

# THE STRIPLING

Newsletter of the Upper Thames Protection Society



Issue 32, October 2012

## Open Meeting and AGM

Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> November at 7.30pm

Cricklade Town Hall Annexe

"A Partnership of People Caring for the River Kennet"

Speaker: Charlotte Hitchmough, Director, Action for River Kennet

Membership only £2 a year. Non-members welcome

Action for the River Kennet, ARK was formed in 1990 by a group of individuals who were very concerned about the river's poor health, which was suffering from low flows and poor water quality. From their very first meeting, ARK drew immediate support from many people in the local community and environmentalists who want to see a valuable chalk stream protected. ARK membership currently numbers over 500, with many members regularly volunteering on the river.



Since its formation ARK has campaigned vigorously against water abstraction, challenging Thames Water and the Environment Agency, however ARK also works alongside these organizations and other partners to make positive impacts on the river.

ARK has achieved much and in many ways, and relies on the continued help of its many volunteers.

It will be a privilege to welcome ARK Director Charlotte Hitchmough to our AGM on 28th November and for us to hear about their work and campaigns. In particular we hope her talk will spark ideas of what we can do to protect and preserve the upper part of our River Thames.

### Chairman's Statement

Welcome to the 2012 issue of The Stripling, a newsletter written on behalf of the Upper Thames Protection Society for all of you who are interested in the Upper Thames and its environs.

As noted in our first article, what a year for water. At the start of 2012 there were real concerns over the underlying levels of water in the Upper Thames and its groundwater. Since those concerns were raised, it seems that we have seen endless rain – to the extent that now I think that many people would like to see an autumnal period with no rain.

The Society's objectives are not just in relation to the river, but also the areas around – which of course have a direct impact upon it. The pressures of commercialisation and agricultural persist. Joined-up thinking between all the competing government organisations is still required and it is hoped that this is something which the Society can promote.

As ever, the Committee work hard but we are only there to support the membership so if you have any issues which are of concern and relevance to the Society, please make your voice heard.

As many of you know, Seymour Aitken, having spent many years as Chairman, has now stood down. We thank him and his wife Louise for all that they have done.

We look forward to seeing you and any non members at the AGM at the end of November.

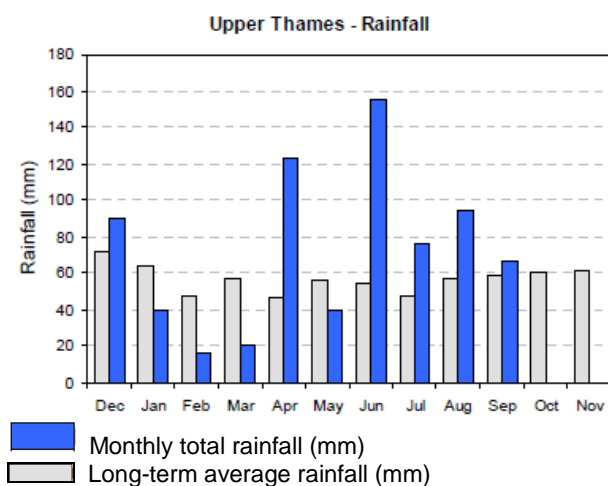
Chris Graham  
Chairman, UTPS

### What a Year for Water!

On the 20th February 2012 the Environment Agency declared that the South East of England was in a drought following two winters of below average rainfall. In the Upper Thames nine of the preceding 14 months had below average monthly rainfall when compared to the long term average. By March 2011 groundwater levels in the Oolitic limestone of the Upper Thames were exceptionally low.

River flows in the River Churn and Coln, both major tributaries of the River Thames, were exceptionally low with some reaches remaining dry despite the time of year. With low rainfall and low groundwater levels throughout the winter of 2011-2012, river flows in the Upper Thames showed little daily fluctuation and remained at a stable low flow more typical of a dry summer than a winter period.

## Upper Thames catchment and upper River Thames



Source: Environment Agency Monthly Situation Report, West Thames Area, September 2012



Photograph by Lois Latimer, Kemble. Thames Head, May 2012 showing unusually large amounts of water for the time of year. As noted in last year's Stripling article by Emily Gordon - the source of the River Thames is most often referred to as the springs at Thames Head (grid ref ST980955) to the north of Kemble. This is in fact only a seasonal source, and may only flow here for a couple of months a year when groundwater is at its highest.

By the start of May river flows were returning to normal and continued to rise. The River Coln which is the key indicator river for the West Cotswolds went from exceptionally low in Mid April to notably high within 10 days. The River Thames source location has remained at Lydd Well which is higher than it would normally be during a typical summer. By the end of May the EA were no longer considering the Cotswolds and Upper Thames at risk from the preceding rainfall deficit. On the 12th June water companies in the South East of England lifted their hose pipe ban.

