

A vision for **Black Bourn Valley** nature reserve



With its flower-strewn meadows and grassland sweeping down to a river lined with beautiful crack willows, Black Bourn Valley nature reserve is a rare and precious piece of old Suffolk.

Suffolk Wildlife Trust's vision is for a wilder, wetter landscape capable of sustaining even more wildlife.



Letting nature take the lead...

When the opportunity arose to buy 70 acres of land next to Grove Farm in 2015, the potential was clear. By linking the existing farmland with the river it would be possible to create a magnificent landscape for wildlife that sweeps down the valley sides with the Black Bourn at its heart.

We have already seen that with its small fields, thick hedges and wide field margins, Grove Farm supports valuable populations of farmland birds that are struggling elsewhere. Now we intend to bring a similar approach to the whole river valley – encouraging ancient hedges to spill out with thickets of blackthorn and hawthorn scrub, creating the perfect habitat for species such as nightingale and turtle dove.

Our approach to the grassland will be to allow a more heathy grass structure to develop, reflecting the furzy countryside of Norton Heath that is now only evident in road names.

Over time we hope the molehills that already freckle the valley will also be joined by the warrens of rabbits; their localised digging and grazing helping to create a complex mosaic of habitat throughout the reserve.

By letting nature take the lead, a natural gradient will soon develop across the valley with habitats merging into one another and creating the wonderful mixed-up edges that are so valuable for wildlife.



Hides

As well as being good for wildlife our vision for Black Bourn Valley is to create a habitat that is good for visitors. A timber hide will be built on the edge of the new wetland area, allowing walkers and birdwatchers to get up close to waterfowl, waders and, for the lucky and the patient, the shy otter.

