



## **Minutes of the 75th Annual General Meeting of the**

### **Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust**

**Held at the London Wetland Centre, Queen Elizabeth Walk, London SW13 9WT and simultaneously online, on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2022, at 2pm**

**169 WWT members and staff were present (76 virtually and 93 in person), including the following members of the Council:**

Barnaby Briggs (Chair), Martin Birch (Hon Treasurer), Andy Beer (AB), and Simon Tonge (ST) at London and Hester Liakos (HL), Luminita Holban (LH), Sarah Pearson (SP) and Alex Mawer (AM) online.

In attendance: Sarah Fowler (Chief Executive)

#### **1. Welcome**

Barnaby Briggs (Chair) gave a warm welcome to the 75th Annual General Meeting of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and introduced himself as host for the afternoon.

It was brilliant to have so many people in the room and online and he was really pleased to be able to facilitate a hybrid AGM to get more people involved.

The Chair introduced WWT's Management Board; Sarah Fowler (Chief Executive), Kevin Peberdy (KP), James Robinson (JR), Corinne Pluchino (CP) and John Rew (JRew), who were all present in the room.

#### **2. Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from WWT's President, Kate Humble, and Trustee, David Tudor.

#### **3. Minutes of the 74<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting held 25 November 2021**

No comments were received on the minutes. Receipt of the minutes was acknowledged by Colin Butcher and Shari Cole.

#### **4. Matters Arising from the Minutes**

There were no matters arising.

#### **5. Elections to Council**

The Chair announced that Martin Birch (Hon Treasurer) was stepping down after 7 years as part of the WWT Council, and Simon Tonge, Vice Chair was also stepping down after 14 years. The Chair thanked them both for their longstanding service and remarked that they would be missed.

To take Martin Birch's place as Treasurer of the Council, the Chair was pleased to announce that Council appointed Philip Wilson as Treasurer for a term of 3 years.

Philip is the Director of Finance & Operations at ISEAL Alliance, an international NGO that shapes and promotes good practice in social and environmental sustainability. He plays tenor saxophone, is a fellow of the Linnean Society, has six grandchildren and has been a member of WWT for over 40 years.

**6. To receive and consider the Annual Report & Accounts of the Council for the year ending 31st March 2022 and the Report of the Auditors thereon**

**a) Chair's Comments on the Report**

The Chair opened by saying that he looked back over the achievements of the past year with a sense of hope. While there were still challenges ahead, they came with exciting opportunities, and before going into more detail of the past twelve months, he wanted to offer a very warm welcome to the new Chief Executive, Sarah Fowler.

Sarah started in March 2022 and came with an extensive background in nature conservation and connecting people to green and blue spaces. She brought vast experience in leadership and organisational development, and joined WWT not only with a clear and ambitious vision of what the future could hold for wetland conservation, but also with a clear vision of what needed to be done to get there. He was delighted to have her on board to lead WWT and ensure it had maximum impact.

He also took the opportunity to say how pleased he was at the reappointment for a further three years of President, Kate Humble and Vice Presidents, Mark Carwardine, Mike Dilger, David Lindo and Chris Packham. He was immensely grateful for the support they and other vice presidents, Dafila Scott, who was in the room, and Her Grace, The Duchess of Norfolk, had given during the year with a wide range of initiatives.

The Chair went on to say that everyone at WWT was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It had been an honour to have the Queen as Patron for many decades until 2016, when she passed the role onto her son, His Majesty King Charles III, then His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. The Queen was an integral part of WWT's history, taking an interest in its work over many decades, and first visited founding site, Slimbridge Wetland Centre, as Princess Elizabeth before her Coronation.

The Queen and her late husband, His Royal Highness Prince Philip, were friends of founder, Sir Peter Scott, and his wife, Lady Philippa Scott, all sharing a deep passion for wildlife and conservation. This close association included Sir Peter painting the Queen's portrait when she was still Princess as well as several visits to Slimbridge with Prince Philip, including one occasion where they stayed overnight at Sir Peter's home. The house where they stayed is now the Scott House Museum, where the Queen's signature in the visitor book is proudly on display.

