



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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The wildlife supermarket

I was asking my grandson what he thought of our wood. Did he see it as a landscape feature with majestic oaks, flowers and butterflies, or as a giant year round supermarket for wildlife. This had him stumped for a bit, but he soon understood what I was getting at. The wood has to be reasonably well connected (literally) to the rest of the local countryside by hedges for it to work well. Woods left stranded in a corn prairie are

in a different world, usually impoverished and neglected. Let us begin in January in the depths of winter.

If there is snow on the ground, the nocturnal comings and goings of fox and badger will be clearly visible. Foxes occasionally breed in the wood, but live outside it through the winter months with shopping expeditions at dawn or dusk. Badgers have expanded out of the wood the other side of the valley and now have a sett in a hedgerow 200m away. They visit at night always on the look-out for bargains. The tracks of rabbit show how many live on the woodland edge and these customers shop both within and outside the wood.

March is the hungry month. Many of the supermarket shelves are empty

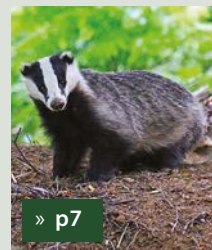
with meagre pickings from the "sell by date" bins. Blackbirds, thrushes and even woodcock can be found here foraging where the leaves are deepest, hoping for a surprise meal. Life looks up at the end of March when the call of the chiffchaff heralds the onset of spring, as these long distant shoppers arrive from West Africa. This can be touch and go if the weather turns cold again. Will there be enough insects on the supermarket shelves? Blackcaps arrive soon after and also head for the insect aisles. By the end of May when bluebells and wood anemone are over, there is a special offer of juicy caterpillars. Flocks of rooks and jackdaws pour into the supermarket like Oxford street shoppers at sale time, gorging themselves in the trees or on the ground. *Continued on page 4 >*

Bramble is a vital source of nectar © Charles Flower

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West Berkshire Countryside Society

Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.

West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

Chair:	Ed Cooper
Vice Chair, Webmaster & Enquiries:	Tony McDonald
Membership Secretary:	Jathan Rayner (wbcsmembership@gmail.com)
Upstream Editor:	John Salmon (upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com) NEW!
Hon President:	Dick Greenaway MBE RD

Initial contact for all above and for the Barn Owl Group, Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group and West Berks Conservation Volunteers should, unless otherwise stated, be made via enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk

Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task.

Date/ Time	Venue	Details
January 2018		
Tue-02-Jan 10:00	Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury. SU387 648	Coppicing to refresh the hazel stools and open up the woodland canopy. Parking at Holt Lodge Farm House near Kintbury.
Tue-9-Jan 10:00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead. SU440 777	Coppicing, felling and scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm. Please leave your vehicles at the bottom of the track and walk up to the common. Vehicles carrying tools and refreshments please drive directly to the task site.
Sun-14-Jan 10:30-13:00	Bucklebury Common, Upper Bucklebury.	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue-16-Jan 10:00	Hockett Field, Bucklebury Common. SU551 685	Hedge maintenance and other tasks. Park at the entrance to the track to Hockett Field SU547 687 with overflow parking at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue-23-Jan 10:00	Elm Farm. Organic Research Centre, Kintbury. SU414 654	Hedge laying. Parking on opposite side of the road from the main building in track leading to barns.
Tue-30-Jan 10:00	Hampstead Norreys Mound. SU529 759	Scrub and vegetation clearance on this archaeological site. Parking in village hall car park. SU527 762
February 2018		
Tue-06-Feb 10:00	Sulham Water Meadows. SU642 742	Coppicing bankside trees by the stream. Parking at Sulham Church. SU645 742
Sat-10-Feb 10:30-13:00	Bucklebury Common, Upper Bucklebury.	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue-13-Feb 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage. SU512 740	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Ample parking at new village hall - through double gates off Pinewood Crescent.
Tue-20-Feb 10:00	Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Lambourne.	Hedge laying DO NOT USE SAT NAV for this site. Parking at the red barn SU349 816. A lunch of soup and rolls will be provided by our hosts.
Tue-27-Feb 10:00	The Malt House, West Woodhay. SU395 637	Hedge laying (visit #1) on the site we have worked on for several years. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcdonald@btinternet.com by the end of the day on Thursday 22nd February.
March 2018		
Tue-06-Mar 10:00	Ashampstead Common.	Veteran Tree Halo Polishing. Help us maintain the glades that help our veterans prosper. We will be cutting back bracken, bramble and small saplings. Meet at The Cottage, Ashampstead Common. SU5765 7512
Sun-11-Mar 10:30-13:00	Bucklebury Common, Upper Bucklebury.	Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue-13-Mar 10:00	The Malt House, West Woodhay. SU395 637	Hedge laying (visit #2) on the site we have worked on for several years. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcdonald@btinternet.com by the end of the day on Thursday 8th March.
Tue-20-Mar	Basildon Primary School. SU592 763	Woodland classroom maintenance. Park along Ashampstead Road.
Tue-27-Mar 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield. SU584 723	Woodland management, coppicing and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.

