



The United Nations General Assembly declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. The aim of this is to celebrate the diversity of life and raise awareness of the importance of our global biodiversity. Safeguarding our biodiversity requires effort from everyone and International Year of Biodiversity encourages individuals, organisations, and governments to work together and take the immediate action needed to ensure a sustainable future for us all. This edition of Berkshire Biodiversity News shows some of the biodiversity activities being carried out in Berkshire during this special year!

*Kelly Thomas
Biodiversity Co-ordinator*

Berkshire Biodiversity News 2010

Compiled by Kelly Thomas Edited by James Scott



Contribute to the Natural Environment White Paper

Defra recently requested responses to a Discussion Document they had produced on the Natural Environment. The responses to this document will feed into the Government White Paper on the Natural Environment due to be published in the spring.

In October BNCF held an event for groups and organisations in Berkshire to discuss the issues raised in the document and help inform responses. BNCF have since produced a response to this document (see www.berksbap.org/contribute-biodiversity-white-paper).

Defra have now extended the consultation period for Grass roots organisations to respond to the consultation and have set a deadline of 31st December. If you are a member of a local environment group please do respond (see ww2.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/).

International Year of Biodiversity Celebrations in Berkshire

Berkshire Nature Conservation Forum signed up to International Year of Biodiversity (see www.biodiversityislife.net). We are working with Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre (TVERC) to encourage recording of some declining species. A postcard has been produced asking for sightings of the following species: Stag Beetle, Bullfinch, Hedgehog and Slow-worm. If you have seen any of these species in Berkshire this year then please send in your sightings www.berksbap.org/have-you-seen-me.

At Reading Museum a series of events were held to celebrate Berkshire's biodiversity. A special biodiversity display had been produced and is currently on display in the museum. A wildlife drawing competition was held earlier this year, with prizes for the winners and runners up. There was a great response to this competition, and the winning entries can be seen at www.berksbap.org/international-year-biodiversity.

Developing Your Skills

The Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has released its "Developing Your Skills" winter training programme. Courses are free to BBOWT volunteers but are also open to anyone looking to learn more about wildlife.

The programme covers a wide range of topics including bird identification, badger surveying, practical skills and photography. Find out more via the BBOWT website: www.bbowl.org.uk and visit the volunteers page.



Small Blue on Bird's-foot Trefoil by James Scott (above)



Strategic Successes in the Loddon Valley

Back in 2003 Wokingham Borough Council was a partner in the Loddon Catchment Biodiversity Strategy. The project was a cross boundary project involving the Environment Agency, Wildlife Trusts (BBOWT, Hants WT and Surrey WT) the Blackwater Valley Group and the affected local authorities. The entire strategy can be viewed on line at www.blackwater-valley.org.uk/loddon_catchment.htm

The aim of the strategy was to set challenging targets for specific parts of the catchment. There were three sections of the Loddon catchment within Wokingham Borough, Dinton Pastures and surrounds, Swallowfield Park and surrounds and the Blackwater Valley. The Environment Agency have recently conducted a review of the achievements of the strategy to see how effective it has been at delivering on the ground. Wokingham Borough Council have managed to deliver a large number of biodiversity enhancements in the last 5 years including 3.5ha of new wet woodland, 7ha of new wildflower rich grassland at Sindlesham Meadows and 6ha of new reedbeds at various sites. In addition to this we have created 19 new ponds and restored 9 old ponds, installed 19 Barn owl pole boxes and constructed 10 artificial Otter holts. Indeed evidence that otters are continuing to thrive on the River Loddon has emerged only in the last year. Surveys in 2008 found fresh footprints and spraints on the river between Swallowfield and the A327 at Arborfield. Then in 2009 further surveys found spraints on the river north of the A327. However most tantalisingly a local fisherman reported seeing an Otter and 3 cubs at Dinton Pastures this autumn. Although it is almost impossible to know for sure that this was an Otter family (rather than the much more common Mink) we are fairly sure that otters are now using the park.