Emily Gordon  
 Technical Officer Hydrology  
 Groundwater, hydrology and Contaminated Land

### Fishing Update from the Swindon Golden Carp Angling Association

We currently have the fishing rights on the Upper Thames south bank from the Cricklade Bypass 9A419) down to South Farm Water Eaton, some 3½ miles, as well as the two fields where the River Ray runs into the Thames.

The unfortunate spate of heavy rain since April 2012 has curtailed a lot of our fishing. The river has all the summer been excessively high and fast flowing. Anglers being unable to get into the margins to reach the main river flow and this after a low water spell over the past two years. So good bags of fish have not been reported this season. Although a few larger chub and the occasional barbel have been caught. Even our annual club matches have been postponed due to the above.

The Environment Agency introduced a further stone groyne into the River Ray to help clear some silted areas. For details of club membership contact: Mr Eric Bizley of 8 Glenwood Close, Swindon, SN1 4EB. Telephone 01793 693268. Memberships are also available from the House of Angling, Cotswold Angling and Hinders Tackle & Bait, all of Swindon.

Eric Bizley  
 Swindon Golden Carp Angling Association



Photograph by Lois Latimer, Kemble. River Thames, by the Bridge in Kemble - February 2012.

During this low flow period the EA continued to monitor the source location of the River Thames. The lowest point at which it was observed was just upstream of Ashton Keynes at the end of September in 2011, leaving a dry upstream channel of just over 10km. The source of the Thames remained low until the end of 2011 and only in the first week of January 2012 did the River Thames return to its typical winter source location which is Lydd Well (about 1.4km downstream of Thames Head).

Following two dry winters, heavy rainfall occurred in the Upper Thames from Mid April 2012 to the end of that month, giving a high April rainfall total of 123 mm, 266% of the April long term average. This was followed by normal rainfall in May and another two exceptionally wet months in June and July. The rainfall allowed rapid summer groundwater recharge and an increase in river flows.

## Invasive Plants on the Upper Thames

Along the river banks on the upper Thames there are lots of pink flowers, which might look pretty, but are a major problem. This is Himalayan balsam, an invasive plant that is out competing our native vegetation. As well as preventing our native vegetation growing and reducing the numbers of other species dependant on native vegetation, it also dies back in winter leaving riverbanks prone to erosion.



Himalayan balsam at South Cerney Outdoor Education Centre. Photograph by Samantha Stork, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

The good news is that Himalayan balsam can be easily be controlled by groups of volunteers pulling the plants before they set seed. On the Upper Thames Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Cotswold Water Park Trust and Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust are working together to remove these plants. We organise regular work parties over the summer to remove the plants. If you would like to get involved please contact Sue Sawyer on [invasiveplants@wiltshirewildlife.org](mailto:invasiveplants@wiltshirewildlife.org) or 07793251557. You can come along for as long as you like and the plants are easily pulled out.

In other areas volunteers have done an extremely good job in reducing the amount of Himalayan balsam. After 3 years areas that were completely overtaken by Himalayan balsam now only have a few plants, so this approach works well. Work on Himalayan balsam on the upper Thames only started in 2011 and this year the high water levels have meant that we were not able to get out to pull the balsam very often. Hopefully, we will have a better summer next year and be able to get out more often. So far various sections of the River Churn around Cirencester and Cotswold Water Park have been targeted. If you have got a few hours to spare next summer please come and join us.

Sue Sawyer  
Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

## Cotswold Water Park Water Vole Recovery Project 2012 Update

The last two winters have been incredibly dry in the Cotswold Water Park, and this has led to very low (or in some cases non-existent) spring and summer water levels in the rivers and streams of the Upper Thames catchment. As a result, the 2011 Water Vole surveys were a bit tricky, with normally flowing rivers often reduced to isolated pools and trickles. Our native

Water Vole is fairly adaptable to such issues and will seek stable back waters where possible, but prolonged dry periods will undoubtedly affect their breeding success. So after another worryingly dry spell during spring 2012, you can imagine my delight at finally seeing some decent rain arrive...

Well, six months later and the rain hasn't really stopped (I'm sure you've noticed). The Thames is flowing at levels more akin to those of a normal winter, with widespread flooding at areas such as Waterhay. The Ampney Brook has been running hard all year, as have the Rivers Churn, Coln and Leach. So my plans for catching up on overdue Water Vole surveys have been blown right out of the water (no pun intended). The standardised methodology of wading upstream has been abandoned due to the safety implications, and I've had to rely on incidental sightings and field records collated by myself or volunteers.