Casting his mind back to the beginning of last year, the Chair remarked that it was hard to remember just how different and difficult lives were back then. The country had only just started to emerge from the pandemic, but as the sun started to shine on wetlands and the reserves burst forth with new life, visitors reappeared and there was a strong message of hope and first glimmers of a return to normality that WWT and its centres were able to offer.

WWT rose to the challenge by offering supporters and members a welcoming picture of its wetland sites as places to get outside, in a safe environment and experience amazing wildlife, in wide, open spaces. It also offered a wider vision, one of confidence, that pointed to how wetlands could be a beacon of hope in challenging times, offering a positive solution to climate, nature and wellbeing crises.

Since then, it had been a story of stops and starts, with many continuing trials and tribulations, as the charity battled its way out of the pandemic and with the rest of the country made its slow and at times difficult return to a 'new' normal.

Throughout the past year, there had been real pressures on the organisation. Sites and wider conservation projects in the UK and internationally continued to be impacted by COVID and it was necessary to take substantial measures to ensure the ongoing safety of employees, volunteers and visitors. He could not overemphasise the second blow of Avian Influenza. The Avian Influenza season saw outbreaks on most of WWT reserves, putting significant strain on operational teams, with Caerlaverock being the most impacted losing thousands of barnacle geese.

Despite challenges, it had been a year of renewed focus. WWT had achieved a sustainable financial framework and rolled out four ambitions, embedded and widely communicated with employees, volunteers and supporters. WWT moved forward with renewed confidence, clarity and optimism, and continued to expand key conservation projects and pick up momentum for those that needed to be put on hold.

He was particularly encouraged that WWT's ambitions had found resonance with others, which was leading to significant grants and expressions of support, both financial and non-financial. WWT was delighted to secure substantial funding to enable continued work to develop and demonstrate the value of wetlands, not just for nature, but as a critical part of the solution to the climate, biodiversity and wellbeing crises. This was a clear reflection of the growing recognition of the role wetlands could play and highlighted WWT's ability to collaborate and take clear and practical action to deliver positive solutions.

In the UK, significant progress was made in areas including blue carbon, natural flood management, blue prescribing and water treatment. Projects designed to manage, create and restore multi-benefit wetlands, while at the same time supporting species recovery within waterscapes, including nature reserves, had made excellent headway. Notable highlights had been two multi-million pound government funded Green Recovery Challenge Fund projects delivered with partners in the Severn and Avon Vales and on the Somerset coast. It was exciting to see valuable wetland habitats created and restored at scale and was hopefully a taste of more to come.

WWT had a long history of improving the fortunes of threatened species and as more wetlands were created and restored, this was going hand in hand with success in species restoration work. To improve breeding success and help pump-prime diminishing populations, WWT used a range of tools in the conservation toolbox, including world-leading skills in conservation breeding. Although WWT had to work within COVID restrictions, 2021 saw the release of 33 curlews in Dartmoor, 43 black-tailed godwits in the Fens and 97 corncrakes at the Ouse Washes, and the Council were lucky enough to go the Ouse Washes in the summer and hear the corncrakes.

It was not just among funders that WWT had found resonance and there was a real appetite for and interest in WWT work among the wider public too. WWT was developing new ways to engage with its members and supporters and it was fantastic to reach completion of Slimbridge 2020 and welcome visitors to the final two exhibits: the Living Wetland Theatre and Mission Possible. He was particularly fond of the pelican Sprout who was very reluctant to get his feet wet!

The Slimbridge 2020 projects had been evaluated and he was delighted to say they'd scored highly for both enjoyment and for the strong conservation messages visitors were taking away from them. Arundel had seen the completion of its Coastal Creek and Pelican Cove exhibits and was delighted with the positive response received.

2021 also saw the launch of 'Generation Wild' an innovative new project which would connect 45,000 disadvantaged children and their families with nature.

