



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 93
AUTUMN
2020



Juvenile Stone Chat © J. Debby Reynolds

First Stonechats Sighted On Bucklebury Common – for 70 Years!

When the Covid19 Lockdown began on March 23rd, I decided to take my permitted single dose of daily exercise, birding – with binoculars at the ready.

Saturday April 4th was a dreary and cool morning but even so by 08.45 I was already traversing the open area of Bucklebury Common. The sound of a Common Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola* (*torquatus*)) rang out from the top of a gorse bush near to the path and within seconds a singing male and calling female were in my binoculars. Now if that had been Greenham Common it would be an everyday sighting, but instantly I knew it was my first ever record for Bucklebury Common despite living there since 1979. Elated with the

sighting and photos I rushed home to share the news and check out historic records.

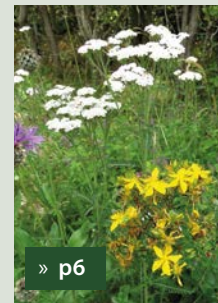
The Common Stonechat is a small, dark, dumpy chat with an all dark tail. The male has a black hood, white neck patch, streaked back, rufous breast and white belly. The female has a brown head, smaller neck patch and plain dark buff breast and belly. These birds can easily be classed as unmistakable in look and call, although the Siberian and other recently split continental Stonechats require good views and much experience to distinguish them.

In her article 'Effect of the War Years on the Birds of Bucklebury Common' Miss L. F. Anderson reports that Stonechat were breeding on the Common before WW2 but were declining. The last pair were lost when the Common was bulldozed

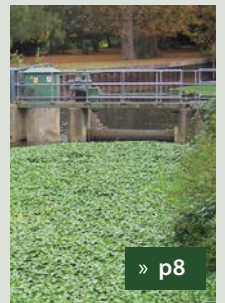
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by the military during the breeding season of April 1944. She did report a pair in December 1950, but they did not stay to breed. Interestingly there were breeding Red-backed Shrikes in those days. There have been no recorded sightings since.

A series of 10 Lockdown exercise visits from April 4 to May 20th 2020 revealed three separate occupied territories, with at least two males, three females and four fledged offspring to date. Sightings continued when unrestricted exercise was allowed, and an extra territory and brood was found nearby. The total of fledged young went up to seven. By June 10th, all the adults had disappeared and only one recently fledged offspring could be located.

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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.

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Future Events

As a consequence of Covid 19 restrictions, this issue of Upstream does not include any diary dates for walks, talks or tasks. If some restrictions are lifted which then enable us to arrange such events before the next issue of Upstream is distributed in mid-January then the events will be publicised on the diary page of our website. So please check the website if there is some easing in the guidance.

'Yattendon for Visitors' – New 2020 Edition

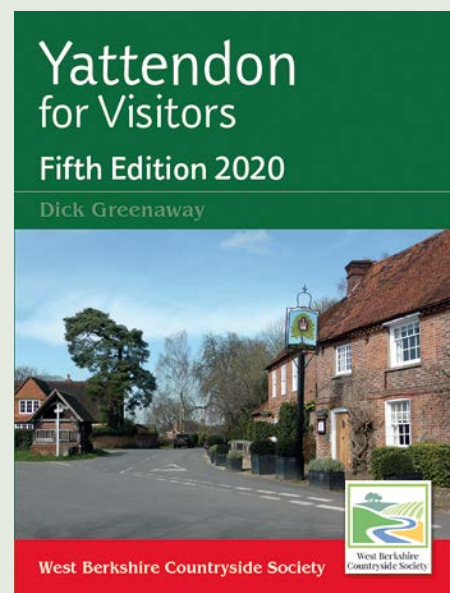
In 2014 the Society published 'Yattendon for Visitors' – a beautifully produced book about Yattendon and the surrounding countryside. This has now sold out. You might think that very little has EVER changed in Yattendon enough to justify a new edition but when we looked we found that new research and new buildings and businesses very much warranted a new look. WBCS's Hon President Dick Greenaway did the writing but its production has been very much a Pang Valley team effort. Funding came from three local sources (including the Society), the maps from another. Yattendon Estate checked the first draft and provided the farming, forestry and Public Access information. Dick's wife, Jill, found all the mistakes and corrected the grammar; finally designer Rowena Coles of Hampstead Norreys turned their efforts into a thing of beauty.

