

THE STRIPLING

Newsletter of the Upper Thames Protection Society



Issue 35, October 2015

Open Meeting and AGM

Wednesday, 11th November 2015, starting at 7.30pm

The Jenner Hall, Bath Road, Cricklade

Talk: "A Collaborative Approach to Improving the River Thames Environment"

Speaker: Jenny Phelps, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group, Gloucestershire FWAG

Membership only £2 a year. Non-members welcome

Upper Thames Protection Society - Registered Charity 299418

Chairman's Statement

Welcome to the 2015 issue of The Stripling. Thanks again must go to Helen Goody for another fascinating and detailed note on what is happening in the Upper Thames area.

2015 has so far been another busy year for your Society. Although there are only a few committee members and others who have the time to promote your interest, they have been active in a number of different areas. Some of this is reported within the magazine, but the most successful areas will be addressed at our AGM in November and I hope you will be able to attend.

The Upper Thames Partnership, of which we are members, pulls together a range of organisations to discuss topics of interest. The problems of flooding several years ago remain high on the agenda for the government and Environment Agency and this is filtering through into the finance that is available for landowners and organisations.

The Partnership meets on a regular basis to update members. Most recently a survey was carried out of all water bodies to assess quality and the results will be fascinating reading when they are published later in the year.

The Society supported an application by Gloucestershire FWAG to create a "farming co-operative" in support of the Upper Thames and stewardship. The application formed part of a facilitation fund bid to Natural England and the role that the Society played was instrumental in the bid being successful – one of only about thirteen in the country. The bid brought together seven major landowners along the River Thames stretch, primarily between Ashton Keynes and Lechlade. The success shows how important Natural England consider this area of the Thames.

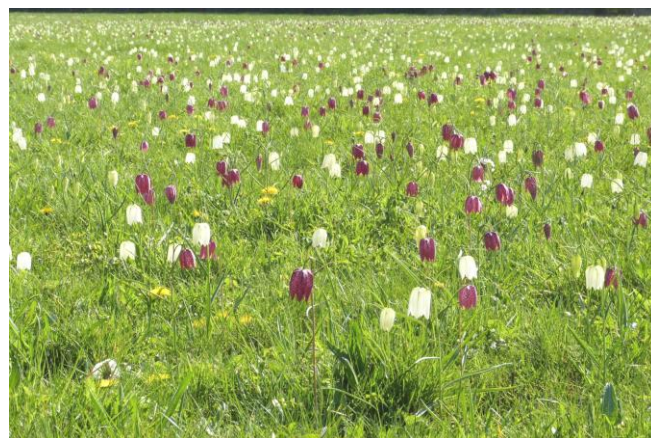
Since receiving confirmation that the area has been accepted, further landowners have joined the area and Jenny Phelps of Gloucestershire FWAG will be talking to us at our AGM to explain in more detail just what the benefits and effects of this will be on our local environment.

As ever, there remain opportunities for the membership to become involved. Please do not hesitate to contact one of your committee members if you would like to do so, whether it be directly on the committee or dealing with a specific issue.

Chris Graham, Chairman, UTPS

Upper Waterhay SSSI, a Wiltshire Wildlife Trust Reserve

Situated 2km south-east of Ashton Keynes is a rather special 2.8 ha meadow, purchased by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust in 1970.



Classified as MG4 grassland (*Alopecurus pratensis*, meadow foxtail - *Sanguisorbia officinalis*, great burnet), a type of hay meadow which is becoming very scarce nationally, it is home to a healthy population of Snake's-head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*). They are now very few remaining sites where this plant can be found in profusion and here 80% of the flowers are

white in contrast to other sites in the area where the majority are reddish. A wide range of other flowering plants appear after the early-flowering fritillaries are over and these, with the rich variety of hedgerow plants, attract a host of insects including bees, sawflies, butterflies and damselflies and dragonflies. These insects in turn provide a food supply for many species of birds which breed in the hedgerows. Roe deer and foxes are frequent.