Away from sites, momentum was building, with notable successes from a new approach, which aimed to raise the profile of WWT, engage more supporters, and

deepen the public's understanding of the role wetlands could play in meeting the current climate, nature and wellbeing crises, which were all closely connected.

At CoP26 in Glasgow, Blue Carbon proposals were launched to growing public and policy interest and more would be heard later in the morning about this work and WWT's research at WWT Steart into the role of saltmarshes in storing carbon.

WWT also launched Wetlands Can!, a major milestone, as it represented WWT's first integrated, strategic, communications campaign, and aimed to raise awareness for wetlands, while at the same time, positioning them as a positive solution to some of the planet's most urgent challenges.

WWT was delighted to have been selected as one of the beneficiary charities by the Times and Sunday Times Christmas Appeal. The Chair hoped that everyone had the opportunity to read some of the wonderful articles that were published about WWT's work as part of the partnership and he thanked Dafila for contributing to one of them. This level of interest clearly demonstrated the traction WWT's story was having way beyond its more traditional supporter base.

One of the most memorable highlights of the past year, was WWT's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations. It was an opportunity to look back at over seven decades of conservation achievements and thank those that made it all possible, but it was also a time to look ahead and set ambitions for the future. The anniversary culminated in the visit of WWT's Patron, the then HRH Prince of Wales, to officially open Scott House and to launch the new Blue Recovery Leaders Group, a major initiative established by WWT to help build engagement with the corporate sector and seek their support to help deliver transformational change for wetlands.

Work was not restricted to the UK, and WWT had been working hard to deliver real successes in the three priority countries of Madagascar, Cambodia and Myanmar. More would be heard later in the morning about work in Cambodia and how WWT had been working with communities on the ground in the Mekong Delta to improve wetlands for people and biodiversity, including the majestic sarus crane. In Madagascar, he was delighted to say that a large grant had been secured which had enabled work to start on a three year community based project at Lake Tseny.

The Chair turned his thoughts to the amazing people that had helped make it all happen. Throughout a period of uncertainty and challenges, the response from employees had been extraordinary. They had experienced ongoing uncertainty for over two years, but had responded, without exception, with true passion and resilience. It was their actions, to do whatever action was needed, that had enabled the Charity to continue its activities and safeguard and grow its finances. Whether it was maintaining sites, keeping critical wider conservation projects going, or ensuring vital corporate functions kept going, all employees had risen to the challenges they faced and he and Council were sincerely grateful to them all.

WWT worked with nearly one thousand volunteers across ten sites, and they had remained engaged throughout. As restrictions lifted, it had been wonderful to welcome them back and work with them to help rebuild after so much activity had been restricted over the past two years.

He was also massively indebted to supporters who had continued to donate exceptionally generously through the further Emergency Appeal and Wetlands Can! Appeal, and thanked everyone who had maintained their membership even when access at some sites continued to be restricted due to COVID measures.

He also took the opportunity to say how much WWT valued the incredibly generous and valuable legacies that supporters leave the Charity. Gifts in Wills made a huge difference and played a really crucial role in helping WWT to continue its work.

The past year had without doubt proved to be a pivotal and exciting moment in the Charity's history. In a year that celebrated seventy five years of extraordinary achievements, it was also now possible to look ahead to an equally bright future.

There was a renewed confidence under the strong leadership of the new Chief Executive and more decision makers were turning to WWT for advice, support and delivery, which was something to build on in the future as WWT sought to find nature-based solutions to some of society's most pressing challenges.

There was also an increased public interest in WWT's work and a growing appetite for nature. With more people falling back in love and re-connecting with the beauty and solace that blue and green spaces could offer, it really was WWT's time.

Above all, WWT was a charity that promoted solutions in a world that needed hope and leadership, and despite the challenges experienced, it had weathered the storm. There were more to come but as the organisation moved forward from the pandemic, it did so from a strong financial base, and he could see a renewed sense of optimism and confidence to tackle the big issues.

The Chair finished by saying that he was absolutely confident that with clear ambitions and priorities, wonderful staff and volunteers and dedicated supporters, WWT was in the strongest position possible to meet the challenges and deliver the answers needed for its future health and the future health of the planet.

