



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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Nightjar
© David Tipling/2020Vision

West Berkshire a 'hotspot' for Nightjars

Nightjars are on the *Birds of Conservation Concern* amber list in the UK, meaning that their numbers and breeding range have suffered serious decline in recent years. In the nightjars' case it is due to the loss of heathland habitat. However, thanks to carefully managed heathland in West Berkshire this area is somewhat of a hotspot for them.

Nightjars are perfectly designed to hunt insects in the dark: with large eyes that help them see in low light and a broad, funnel-like mouth that they use to scoop midges, moths and

other flying insects out of the air. Their scientific name *Caprimulgus europaeus* means, literally, European goat-milker. This name is based on ancient folklore: it was believed that nightjars were responsible for nanny goats stopping producing milk, amongst many other rather dire livestock-related maladies!

Nightjars are ground-nesting birds. Their ideal habitat is open heathland with light scrub and a few trees to be used as perches. BBOWT manages heathland reserves, such as Greenham and Crookham Commons, to maintain a mix of bare ground, open heath, mature gorse and scrub to accommodate all our heathland specialists. Similar habitat at Buckleberry Common is maintained by the WBCV, Green Gym and other volunteer groups. We cut back bullish bracken, leggy gorse and stubborn silver birch. These species,

and others, grow ferociously and reduce the open ground and heather on the Commons, decreasing the space available for our ground-breeding birds, including the nightjar.

Nightjars arrive in this country from western and southern Africa every summer. The fact that they migrate here and are a crepuscular species (most active at dawn and dusk) gives them an enigmatic quality. Their feathers add to this mysteriousness, creating a perfect camouflage and making them incredibly hard to see during the day. At night they're equally hard to pick out as they generally start flying close to absolute darkness. All you can see are silhouettes against the night sky. This all makes surveying them particularly tricky!

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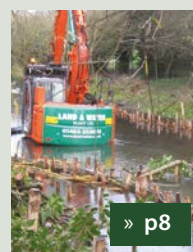
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West Berkshire Countryside Society

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, Webmaster & Enquiries:

Membership Secretary:

Upstream Editor:

Tony McDonald

Jathan Rayner (membership@westberkscountryside.org.uk) NEW!

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
Oct 2018		
Tue 02 Oct 10.00	Winterbourne Woods. SU447 717	Coppicing and woodland maintenance. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue 09 Oct 10.00	The Malt House, West Woodhay. SU395 637	Hedge laying and coppicing 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 midday on Thursday 4th October.
Sat 13 Oct 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue 16 Oct 10.00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley. SU593 812	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road.
Tue 23 Oct 10.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Cutting silver birch and Scots pine saplings. Hopefully a bonfire. Parking at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue 30 Oct 10.00	Decoy Heath BBOWT site near Aldermaston	Heathland habitat maintenance. Reserve car park opposite Allport factory, RG7 2PF. SU613 634
Nov 2018		
Tue 06 Nov 10.00	Kent's Down Farm, Cox's Lane, Midgham, SU547 676	Variety of tasks on this wildlife site. Parking in the driveway of Kent's Down farm. Space is limited so do please car share if at all possible.
Sun 11 Nov 10.30-13.00	Bucklebury Common	Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Tue 13 Nov 10.00	Furze Hill, Hermitage, SU511 739	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent.
Tue 20 Nov 10.00	Boxford Water Meadow Site #1 Westbrook, Boxford. SU426 717	Scrub and vegetation clearance on this SSSI. Parking in access track off Westbrook.
Tue 27 Nov 10.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Cutting silver birch and Scots pine saplings. Hopefully a bonfire. Parking at Angels Corner. SU550 688
Dec 2018		
Tue 04 Dec 10.00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead, SU440 777	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.
Sat 08 Dec 10.30 -13.00	Bucklebury Common	Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU 550 688.
Tue 11 Dec 10.00	Boxford Water Meadow Site #2 Westbrook, Boxford. SU426 717	Scrub and vegetation clearance on this SSSI. Parking in access track off Westbrook.
Tue 18 Dec 10.00	Stanford Dingley	River bank clearance. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm. SU566 716
Thur 27 Dec 10.00	Padworth Common	Joint task with CROW with bonfire and baked potatoes. Park on Padworth Common. SU619 647