Several Water Voles have been sighted in wet ditches where the flows are more sedate and the vegetation has flourished. Others have been spotted on main rivers where slack waters allow them to swim across channels. The largest colony in the CWP, on a River Thames side channel near Lechlade, seem to have maintained their good numbers; again due to a reduced flow rate and an abundance of food plants.



Arch enemy number one, the American Mink, is still very much on the back foot in the Water Park thanks to my army of dedicated volunteers. They've been busily checking mink rafts throughout some very challenging conditions. I draw the line at making volunteers wade out to rafts floating adrift in floodwaters, but some have undoubtedly got their feet wet making sure that tethers are secure. We've only had two or three sightings of mink this year, with one trapped on the River Coln near Fairford, but we remain ever vigilant. If any readers live on stretches of river where they'd allow me to monitor a raft, then please don't hesitate to get in touch (Office: 01793 752730).

Finally, I'd like to use this forum to wish my old boss Gareth Harris the best of luck in his new career with the RSPB. Most of you will know Gareth from his presentations at the Upper Thames Protection Society's AGM; but many will know him as the instigator of the Water Vole Recovery Project and the Mink Monitoring Scheme which he set up in 2002. The RSPB's gain is very much the Cotswold Water Park's loss, and I can only hope to fill a very small section of

his shoes. He'll still be around and about the CWP in his spare time, volunteering on the CWP Bat Initiative and the Wetland Bird Survey.

Ben Welbourn  
Biodiversity Field Officer  
Cotswold Water Park Trust

## Endangered crayfish released into the wild by Bristol Zoo

Bristol Zoo and its conservation arm, Bristol Conservation and Science Foundation, released approximately 80 endangered, white-clawed crayfish into an ark site in the wild during September 2012. This was a relatively small release; however, it is the beginning of a large scale approach to prevent the extinction of this species.



Bristol Zoo started its crayfish breeding programme three years ago in 2009 with the view to eventually release these captive reared, globally endangered animals and work to save the species from extinction by re-establishing sustainable populations in south west England. The start of 2012 saw the South West Crayfish Partnership obtain funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund enabling the Zoo to undertake the release of this precious, captive reared animal as part of the Crayfish in Crisis project.

Crayfish are smaller than a five pence piece when born and are at risk of being eaten by larger animals. The crayfish being released have been reared at the Zoo for a full year to ensure they have a good chance of survival when introduced in to their new home.

The ark site, where the crayfish were released, is a safe haven. They are under threat of extinction due to the spread of North American signal crayfish, which compete for food and habitat and carry crayfish plague - a disease, which is deadly to white-clawed crayfish. This disease can be easily spread by people on damp wellies, walking boots, fishing tackle and nets.

To raise awareness of these threats and of how people can help protect our white-clawed crayfish, the Crayfish in Crisis project has developed a new Roadshow for schools. Innovative, interactive games and activities are used to inspire and engage children and to encourage them to protect our rivers and crayfish.

The main message is simple:

After a visit to a river, lake or pond, clean your boots and nets! Check your boots, nets or other equipment for stow away animals, plants or mud and clean them off before you leave. When you get home make sure you dry everything to make sure that any disease, such as crayfish plague, is killed. By taking these simple steps you can help save native crayfish by preventing the spread of crayfish plague and protect our rivers from all kinds of damaging invasive plants, animals and disease.

Maddy Ivey  
UK Conservation & Communication Officer

## Olympic Fame!

The opening ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games began with a two-minute film "**Journey along the Thames**", directed by Danny Boyle and produced with the BBC. The film followed the River Thames from its source to the heart of London, and we saw (albeit briefly) Thames Head, Ashton Keynes, through Eysel, on to Lechlade. A moment of fame for the Upper Thames!

## The Canal and River Trust

A new charity has replaced British Waterways to look after Britain's canals and rivers. The Canal and River Trust, whose patron is the Prince of Wales was launched in July 2012. Also unveiled is an appeal to raise £10,000 for 50 projects designed to breathe new life into tow paths and riverbanks, of which 4 are along the Kennet and Avon Canal. Three major partners have already pledged their support to the trust – Google, The Co-operative Bank and People's Postcode Lottery.

## Wilts & Berks Canal Trust

Wilts & Berks Canal Trust has received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest honour for voluntary groups. Trust volunteers have given their time to restore almost 1700m of canal between Melksham and Chippenham. The Trust aims to create a new wildlife corridor linking the Kennet & Avon Canal near Melksham to the Thames & Severn Canal near Cricklade and the River Thames near Abingdon.

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Note: The opinions expressed by correspondents are not necessarily those of the Upper Thames Protection Society. Please send contributions, letters, comments to Editor: Mrs Helen Goody Tel: 01793 750380  
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