By Andy Glencross, Wokingham Borough Council



Creating reedbed on the Loddon (above), Andy Glencross



The site after 2 years regrowth (above), Andy Glencross

Mapping Important Habitats - Lowland Meadow Habitat in Berkshire

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) staff have spent many an hour since we came into being in 2003 mapping habitats in Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Now we have a fairly comprehensive idea on the distribution of habitats in both counties, especially the key habitats which tend to be where many of the less common species are found.

The loss of habitats has been a regular headline in the nature conservation world. Perhaps the most stark has been the loss of 95% of lowland meadows. When looking at the habitat information we now have it becomes very clear what this means on the ground. It is particularly worth looking at Berkshire. There is plenty of meadowland in Berkshire but very little of this is actual flowery lowland meadow habitat that qualifies as the UKBAP priority habitat. Even amongst these sites we have a lot of "remnants" and "elements" where the grassland community does not have the typical range of meadow species so only just makes it an example of the priority habitat. A decline in species richness is typical, often to an extent where sites which once supported lowland meadow habitat now only have remnants left.

In 2007 TVERC helped compile the semi-natural grassland data into the national habitat inventories maintained by Natural England (NE). Only 111 hectares (270 acres) qualified to be included, by comparison, some of the individual sites in Oxfordshire were of a similar size to the whole county resource in Berkshire!

If we take into account the remnants and sites with elements of lowland meadow habitat (which did not qualify for the NE inventory) we still only have an area of about 220 hectares. The size of Berkshire is about 126,000 hectares so that's less than 0.2%. But we know there is about 40-50,000 hectares with suitable soils for lowland meadows on undeveloped land that no longer supports flowery meadows, illustrating well how important it is to protect and manage what we have left.

Are we missing anything? Yes, but probably not a lot. Dick Greenaway found a small meadow near Yattendon quite recently and this year we are looking at Saches Island Meadow along the Thames. There might be some remnants in some of the small fields north of Bracknell. Churchyards and older cemeteries often have potential to have remnants of lowland meadow habitat and this year Shinfield Cemetery has been brought to our attention.

Do you know of any other sites we may have missed? If so then please do get in touch (email: melanie.hardie@oxfordshire.gov.uk).

by Graham Hawker & Melanie Hardie, TVERC

Threats to Lowland Meadows

Agricultural improvements such as ploughing, drainage, re-seeding, and the application of inorganic fertilizers and slurry make more economic farming at the expense of wildflower diversity. The old traditions of hay-making with later cutting allowed plants to set seed (as well as providing food sources and shelter for farmland birds and mammals), these days there are more frequent cuts and silage production. Overstocking with livestock, particularly in spring means more of the sward can be damaged and reduces the richness of flora. There is a natural succession of grasslands which reverts to rank grassland, and eventually to the development of scrub or secondary woodland, that is why we need active management to maintain the traditional countryside landscapes. Also there are still threats from new development.

TVERC Has Moved!

New Address: TVERC, c/o Oxfordshire County Council, Signal Court, Old Station Way, Eynsham, Oxon. OX29 4TL
Telephone: 01865 815451

TVERC contacts for Berkshire: paul.evans@oxfordshire.gov.uk
or melanie.hardie@oxfordshire.gov.uk

All enquiries regarding data searches should be directed to the above address, phone number or by email:
datasearch@tverc.org

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas

Here is an update of progress within some of Berkshire's Biodiversity Opportunity Areas. For further information visit (www.berksbap.org/boas).

A BNCF event was held for woodland owners within three BOAs in Wokingham and RBWM. The event included a talk on the importance of woodland management for biodiversity by Kate Dent from BBOWT and a talk on the grant schemes available from Richard Edwards from Forestry Commission. Stephen Loyd then led a guided walk around Ruscombe Woods. Since the event several of the attendees have shown interest in managing their woods to benefit woodland.