Conservation Volunteers Round Up

After rain and snow had followed a clement early winter, our changing climate gave us exceptional heat for our summer activities. Our tasks at **Sulham Meadows** are traditionally very hot, especially with no shade there. During this year's visit we pulled up a satisfying amount of ragwort that otherwise could harm cattle. Each year we extend the area we cover, having removed so much from the original site.

Another annual task is raking up grass in three clearings on **Ashampstead Common** after mowing by the Yattendon Estate. These were once used to stack harvested trees and had become bare mud, impacted and rutted by machinery. However, more than 20 years' efforts by volunteers have restored them to flower-rich glades. Some years ago, Reading University researchers discovered more than 90 different plant species in a four-metre square in one glade – and the flowers

spread every year. Significantly more butterflies have also been noted.

Also, at **Leyfield Meadow**, we cut thistles and 'bashed' bracken to encourage its amazing ground flora.

Bracken can threaten other plants and animals, and bashing it is a recurring summer chore. At **Winterbourne Wood** many years' efforts have considerably weakened regrowth. This July we also brush-cut one grass area to see how it affects regrowth next spring and haloed specimen trees and hazel stools to give the young shoots access to light. We used brush cutters, scythes, shears, sickles and grass-hooks to cut bracken on a steep slope at **Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury**. Last year the regrowth was noticeably less compared with 2016 and we expected a further reduction this year. However it was much taller and thicker (perhaps because of the hot, dry summer) as evidenced by the photo of our brushcutter working there.

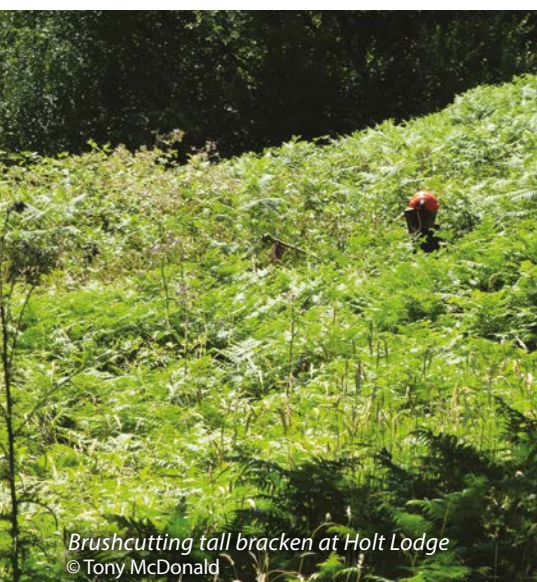
We paid two visits to **Grimsbury Castle, Hermitage** to continue removing invasive rhododendron, this year tackling the earthworks' northern slopes. Working a month earlier than usual, we aimed to remove shrubs (some as high as 20 feet) before the flowers seeded. Other flora and fauna can now see daylight, with patches of foxgloves likely to spread. **Rushall Manor Farm, near Bradfield**, which encourages countryside education, has seen marked increases in numbers of visitors and environmental volunteers. We continued to widen rides to let in sunshine and

encourage plants and flowers to grow on the enlarged verges.

At **Hosehill Lake, Theale**, we improved the perimeter footpath, parts of which get so muddy in winter as to deter visitors. We installed revetments (timber side-boards) and laid compacted stone that had to be wheelbarrowed some distance from where it had been delivered. We continued to enhance the Donkey Field at **Elm Farm Organic Research Centre** to encourage wildlife. We cleared brambles from the permissive path, reeds growing through the bridge over the stream and brambles and willow saplings from the meadow, which otherwise would soon become overgrown.