## **b) Treasurer's comments on the Accounts**

Martin Birch introduced himself as WWT's Honorary Treasurer and recalled a time from his childhood as a small boy, who climbed up onto his bed and scribbled down his sightings. Some ten years later, he was a zoology student at Bristol University and weekends were spent, mostly in the winter months, observing swans and hatching plans with his best pal to see a lessor white fronted goose. Those who had looked for a lessor in front of white fronted would know how difficult this was!

In 2015, some thirty years later, The Hon Treasurer returned to Slimbridge at the invitation of the late Peter Day, to pick up the position of Treasurer. He was delighted by, and in awe of the work, that the Trust did, and hoped that he had made a small contribution to the governance of such an amazing conservation charity.

The Honorary Treasurer noted that income in 2021/22 saw an improvement of 5% on pre-pandemic levels and proceeded to highlighted seven year income by stream.

WWT had achieved amazing things in seven years, from banning led shot, to inspiring communities in the Russian arctic to urban Slough, and none of it could have been achieved without the incredible support of members, raising a total of £168m in that time. Almost a third had come from memberships, totalling just shy of £50m, and a further one fifth from catering and retail. Approximately one seventh came from admissions, and legacies had raised over £18m, with last year being one of the best year of gifts totalling £3.5m. £50m was secured in grants, donations and appeals, and made up the other major income streams.

The Honorary Treasurer went on to share a few of the financial highlights from the past year. Trading and admission income had tumbled and legacies fell, but there was a strong bounce back, and income received from members through membership or generous donations through appeals, was striking. Whilst one side dipped, another picked up; memberships grew to over 88k, and membership retention improved from 82% to 87%.

WWT ran two appeals; a summer appeal to protect wading birds; and Wetlands Can! appeal to create 100,000 hectares of healthy wetlands in the UK; and WWT was delighted to be chosen by The Times and Sunday Times as one of their partners.

The impact of covid uncertainties was felt in WWT food outlets, and plans to diversify the offer had been hit by numerous challenges including fuel rises, supply chain issues and the industry-wide problem of staff recruitment.

WWT launched its own Wetlands Blend coffee, and the dual bean roast was sourced from quality Fairtrade certified producers, but also collected waste coffee grounds from WWT sites to roast the next batch, delivering closed-loop recycling, and was available to buy at sites to enjoy at home.

Total reserves, consisting of a mix of restricted funds, land and property assets and general reserves, strengthened to just shy of £45m.

The Hon Treasurer paid tribute to all the staff and volunteers who make WWT incredible. He was inspired by the knowledge, commitment, tenacity and warmth shown on visits, and remarked that they were heroes of wetland conservation.

Wetlands are essential to mitigate the impact of climate crisis, and as he stepped down, he wished Philip Wilson all the best. It had been a privilege and he was honoured to have been part of Sir Peter Scott's legacy.

The Hon Treasurer finished by commending the 2021-22 financial statements to the members, on behalf of Council.

Receipt of the Annual Report was acknowledged by Karen Fraser and Charles Dewhurst.

**7. To re-appoint Crowe UK LLP of St James House, St James Square, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 3PR, as auditors and to authorise Council to agree their remuneration**

**a) Auditor's comments**

The auditors were not in attendance and no comments were received.

**b) Appointment of auditors**

Re-appointment of the auditors was acknowledged by Robert Falkner and Karen Rose.

**8. Marsh Awards**

Annie McCarthy introduced herself as Trust Manager of the Marsh Charitable Trust, founded in 1981 as a grant making body by Chairman Brian Marsh, and over the past 30 years had developed the Marsh Awards scheme. Recipients of the awards were people who had made a difference by selflessly contributing their efforts to causes they believed in. The awards were part of a larger scheme in partnership with various external organisations spanning across the areas of heritage, social welfare, arts and conservation. The partnership with WWT went back to 2010 and she was pleased to be in attendance to celebrate and present the following awards:

- **Nigel Jarrett, Conservation Breeding Manager, Slimbridge HQ - Marsh Award to a WWT staff member for an outstanding contribution to wetland conservation in the UK**
- **Harison Andriambelo, Country Co-ordinator (Madagascar) - Marsh Award for an outstanding contribution to international conservation**

- **Norman Ridley, Volunteer - Marsh Award to a WWT volunteer for an outstanding contribution to wetland conservation in the UK**

Videos were played in turn to celebrate the achievements of each individual, followed by presentation of their awards by Annie. Norman Ridley was unable to attend in person, but watched online with his colleagues in Welney.