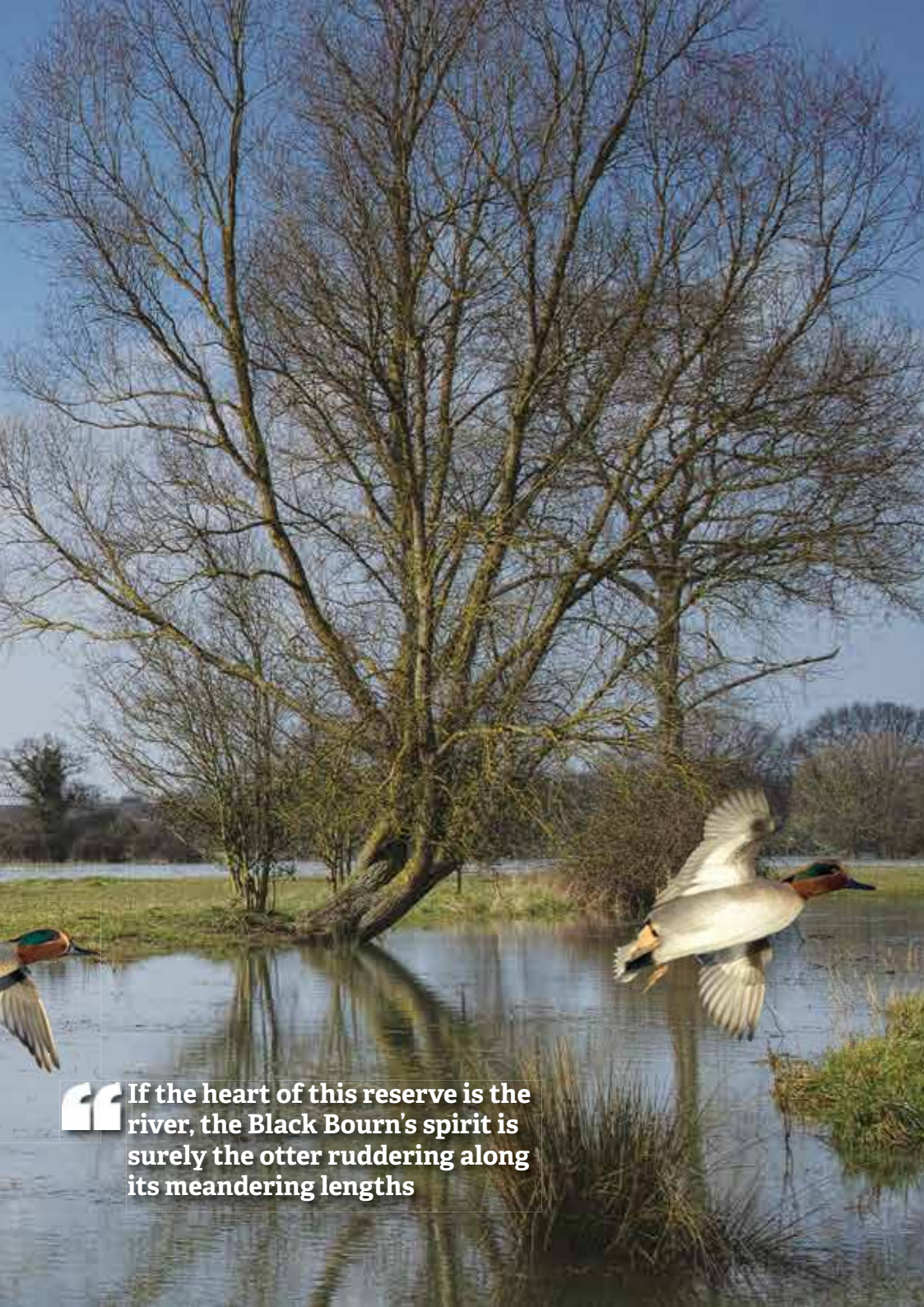
Access

Public access to the reserve will be improved with the creation of a new riverside trail and the creation of a carefully screened visitor car park that can be reached from Heath Road.



By working with nature, this valley could once more run with the liquid song of nightingale





... and rejuvenating the river

As the name of the reserve suggests, the river is at the heart of what Suffolk Wildlife Trust wants to do at Black Bourn Valley. We know the meadows along the length of the Black Bourn would have flooded every winter. The snipe and large flocks of duck such as shoveler and teal that still gather here during the all-too-fleeting high waters give a snap shot of a wild valley of times long gone.

At some point in the past, possibly in the 1950s, the river channel has been highly modified with some sections being straightened and even blocked. A remnant of an old channel, now not connected to the main river but located in the flood plain on the eastern side of the valley, forms what is in effect a long linear pond. The old course of the river, marked by thick banks of reeds, can still be seen ghosting through the countryside.

When the Trust first considered buying this part of the reserve we initially thought this route could be completely restored and that the water would soon remember the sinuous bends it took through this landscape. But creating a wilder, wetter river corridor to support more wildlife is not so straight forward.

The current river course is lined with beautiful and brittle crack willow that slow dive into the water, their split limbs and tangled roots creating an intricate tangle of habitat for barn owls, bats and otter. The linear pond, another feature that has been established for decades, sustains fish and a wide variety of invertebrates; some of which are pond specialists.

With not enough water to sustain both the Black Bourn's old and current courses, our surveys suggest a more sensitive approach would be to reconnect the river's old route using flood water from the newer channel. By holding back water over the winter months, the old course will become a seasonally flowing river, with the overflow forming and sustaining wetland shallows that are so crucial to wading birds and waterfowl.

Our ambition for the river's wildlife goes beyond the nature reserve. The Black Bourn meanders northwards from Grove Farm to Mickle Mere, eventually flowing into the Little Ouse, just south of Thetford. Over the last two years we have worked closely with landowners along the length of the Little Ouse to restore a more natural channel, bubbling with invertebrate life. In a similar way, we hope buying and restoring this stretch of the Black Bourn can be a catalyst for conservation enhancements all along the valley.

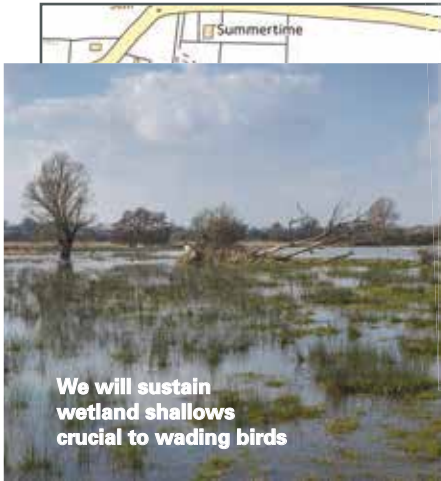


Thank you

The purchase of the river meadows was possible thanks to the generous donations of our members and through the legacies of Gerald Ford and Mary Newman.

Buying land is one of the most powerful ways we can secure a better future for wildlife and without such support it would not be possible.

