**Anything But Footy:**

The London Stadium, the Copper Box, the London Aquatic Center, the V&A, BBC Studios and UCL East part of East Bank, the new culture and education district. All around us are world-class sporting, educational, arts, and culture facilities. But all around us too, sharing this amazing space, are 14 species of dragon and damsel flies, 12 species of butterflies, mammals like weasels and red foxes, seven species of bats and 66 types of birds.

In this episode of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park Podcast, we find out more about the wildlife that lives here and how you can see and hear it too.

**Tom Bellamy:**

Hi everyone. My name's Tom Bellamy. I'm the biodiversity manager at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

**Anything But Footy:**

So Tom, very early in the morning, we're walking down the greenway. There's a quarry on our left hand side, but we're we're off to the old Ford Waterworks.

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, that's right. The old Ford Waterworks itself has a small nature reserve there. So that kind of area of mature trees is really good for attracting in the birds.

This time of year, lots of birds are setting up the territories, so it's a great time of day to be out listening to the birds, so we're expecting to hear quite a few. And yeah, the calls that you can hear will be robins. We've got great tits and probably a wren in there as well, a little trill kind call there.

**Anything But Footy:**

How many birds do you know are on Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and how do you even go about finding that out?

**Tom Bellamy:**

Well, since I've started, which was nearly two years ago, I've recorded 66 species and that's just being out on the ground really. We do annual monitoring of all the birds as well. So we do three breeding bird surveys across the spring and early summer. And that kind of gives us an idea of what's on the park, what's using the park and what more importantly what's breeding on the park.

We also have quite a few winter visitors, so we have jack snipe come in. We've also got red wing here at the moment that come over from Scandinavia, which is a great visitor at the park.

**Anything But Footy:**

And you mentioned that we will hear some tits and robins and wrens. Is that the kind of thing you would hear in back gardens?

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, traditional British garden bird really. But yeah, they found a home here in this kind of urban setting, which is fantastic. And they're very, very vocal at the moment.

**Jess Edwards:**

Hi, I'm Jess Edwards and I'm a recently qualified horticultural apprentice at the Olympic Park. I used to live on the Park a few years ago and it was such a solace during, what do we call it, lockdown. I really liked that I can't remember what that I was called.

And just kind of being outside, seeing all the wildlife, the greenery, particularly because during the first couple of lockdowns I didn't have any outdoor space. And I kind of moved from a project management role and I really wanted to do something hands on and practical and it was the perfect opportunity on my doorstep. So I just emailed really cheekily and said "Hello, will anyone take me on?" And they said yes. So that was a great opportunity.

**Anything But Footy:**

So we can hear one of your colleagues working hard in the background.

**Jess Edwards:**

Bless him.

**Anything But Footy:**

Tell us what you do on a daily basis. I think you might be collecting rubbish at the moment. That doesn't sound very horticultural.

**Jess Edwards:**

No, it's not the most glamorous bit of the job, but we got to do it every day just to keep the park kind of ticking over. And in the summer it's a bit more obviously when there are more people out. So we start the day off litter picking. There's a few route that we all take and emptying the bins.

And then it depends on the season, what we're up to really. At the moment, we've been cutting down all the beds. That was a couple of months ago. And then mulching everything to give the beds that bit of extra protection and some nutrients and kind of help them retain moisture.

After that, we're going to go into a long season of weeding. That'll be really fun, hours on our knees, kind of getting out the tough weeds. But other things we do are things like pruning all the various shrubs and the trees as well. We do lots of lawn mowing that should start quite soon. And lots of lawn renovations as well because we have a problem with crows eating our lawns.

There's so much stuff. I really like also getting involved with Tom, who's our biodiversity manager and doing kind of mini projects with him. So we've renovated some of the Sand Martin banks along the canal. We've put up some bird boxes and things like that. So yeah, it's really varied.

**Anything But Footy:**

And spring is a particularly important season for nature. So what can people expect if they’re coming along during Easter?

**Jess Edwards:**

Well, I think it's really nice. After however many months, four months of seeing lots of deadwood everywhere, we're finally seeing some green. We've got a little bit of color as well that should start coming up more and more in the next couple of weeks. All the birds tweeting, just being outdoors, feeling a bit more warmer. You don't have to wear three layers and just enjoying the fresh air.