The book covers Yattendon parish (and bits of other parishes!) with

descriptions of the Pang Valley landscape, with village development from earliest times, with stories of historic residents like 'Black Jack' Norreys and of the area during World War Two. Finally the book comes up to date with life in Yattendon today.

The plan was to make the book more than just a Guide Book or a Parish History or just another Walk book. It had to serve all three purposes. The first part covers the landscape – geology etc. – and the history (Yattendon is a very ancient place). The second is aimed at someone going for a stroll around the village and has a clear large scale map labelled with the various notable buildings and with a short note about each one – lots of pictures! The third part deals with the outlying areas. A good map for walkers and information about things like the LiDAR discovery of the Domesday watermill and the new West Berkshire Brewery. Again, lots of colour pictures!

The donors' generosity has allowed lavish use of colour and pictures and has allowed us to keep the price low at £3.50 so that as many people as possible can enjoy it. It will be on sale in Yattendon Stores or by post via the West Berkshire Countryside Society website www.westberkscountryside.org.uk or via rg.greenaway@btinternet.com.





Conservation Volunteers Historical Round Up (Part 1)

Wherever one goes, it's usually possible to find something historically interesting about the place. Sometimes it's there in front of our eyes, though we may not notice it, on other occasions it may need pointing out. This is certainly true about some of the sites where we volunteers have worked, frequently oblivious to their historical significance – which is often of a military nature.

Ironically, the site that has the most conspicuous "pointer" is the mound at Hampstead Norreys that we clear of vegetation every three or four years. An information board claims that it was a motte for a small wooden castle, as depicted in an "artist's impression". However our Honorary President, Dick Greenaway, with his extensive knowledge of West Berkshire's landscape and history, is positive that it is a burial mound, and certainly it is not large enough to have supported anything like a castle, as has been proven when a dozen volunteers have had trouble crowding on to it for a group photograph.

Another ancient earthwork where we work is Grimsbury Castle, an Iron Age hill fort that remains in reasonable condition, albeit divided by a country lane and obscured by invasive rhododendron, which WBCS volunteers have been steadily removing over the years. Far less obvious are six or seven pillow

mounds built for breeding rabbits, and even less so are the traces of a number of back-filled trenches said to have been dug by soldiers for training or defensive purposes in the Second World War. Dick points out that they are actually saw-pits.

Definitely defensive and far more obvious (and likely to remain so for centuries) are the pillboxes along the Thames and Kennet valleys built in 1940 as "Stop Lines" to protect London and Britain's industrial heartland from invading forces and in particular their tanks. The pillboxes added to the natural barriers of the Thames and Kennet & Avon Canal, as did concrete obstacles known as "dragon's teeth", some which can still be found if one knows where to look. Two lines met at Theale Mill, with Red Line being established through the Sulham Valley, where one of the largest concentrations of pill boxes in the country remain, with several in sight when we have cleared the banks of the Sulham Brook or (as in the photograph) pulled ragwort in Sulham Meadow.

Now nearly completely invisible to the naked eye is an anti-tank ditch, the building of which prompted the owner of Oaklands Farm to complain to the Berkshire County War Agricultural Executive Committee in July 1940 that a ditch "800 yards long and 55 feet across" had been



WBCV Clearing Hampstead Norreys Mound

cut through her farm, rendering it "practically unusable". She tried to have the line moved further to the east, but without success. The ditch was filled in early in 1944, apart from a section in Pangbourne Meadow (where it can still be traced) that was used for training in army bridging. Land-owners were given £5 towards the costs of removing each pill box but so formidable was the task that most merely pocketed the money.