Conservation Volunteers Round Up

As summer slipped into autumn, West Berkshire Countryside Society volunteers returned to familiar sites and once more were pleased to see that our efforts were continuing to yield benefits.

We paid two visits to **Malt House Farm, West Woodhay**, where we continued to coppice hazel. Previously we had used brash fencing to protect the resulting stools from browsing by deer – with only partial success. Some fencing had been damaged and the hazel re-growth had been nibbled and become stunted, threatening regeneration. As an experiment last year, some stools had been protected by wire fencing and had grown strongly without damage. So we replaced the brash protection with wire fencing, which we also used around newly coppiced stools. We expect to see strong re-growth next year.

Two days were also spent at **Winterbourne Woods**. In September we cleared birch saplings from Four Acre Field on the wood's northern side, the plan being to stop their growth; with sheep then being introduced to keep them at bay. We also pushed back scrub and invasive trees to the field's margins. In October we continued hazel coppicing started seven years ago, dealing with some unusually mature, and consequently very large, stools.

We again visited **Bucklebury Common** to augment the efforts of the regular weekend team, cutting down Scots Pine and birch that otherwise would dominate the heathland's rich variety of flora and fauna. Similar work was done on **Aldermaston's Decoy Heath**, which is well known for its biodiversity

– not least its mosses, lichens, liverworts and adders.

The first of two visits to the water meadow at **Cleeve Court, Streatley**, saw us raking into mounds grass mown by a contractor so it could dry out prior to burning. We also removed silt and debris from two drainage ditches. On our second visit we dealt with a large amount of willow cut by tree surgeons, wheelbarrowing logs and branches to form stacks for firewood and burning the remaining brash and much of the dried grass in a controlled bonfire.

On **Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead**, we cut back vegetation that had overgrown the edges of the bridleway and opened up ride avenues, piling up the cut material to be burnt later. We also cleared halos around staked and guarded hazel saplings and cleaned information boards at either end of the common.

A programme of widening rides at **Rushall Manor Farm, Bradfield** continues to let in more light and sunshine to make visits by the public more pleasant and to encourage wild flowers and plants to flourish.

At **Elm Farm Organic Research Centre, Hamstead Marshall**, we are cutting back the dormouse hedge in sections to remove unwanted growth and to let in light, taking care that we improve the environment for the dormice. A longer-term plan is to gain access to a fence partially hidden by the hedge, so that it can be replaced by the farmer. Dormouse expert Corrine Sreeves sought our assistance in checking the dormouse boxes placed along the hedge lines, so several of us opened them under

careful supervision. No dormice were found, but one surprised volunteer and two surprised field mice came face to face!

On a hot August Tuesday we held our annual barbecue and tools check. With turnout on tasks averaging more than twenty volunteers, we need a good range of tools and protective equipment, the provision and regular maintenance of which is undertaken by a trio of stalwarts. Our "armoury" includes thirty bowsaws, thirty loppers, twenty billhooks, eight grasshooks, four scythes, eight pruning saws, eight pairs of shears and eighteen grass rakes.