**Anything But Footy:**

And this park, we're standing with the new V&A building and the UAL building towering over us, the stadium to the other side of us, and then all this nature as well. It's an incredible place.

**Jess Edwards:**

Yeah, I think it's something that east London hasn't really had before the Olympic Park, and that's why I love it so much. I think it's so important to bring kind of greenery to urban spaces. Because otherwise there's thousands of people who just aren't really getting in touch with nature and kind of getting the benefits that it gives as well, not just to people, but the environment and everything.

And not only that, as you say, all the building, it's amazing there's so many different aspects coming to the area. If you haven't been since 2012, it's changed a lot. I remember being where we are are now, and I think it was all multicolored tarmac stuff and it's really different now and it looks great.

And we're standing here by one of the playgrounds, which is obviously great for families. This is on the South Park. And then on the North Park there's also the tumbling bay, which is a great kind of wooden structure. I happen to have been on a few times and have really enjoyed myself as well. So yeah, I really recommend it for families.

**Anything But Footy:**

So Tom, we've moved on to the Great British Garden. Firstly, tell us about where this is in the park and what's here.

**Tom Bellamy:**

So the Great British garden is located in South Park. It's kind of a hidden gem really. It's got a very nice pond. It's surrounded by hedgerows and semi-mature woodlands. And yeah, it's got the old Lee coursing past it.

Great place to sit and have your lunch. Great place to do a bit of bird watching. I come here most days. In fact, I'd just been there earlier in the morning to do an amphibian survey. So I had 45 smooth newts in the pond there. So it's a very, very productive corner of the park.

**Anything But Footy:**

I thought I was up early to see the sunrise. But you've been here for what, since 4:00 AM?

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, I was up at a nice 2:45 this morning to make it in for a 4:00 start, yeah.

**Anything But Footy:**

And how important is it that you get to count how many newts are here and hope that they obviously grow?

**Tom Bellamy:**

It's really important. We can't really effectively manage the park without knowing what's here. So the annual monitoring that I carry out, and I carry that out with the helper volunteers as well, feeds back in and informs our management decisions. So it's really important to know what's here.

**Anything But Footy:**

So what are we listening to at the moment here in the Great British Garden? I thought it was a woodpecker, but it's not.

**Tom Bellamy:**

So we've got a shift chaff calling. They would've just come over from Africa and I believe in the distance there's a dunnock. We've had a coot as well and a carrian crow, which is a common bird on the park.

**Anything But Footy:**

And then up in the trees we have managed to spot one of two species of woodpecker that you have in the park.

**Tom Bellamy:**

That's right, yeah. We've got the great spotted woodpecker and the green woodpecker here. So obviously I'd love to have the lesser spotted that would the trifecta. But yeah, still holding out for that one, unfortunately.

**Anything But Footy:**

And also there's a world record that Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park holds for the number of bird boxes.

**Tom Bellamy:**

That's right. So we have, well, following the games there were 525 boxes put up and 150 bat boxes. Since then, we've put up a further nine. Obviously it's not a huge number, but we're hoping to continue that because they've been a good take up of those. So five out of the nine that we put up have already had prospecting and have been occupied by birds, so that's fantastic.

**Anything But Footy:**

And also everything's changed in 10 years. It's an ever-evolving landscape.

**Tom Bellamy:**

That's right. The park continues to develop. Habitats are constantly changing and we're seeing the biodiversity kind of change with it. We're on an increase at the moment, which is fantastic. So yeah, it's a great time to come and see it.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:** I'm Neal Glucksmann-Smith. I'm one of the community guides on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

**Anything But Footy:**

The Great British Garden. What's the gold, silver, and bronze bit?

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

Well, as you walk into the garden coming from the river, you'll see a huge sort of bronze globe surrounded by lovely planting. And as you move through, you then go to the silver birches and there's a wonderful sundial and you can stand on it and it's even actually calibrated for British summertime and GMT.