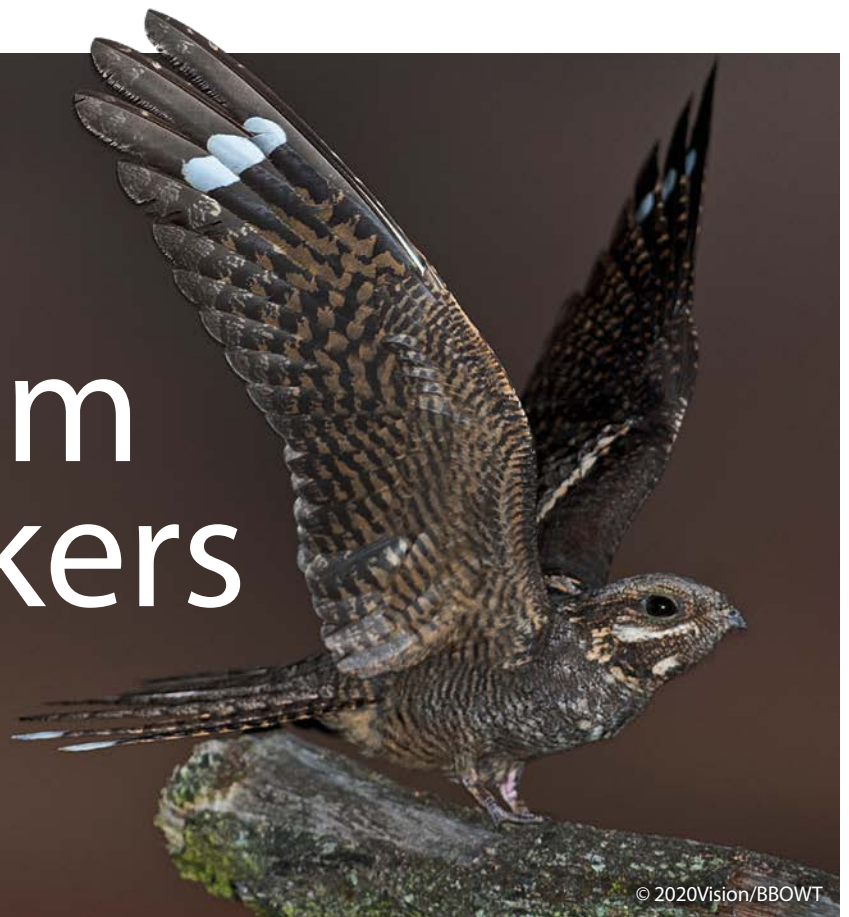
Ashampstead and Burnt Hill Commons also suffered from the necessity of wartime use that destroyed ground flora, though at the former our activities have concentrated on enhancing glades and restoring an area used to store felled timber. In one disused chalk pit stands a sycamore known as the "Soldier's Tree" because of the initials carved on it by a soldier based on the Common.

Snelsmore Common also saw wartime use, with United States Army gasoline, chemical decontamination and ordnance units based at a depot there that must have been extensive, judging from the concrete roads that remain.

Terry Crawford

Part Two of this article will appear in the Winter issue of Upstream.

Greenham Goatsuckers



Nightjar

© 2020 Vision/BBOWT

It is difficult to imagine a better job than Wildlife Warden on Greenham Common, with Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). It is a seasonal role coinciding with the official bird breeding season in the UK from the beginning of March to the end of July.

It is particularly satisfying to share with visitors something of the wonder of the many amazing animal species that can be seen at Greenham Common. Often we find ourselves listening to tales about the creatures that people have stumbled across when they least expected it, and other times we find ourselves waxing lyrical at how very fortunate we all are to have this wonderfully unique nature reserve right on our doorstep.

