

Faced with growing restrictions on their wildfowling area, Rockland Wildfowling Association fought back to secure funds to purchase as much land as they could. Two years on, chairman RICHARD DICKS offers his experiences as inspiration to us all.

ROCKING THE BOAT

Rockland Wildfowling Association (RWA) is based in Norfolk, five miles south of Norwich. The initial objective when the club formed in 1985 was to maintain wildfowling on Rockland Broad. This has been achieved through a good relationship with local landowners, the Broads Authority, English Nature (now Natural England) and, importantly, Rockland Parish Council. As this is only shot two days a week we also manage shooting on a substantial rented acreage of freshwater marshes and ponds, which are all only shot one week day and a Saturday.

Sustainability of this type of shooting is threatened on many fronts. In recent times, the best land tended to be bought by the RSPB. However a new threat means the RSPB need not waste their funds, as the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLSS) now offers farmers subsidies to manage the land for the benefit of over-wintering species. Certain clauses include not having their land disturbed during October to March, unless agreed by Natural England.

These substantial subsidies (£280 per hectare) cannot be matched by us. For example, one particular marsh we rent could provide an income of over £14,000, whereas the farmer derives just £2,000 from shooting income.

Sadly, two years ago the club's long standing chairman had to stand down. I felt strongly that the future for wildfowling lay in land purchase and if this was to happen with our club of 40 members, some things had to change. Firstly, I had to volunteer to act as chairman and form an energetic committee prepared to pursue this vision.

The demands of renting land used up most of the club's subscriptions and, without spare income, you cannot fund the

interest payments on a loan to buy land, let alone repay the capital. So the first year for the new committee focused on sorting out the essentials, such as updating rules and building membership.

Thanks to the endeavours of our membership coordinator, membership increased 25% to 50 full paid members in the new committee's first year - providing us with surplus income. The success of our vision will inevitably depend on the club's ability to increase this surplus through more members, fund-raising or increased subscriptions.

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The next step was to get buy-in to our vision from the membership, so we could seriously look to improve the club's turnover. There was some concern on the RWA committee with regards to increasing subscriptions - the sort of increases we would need to set to be able to buy land would result in loss of membership and a potential reduction in funds.

Our irreplaceable secretary came up with a solution. He proposed a short-term subscription increase of £60 over three years and, importantly, the implementation of payment by standing order. The

incentive to do this is two fold. You do not have to find £180 in one go and members pay for next year's subscription at this year's rate.

Luckily our membership value their wildfowling and realise that the threats we face now and in the future mean we either dedicate more of our resources to land purchase, or we see fowling in this region changed beyond recognition.

All this activity seems to have boosted morale. Since our AGM we have picked up another 10 members. Club meetings and work parties are now better attended and this year we have refurbished three boats and replaced crumbling, dangerous old banking with a new quay. A club website is in development, through which we hope to attract new members, educate the public about our conservation work and generate income through an auction/sales page - a great tip provided by a relationship developed with Devon Wildfowling.

We are now in a more serious position to request grants and loans from the WHT and other sources, which is just as well as one of our landowners has announced they are selling up and we have to formulate a plan to purchase some or all of the 45 acres over which we currently shoot.

Hopefully by the time you read this we will be on our way to joining the growing list of clubs that BASC and the WHT have helped secure land for future generations to wildfowl.

If you want to sample the joys of fowling on the Broad or Norfolk marshes you can hire a boat for only £30 a day, or even join the club - you are more than welcome. Contact us via BASC's wildfowling department on 01244 573011.