Hazel woodland at **Malt House Farm, West Woodhay**, is maintained as coppice, replicating the traditional management of deciduous woods in a sustainable way for timber products and fuel. Regrowth from coppiced stools can be damaged by grazing deer and we have tried enclosing them with branches cut during coppicing, but with limited success. So this year for the second time, we used wire fencing topped with small branches. At **King's Copse near Bradfield** we cut nettles and other unwanted growth from a laid hedge alongside a right-of-way and removed bracken from the wood itself. At **Cleeve Meadow, Streatley**, we pulled up nettles, tidied logs and reinforced the stockade along the Thames towpath.

Terry Crawford



Brushcutting tall bracken at Holt Lodge
© Tony McDonald

Continued from page 1.

To survey, we mostly use the calls and sounds they make as part of their breeding ritual:

- Churring – an incredibly distinctive call. The male nightjar will sit on a perch in his territory and emit a drawn-out 'churr'. A deep, reverberating call that registers over 1,900 notes per minute.
- Guipping – a contact call between male and female nightjar. The 'guip' is definitely onomatopoeic!



Nightjar

© Amy Denness

- Wing-clapping – part of the male display flight. The male will take off from his perch and clap his wings together several times in succession. This also highlights the one visual cue we can use to identify males: a silver spot on the wing that almost flashes in the dark when the male claps.

It can be hard to identify the exact number of nightjars in the dark, but listening out for where different males are churring at the same time gives us a clear estimation of where individuals are.

From the information our stalwart volunteers collect every year we can estimate how many territories there are and, in turn, infer how well our management work is helping to provide just the right conditions for nightjars to breed on our reserves. This information is not only key to the effective management of heathland in the West Berkshire Living Landscape area, but also extremely important in the national context to monitor how successful our nightjars are.



Nightjar

© David Tipling/2020Vision

If you'd like to take part in BBOWT's nightjar surveys next year during May and June we're always looking for extra help. No experience is necessary as training is provided on the night, so please get in touch: berkshireoffice@bbowt.org.uk

Simon Claybourn, Landscape Ecology Officer, Berkshire for BBOWT

Newbury and Thatcham Green Gym

Newbury and Thatcham Green Gym has been operating independently since April 2015. We meet on Monday mornings, 10 am to 12.30pm, and have between 8 and 20 volunteers attending our sessions. In common with many voluntary groups, we are mainly retired or semi-retired, though we do have a few teenage volunteers who lower our average age considerably!

We usually work on one BBOWT site per month including Hosehill Lake, Snelsmore and Padworth Commons. We contribute to heathland restoration on the Commons in north Hampshire, (Newtown, Burghclere and Earlsstone), clearing birch, pine and rhododendrons and sometimes having bonfires – a popular activity. Like a number of other groups, we work on Bucklebury Common, again doing battle with pine and birch, and at Rushall Manor Farm, where earlier this year we did some hedge-planting, which made a change from cutting things back.

As well as the all-important mid-morning break for socialising, we have a well-attended Christmas meal. So, it's not all hard work. The first Green Gym in the country was set up 20 years ago by a Sonning Common GP who wanted his patients to benefit from outdoor exercise. Research evidence indicates that Green Gyms are

beneficial for volunteers' physical and mental health, and a Green Gym has been featured in the Trust Me I'm a Doctor series, again highlighting its health advantages. We have promoted Green Gym to medical professionals who have referred volunteers to aid their well-being.

We therefore continue to reflect the spirit of the original Green Gym, whose 20th birthday celebrations some of us attended earlier in the year. To read more about us or to join our mailing list, please visit:

www.newburyandthatchamgreengym.org.uk

Helena Barker



Green Gym at Padworth

© Kirsten Roell

In Praise of Stinging Nettles

Not many of us have much affection for the Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*). We all recognise it instantly. We avoid it, trample it, rip it up or poison it. It belongs to the family *Urticaceae*. *Urtica* is Latin for nettle. If you pick it up, you are likely to experience urere (burning). We will be more familiar with "*urticaria*", better known to the lay person as "nettle rash", and we will all have experienced the 2-3mm pimply lumps on our skin following exposure, which itch and burn, sometimes fiercely.