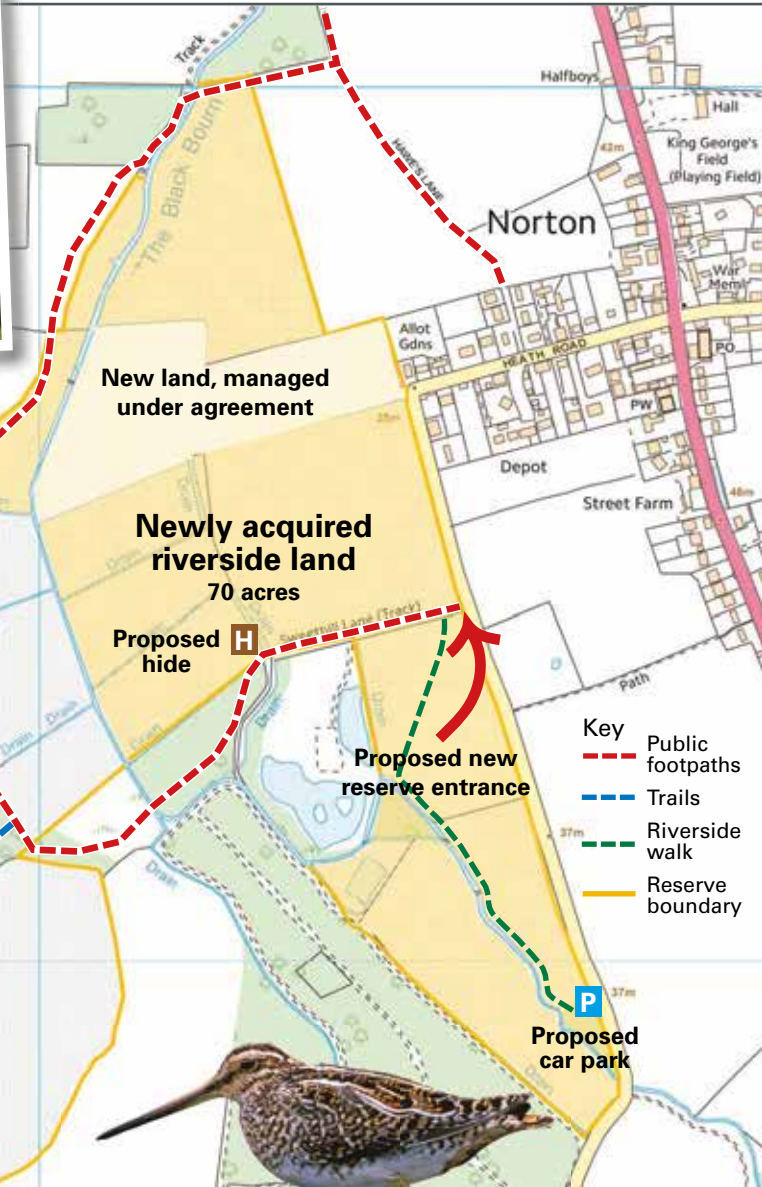
“ If the heart of this reserve is the river, the Black Bourn's spirit is surely the otter ruddering along its meandering lengths



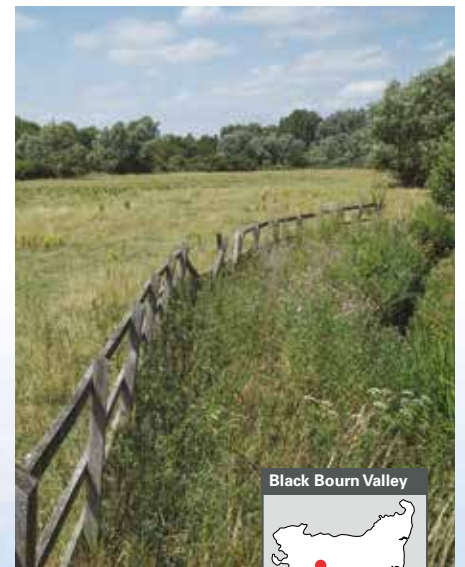
We will sustain wetland shallows crucial to wading birds



Crack willows on the riverbank



There is lots of water vole activity along this stretch of the Black Bourn. Our plans to create a new riverside walk should give a good chance of spotting one.



Black Bourn Valley



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Current course of the Black Bourn river

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