## 9. Long Service Awards

The Chair was delighted to recognise the following individuals for 25 years long service and the enormous contribution they had made in that time:

- **Belinda Dargie**, Office Manager at Martin Mere, started with the Trust on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1997, and
- **Tanya Grigg**, Senior Conservation Breeding Officer at Slimbridge, started with the Trust on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1997.

The Chair also acknowledged and commended the amazing contribution of Nigel Williams who left WWT this year with 28 years long service.

Nigel had been integral to the Llanelli centre since May 1994 when he joined WWT as Reserve Manager. As Centre Manager since August 2005 he had overseen the ongoing development of the reserve and the site more generally.

The Chair gave thanks to all those who serve WWT for a very long time.

## 10. Chief Executive address

The Chief Executive opened her address by acknowledging the immense and significant contributions of the celebrated individuals. She thanked them all, and also The Chair, remarking that it was great to have joined such an incredible charity. She wanted to share three things over the course of the afternoon; wetlands and what they meant to her, a little about herself, and what she could see in WWT in her eight months so far, which had been fantastic.

Starting with what had brought everyone together for the occasion, wetlands and their wildlife, she described wetlands as three things; beautiful, essential and threatened.

Wetlands are beautiful. Incredible things happen when land and water meet to create wetlands, from the humble garden pond to mighty estuaries and deltas, wetlands brim with wildlife and are breathing spaces. She loved that WWT's ten wetland centres brought that beauty to life and recalled speaking to a person in the restaurant that day who felt at home when they came to the centre, and how a colleague at the COP14 Ramsar Convention had reminisced to her about their first visit to Slimbridge as a nine year old boy and seeing his first widgeon and nene, sparking a connection with nature which had remained ever since, and still informed their work today.

Wetlands are essential, connecting people globally like no other habitat, and something we are reminded of every winter when welcoming the return of Bewick's swans from Russia's arctic tundra. At the places where water stops, to dwell a moment on land, is where wetlands come into their own, for people, climate, nature and places. Wetlands are a life support system, central to food and water security, as well as stabilising the climate, cooling cities, cleaning water and bringing a world full of wildlife. That wetlands are essential was indisputable and she believed everybody in the room believed it too.

Wetlands are threatened and being lost at a terrifying rate, disappearing three times faster than rainforests. 35% had been lost since 1970, with freshwater species populations crashing by an average of 83% since 1970, and the situation was worse in the UK, with 90% of wetlands loss in the last 100 years. Wetlands loss had largely

gone unnoticed, despite their superpowers, and sat in the shadows of forests, woods and oceans for too long. She wondered whether it was because they were not a well understood habitat, or there were many diverse habitat types, or their importance had not been raised enough, or that in the past, wetlands were steeped in mists, danger and of life lived on the margins. A guiding philosophy of Sir Peter Scott was to inspire people to connect with the wetland world, and it was one she aimed to uphold.

WWT had amazing stories of hope to share, such as its science work which showed that farmland ponds created a biodiversity bounce-back way beyond the edge of the pond. Work with farmers in Somerset on ghost ponds showed that while past wetland footprint might well feel lost, it was sitting in the ground just waiting for water to arrive to bounce-back; an amazing superpower. With WWT support, communities in Cambodia and Madagascar were creating Community Based Savings Groups to provide low interest loans to farmers to help them manage wetlands sustainably and provide a food source and security. When WWT started working with the community on the Salt Hill stream in Slough, it was in terrible health; covered up, neglected and forgotten, fish were dying and it was clogged up with old car tyres and waste. Its future looked bleak, but several years later, having day-lighted the stream, it was thriving and firmly part of the local community, testament to the ability of wetlands to bounce back and a testament to what happens when communities come together.

