



# Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust

## **BIRDFAIR UPDATE – 23/11/2021**

### **A MESSAGE FROM THE LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND WILDLIFE TRUST CHAIRMAN**

It is with great regret that Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust (LRWT) has made the decision to no longer run the annual Birdfair staged at Rutland Water Nature Reserve.

For over 30 years, LRWT, supported by its staff, volunteers and members, has been proud to run this internationally-renowned event. Working with our co-promoter, the RSPB, we have brought thousands of visitors to Rutland Water Nature Reserve for three days each August, and overall have raised more than £5 million for overseas projects run via the Birdlife International group of charities. We are immensely proud of this achievement in global wildlife conservation.

The global pandemic has had a significant effect on our day-to-day operations as a charity. Like many other similar institutions, we have seen income streams lost or reduced, with resultant significant impact on our financial reserves and thus the delivery of our charitable work.

Birdfair operations have contributed to these financial concerns. When Covid struck, we were obliged to cancel the 2020 event. We could have chosen to close the gates of Birdfair for good at that point. Instead we decided to press forward with evolving the event and continuing the Birdfair legacy. Our innovative Virtual Birdfair, held in 2020, showed how new digital techniques could be harnessed effectively to communicate with the public and spread the Birdfair message.

However, to continue Birdfair operations, we had to obtain external funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, as well as a loan from the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts to support our working capital. Despite these measures, Birdfair operations made a loss of over £19,000 in Financial Year 20/21, which is wholly borne by LRWT itself. These stresses were exacerbated by the prolonged Covid measures which meant that an event in 2021 was also not viable.

The impact of Covid has meant that we have had to take a long, hard look at our commitment in operating Birdfair.

Birdfair proceeds have always been donated in full to Birdlife International. LRWT has never received any part of this, but we have nevertheless borne all the risks and liabilities. Moreover a large part of our staff team have had to devote significant time to its preparation and running over the years, supported by our remarkable team of 341 Birdfair volunteers. This is a significant burden for any organisation, let alone a small, local, charity such as ourselves.

LRWT's focus now has to be on our recovery from the financial impacts of Covid, and on our new forward strategy '30 by 30', which aims for 30% of land managed for wildlife by 2030.

We also need to be aware that the world has changed markedly over the past two years. One realisation in particular is that a vastly disrupting event such as the global pandemic we are still experiencing may not be uncommon in future.

Other concerns have also been key to our decision.

Firstly, the current format of Birdfair is heavily influenced by travel and tourism. The carbon footprint generated both by the event itself and the activities it promotes does not now fit well with our own strategy towards tackling the climate crisis.

Secondly, we have become concerned about the impact the event might be having on Rutland Water Nature Reserve itself in terms of compaction of soil in the site area. Whilst our studies have not been conclusive so far, our stewardship of the Nature Reserve has to be taken seriously. On balance, we believe the risk to the site itself, and also to LRWT's reputation should the site become damaged, outweigh the benefits of the event continuing at the Nature Reserve.

We conclude that in this overall scenario, continuing to run Birdfair in its current form presents LRWT with unsustainable financial, ecological and reputational risk. We feel that if it were to continue, then the event would need a radical rethink in terms of content and format. Given the other factors to our decision I have noted, LRWT does not have the resources to take up this challenge.

We have thought long and hard about all these concerns, and the decision has been an extremely difficult and sad one. But we knew that it was now time to make the future clear, in the interests of the event, and of everyone who is involved in it or supports it.

We hope the legacy of Birdfair may live on in similar events, run by organisations with greater resources than our own.

Although we are bringing our involvement with Birdfair to a close, we are pleased to be able to announce a donation of £15,005 to Birdlife International. This amount is made up of direct donations and auction proceeds in aid of their Helmeted Hornbill conservation project supported by our Virtual Birdfair in 2020.

We send our thanks to all our sponsors, exhibitors, site contractors, and the many wildlife experts and media presenters who have supported Birdfair over the years. Thanks are also due to LRWT's members, and the tremendous family of Birdfair volunteers, not forgetting LRWT's Birdfair organisation team, the Rutland Water Nature Reserve site team, our finance team, and Anglian Water. Birdfair could not have existed without these key people.

We wish you the best for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Anthony Biddle  
Chair LRWT