Hay is cut in late summer followed by aftermath grazing to reduce residual nutrients. In winter the meadow is usually partially flooded and at this time attracts Common Snipe, Curlew and sometimes wildfowl from nearby lakes. For access to this reserve please see directions on the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust website: www.wiltshirewildlife.org

John Grearson, Voluntary Reserve Warden

The role of Large Woody Debris in River Ecology

Before humans changed from nomadic hunter gatherer lifestyle into settled dwelling with agriculture, rivers were free to function as the physical nature of the land dictated. So if a river flowed through woodland it stands to reason that fairly frequently leaves, twigs, branches and whole trees would fall into the river. Consequently much of our river flora and fauna have evolved over millions of years to live in rivers with woody material present.

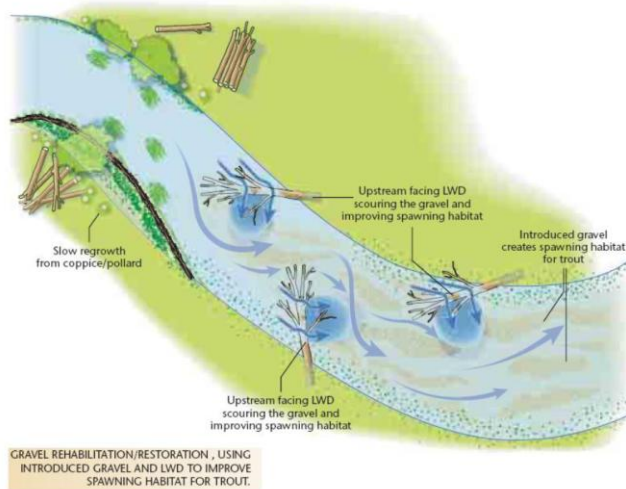
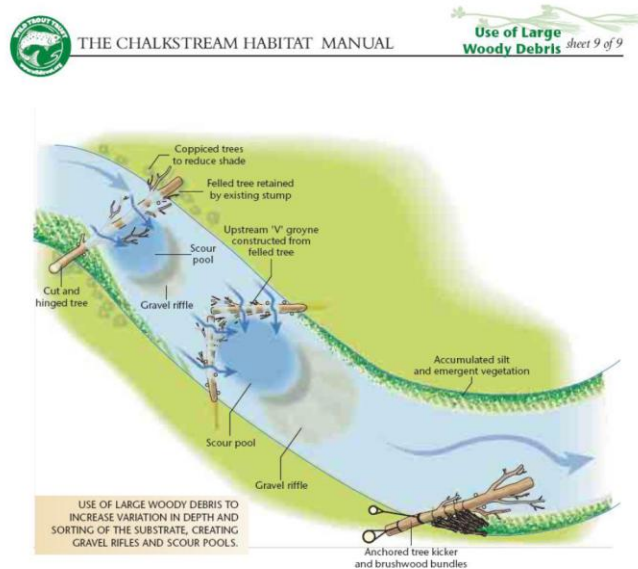
Large branches, whole trees and root plates in rivers are commonly referred to as Large Woody Debris LWD. In recent years river function specialists have become increasingly aware of the importance of LWD to the health of a river system. Prior to the 1980s it was common place for any significant woody material (often then referred to as snags or blockers) to be removed along with machinery digging out a wider, straighter trapezoid shape channel.

This did a huge amount of damage to the ecology of our rivers, and by speeding up the flow of the water, localized flooding increased at urban centres when the newly speeded water met bottlenecks like bridges further downstream.

Since the 1980s there has been a huge amount of research into the importance of LWD. It provides a substrate for aquatic plants to grown on, food and habitat for many invertebrates which in turn provide food for fish, birds which in turn provide food for predatory fish, birds and mammals. Course Woody

Debris like branches with twigs can also provide protection for fish from predators like herons or otter giving them a fighting chance particularly when water levels are low and trap silt improving water quality.