The Chief Executive urged everyone to keep speaking up for this work, and went on to recall happy memories as a young girl, using the freedom of a new bike to explore the surrounding villages and countryside and nearby ponds and rivers. Her MSC in aquatic resource management led to her first job working on the Water for Wildlife campaign for the Wildlife Trusts in Wessex, and she had worked on water and wetlands in many areas; as a policy and parliamentary advocate in the RSPB; as the government statutory advisor in English Nature; and at the Environment Agency as a regulator of water companies and building flood defence schemes, such as the Nottingham Flood Defence scheme, as well as responding to flood incidents. She had been in the thick of it and understood the impact of when water went wrong.

At the Peak District National Park Authority she spent time conserving and enhancing the cultural and natural heritage of the 555sq miles of upland landscape, bringing moorland owners together to find solutions to mitigate wildfire risk on upland peatbog. She also worked as a leader of a local planning authority setting the planning policy framework and making decisions on planning applications. While there, she chaired the Great North Bog and a group of six partnerships that came together to restore the northern upland peatbogs.

The Chief Executive's focus throughout her career had always been on the environment and the power of people coming together to inspire and be inspired and care about the planet. Nature based solutions had been talked about right from the start of her career at the RSPB, working with consumer bodies, water companies and farmers. She had an empathy for what it was like to work in the public sector, often in thankless situations, but always looking for solutions to help tread lightly on the planet and it was important to work with government and local government in collaboration.

She remarked that writing a twitter profile was a brilliant discipline in describing who you were in as few words as possible and noted hers read:

"To inspire joy in nature and being outdoors. CE at WWT, works to enrich lives by the power of nature rich wetlands. Often seen running. Believer in partnerships"

She was about bringing people together, to collaborate and deliver for the planet and people. To be a beacon of hope for what was possible, and in the face of gloom, find solutions together, that are nature positive, climate positive and community positive.

Her journey had been one of mistakes, tears, fun, and enjoyment and she had learnt the importance of courage to make the right decision, not the popular one, to be in the room, with sweat and tears ready to fail or at least to try. She knew how much



compassion mattered, to listen, to support and empower others, to own her mistakes and could only be her best if she felt connected, something she was looking forward to building and doing over the course of the day. She had been asked a few months back if she was a wetland scientist, and whilst that was her training, she saw herself as a wetland engager.

WWT was a charity with a reputation for scientific rigour and a proven track record of delivery. A charity that inspired people to fall in love with and care for wetlands and its wildlife. It's woven into its history and in its blood, just as wetlands is the lifeblood of the planet, and that was why WWT was perfect for her, and she was grateful it had given her the opportunity to lead such an auspicious charity.

Eight months in, the Chief Executive could see much to celebrate about what WWT does; impactful, courageous conservation, with a singular focus, serious about science and engagement with people, with an international reach. WWT was on the hopeful, doing side of the conservation movement, and its sites offered an unrivalled opportunity for people to connect with wetland wildlife. WWT went about its work with humility and openness, was great at collaboration, brave pioneers in its field, and delivered before shouting about it quietly later. She wanted to keep hold of all this, because WWT was an antidote to a lot of society's problems.

The Chief Executive highlighted three fierce truths:

1. Wetlands are amazing, they brim with wildlife and they have super powers, but, 45% of British people do not know what a wetland is and even fewer, less than 1%, know who WWT is.
2. Time was running out, the new UNEP Emissions Gap report warned that only a root-and-branch transformation of economies and societies could save the climate crisis and disaster. And last month's Living Planet Report showed that nothing short of transformational change is needed to tackle the biodiversity crisis.
3. There are global economic challenges, which risks a drive for economic growth without nature at its heart. The national economic position means we're seeing rising inflation, rising costs and a cost of living crisis that is impacting staff recruitment and income which needed to be recognised too.

