and data management

Following its launch in April 2024, the iNaturalist Biodiversity Project has recorded 561 observations representing 311 species across UW campuses. The platform allows campus users to photograph wildlife and contribute to a growing dataset of biological records. Most observations are of plants and insects, with fewer bird records (likely due to preference for platforms like eBird among birdwatchers). The most frequently recorded species are Red Deadnettle (*Lamium purpureum*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Buff-tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*), Green Alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens*) and Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*).

A small-scale Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) project delivered three workshops for older adults on using the iNaturalist app. This initiative, supervised by Dr Kate Ashbrook, Katy Boom, and Tim Whittaker (Worcester City Council), offered valuable insight into supporting broader community engagement in biodiversity recording.

A Lakeside Nature Trail has been developed as part of a Green Impact Project, extending the walking routes across campuses.

Figure 2. Damselfly species recorded at Lakeside Campus: Male Banded Demoiselle (left) and pair of Azure Damselflies (right). Photographs by Roger Mason.

Student Engagement and the Campus Conservation Crew

The BSG has historically benefitted from student input via the University's Nature Society. Unfortunately, the society has declined in recent years, largely due to difficulties in sustaining committee leadership. A relaunch, supported by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's Nurturing Neighbourhoods Team, attracted around 30 students, but the committee was ultimately unable to deliver engaging activities.

In response, the Campus Conservation Crew (CCC) was launched as a staff-led initiative to engage students and staff in hands-on conservation tasks on campus. Four events were organised in spring 2025, with the first (wildflower planting) drawing the largest turnout. A small group of regular participants has emerged and expressed interest in maintaining the CCC into the next academic year. Some have agreed to help promote the initiative at the Welcome Fair.

The BSG agreed it would be more sustainable to maintain the CCC as an initiative aligned with the Steering Group, rather than reattempting a student-led society. This structure ensures alignment with the University's Biodiversity Strategy and can benefit from associated external partnerships. Students who participate in CCC activities will be invited to attend steering group meetings, ensuring that they can shape the group's priorities and enabling them to contribute directly to campus biodiversity planning.

Working with Partner Organisations

Enhancing Lakeside Bird Ark: In collaboration with the RSPB Worcester and Malvern Local Group, we were awarded £995 from the Worcestershire Duckworth Trust's Community Environmental Legacy Grant. The funding supported the planting of 450 native hedgerow plants and 36 native trees (including Damson, Birch, Alder, and Hornbeam) at Lakeside Campus to enhance the existing 3-hectare bird area. The planting took place during two community events in March 2025, with participation from students, staff, RSPB members, and a volunteer team from Vimto. The project was featured on BBC Midlands Today.

Since October 2021, 26 bird species have been recorded at the Lakeside Bird Ark, including 11 red-listed species. Although overall diversity metrics have remained stable, the composition

of the community has gradually changed between October 2021 to April 2025. The primary driver of this shift has been red-listed Linnets, whose winter flock size have increased in recent years compared to the early monitoring period (Figure 3a). Skylark, another red-listed farmland specialist species, has shown a significant increase in abundance over the monitoring period (Figure 3b). Initially rarely recorded, this species has become increasingly regular in recent years, with a pair now maintaining a breeding territory. It is likely that managing longer grassland areas adjacent to the Lakeside Ark from 2024 has enhanced the site's suitability. In contrast, Starling – another red-listed farmland specialist – has experienced a significant decline in abundance over the time, suggesting that the site may have become less attractive to this species. This trend will be further discussed at upcoming BSG meetings.

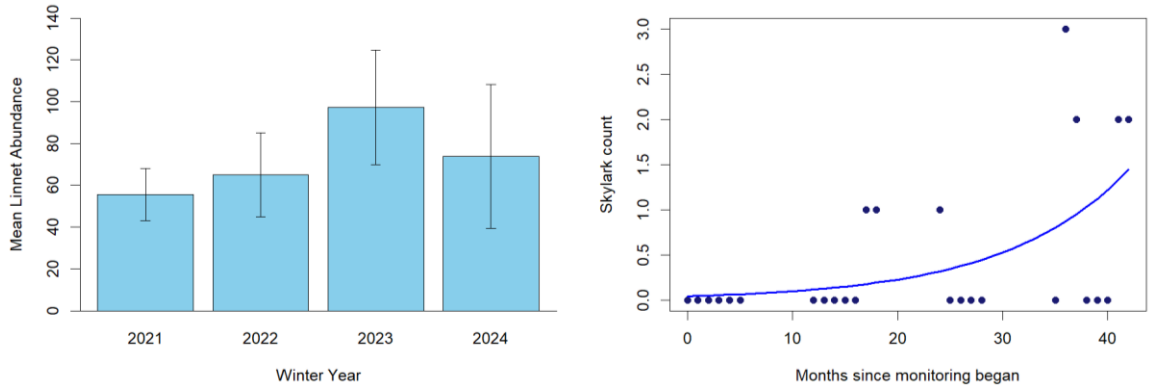

Figure 3. (a) Mean Linnet abundance at Lakeside Ark. (b) Changes in Skylark abundance over time at Lakeside Bird Ark (October 2021 – April 2025). Each point represents the recorded count in a given month. A fitted line from a generalised linear model is shown in blue.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Worcester Nature Forum: Dr Ashbrook contributed to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) planning meeting, hosted by Worcestershire County Council. She subsequently joined the Worcester Nature Forum, led by Worcester City Council, which met three times in 2024–25. This network fosters cross-sector collaboration on nature-based projects. Planning is now underway for 'Worcester Grows Wild', a year-long public engagement programme launching in spring 2026, focused on wildlife gardening and involving partners across the county.

Worcester Swift Recovery Group: In August 2024, Dr Ashbrook was invited to create and chair a Worcester Swift Recovery Group. This group includes representatives from the University of Worcester, RSPB Worcester & Malvern, Natural England, Environment Agency, Worcester Cathedral Eco Group, Worcestershire County Council, and other local organisations. The group submitted a £31,000 collaborative bid to the Duckworth Trust for a three-year "Swift Spaces" project, focused on installing nest boxes and creating wildflower habitats in Worcester City. While the bid was unsuccessful, the group is planning a series of joint public engagement activities in summer 2025, with additional opportunities anticipated in 2026.

Looking ahead

We have recently submitted a proposal to the University Executive Board to begin planning a community orchard project, involving local partners such as the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and residents in St John's and City Campus communities. We see this as a key future step in our commitment to enhancing biodiversity and community participation on and around our campuses.