Terry Crawford



Bucklebury Common (after) © Tony McDonald

Conservation Tools: No 1 – The Scythe

My favourite conservation tool, by far, is the scythe for long grass and brush cutting. It is efficient and does not wear you out if used correctly. It is designed precisely for the job it does and competes well with other options such as brush cutters, which are noisy and may I say anti-social!

Apart from changes to the material of its construction, the design of the scythe has remained pretty much the same since its invention around 500BC. Some say it was invented around 900 BC by the Scythians a nomadic, warrior race from the Central Eurasian Steppes. I am sceptical of this connection, why would a nomadic warrior class, who developed mounted warfare techniques have need of a farming implement.

What does seem clear is that the scythe was introduced to Europe around the 12th Century. Whichever

way one views it, the scythe has been around a long time.

Using the scythe is quite a skill but once you have acquired that skill it is a joy to use, and doesn't tire one out. The action is to wipe the blade across as close to the ground as possible, with the body twisting smoothly to the left, without contaminating the blade with soil which would quickly blunt it. The blade should be at a narrow angle to the line of the cut so that only a narrow strip is cut during a sweep. The temptation is to hold the blade at right angles to the line of the cut this causes the blade to hack at the grass and makes the job, hard work. Regular sharpening is strongly recommended.

There are several types of blades, in addition to the regular version, the Austrian which is a narrow blade requiring regular peening (hammering to draw out the width of a thin sheet



© Tony McDonald

of metal) to retain its width and the American which is narrow but is made of harder, stamped steel which is difficult to peen.

The act of scything is correctly called mowing rather than scything. Happy mowing!

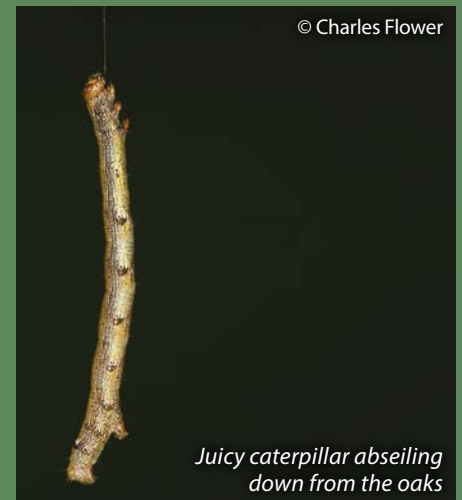
Tony McDonald

Continued from page 1.

Late spring and early summer have more special offers, this time it's nectar from the many woodland wild flowers but also from bramble which, given a little light in rides and aisles will satisfy large numbers of customers. These are mostly residents, such as butterflies and other insects. The silver washed fritillaries make most butterflies look like slouches as they hurtle over the hazel and descend into a ride with the dexterity of an expert shop lifter. Some shoppers come considerable distances such as painted lady, silver Y moth

and hummingbird hawk moth from as far away as Africa. This abundant nectar provides food for a myriad of insects which are preyed upon by bush crickets and spiders, which lay their incredible web traps near the till for the unwary shopper.

Wildlife supermarkets never shut, so as the day shift ends, the night shift starts up with a Tawny owl watching a particular shelf where a juicy vole ready meal is anticipated and bats hunt the aisles for moths.



© Charles Flower

Juicy caterpillar abseiling down from the oaks



Good acorn years are a bonanza for wildlife

© Charles Flower

As autumn creeps up on the wood, the best offer is in the fruit and nut department with shelves loaded with hazel nuts and sweet chestnuts, with less frequent special offers of acorns. Grey squirrels can be seen trooping into the supermarket together with large numbers of mice and voles. The fruit department has shelves stacked high with crab apples, hawthorn berries and rose hips all ready for the thrush invasion from Scandinavia. By the end of November the shelves are bare and the aisles deserted.

Charles Flower

Monitor Riverflies

Riverflies are an important part of the freshwater ecosystem, living most of their lives as larvae on the bed of rivers and still waters before emerging as short-lived adult flies mainly in spring and summer. Spectacular mass hatches can trigger fish feeding frenzies. Commonly referred to as 'the canary of our rivers', riverflies' limited mobility, relatively long life cycle, presence throughout the year and sensitivity to changes in water quality, habitat diversity, water level and flow rate make them powerful biological indicators of the health of fresh water habitats.

