

THE STRIPLING

Newsletter of the Upper Thames Protection Society



Issue 36, October 2016

Open Meeting and AGM

Wednesday, 2nd November 2016, starting at 7.30pm

The Jenner Hall, Bath Road, Cricklade

Talk: "Managing the River Landscape for the Community as a Whole"

Speaker: Christopher Short, Upper Thames Catchment Partnership

Membership only £2 a year. Non-members welcome

Upper Thames Protection Society - Registered Charity 299418

Black Swan seen on North Meadow



Photograph taken February 2016 by John Grearson

The Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*) is an uncommon sighting in the UK; not surprising when you consider that its home range is limited to the other side of the globe in Australia. No, they haven't flown all that way in an attempt to find cooler, wetter climate, but were introduced to private collections in the UK in the late 18th century. As is often the way with such collections, they soon escaped into the wild (because they can fly!), and by the early 20th century had begun breeding here. There is now an established breeding population in the Netherlands, along with the 20 or so successful pairs in the UK.

We usually get one or two individuals making an appearance in the Cotswold Water Park every year, much to the delight of visitors, but it's not all good news. As with many non-native species introduced to the UK, Black Swans can have negative effects. They can cause damage to crops and amenity areas through their grazing and fouling, although compared to some of our native species it's probably a drop in the ocean. More concerning is their potential for acting aggressively toward native birds; outcompeting them for feeding and nesting sites. What we don't want to see is a situation similar to that which has been

reached with the Canada Goose, as well as the new kid on the CWP block; the Egyptian Goose, with numbers of those increasing every year. You can help us to monitor numbers of all these species and indeed any other wildlife, by submitting your sightings to the local online blog:

www.cotswoldwaterpark.wordpress.com

Ben Welbourn, Biodiversity & Estates Manager
Cotswold Water Park Trust

Rivers Churn & Thames Enhancement Project

The Cotswold Water Park Trust was delighted to be awarded a Biffa Award of £38,476 back in September 2015, as part of the Landfill Communities Fund, to conduct works on the Rivers Churn and Thames on and around North Meadow National Nature Reserve.



The aim of the project is to enhance the ecology of the rivers around North Meadow by reducing sediment loading, diversifying the channel and reducing excessive shading. The Rivers Thames and Churn are subjected to significant damage to their banks and riverbed from livestock and dogs. These areas of mud are exposed all winter, so flood water and rain wash this sediment into the rivers which then pollutes the water, smothers aquatic vegetation and gravels that fish need for spawning.

This damage on the river bank will be reduced by repairing the bank, installing temporary electric fencing

during grazing periods and installing pasture pumps to provide fresh water for the cattle. Dense shade inhibits sunlight reaching the river and therefore inhibits the growth of aquatic and marginal vegetation. In the densely shaded areas scrub will be cut back and/or small sections removed and/or large willow trees will be pollarded or crown raised. This will allow some sunlight to reach the river and we will aim to create around 60-70% dappled shade on the river.

In places the rivers have been straightened and have a very straight uniform channel. This reduces the habitat complexity needed in order to support flora and fauna at various stages of their lifecycles. Installing Large Woody Debris deflectors, where practical, will encourage diversification of river form and flow to enhance micro habitat variation, which in turn should help increase biodiversity.

By reducing the sediment loading and allowing more light to reach the watercourse, water quality should be improved along with the ecological value, as aquatic and marginal vegetation will be able to grow and exposed gravels will be kept cleaner. In time the channel may also start to self-narrow as new marginal vegetation stabilizes sediment allowing the river to form a more natural morphology and consequently improve its ecology.

To date the River Churn has had 1620m of shade reduction works, deflectors installed over 730m and 670m of new livestock fencing. Further bank repair works over 30m, 900m of temporary electric fencing and 30 trees to be pollarded are to be completed by the end of October.

The River Thames has had 4 drinking bays installed for the cattle, 350m of fencing installed and deflectors installed over 100m, with more planned.

Petrina Brown - WILD Biodiversity Officer
Cotswold Water Park Trust

Thames Water for Wildlife: New Volunteer Survey

This year marked the beginning of Thames Water for Wildlife an exciting volunteer survey, to uncover more about the quality of freshwater habitats that surround us, using simple nutrient testing kits.

Flourishing freshwater habitats, from the biggest lakes to the tiniest trickles, pools and springs, are home to a vast array of plants, invertebrates, amphibians, mammals and birds. However it only it takes a little pollution to cause the loss of much of this wildlife. Despite these harmful effects very little is known about the quality of most of our freshwaters.

