

A Chat with the Head of Land Management at Earth Trust

David Corney, Footpath Warden Long Wittenham Parish.

In addition to the many local rights of way through the parish, I am also very aware of the many permissive footpaths provided and maintained by Earth Trust, which offer many extra miles of beautiful walks for the people of Long Wittenham and the surrounding area. As a dog owner and local dog walker, I frequently meet and chat to other dog walkers, and everyone I talk to is, like me, very appreciative and grateful for these additional walks through the countryside.

Recently I met up with Chris Parker, who is Head of Land Management at Earth Trust. We walked through the meadow with our dogs, and round the back of Paradise Wood, returning eventually to the car park by Neptune Wood, via some of the permissive paths that Earth Trust provide. It was a useful chance to catch up with Chris and find out more from him. Chris was explaining how Earth Trust welcomes visitors, and recognises that visitor numbers are growing rapidly, both as a result of people seeking exercise during Covid, and the significant house building program which is underway across the area. Chris explained that Earth Trust needs to balance the demands of walkers and visitors against the need to also manage and maintain the habitat and wildlife. This is not an easy job, but it was really helpful to understand how there are some important ways we can all help to support and maintain this lovely resource as the pressures continue to rise over the coming months and years.

Chris explained that as many of our nearby walks continue to be busy, we need to stay on the footpaths as much as we can. (See the footpath map). The footpaths wind their way through important habitats, which we need to help protect in order to support the wildlife we all love to see. I found it so useful to understand that some of the tracks which are not permissive footpaths, but which are so tempting to walk on (and yes, I admit that I have done so, but will not do so now), support ground nesting birds, which walkers and dogs can and do disturb, often ensuring they never return.

Chris explained the importance of taking a bag with you to keep rubbish in when out for a picnic, and making sure to take all your rubbish home at the end of the day. Earth Trust don't have general waste bins at their places as these would be classed as commercial waste. This would come at a significant cost to the charity, as well as needing ongoing maintenance and monitoring (for example after busy days or bad weather). Not to mention that taking rubbish home usually means more can be recycled.

If you're out with your dog, you can find poo bins at most Earth Trust places – these are emptied by the local authority (South Oxfordshire District Council). What I had not known is that you can also report full bins to SODC at: www.southoxon.gov.uk

Chris went on to explain that many volunteers have been out litter-picking in the last year, including through the lockdowns where it has been particularly problematic. Chris asked me to say that if you're one of those volunteers, then please know how grateful the team at Earth Trust is for your help in keeping these green spaces so well cared for – thank you. (And thank you from me too, for making my walk a nicer place).

The Clumps are probably a favourite place for many of us. As we move into longer and warmer days, the grass in the meadows will be growing faster, and the cows will be on the Clumps to keep it in check. These are Herefords which tend to be fairly placid around people including dog walkers. They

are, however, still livestock and not pets – so please do give them space, keep dogs on lead (unless chased, in which case you should let go of all dogs), and make sure to leave all gates as you find them.

It was really helpful to talk to Chris to better understand not only what pressures Earth Trust are under, but also what they need from us as locals, and why it matters.

I do hope you find this article helpful. I will be meeting up with Chris regularly, so if you have any particular questions or concerns please email them to me at david.r.corney@gmail.com and I will be sure to pass these on to the Earth Trust team and get back to you with a response.

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