There are 278 species of mayflies (Ephemeroptera), caddisflies (Trichoptera) and stoneflies (Plecoptera), of which 8 species are recognised as of priority for conservation by the government.

Over recent decades there has been a worrying decline in the numbers of riverflies in some British rivers. Riverfly survival is under threat from:

- **Habitat loss.** Many ponds have been lost through in-filling or draining. Straightening or widening of river channels can cause the loss of important bankside and shallow in-stream habitat.



- **Pollution.** Water with excess nutrient levels can lead to large algal growths, smothering vegetation and reducing water oxygen levels. Toxic insecticides can be present in industrial or agricultural run-off e.g. acidic run-off from conifer plantations.



- **Soil erosion.** Damage to soils on farmland can lead to unnaturally high levels of silt in watercourses which smother the river bed, clogging the gills of larvae and preventing plant growth.
- **Abstraction.** Reduced flow rates can affect riverflies – creating less habitat for riverflies, and causing pollutant levels to become more concentrated.
- **Light pollution.** Artificial light can cause adult flies to become disorientated and attract them away from the water.

The Riverfly Partnership brings together anglers, conservationists, scientists, watercourse managers and government agencies. In 2007 it launched the national Anglers Riverfly Monitoring Initiative. This enables trained volunteer groups to record the presence or absence of 8 indicator invertebrate groups, 7 of which are riverflies. It has generated interest from local organisations to monitor the biological water quality of their rivers.

Locally, ARK (Action for the River Kennet) co-ordinates monitoring for 53 survey sites on the Kennet and its tributaries between West Kennet & Reading – training volunteers to become accredited monitors, recording data and liaising with the Environment Agency (EA). Some sites have been monitored for over ten years building up valuable long-term data.

ARK recently delivered another riverfly monitoring training workshop

to the Renewal Project who look after a 1.5 mile stretch of the River Lambourn. Five enthusiastic trainees went along to find out about what is involved in becoming a monitor and to learn how to identify the invertebrates which live in our rivers. Once training is complete, new monitors visit their site each month to take a 3 minute 'kick sample' from the gravel in the bed of the river. The indicator species are counted and the information entered into a national database.

The value of riverfly monitoring was demonstrated in 2013 when ARK monitors identified a serious pollution incident on the Kennet, when an insecticide (Chlorpyrifos) was discharged into the river, killing millions of invertebrates. Visually the water looked beautifully clear, it was not until a routine monthly kick sample was taken that the low number of invertebrates, which were either dead or dying, was evident. This enabled the EA to prevent further release of the chemical from the sewage treatment works concerned.

If you would like to get involved contact Anna at www.riverkennet.org or Laura at www.therenewalproject.co.uk both of whom kindly assisted with this article.

Many thanks to www.buglife.org.uk & www.riverflies.org who provided the source material & photographs.

John Salmon

This talk was given to the Royal Society in London in 1692

'An account of a rivulet in Berkshire, 1692'

In the County of Berks about one mile and an half from East Ilsley, there arises a certain Rivulet which running through Hampstead Norris, Yattendon, Frilsham, Marlston, Burgulbury, Stanford Deanely, Bradfield and Tidmarsh, falleth into the Thames at Pangborne 4 miles distant from Reading: Abot Yattendon, Frilsham, Marlestone and Bugulbury, it yields the fattest and the best growne trout, that I ever Saw, or could ever heare of in any part of the Kingdome.

This Rivulet was never knowne to be dry in any Mans Memory; Neither is there any Tradition, that it has been dry, till some little time before the first Dutch Warr neare the year 1651 in the midst of which warr it was dry to that Degree that at Frilsham they were constrained to digge fouryards Deepe in the bottom of the Channell for water: Some little time before the Ending of that Warr, the waters returned to their Channell, without the fall off any great quantity of raine, more then at other times.

