

## **Working Towards Eden**

Fleets's newest Country Park, Edenbrook, located behind the new housing on Hitches Lane has recently been handed over to Hart District Council who have opened its stunning 53 acres of countryside to full public access. There are concerns however held by locals that this valuable wet floodplain, home to many rare birds and one of the most important bird areas in Hart, is at serious risk because of the poorly planned dog walking arrangements. FACE-IT ( Fleet and Crookham's Environment Is Threatened), the local community group, is hoping to work closely with Hart District Council and other local organisations to improve the situation and develop an exemplar open space that is great for dog walking and residents but not at the expense of our fragile natural heritage, its great beauty and special wildlife. "Visions of a large car park with commercial and intensive dog walking would not only ruin the value of this precious asset but would clog already busy Hitches Lane and connecting roads" a FACE-IT spokesman commented.

" This wild area of brooks, wet riverside meadows, hedgerows and wetlands with views across the River Hart valley has always been a special place of real beauty and bountiful wildlife. With limited access in the past its exceptional value has been largely unknown and enjoyed by just a few intrepid locals. Its good to see the area opened up for people and their dogs to enjoy but it would be tragic to lose what makes the place so special."

Apart from providing space for the new residents a key function of the park is to encourage dog walkers away from the heathland to the east of Fleet that extend to the outskirts of Aldershot. The heathlands are home to some of Britain's rarest and most threatened ground nesting birds that are easily disturbed by dogs and dog walkers across the many 100's of acres. The heathlands are protected by a European designation "Special Protection Area" for Dartford warbler, woodlark and nightjar. The concept sounds great but there is a flaw. The Edenbrook Country Park, technically a SANG ( Site of Alternative Natural Greenspace) is also very important for rare and declining ground dwelling birds that are susceptible to disturbance from dogs and dog walking across its 53 acres .The site has not been previously designated but has an incredible birdlife with almost 150 species recorded. These include many declining species such as redshank, lapwing, snipe, skylark, yellowhammer and real rarities such as long-eared owl, garganey,

nightjar and woodlark all seen this year and all vulnerable to excessive disturbance.

The FACE-IT Spokesman said “With clever adjustments and some fine tuning of the layout we believe it is possible to get the best value out of the Country Park for people, dogs and the wildlife. Our ideas include:

- Low stock-proof fencing, perhaps using existing materials, to limit dog disturbance and create wildlife refuges.
- Excavation of shallow scrapes, to improve wetland habitat for important species like snipe, which have been displaced by the current scheme.
- Additional reed planting/ shrub planting to provide habitat and natural screening to sensitive areas.
- Re-siting of some of the BBQ/picnic furniture to areas that are less sensitive visually and to wildlife.

We have already sent a schedule of ideas to Hart District Council and local Councillors for discussion and have had a positive response so far. We will continue to work with them to seek these essential improvements”