BBOWT's Moor Copse reserve lies within the Lower Pang to Sulham Stream BOA. This winter 3000 trees will be planted at the extension in a currently arable field. This is all possible thanks to the generous support of BBOWT members. The trees will reflect the natural vegetation assemblages of the surrounding woodland and will be deer fenced. This work will benefit a host of wildlife including woodland birds and butterflies such as Silver-washed Fritillary.

Farmland Bird Project Launched in North Wessex Downs

An exciting new partnership led by the RSPB and Natural England has been launched in the North Wessex Downs in a bid to help farmers and land managers boost key farmland bird species. A Farmland Bird Advisor, Diane Nicolle, has been appointed to cover the Berkshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire sites of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Diane will be providing advice and free no-obligation farm visits to help farmers and land managers who are considering entering Environmental Stewardship schemes for the first time, renewing existing schemes, or who would like advice on managing or amending their current arable options.

The North Wessex Downs is a nationally significant area for farmland birds, holding important populations of species including Lapwing, Grey partridge, Corn Bunting and Stone Curlew.

Environmental Stewardship schemes including Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) present an opportunity to create the habitat required by farmland birds whilst providing the farm with a stable income during its time in the scheme. Choosing options that provide nesting habitat, summer and winter food (the 'Big 3'), such as conservation headlands, wildflower margins and wild bird seed mixtures, has been shown to benefit not only farmland birds, but also other important species such as bumblebees and rare arable plants.

Diane will work closely with the farmland advisor who already covers the Wiltshire part of the North Wessex Downs under the South West Farmland Bird Initiative (SWFBI), and together they will form the North Wessex Farmland Bird Project.

The Project will also tie in with the current Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE), which aims to prevent the reintroduction of compulsory set-aside by asking farmers to enter ELS, to register any of their land already in voluntary options and to consider delivering one extra voluntary measure.

Farmers in the North Wessex Downs who would like advice or to arrange a farm visit can contact Diane on: 01488 680452 or at diane.nicolle@rspb.org.uk



CFE Launch a Resounding Success

More than 90 farmers and landowners attended the launch of an initiative to help protect and enhance the environmental benefits on their land. The Campaign for the Farmed Environment www.cfeonline.org.uk is a nationwide initiative that encourages farmers to protect soil and water and to conserve farmland wildlife through environmentally sensitive land management practices. It is a chance for farmers to show they can provide a healthy environment within commercial agriculture and to help prevent the re-introduction of compulsory set-aside.

The Campaign in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire was launched on March 25 at Phillimore Farms, Dunsden Green, near Reading on the Oxfordshire/Berkshire border. The event was hosted by Phillimore Farms' manager Simon Beddows, a keen proponent of Environmental Stewardship.

Visitors were welcomed by Laura Francis, CFE coordinator in the three counties, and Ian Waller, a Buckinghamshire farmer and chairman of the local liaison group who are driving forward the Campaign in the area. He was delighted with the response and said: "The event was oversubscribed, demonstrating the level of interest in the Campaign. Farmers, land agents and crop advisers attended. There was a real buzz and enthusiasm for the Campaign which was obvious from the number of questions we received at the outset and during the farm walk. We just need to make sure that this enthusiasm spreads across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. We will be holding a wide range of events to deliver on-farm advice at grassroots level between now and 2012."

Visitors enjoyed a guided farm walk while advisers pointed out measures that enhance farmland biodiversity, many of which are funded under environmental stewardship schemes. These can include wild bird seed plots and fallow areas to provide wildlife with food, shelter and breeding sites, and grass buffer strips beside watercourses to limit runoff into rivers and streams.

The Campaign has brought together farming organisations including the NFU and CLA in a partnership with Defra and its agencies, and conservation groups including RSPB and BBOWT (Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust).