WWT could not ignore these fierce truths as it looked to the future and needed to generate investment in wetland restoration, action to stamp down on the causes of wetland destruction and bring an increasing range of people in to support. That's why through its blue recovery work, WWT is calling for a hundred thousand hectares of restored or created wetlands in the UK. That's why globally, WWT is calling for the protection of wetlands on important flyways and seeking a movement of people to increase awareness and understanding of wetlands and of WWT, creating opportunities for people to engage and act.

There were tough times ahead and the time for incremental change globally was over. WWT needed to change with that and work with business and government, communities and conservation partners, to form alliances to unlock investment and action. WWT had a strong voice but also needed some jeopardy and urgency and would be speaking up more for wetlands. Conservation science needed to be accessible and shared to increase understanding of the importance and potential of wetlands to address global challenges. Independent research showed that WWT was not well known beyond its core supporters and experts in wetlands and it was essential to broaden the understanding of wetlands and find a brutal simplicity about who WWT is, what it does and why, and to speak in a way that resonates more clearly with the audiences it wants to reach. Wetland centres needed to keep working to maintain an experiential edge, deliver for conservation and support financially, and it was important to focus on the things that made an impact and pare down the things that didn't, yet consumed effort.

The Chief Executive was taking time to listen and the Management Board were in the initial phase of strategy development, more of which would be shared as it developed

over the coming year. She thanked the Management Board, staff, Trustees and members for their support, and gave particular thanks to Kevin Peberdy, who had been fantastic in welcoming her to WWT. It was a fascinating time in the Trust's history, its voice was resonating and proving relevant, and it had wetland stores and nature connectedness to share.

The Chief Executive finished by thanking everyone for their membership, support and encouragement, and asked everyone to inspire at least one person to join WWT. She asked for collective effort and support to speak up for wetlands and promised to keep engaging and inspiring everyone to continue supporting WWT.

The Chief Executive handed back to the Chair, who recognised Liz Rae, who was attending online, for her work as a volunteer at London Wetland Centre for many years and on the Finance, Audit & Risk Committee. The Chair thanked her for her excellent dedication to detail and thorough advice, which was hugely appreciated.

The Chair then gave a fond farewell to the Honorary Treasurer and ST, thanking them for everything they had done for WWT.

## **11. Questions (raised with the Chair prior to the meeting)**

The following question was received prior to the meeting:

### **1. How severe is the impact of temporary closure at Martin Mere due to Avian Flu and is there any idea on when it might open.**

KP was delighted to announce that Martin Mere had reopened on 8 November but Avian Influenza (AI) continued to be a major concern. The outbreak had been much longer than previously experienced and it was circulating in wild birds annually rather than just in winter. WWT was dedicated to reducing the risk of AI at sites, but unfortunately it had been found in a number of wild birds across all sites, and was now widespread in the UK, which had resulted in the closure of Washington last year, and Martin Mere and Castle Espie this year. Through the hard work of the team, Martin Mere had reopened, by isolating birds to minimise the risk, but it meant that parts of the grounds and living collections could not be visited whilst the birds were maintained and monitored to check their health. Castle Espie remained closed while the situation was assessed. He remained optimistic for two reasons; the disease wasn't behaving as expected and even though there were cases within the living collection, it was not rampaging through the entire collection, and secondly, there was evidence to suggest that some birds who had come down with AI had survived, and hopefully had a degree of immunity, which was an important finding. It was still a very serious situation and would need to be taken into account in future thinking.

The Chair opened questions to the room, and those online, and the following questions were asked:

From the floor:

### **2. Thank you for opening the London Wetland Centre early for six Sundays in and around May, which was very much appreciated by birders. Is it possible to extend that facility for longer, perhaps during the migration season in October?**

KP responded that Lisa Woodward, Centre Manager, was unavailable to answer, but as acting Director of Operations, he confirmed there was a precedence at other sites to allow birders to come in early, and it was certainly something he would take away and speak to Lisa about. It was an important question which would be given due consideration.