My personal favourite wildlife experiences on Greenham Common include listening to the beautiful songs of the skylark and the woodlark, high in the sky, especially on a crisp, clear sunny February morning, promising that Spring is on its way. Or catching glimpses of the tiny elusive Dartford warbler as it flits between the gorse bushes before it then decides to sit, bold as brass, on top of a gorse bush singing its grating song for the next minute. But the one that I love most to share with people is the weird

but wonderful nocturnal nightjar... or goatsucker, as it is sometimes known. A reference first made by Aristotle in the 4th century BC.

From May to September several pairs of European nightjars (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) live and breed on Greenham Common, spending the rest of the year in Africa or en-route between the two. If you wish to see them then you must venture out at dusk just as they are waking up. They spend the day sleeping or resting in a scrape on the ground in between the heather plants, relying on their camouflage to protect themselves.

It is definitely worth making the effort to try and see and hear these strange birds as they are truly like no other that you are likely to encounter in the UK. If successful, you can expect to hear a two-tone croaking reel reminiscent of a frog calling. This can last for several minutes while the bird sits upon the branch of a pine or birch tree. All then goes eerily quiet as the bird takes off and swoops around often close enough to be seen, even in the fading light. This is accompanied by what we call the "gwwwip" call, and wing clapping as the males try to impress the females.

In most years the Greenham Common wardens arrange for teams of experts

and novices to survey the Common for these peculiar sounds. The aim is to monitor how many nightjars there are on the Common, as well as the specific areas that they are using to breed. These areas can then be managed by BBOWT staff over the winter months to keep them suitable for nightjar the following year. Three of these surveys take place at fortnightly intervals from the end of May.

Once we have an idea of how many nightjars there are and where, we arrange a series of evening nightjar walks for the public. Every time I witness someone experiencing these enigmatic birds for the first time it makes me smile and once again feel that sense of delight at doing the job that I do.

If you would like to take part in the guided walks, then please keep an eye on the BBOWT Events calendar at www.bbowt.org.uk from March 2021. If you would like to take part in the surveys then please contact greenhamwardens@bbowt.org.uk between February and April 2021. We look forward to seeing you.

Clare Sulston
BBOWT Seasonal Warden –
Greenham and Snelsmore Commons

Saving Our Historic Footpaths and Bridleways

Those with good memories will recall that the Summer 2001 edition of *Upstream* contained an article about the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act. This was intended to extend the public's ability to enjoy the countryside. What the article did not mention was the Act's 'cut off' clause – the clock is ticking.

Any historic right of way created before 1949 must be recorded on the definitive map (the legal record of public rights of way); which ensures that the public right to use them is officially recognised. If these historic

paths are not recorded by January 2026 the legal right to use them will be lost.

An estimated 10,000 miles of historic paths – equivalent to the distance from London to Sydney – are thought to be missing from the map in England and Wales. These historic paths are a vital part of our heritage, yet if they are not claimed by 2026, we risk losing them forever.

The Ramblers are trying to build a movement of 'citizen geographers' to help find all these missing rights of way before it's too late. To discover

if a route appears on the current Ordnance Survey, you can access the Ramblers new mapping tool, via 'Find.Map.Save' on their website. Other organisations such as, the British Horse Society and Cycling UK are involved in this race to save our historic routes. To save a route that is not on the legal record, a Modification Order will need to be raised.

Our rights of way are one of our most precious assets. Let's ensure they are not lost.

Terry Davis

Continued from page 1.

A study of Stonechat breeding behaviour in 2020, after a gap of some 76 years, has raised some questions. Have these birds been overlooked in previous years? Possibly, especially as coverage by me this year has been exceptionally regular. However, although these are birds which are easily heard, seen and identified, all the adults had gone by June. The one remaining fledgling was quite hard to find and could easily have been overlooked. The June and July Nightjar visits by numerous birders would probably have missed the Stonechats completely if they had been breeding earlier in the year. So, they may have been overlooked or may be a new colonisation.

It's impossible to say where these birds may have come from, as none were

ringed. It is known that these birds are partial migrants who also move around in the winter. There is a fairly strong population in southern England, including at Greenham Common, which is only a short distance away.