The Water thus returned as is before expressed; it continued as in former times till about the beginning of the next Dutch Warr neare the Year 1664 at which time it became dry againe and so continued to be some little time before the burning of our Shipps at Chattam at which time rideing over the Channell with Cptn. Peter Blackborough now dwelling in great Trinity lane London at the next Dore to the Citty Glassiers; I did then

wager with the said Captn. That before the End of the approaching summer, wee should have a Peace with the Dutch, discoursing what I formerly noted with respect to the said River; and the Event answered our Expectation; for a Peace quickly ensued.

From that time the River enjoyed its waters, till a little before the last Dutch Warr about the year 1672 when according to what I noted before, with respect to the two former Warrs, it was a 3rd time deprived of all its Water, and continued so to be during the Warr, till a little before the Close of It, at what time the waters returned again to their Channell and not only filled, but over Flow'd It, there having been noe quantity of raine answerable to soe great and sudden a flood, which occasioned me to conclude and declare to severall that notwithstanding the Improbability of the thing, I did verily believe that we should have a suwaine peace with the Dutch; and 'tis very well known that we had soe; and I hope a firme one which God Grant.

A paper given in the last Meeting by ye President who had it from Mr Boyle was read, it was about ye Spring in Berkshire, which has been observed to stop during the Continuence of the last 3 Dutch Warrs, and in those times only. It was proposed that it might be Enquired, whether it run now during the present French War.

Transcribed from an M.Sc. Dissertation in Conservation at University College London submitted September 1993 by Rosalind Heywood.

Dick Greenaway WBCS Archivist

Why do they do that?

A very popular new feature in Upstream has been 'Why do they do that?' In 2017 we have covered Hedge Laying, Coppicing, Ride Widening & Meadow Mowing. In this edition we continue the series with information about Riverfly Monitoring.

If you have suggestions for other conservation or related activities that you would like explained in future editions, please email them to upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com.



Don't forget our website!
www.westberkscountryside.org.uk



Badger Vaccination

Releasing a badger © Tom Marshall

It's late on a sunny autumn afternoon and I'm wandering across Greenham Common. Aside from carrying a spade I look much like many of the others out enjoying this most well-known of nature reserves. Except, I've walked this route every day for two weeks now, always with my trusty backpack and spade. I reach a wooded area south of the main common and disappear into the trees following a path most others wouldn't even notice. A leap over a ditch, duck under a fallen beech tree and I arrive at a badger sett.

The sett consists of three large D-shaped holes, with large piles of sand and earth in front of them. Nearby an elder tree is clearly a favoured scratching post, and alongside that a 'latrine', or, in layman's terms, a hole full of badger poo! This sett, along with many others nearby is part of Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT)'s badger vaccination scheme.

This is the second year that we have vaccinated badgers over a 15km² area

including Greenham Common, with a view to protecting them and local cattle from bovine tuberculosis. Using my spade I scoop a generous portion of peanuts from my backpack and place them into each trap, and then set the traps to 'catch' mode.

Three of us meet back at the Common the following morning at 5am. It's still dark but dawn fast approaches and we must check 30 badger traps before 8am. While the dawn chorus starts we arrive at our first sett, and find two badgers have been caught.

The vaccine must be mixed and then injected into each badger's thigh. Fortunately most trapped badgers are very docile, in fact most are asleep in the traps when we approach, so it's usually very easy to give a visual health check and then inject each animal. After vaccination a small amount of fur on the back is clipped and a coloured mark sprayed onto each animal. This helps us determine if we recapture an animal on our second day of trapping.

The whole vaccination process takes about two minutes, after which the badger is released. Badgers can run much faster than you may think, they usually head for the nearest hole without so much as a backward glance to us.

It's now getting light, so we head off to our next sett in the hope of more

'vaccination customers', drawn in by our peanut offerings. I will return later in the afternoon, spade and backpack in hand, to reset the traps for a final night in the hope of catching any stragglers.