From the floor:

**3. Subsequent to the pandemic, how have things gone with school visits to all our centres, and secondly, are free school visits still happening at the London Wetland Centre?**

KP answered that school visit numbers had reduced during the pandemic, but it was pleasing to know that numbers at London were now almost back to what they were pre pandemic. Free visits were still being offered to children from disadvantaged areas through Generation Wild, a fully funded project, and he was very proud that WWT was able to bring children to centres and encourage them. More would be heard later about the project.

From the floor:

**4. I notice that one of the centres uses a wetland hero's app designed for children to engage with sites a bit more, and are there more approaches that WWT will try to do with technology in the future to engage more people and solve more problems such as AI?**

KP remarked that it was a very good question and formed an ongoing debate within WWT to embrace technology, but also to keep alive the idea of real and being out in nature. There were technologies like the wetland hero's app, and the app that was developed as part of the Slimbridge 2020 project, designed to get people outside and engaged with wildlife, but he wouldn't want to see wildlife replaced with a virtual world, and getting the right combination would always be important.

From online:

**5. Are you planning to extend the number of wetland sites?**

KP responded that WWT was thinking about its strategy going forward and sites remained important, but if any further sites were developed, they were more likely to be in line with a Steart type project to demonstrate the multiple benefits of wetlands. There were opportunities for funding to develop sites like Steart based on carbon storage and he would love to see a combination of cluster sites similar to Slimbridge and Steart.

From the floor:

**6. The Chief Executive and Chair said they would like members to come together to spread the word for more recruitment. Do you have any ideas for what people might do and is there any interest in doing events which bring people to wetlands?**

CP responded that one of the key streams of this work, that Trustees have asked us to think about, is how we engage with all the different streams of audiences, not just those we talk to now, but those we want to talk to. There are a lot of people that don't have the opportunity to come to our centres and we are very much looking at how we achieve this.

From online:

**7. Would WWT consider further reducing meat and dairy options in its canteen and stock with the issues on livestock production, climate loss and habitat change?**

KP responded that changes had been made to improve the catering offer, but there had been problems with inflation, costs of buying etc. Consideration was being given to those constraints, and also sustainable options, and there was an intention to look at improving and sourcing those types of products.

From the floor:

**8. Thank you all for wonderful presentations. I thought drought may crop up which will have some effect on wetlands, and how is this changing our thoughts for the future?**

JR advised that WWT is acting in a number of areas to solve some big issues like flooding, carbon storage, water quality and wellbeing and it was also important to address the biodiversity crisis and consider water quantity. WWT had done a lot over the year to influence decision makers to address these questions and was doing great work to find solutions. He had just returned from Geneva to try and solve other country issues too, and was proud to be there to help ensure other countries would promote wetlands and wetland solutions.

From the floor:

**9. I'm delighted to see Illuminature is launching this evening, and opening to the public tomorrow. Can you help us understand if the programme will be offered at other sites, and secondly there are so many members locally who want to see Illuminature, can you help us understand why members pay more?**

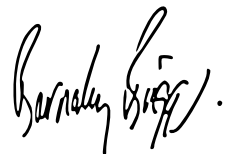
KP was delighted to see Illuminature launch and noted that one of the most exciting outcomes was that 50% of visitors to Illuminature had never been to the site before, and anything that brought in new people to engage with wildlife and wetlands and provide income was really welcomed. It was a useful event which combined a focus on wetlands, and thought would be given to doing it elsewhere. In terms of membership, there were limits on what could be offered and he hoped the membership was seen as good value for money.

**12. Chair closes the meeting**

The Chair thanked everyone for joining the 75th AGM and invited everyone to share their experience of the event by completing a survey to be issued the next day.

The Chair invited everyone to enjoy a short break, after which presentations would be given by Bena Smith and Bunny Yorth on international achievements in Cambodia, Mark Stead and Paul Lawston on Generation Wild and Hannah Mossman on Steart Marshes and Blue Carbon.

The Chair officially closed the meeting at 15:45pm.



Handwritten signature of Bernard King.