And then you move further towards going towards where the pond is and you'll see more gold planting at one time, but they've changed it to making more sustainable. But you do have your oak trees, which are quite special.

In 1894, Barron de Cupitan went to a place called Much Wenlock in Shopshire because he'd heard about the villages around there during the Victorian period used to have their Olympian games. He was so impressed that that helped feed the development of the modern Olympiad.

When he was there, he planted some oak trees. When we knew that we were going to have the Olympics, they took some acorns from those oak trees, propagated them at queue, and they were planted at the Great British garden.

When we take groups around, we actually explained to them about the fact that there's a link with Much Wenlock and there were two mascots. One was Mandeville and one was Wenlock. And so that actually gives the context to the fact that we have one called Wenlock.

**Anything But Footy:**

So as we continue to walk round the London Stadium, you mentioned Wenlock and Mandeville, you then come across Mandeville Place, and actually coming here in springtime, you can begin to see the trees in full bloom.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

You can. I was out this week and you can start to see the buds coming through. And what you've got is fruit trees. And there are 34 different varieties of fruit trees. And that represents the 34 Paralympic gold medals that were won by Team GB in 2012.

And it celebrates the Paralympic movement, para meaning parallel games. Some of the trees are named after some of the paralympic athletes. There's an Ellie Simmons. Ellie Simmons has got a cooking apple and I think David Weir's got a pear.

**Anything But Footy:**

He won a lot of gold medals, probably more than a pear, to be fair.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

That's true, that's true. Very true.

**Anything But Footy:**

And we forget that we're on a bit of an island in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park generally. And when you walk around these gardens, you kind of get that feeling because of the waterways around you.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

Yeah. And some people think these are all sort of, they've been created. But actually if you go back 18,000 years, that's how the River Lee was. And where the Olympic stadium is was actually called Stratford Marsh.

**Anything But Footy:**

We look around us, there are buildings, high rises, the new V&A, but then we have this amazing space as well.

**Neal Glucksmann-Smith:**

It's the biggest urban park created in over 150 years. And I think sometimes we forget that we've got over 560 acres, a lot of it down to planting. And I think you get preoccupied with the building, but actually sometimes forget that the planting is actually amazing and how much thought went into it in the first place.

**Anything But Footy:**

So we've taken a wander in the lovely park. It's an absolutely glorious morning and you forget how amazing this park is, although you Tom, probably don't because you're here most mornings.

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, I mean I try and get out in the park every day now, particularly going into spring and summer. I'll be out surveying all the time. And yeah, we're up near the North Park reed beds. So the reed bed is in an area dominated by common reed and it's a declining habitat across Lee Valley. So this was put in following the games. And it's an incredibly important habitat. It's probably my favorite habitat on the whole park. And yeah, we manage it annually by doing a 20% cutdown and that increases the habitat complexity and the birds respond really positively to that. So it's great.

**Anything But Footy:**

So what kind of birds are being bred in the reed beds?

**Tom Bellamy:**

So we have reed bunting, sedge warbler, reed warbler, Cetti's warbler, the gray heron come down probably from Waltham Stone wetlands up the river to forage here. And we have little egret using the park as well. So yeah, a whole host of birds really.

**Anything But Footy:**

And also, did we see what you said is a sniper?

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, we saw a jack snipe. So that's a winter visitor to the park. Not yet confirmed breeding but I'm hoping to. I have seen a pair this year, so fingers crossed for that.

But yeah, it is a incredibly specialized bird. So it's a waiter that thrives in this kind of wetland ecosystem, very susceptible to disturbance. So we did flush it this morning, at least we got to see it in flight because it has got this amazing kind of darting flight. So if you're lucky enough to see one, then it's a really special bird.

**Anything But Footy:**

And then all around the park there are the original trees, the original bushes, and we can hear other birds here. Again, very similar to what you might hear in a garden. We can hear magpies and black birds.

**Tom Bellamy:**

That's it. Yeah, all your kind of standard garden birds are here. And then we have a couple of just rarities really. So we have black redstart, which is a schedule one very rare bird, one of the rarest breeding birds in the country. We have them breeding in Stratford Westfield area. And yeah, they're an urban specialist bird.