As the first of its kind, this project will uncover the facts about nutrient pollution in all freshwater habitats and discover fantastic freshwater habitats free from pollution, where wildlife still thrives.

So far...

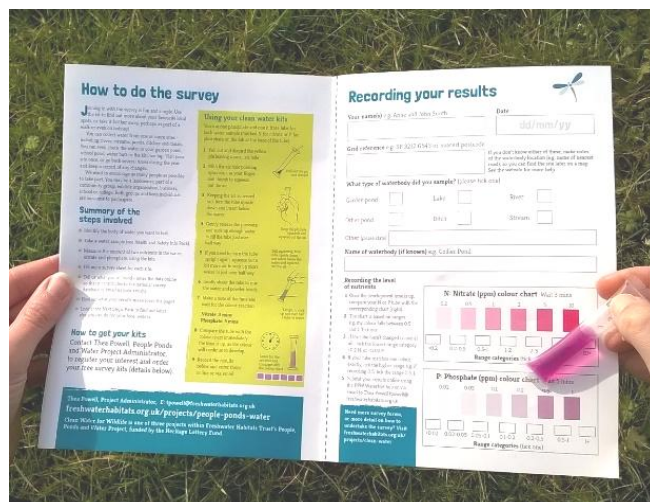
Volunteers have sampled over 2000 freshwaters habitats within the Thames Water region for nitrate and phosphate, two widespread and prolific causes of nutrient pollution.



Volunteer collecting a water sample

Out of the sampled freshwaters a third were clean water habitats, completely free of nutrient pollution. Over half of these were ponds (59%). Ponds appear to be the overlooked champion of freshwater life as they offer the best potential as a home free from nutrient pollution.

With 66% of sites showing evidence of nutrient pollution, it should not be overlooked that the majority of places are too high in nutrients for wildlife. 40% showed signs of phosphate pollution and 54% of nitrate pollution.



However even within highly developed and agricultural areas there are small pockets where clean water wildlife prevails. For example, within the River Ock catchment, nature reserves and protected areas are acting as barriers to pollutants, creating wildlife havens brimming with freshwater life.

Many headwaters are still pristine where they surface in woodland and uncultivated areas. However as they flow through intensively farmed land they can become burdened by pollutants.

These results are only provisional as there are still many more freshwater habitats left to sample. This survey highlights the places we should be protecting and will also locate places to extend the network of clean waters by creating ponds or extending downstream from streams and ditches.

Thames Water for Wildlife is part of the Freshwater Habitats Trust's People, Ponds and Water project. It is funded by Thames Water and the Heritage Lottery fund.

Taking part - Sign up for your kits and discover more about your local freshwaters.

Hannah Worker, Project Assistant
Freshwater Habitats Trust
Email hworker@freshwaterhabitats.org.uk

Farmers to be Rewarded for Clean Water

Developing a Payments for Ecosystem Services model

Gloucestershire FWAG has teamed up with Thames Water to provide targeted facilitation support and advice to farmers on reducing problem pesticides in rivers.

The chemical metaldehyde, which is the active ingredient in many slug pellets, is extremely difficult to remove from drinking water and there is increasing pressure on the agricultural industry to reduce its usage. Water companies are working with farmers to try to solve the problem using catchment management. The Upper Thames has a known metaldehyde hotspot.

Metaldehyde levels in rivers peak in autumn/winter each year when slug pellets are used to help ensure that crops successfully establish, particularly winter cereals and oilseed rape. The project, therefore, will focus on land management activities during the months of October-December.



June 2016 - FWAG Farmer Event - talking about best practice slug pellet use, soil management and keeping pesticides out of water.

Gloucestershire FWAG are working with farmers in a number of catchments in the Upper Thames to implement a scheme whereby farmers who agree to help try and solve the problem will be rewarded with a payment from Thames Water, based on the amount of water that is within the drinking water standard for the pesticide when tested weekly at the outflow point of the catchment (typically before it enters the Thames).

The scheme involves providing advice on how to reduce pesticide use and input losses on farm, including free advice on soil management and making the best use of Countryside Stewardship on farm; in addition to sharing knowledge with arable farmers about the use of alternative slug pellets which have better environmental credentials than their metaldehyde counterparts.

Sarah Wells, Farm Conservation Adviser
Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) SW

Fritillaries Recovery on North Meadow

North Meadow National Nature Reserve holds SSSI and SAC designations for its MG4 plant community, *Sanguisorba Officinalis* / *Alopecurus Pratensis* Lowland Hay Meadow.