Furthermore when water flows against the LWD the water is forced to change direction and find new ways under over or around the wood. As illustrated in these diagrams from the Wild Trout Trust:



This creates a more diverse bed profile in a river such as deeper pools, shallow sections with faster flows and clean gravel which is important habitat diversity for flora and fauna with clean gravel being essential for fish spawning.

Of course woody debris can also cause a barrier to flow particularly if it starts to accumulate in one area, bridges and culverts are particularly vulnerable but on occasions it can accumulate against other LWD and effectively form a “debris dam”. On these occasions it will probably be necessary to remove at least part of the dam to allow water to flow past unless localised flooding is a desirable as in some upland flood retention schemes. For that reason whenever LWD is intentionally installed on a river it has to be fixed in place very securely, so it doesn’t attract more debris or get caught at bridges.



Photo: CWPT Ranger team using steel reinforcing bar to fix LWD in place on the Ampney Brook

So overall if LWD can be retained then this is best for the health of the river, but we do recognise that in our highly urbanised, densely populated and intensively farmed land this is not always possible.

Petrina Brown, WILD Biodiversity Officer
Cotswold Water Park Trust

Water Vole and Otter Update

Two relatively mild winters have allowed Water Voles a much higher over-wintering survival rate, which when combined with the ongoing efforts of the Cotswold Water Park Water Vole Recovery Project, has resulted in some localised population booms. Whilst on the face of it this would seem excellent news (which it is), it also demonstrates the wider problem of habitat loss and fragmentation. These booms are fine if the increased number of individuals can then go on and breed, but with populations very isolated this is not always the case in the CWP. Water Voles will rarely travel great distances to find a mate, especially when confronted with habitat that provides little in the way of feeding opportunity or increased exposure to predators. This is why it is vital that we continue with projects to repair and enhance the natural riparian ecosystem, but also remain vigilant in our efforts to control American Mink.



© Russell Savory

Mink numbers have remained relatively low for the last few years due to our ongoing monitoring and trapping programme, but we still see a few attempting to establish territories along the Upper Thames each year.

The main hotspot seems to be between Cricklade and Kempford, perhaps due to individuals navigating their way up the River Ray from Swindon. We are always looking for new, accessible but private locations to place mink monitoring rafts, so if you are a riparian landowner in the area and think you can help us fill a few gaps then please get in touch.

Otters continue to stage their remarkable recovery from the brink of extinction, with the Cotswold Water Park seeing lots of activity due to its network of watercourses and interspersed still waters. This natural predator is not welcome everywhere however, as fisheries continue to see fish losses, sometimes with financial implications running into thousands of pounds.



Photo: Otter footprints from a mink monitoring raft on the Thames © Ben Welbourn

Otter-proof fencing is expensive and can be a bit of an eyesore in a rural location; it also has the knock on effect of forcing Otters to cross highways with the inevitable instances of road kill. Despite the problems however, the resurgence of Otters is an indicator of the improving ecological status of our rivers; - something which we should all be very happy about!

Ben Welbourn – Biodiversity & Estates Manager
Cotswold Water Park Trust

Thames Path – Appeal for Volunteers

Thames Path National Trail Volunteers perform a vital role in helping to maintain the trail either by joining our practical tasks – an ongoing programme of maintenance and improvements or by being our trail wardens feeding back to us on any issues they find along the trail.

Practical Tasks include vegetation clearance, installation and repair of signs, gates and bridges and some workshop tasks. Led by staff from the National Trails team, tasks take place most weekdays and occasional weekends. All tools and training are provided and the tasks are a good way to meet like-minded people.

Alternatively, volunteers can become trail 'wardens' by adopting a 2-3 mile section of a Trail, walking it once every three months and reporting back any problems. These issues are then checked through and attended to by either the volunteer practical task team, by outside contractors or by the highway authority - depending on what these issues are.



We are currently actively recruiting volunteer river wardens in the upper reaches and if you could spend 2-3 miles every 2 to three months and report back to us on issues such as fallen trees, river bank erosion, signage issues - then please do get in touch with us. We'd love to hear from you.