Once thought to be the result of formic, tartaric and oxalic acids, current thinking is that these are present in too low a quantity and produce only vague symptoms. The minute hairs (trichomes) of nettles also release other pharmacologically active chemicals, notably acetylcholine and serotonin, (nerve stimulants), as well as histamine, the mediator in allergic reactions, producing pain, localised swelling (oedema), blood vessel dilation (redness) and itching.

So, is it any surprise that we dislike it?

Nettles grow best in fertile, disturbed soils that are rich in phosphate and nitrogen. Many gardens, fields and hedgerows are now enriched with these fertilisers, so the nettle tends to



Painted Lady Larva

© Jim Morison

thrive wherever humans are. But their chemical make-up can be turned to our advantage. Their high nitrogen content being an effective compost activator and a useful source of magnesium, sulphur and iron.

Nettles have several culinary uses. Soaking in water removes the chemicals that irritate; the nettle can be used for soup or to provide a subtle salad flavouring between cucumber and spinach. Dried nettle leaves can be infused with hot water. They have been used to flavour some cheeses such as Cornish Yarg and some Goudas. There are examples of nettles used as folk medicines, often with minimal evidential support, though much local traditional belief.

But for all these fringe benefits and uses, for me the nettle has one undisputable benefit. It is the food plant of some of our most colourful and well-known butterflies. Won't all of us, even momentarily, pause to admire the beauty of the Red Admiral, the Small Tortoiseshell, the Painted Lady, Comma or Peacock butterflies? For all these, the common stinging nettle is the major foodplant. Additionally, half a dozen of our common moths also use the nettle as a larval food source.

In early summer, look for tightly packed groups of black caterpillars which may be either Peacock, (black with spikey hairs) or Tortoiseshell (black, spikey hairs and a yellow line running down the side). As the larvae grow (remarkably quickly, often doubling in size every few days),

they gradually disperse, eventually travelling down the plant to pupate hanging from vegetation close to ground level. Curiously, these two species have slightly different preferences, Peacock larvae usually being found on young nettle growth near the centre of nettle patches, whereas Small Tortoiseshell larvae tend to be located on fresh nettles on the edge of patches. In common, however, is that the butterflies choose nettles in full sun and which show active fresh growth.

Other clues to look for are cocoon-like webs produced by colonies of tortoiseshell caterpillars, or the collection of black droppings contrasting conspicuously with the pale green "droppings" of the nettle flower heads. Red Admiral and the jazzily coloured Painted lady butterfly larvae are usually found singly. Look for nettle leaves rolled longitudinally and packaged with a tie of silk.

So please be kind to at least one of your nettle patches!

Jim Morison



Caterpillar nest

© Jim Morison



Small tortoiseshell Caterpillar

© Jim Morison

WBCS 2018 Walks

Bluebells and History 29th April

Bluebells and History' is a popular and well attended walk that takes place in the woods of Hampstead Norreys. Surviving, historical landscape features show us changing land use and farming practices through the ages. The presence of varied plant species reflects soil types, exposure and disturbance, or lack of disturbance, to the ground.

The first item of note is the well-signed, but sadly incorrect, Motte. A motte is a Norman fortress, usually placed at the top of a hill for defensive reasons, commanding views over the countryside. The so-called Hampstead Norreys Motte is part way up a hill without commanding views and without the expected surrounding earthworks. Dick Greenaway, who has studied the landscape features of this wood for many years, demonstrated

the impracticality of its use as a fort by getting us to stand on top. Clearly there would not have been enough room to swing a cat let alone a sword. The true reason for the mound is much more likely to have been a burial mound. This mound has survived being ploughed over because the steep nature of the hill made cultivation much harder than in the fields of the river basin.