It famously boasts a large population of naturally occurring snakes-head fritillaries, *Fritillaria Meleagris*, which create a purple haze over the meadow in the spring. North Meadow is flanked by both the Rivers Thames and the Churn, which flood each year contributing towards the delicate ecological balance which maintains the habitat for these rare and wonderful species.



Each year, the Flood Plain Meadows Partnership, with the help of volunteers, survey the number of fritillaries over 200 quadrats, as part of an ongoing monitoring project.

In 2012 North Meadow experienced heavy amounts of spring flooding. This caused a dramatic decline in the number of fritillaries with only 9 being found in the annual survey quadrats.

The following year, in 2013 most plants in these quadrats were recorded in a vegetative state and 118 plants were found in flower. This initial surge of vegetation speaks volumes about how hardy the little plants can be and drew attention to their ability to be hit so hard and still retain enough energy to push back the next year.

Since 2013 vegetative plants kept increasing and 2015 saw double the flowering plants of the previous year. All good so far...

Spring 2016 however threw another challenge at the meadow in the form of more spring flooding. Each spring over 2000 visitors come from far and wide to see the display of flowering fritillaries. This footfall combined with the saturation, silt deposits and full drainage ditches led us to close the meadow to the public. Our biggest concern was that the paths would very quickly become muddy tracks, widening into the meadow as they became more impassable and new desire lines would establish as people encountered flooded drainage channels.

The fritillaries however did OK, with vegetative plants increasing and flowering plants being found in good numbers in the drier area but more sporadically in wetter areas.

On the whole the meadow and the fritillaries are still recovering from the 2012 floods and it will be

interesting to see what happen in 2017. We hope that the weather will be on their side this spring and management to help the meadow drain efficiently is planned for the months leading up to the natural flooding of the meadow.

Aidan Fallon, Natural England

Thames Path Celebrates its 20th Birthday

The Thames Path baton relay, “source to sea”, celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Thames Path National Trail. An eclectic mix of people and groups, who shared a passion for walking the trail and the river, turned out to walk the 16 days, despite a heat wave.



Day 1 – Starting at the Source of River Thames

The baton left the source of the Thames in the Parish of Coates in Gloucestershire to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of Thames Path National Trail, which was finally created on 24th July 1996. Steve Tabbitt – the Thames Path National Trail Manager said:

‘It’s been a truly inspiring 16 days of walking, the Thames has dried up at the source for a number of miles and seeing the river change to the vast riverscape of the Thames estuary is an incredibly interesting experience. For me the most memorable experiences of the 16 days were the people and communities who turned out to walk with us starting with the Parishes of Coates and Kemble and finishing with Deptford London. We also experienced some amazing scenery and wild life for example - seeing a Curlew being hunted by 2 Peregrine Falcons – an amazing sight that you might expect to see in some isolated area of the Britain isles, but to see this on day 14 of our Thames Path walk, just a couple of hundred metres upstream of Vauxhall Bridge is really awesome. We know that the river and – The Thames Path creates a corridor for wildlife to pass into and through our capital- but it is really breath-taking when you experience this for yourself, when standing on the Thames Path”.

The trail is there for everyone to enjoy. You really never know what you’ll see and experience on the Thames Path National Trail.

To learn more about the Thames Path National Trail please visit www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thames-path

Steve Tabbitt, Thames Path National Trail Manager

Seymour Aitken – UTPS Champion

It is with great sadness that we report the death of one of our long standing members, Seymour Aitken.

Seymour was a gentleman - wise and dependable, thoughtful and constant - and it is these qualities that UTPS greatly benefitted from.

On moving to Cricklade in 1980, Seymour always had a great appreciation of the natural environment of the River Thames. Indeed the river runs alongside his garden and he was the proud owner of a beautifully varnished wooden Canadian canoe, which on occasions was used by his grandchildren to paddle down the Thames.



He was passionate about the need to preserve for the wider community and future generations our special part of the Thames Valley. He was always very keen for UTPS to continue to be in existence as a vehicle to enable local people to have a voice should development or

interventions threaten the river environment. Seymour joined UTPS soon after its formation, and he was Chairman for 15 years up until 2010. He continued to serve as a Committee Member right up until his death. He and Louise hosted all our Committee meetings over recent years, supplying tea and often home-made biscuits to keep our discussions going.

We are thankful to have had Seymour’s leadership and his considered and thoughtful input to our Society, for so many years.

Helen Goody, UTPS Committee Member



July 2016 – Young canoeist taking on one of the challenges of the River Thames between Cricklade and Castle Eaton; Photograph by Helen Goody

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
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