Vaccination has been proven to reduce both the prevalence and severity of TB in badgers. When sustained over several years the benefits increase as the number of immunised badgers rises and infected animals die off. A reduction in the disease in unvaccinated badgers then starts to be seen as a result of vaccinating a high enough proportion of the population.

Vaccination of badgers alone will not solve the problem of bovine TB. However BBOWT believes that vaccination is the only viable way to effectively manage the disease in badgers and prevent transfer between them and cattle. The Wildlife Trusts believe that culling has been shown to be ineffective and inhumane; at worst the perturbation effect of badgers moving into new areas could even accelerate the spread of bovine TB. As well as vaccinating badgers, farm and cattle biosecurity is key to combating the disease. Research also continues into a cattle vaccine. For more information: www.bbowt.org.uk/badgers-and-bovine-tb

Gavin Bennett from the Mammal Team at BBOWT



Badger in woodland

© Rob Appleby

'Veteran Trees for the Future'

The new Bucklebury Ancient Trees Leaflet

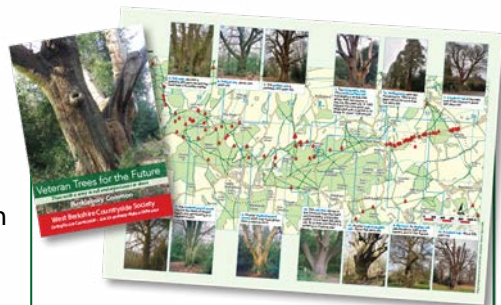
Veteran Trees are younger than Ancient Trees and will form the next generation of Ancient Trees when these eventually die. Veteran trees are trees with a story to tell and experiences to share. They will be trees with significance for the local community or with particular historic or ecological importance. Their shapes and scars can tell us tales of their lives, of when they were established and what they provided for the people who lived near them. They can tell how



the land was used and give clues to the age of the landscape features they stand on. To add to this, their scars and rugged barks provide homes and food supplies for a multitude of wildlife from fungi and invertebrates to birds and mammals which link us to the ecology of their youth.

In 2005 public interest in ancient trees was growing rapidly. In the Pang Valley, Yattendon Estate had allocated 22 trees on Ashampstead and Burnt Hill Commons to be 'Veteran Trees for the Future'. The North Wessex Downs AONB provided funds for a leaflet about the trees. It contained a clear map of the Commons showing the sites of the trees and their pictures. It rapidly became a 'treasure hunt' as families explored to find the trees – even asking for help to find the more obscure trees! Four years later the Pang, Kennet and Lambourn Countryside Project produced a similar leaflet for the Veteran Trees on Bucklebury Common. It was equally popular and by last year had run out. In July our Society launched a new and up-dated version which is now available from Bucklebury Parish Council and as a free down load from www.westberkscountryside.org.uk.

Dick Greenaway



Our Parish Council had run out of the 'Veteran Trees for the Future' leaflet, so we were delighted when the West Berkshire Countryside Society offered to produce a new and updated version for us. As usual, it was a delight to work with the Society to produce this.

We had planned to launch the new leaflet at the end of July with a picnic tea around the Coronation Oak on Bucklebury Common. Unfortunately it was a wet day; so all festivities took place indoors.

We are indebted to Dick Greenaway for leading the project, to the WBCS for raising all the money for the revised leaflet, and to Sally Wallington and Helen Pratt, clerk of Bucklebury Parish Council for their hard work and valuable input. Thanks also to the Society's Conservation Volunteers for fitting in a considerable amount of unscheduled work to clear vegetation so that we can see the trees clearly.

Wynne Frankum, Chair
Bucklebury Parish Council

John Dellow Lifetime Achievement Award

At the recent AGM of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, Barbara Muston the Chair-Elect presented a Lifetime Achievement Award to John Dellow leader of the WBCS Barn Owl Group. The citation noted both John's work with Barn Owls, and his contribution to many activities within BBOWT over the last 25 years including more than 20 years as Warden of BBOWT's Kintbury Newt Ponds nature reserve.

John said: "This is a wonderful honour and recognises the work done by the whole barn owl team", adding "It may be a 'Lifetime' award but I intend to keep going for many more years!"