Near the burial mound is an area rich in native woodland flora. Goldilocks (*Ranunculus auricormis*), Town Hall Clocks (*Adoxa moschatelina*), Sweet Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), Wood Spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*) and Spurge Laurel (*Daphne laureola*) are among the plants present.

Park Wood hill is terraced to the North probably for ease of cultivation even though the labour involved in forming



Wood anemone,
Anemone nemorosa

© Charles Gilchrist



Wood sorrel,
Oxalis acetosella

© Charles Gilchrist

Wood Sorrel appears very similar to Anemone but for the shamrock leaf.



Hampstead Norreys 'Motte'

© Charles Gilchrist

the terraces without machinery would have been considerable. The hill is also terraced with Lynchets; formed when cultivated soil moves downhill and stacks up against a boundary. The woods also have remnants of Chalk pits and quarries, saw pits, potash pits, kilns, ponds, banks and holloways all of which are described in the walk's accompanying leaflet.

Further evidence of the antiquity of this wood comes from the flora. There is an abundance of ancient woodland indicator species such as bluebells, wood anemones, wood sorrel, sanicle, yellow archangel and many others. These are plants that generally resent disturbance and are slow to spread by seed (anemones do not produce viable seed and so only move an inch at a time from underground shoots).

Heather, Botany and Bogs 8th July

Snelmore Common has a mixture of diverse habitats from woodland to lowland heath and wet fens. As such it is the perfect venue to study how different plant species have adapted to the (sometimes harsh) environmental conditions. Butterflies too are particular, not just about their food-plant, but also where they range. Charles Gilchrist led the walk with Grahame Hawker whose expertise in butterflies gave us dual interest for the afternoon.

The first butterfly we came across, in the car park, was the purple hairstreak. This is seldom seen because it usually keeps to the upper branches of oak trees. However, in the heat they sometimes come down to feed on honeydew, exuded by aphids and thrips, that drips onto the lower leaves. We followed the path marked 'Heathland trail' which goes through swathes of ling, bell heather and gorse where Silver Birch trees and Scots pines are trying to re-establish in areas where the vegetation has been cleared. This acidic land is on gravel and consequently very dry; the birches were already starting to shed their leaves. The heathers and gorse have very small leaves (in the case of gorse spines take the place of leaves) in

order to minimise transpiration so that they can hold out on this harsh soil.

The heat made the butterflies very flighty and they seldom settled long enough to get a positive identification but we saw for certain many Gatekeepers (smaller and brighter than the meadow browns) who love the brambles and wood sage that also occur in this habitat. Also appeared were Marbled White, Speckled Wood, Comma, Peacock and Large Skipper (we were able to see the spots on the wings when it settled briefly).

The path then joined a track marked as the 'Mire Trail'. This led us down a slope to a boggier, peaty valley (even in this drought). The plants are similar to those that you would come across in highland peat bogs such as Cotton grass, Bog Asphodel, Cross-leaved Heath and Sundews; the nearest similar conditions can probably be found in the New Forest.

The Sundews (*Drosera rotundifolia*) are particularly exciting to see because their adaptation to nitrogen-poor soil is to supplement their diet with flies lured to their leaves with a sticky, sweet liquid. An enzyme in their leaves then digests the flies. The flowers of the Sundew are unusual too because they do not open;



they are self-fertile and can pollinate themselves whilst still in bud.

If you would like further details of either walk a WBCS booklet is available from Dick Greenaway rg.greenaway@btinternet.com

These walks, and many others are included in the book 'Around the 3 Valleys'. Copies can be obtained from Dick Greenaway at £5 +P&P

Charles Gilchrist



'Habitat of Cotton Grass, Sundews & Bog Asphodel' © Charles Gilchrist

Thank You from the Chairman

I should like to say a big thank you to all our members for their patience while we ploughed through the extremely tedious business of complying with the latest changes to the General Data Protection rules. Our principle concern was to comply with the new rules and to make sure that your personal data, which we hold, is secure. Did we carry this out correctly? Well that was our intention and your responses to the letter which I sent out with the last issue of Upstream seems to suggest that we did, so thank you.