Local 'beacon' farms are already being selected to demonstrate how commercial farming and environmental management can work hand-in-hand. Farmers can find out about Campaign for the Farmed Environment activities online at www.cfeonline.org.uk or by contacting Laura Francis on: 0300 060 0171.

BBOWT's 2010 Reserves Surveying Programme

2010 has been another busy year for the Reserves Surveying Programme on BBOWTs Berkshire reserves. At the beginning of the year 67 individual surveys were planned by the Biodiversity Team and in spring most were allocated to the fantastic army of BBOWT volunteer surveyors.

Butterfly transects account for many of the planned surveys and the survey data already received suggests 2010 has been a reasonably productive season for many species. Silver-studded Blues did well at Broadmoor Bottom and have been recorded at the adjacent Wildmoor Heath for the first time in several years. Bowdown Woods had another fantastic year for Silver-washed Fritillaries. Graylings have been seen at both Decoy Heath and Wildmoor.

Both BBOWT volunteers and staff have also been busy carrying out a series of habitat condition assessments of some of the habitat features on the reserves. These assessments are very much like a 'health check' to determine the condition of the habitat and how it may have responded to recent management work.

As the survey season winds down it will be time to gather and analyse all the survey data for the year and feedback to the reserve team to help them plan future management work.

Colin Williams, BBOWT



Ian Waller, BBO Chairman (left) and Campaign Launch Attendees (right). Photographs thanks to NFU.



New Swiftboxes in Bracknell

As one of the "Bracknell 24" species in the Bracknell Forest Biodiversity Action Plan, Swifts are of key concern in the borough and the country due to their recent decline. In 2009, David Lloyd of BBOWT and Bracknell District Urban Wildlife Group very kindly helped me check the results of some 20 boxes that had been installed in 2004 but with no positive results so far. Trying a different tack, we managed to install five new nestboxes on the top of the new Bracknell and Wokingham College building with the help of their site manager during April this year. These have been fixed to the rear of the screening and we have also invested in a swift call CD to play through speakers next to the boxes in order to improve the chances of swifts finding them. If anyone sees parties of screaming swifts flying low over buildings this is likely to indicate that they will nest somewhere close, any records of these or confirmed nest sites would be most gratefully received. Please send to Marlies Fell, Biodiversity Officer, Bracknell Town Council, Market Street, Bracknell, RG12 1JD.



Bracknell Swift Box (right)

New Tawny Owl Nestbox for Ruscombe Woods

The Friends of Ruscombe Woods have been aware of Tawny Owls in and around their wood for a number of years. Although due to the lack of hollow trees on the site, there had been no sign of a nest. The obvious solution appeared to be an artificial nestbox which generally work well for tawny owls. So when some recently felled larch from a nearby wood became available, the opportunity was taken to turn one of the logs into a suitable nest box. The log had two slices removed to form the roof and floor before it was hollowed out. The bottom and half the top slices were nailed back on to form the nest box (see inset photo). The work started on the nestbox in the spring 2009, and it was left to dry out during the summer to reduce some of the not inconsiderable weight before it was mounted in a tree. Once a suitable tree was identified with a leaning branch for the box (and overhanging branches for young owlets to perch for feeding by parent birds) the finished box was attached with heavy duty wires. The friends are now keeping their fingers crossed that the local owls take a shine to the new purpose built residence.



The Nest Box (above)



Attaching the box to a suitable tree (right)

Hard Times for Swifts

Are there Swifts still nesting in your village or town? Even if there are, I expect there are fewer than there were 15 years ago. According to the British Trust for Ornithology numbers in South East England have dropped by about 40% since then. One reason is that nest sites are being lost because buildings which Swifts have used for years are altered or repaired.