But we also have linnet, which is traditionally a farmyard bird, but they'll be out on Hopkins field looking for seeds. So yeah, we get all the standard birds plus a little bit of special ones as well.

**Shirley Henry:**

Hello, my name is Shirley Henry. I am a Park Champion volunteer at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. We have a mobility service. We pick up customers from various parts like the Orbit. We also have the Velodrome and Copper Box area as well in addition to Timber Lodge.

**Anything But Footy:**

And around there, it's important that people feel like they can see every part of the park.

**Shirley Henry:**

Absolutely. It's completely accessible. There's so much to see and do there. And it's such a great space and there is an awful lot to see there, especially wildlife.

We do actually have volunteers who will actually take people round through on walks and talk about all the different things that we have within the space. And that's something that they can get to see.

**Anything But Footy:**

You obviously say that that's a walkthrough, but if you have mobility issues, you can have help with that.

**Shirley Henry:**

Yes, absolutely. Like I said, that's one of the services that we can actually assist with that. I was a performer in the opening ceremony of London 2012. I spent a few months here, particularly at the stadium before it was open to everyone. So it was so exciting. And I was also a volunteer for the Olympics and Paralympics.

This is a space that I really do enjoy being in, and it's just wonderful what we do here. It's not just providing people's information. It's a whole lot more.

**Anything But Footy:**

You mentioned the mobility service. Where do we find you?

**Shirley Henry:**

We are based over at the information point, and there will always be someone there to greet you and assist you and just find out what exactly it is that you need and we then sort of take it from there.

**Anything But Footy:**

So the message Shirley, this spring, come along.

**Shirley Henry:**

Absolutely. Please come along to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. There's lots to see and do and it is a fantastic space.

**Anything But Footy:**

So our final stop on our journey is the London Blossom Garden up near Timber Lodge where the playground is not far from the velodrome. Firstly, this is an important part of the park and a new part of the park.

**Tom Bellamy:**

That's right. Yeah. It was recently developed. And yeah, it's got lots of fruit trees that blossom at this time of year. And each of the trees represent a London borough and it's a memorial to those who passed on during Covid. Because of the different species of trees we have here, yeah, it's designed to kind of stagger that blossom to last as long as possible.

**Anything But Footy:**

And Tom, we stand here in the London Blossom Garden. We've just seen, is it a pair of kestrels or one kestrel?

**Tom Bellamy:**

Yeah, it was a solitary kestrel being mobbed by a crow. Crows are fiercely territorial and yeah, they won't tolerate the threat of a kestrel, particularly around the breeding season. But it's fantastic to see kestrels using the park.

So we have three species of raptor that use the park, kestrels being one, sparrow hawks, and peregrine falcons. So if you're lucky on a clear day and you look up particularly in the southeast corner of the park, you might see a peregrine falcon, which is becoming a more common sight across London, but still a absolutely incredible bird.

**Anything But Footy:**

What's your favorite?

**Tom Bellamy:**

My favourite is the sand martin. So they have recently come in the last week, they've turned up from a long journey back from Africa and they breed every year in the drainage holes coming off Stadium Islands. So if you're walking in South Park along the city, Mill River, stop and have a look at the little holes on the concrete embankment and you'll see these small brown birds. And they've had this incredible migration and they breed every year. And it's, yeah, it's easily my favorite bird.

**Anything But Footy:**

And just again to finish, the contrast between where we're standing now, where we can hear the birds singing, we've got planes flying above us, we've got students living around the corner. We've got East Bank coming with more tourists visiting. You've got ABBA fans in the park. This is an incredible place.

**Tom Bellamy:**

It is, yeah. There's always lots going on. Yeah, I mean, but from a biodiversity standpoint, it's really unique in that it is such an urban park, but we're able to deliver such a high variety of biodiversity. So yeah, it is really fantastic here.

**Anything But Footy:**

Tom Bellamy, biodiversity manager, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. This is the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park Podcast. Want to know more about what's happening? Hit follow where you're listening to this episode for many more stories, including wildlife, wetlands, and waterways. Or check out Queen Elizabeth Olympic park.co.uk