Several of you mentioned the cost of the process and you are quite correct

it was additional expense for stamps, paper, ink etc. but we felt that this was worthwhile. The method we chose has also helped considerably to update the records which we hold, and we feel happier that we now have correct details for everyone.

A small number of members decided that they did not wish to continue their membership and we are sorry that they have chosen to leave us but

the numbers are, happily, very small. Please continue to enjoy reading Upstream and keeping in touch with the Society's activities and please do let me know your thoughts at any time using the enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk email address which comes straight to my mail box.

Tony McDonald, Chair, West Berkshire Countryside Society



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

Improving the River Lambourn

Chalk rivers, such as the Lambourn, Kennet and the Pang, support a unique ecology and form, driven by the underlying geology and the hydrology it generates. The River Lambourn is one of the UK's finest chalk rivers; designated as both a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and a European Special Area of Conservation.

Chalk rivers derive their flow from the chalk aquifer deep below the rolling downs. The porous chalk is full of cracks and fissures, which can hold many millions of gallons of water which slowly filters down from the very permeable soils above following rainfall. As this aquifer fills, the spring flow to the river increases. This clear, clean, low in nutrients, reliable water supply is what supports the rich ecology.

Flint is a characteristic component of chalk geology. As the chalk has eroded over the millennia, especially following periods of glaciation, this material has formed the bed of the river. The fractured, angular flint gravels are an inseparable component of chalk rivers, without it the ecology will not thrive. The water flowing over and through these gravels should be shallow, and fast flowing, helping to keep them clear of excessive fine sediment. There should be: rich aquatic plant populations, dominated by ranunculus, rooted into the gravels; a healthy population of wild fish such as brown trout and grayling, which have successfully spawned in the clear gravels; and a rich invertebrate population, with the larvae of characteristic mayflies and stoneflies making their homes in the gaps between the angular stone.



Restoration work on the Lambourn

© Environment Agency



Shaw Mill Gauging Wier

© Environment Agency

As with most ecological systems, man has left his mark. We have tried to control rivers and harness their energy. We have built mills and weirs, which have reduced the river gradient, caused sedimentation of the important gravel bed, stopped the river from transporting its own gravel downstream to create habitats, and prevented fish from moving upstream to spawn and strengthen upstream populations; we have widened and straightened the channels in our attempts to drain land and reduce flood risk. This has taken away the energy under lower flows and increased sedimentation.

The EA, with partners such as Natural England, Action for the River Kennet (ARK), and numerous supportive landowners and fishing clubs, have taken steps to improve the physical habitat of the Lambourn. Together we have removed weirs, built fish passes and restored several kilometres of habitat. Between 2010 and 2018 in Newbury alone, we have built 4 fish passes and restored over 1.5km of channel – replacing the gravel bed that had historically been dredged, and creating a more natural width using natural products such as hazel faggots. We have literally given the river its energy back.

We are currently planning to remove the weir in Shaw Recreation Ground in September 2019. This EA owned flow gauging weir, is the last remaining structure on the Lambourn in Newbury to either be removed, modified or made passable to fish. The data it provides help us protect the flows from the pressures of abstraction, and monitor and predict high flows and flood risk. Although it plays an important role, like all weirs it has an impact on the biodiversity and natural processes within the river. A quick look upstream and you will see the uniform deep and wide channel, with large volumes of fine sediment smothering the gravels. The removal of this weir will energise the river, improve the habitats upstream and reconnect the fish populations. To protect the important data and alternative, non-intrusive gauge has been installed. We would welcome any comments or suggestions for this proposal.

Paul St Pierre

Area Geomorphologist, Environment Agency
paul.stpierre@environment-agency.gov.uk