However it is possible to help them by protecting existing nesting places and by providing additional nesting places. This is what has been happening in the Cherwell District of Oxfordshire. For the last three summers volunteers have been recording Swifts' nest sites - not easy because unlike Swallows and House Martins, their nests are not visible. They are tucked away under eaves or in a crevice in the masonry. However we now have some information from nearly all the 78 parishes in the District. Several villages no longer have any nesting Swifts. Others have just a few remaining pairs and some still have quite healthy colonies. We know of more than 90 buildings where they nest (some of them with up to 8 pairs), and many others where Swifts are close by. Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre makes details of nest sites available to planning authorities. This provides some protection, because the local authority can request that planned alterations are made 'Swift-friendly'.

Perhaps as important for Swift protection, there is a growing network of Swift watchers who know where their local Swifts are, and who can encourage local interest and keep an eye on their nest places. Swifts will also use nest boxes, but they have to be carefully sited. We have also provided some new nest sites. We are promoting the inclusion of nest places for Swifts (and for other species which are dependent on buildings) in new developments. This has happened at a few sites in Oxfordshire, for example the Spiceball Centre in Banbury has built-in places for Swifts and bats.

By Chris Mason

Information about how to help your local Swift population can be found on the Swift Conservation website
www.swift-conservation.org

By Stephen Loyd



Sheepdrove Farm Has Got the Blues!

Small Blue started their first breeding colony at Sheepdrove Organic Farm this summer. Britain's smallest butterfly and a national priority species found new habitat created especially for it, as part of Sheepdrove Rare Butterfly Project.

"Small Blue is a big milestone for our nature conservation work" explains Jason Ball, the farm's resident ecologist, "We are delighted to be making a difference just one year after creating habitat especially for Small Blue, rich in the caterpillar food plant, Kidney Vetch."

"Volunteers, farm staff and a task force from the UK Green Buildings Council all take credit for the success, because they made the chalk crescents and seeded them by hand. This gives us hope that our special effort to attract these vulnerable butterflies will really work, although species like Marsh Fritillary are not as easy to please!"



Small Blue on Kidney Vetch by Jason Ball. (above)

By Jason Ball, Sheepdrove Organic Farm

Haymill Valley Community Nature Reserve

The local community has been doing some sterling work at Haymill Valley Nature Reserve this year. The local scouts wanted to become involved with a project so the Friends of Haymill invited them to help with the planting of around fifty young hawthorn bushes. They were very enthusiastic and soon had all the saplings in place. Local group volunteer Brian Hollins explains "These will provide us with flowers in the summer and berries in the autumn as well as deterring adventurous youngsters from climbing over the fence rather than using the nearby open entrances". The hawthorns are currently well established and growing well. The group also had volunteers from St John's Ambulance Cadets join them to help dig four new small ponds in the reed bed. Brian says "They too enjoyed their half day at the reserve and promised to visit from time to time to check the progress of 'their ponds'". If you haven't visited Haymill Valley Reserve yet, or have not been for some time, do go along. It is a small reserve but is a pleasure to wander through and you might see something of real interest.

By Abby Stephens
(www.bbowl.org.uk)

Local scouts working hard at Haymill (right)



Juniper Berries (right) and Wild Juniper (far right). Images courtesy of Plantlife.



The Great Juniper Hunt

Juniper is a UK BAP species, which is gradually becoming extinct at many former sites, partly due to the general absence of suitable habitats, but also due to factors such as seed viability, population sex ratio and age structure. It supports an astonishing amount of wildlife, including numerous insects and fungi that are unable to survive without it. As part of the Juniper conservation project, Plantlife are promoting 'The Great Juniper Hunt'. They are hoping volunteers will help them to obtain records of wild Juniper across lowland England and thereby ascertain the current situation, and give us a deeper insight into reasons for decline. For further information on how you can take part visit the Plantlife website (www.plantlife.org.uk/wild_plants/conservation_projects/juniper_down_the_hatch/).

Contact Details

Berkshire Biodiversity News is the newsletter of the Berkshire Nature Conservation forum. If you would like further information on the work of the partnership and biodiversity issues in Berkshire visit www.berksbap.org or contact:

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