Contact: Nt.volunteers@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Steven Tabbitt, National Trails Office

Protecting the River Thames Along its Length

It is pleasing to know there are a number of organizations and initiatives working to help protect, improve and enjoy the River Thames, from source to sea.

Other organizations UTPS is aware of include:

River Thames Society, a registered charity founded in 1962. Dick Mayon-White gave a wonderfully illustrated talk at UTPS AGM 2014, and is co-author of *Exploring the Thames Wilderness* - a guide to the natural Thames. The book and website have been produced in partnership with The Thames Rivers Trust. See www.riverthamesociety.org.uk and www.thameswilderness.org.uk/.

River Thames Alliance was originally formed 15 years ago after initiatives from River Thames Society and Thames boating interests to encourage more use of the river and build tourism. Initially financed and managed by the Environment Agency, EA funding was withdrawn 2 years ago and the RTA has since set up as a new fully independent organization, financed by subscription. It now has over 100 members, including 23 local authorities, the Environment Agency, Thames Water, Thames-side companies, clubs, charities and community groups. RTA's current work programme is focused on developing a new River Thames Waterways Plan for the period to 2021. Its scope is the corridor of the River Thames from its source near

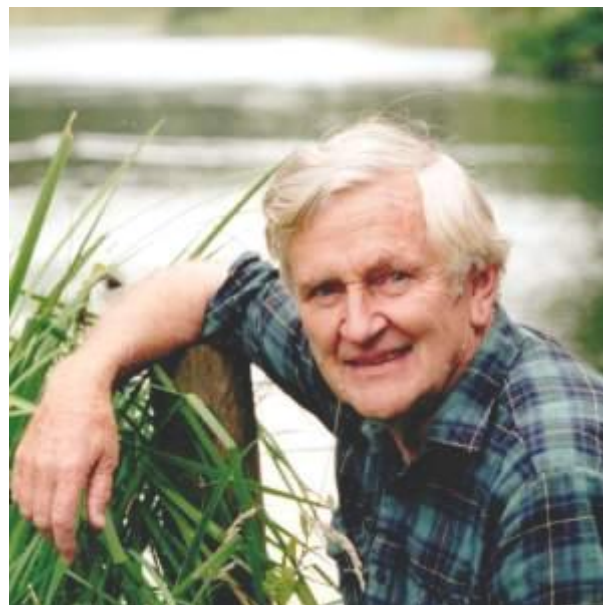
Cricklade to Teddington on the outskirts of London. See www.visitthames.co.uk.

Thames River Basin Citizen Science on 14th September 2015, as part of the Totally Thames Festival, a major citizen science project was organized. River Catchment partnerships within the area of the Thames River Basin held coordinated river sampling events with the aim of providing a snapshot of the river's condition. Using simple, standardised sampling techniques, a range of pollutants in streams and tributaries were measured. This event was timed to coincide with a more sophisticated water sampling run on the Thames itself, undertaken on behalf of the Environment Agency. Members of UTPS took part in this project and it will be interesting to see the results.

With its focus on the Upper Thames, UTPS is able to continue its work to protect the natural beauty of our section of the river and we are able to link with these other organizations to strengthen our knowledge and efforts to support our special area of the Upper Thames.

Helen Goody, Editor

Martin Neville – Founder Member of UTPS



It is with sadness that we have to report the death of one of our founder members, Martin Neville. He was a knowledgeable and dedicated committee member of the Society for many years.

A former engineer and sailor, his most recent profession was of an actor, but from his home in the Golden Valley his stage was in the Upper Thames, where he was a passionate advocate for the protection of the river environment. He linked this interest with work to re-establish otters in English rivers. He and his wife Daphne, who survives him, were national and international authorities on the lives and habitats of otters.

We are thankful for his support and miss him.

Seymour Aitken, September 2015

Note: The opinions expressed by correspondents are not necessarily those of the Upper Thames Protection Society. Please send contributions, letters, comments to Editor: helengoody@talk21.com
Upper Thames Protection Society - Registered Charity 299418