The Stonechat is essentially monogamous but with a small proportion polygynous (male with several females) as seems to be the case at Bucklebury Common. It would have been so interesting to have colour rings to see what was actually going on. The three females have been faithful to their territory. There were definitely two males, but who belongs where is anyone's guess!

What has changed in the habitat, biology or other factors to make 2020 so successful? This species is sensitive to cold winter weather and so changes in climate with a series of mild winters is probably beneficial to them. Records show a national gradual eastward expansion; however, it is still considered a scarce summer visitor.

There has been a period of intensive management of habitats on the Common by Tim Culley and his teams over recent years – including the regular work parties of WBCS. The 2020 birds have favoured the recently cleared areas



Female Stone Chat
© Debby Reynolds

with low birch, scattered gorse and heather with small trees for song posts. The conservation work has undoubtedly created a perfect habitat.

Will the adults and/or offspring birds stay on the Common, might they overwinter or even return in subsequent years? Time will tell. The first brood to fledge left their territory within a few days of fledging. I'll definitely be following up in 2021.

There may be up to three broods of Stonechat per year, so this story isn't over yet. The discovery of Common Stonechat, along with several other unexpected sightings, have been one of the few silver linings of The Great British Lockdown in 2020.

Debby Reynolds



Male Stone Chat
© Debby Reynolds

Summer Railway Track Walk

Our series of seasonal walks along the recently opened footpath & cycleway along the route of the old Hermitage to Hampstead Norreys railway line continues with the Summer walk.

It was a typical, pleasant summer's day with a gentle breeze. The first section of the walk from the Hermitage end was notable for a buddleia in full flower, which would no doubt be full of butterflies in the sunshine, but there were none as we passed by. There were many nettles, teasel, thistles and ragwort along the path edges.

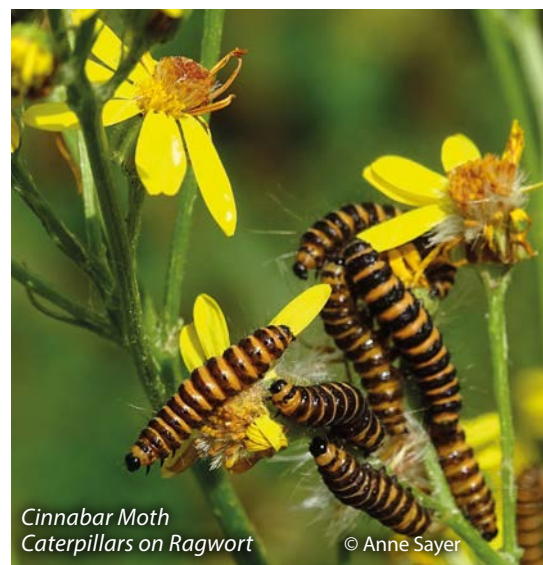
A detour to look at Furze Hill butterfly meadow provided a glorious sight – full of scabious and numerous other flower species and buzzing with bees and butterflies (mainly peacock).

The track continues in a hawthorn thicket about 20-30' high with a sycamore canopy. There is not much understorey save some ivy ground-cover but it shortly becomes an open glade, some 40 yards long, with typical grassland herbs, much like the butterfly meadow on Furze Hill. This is one of the prettier sections of the walk in Summer because the ground flora is a tapestry of colour where the sandy soil is too poor for grass to get a hold and the canopy too thin to exclude light. The plants that benefit include Scabious, wild Basil and wild Marjoram,

Yarrow, Hypericum, Agrimony, common Centaury, Ragwort (foodplant of the Cinnabar moth), Lady's and Hedge Bedstraw (now mostly over), Bird's Foot Trefoil, Knapweed and Fairy Flax. In turn these attract insects such as grasshoppers, small and large cabbage white and green-veined white butterflies, Red Admiral, common blue butterfly, honey and bumble bees and day flying moths. An oasis in the otherwise wooded track.

The next section is back to hawthorn scrub, in a shallow cutting, with some Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) providing flowers for insects in shady areas. The cutting gradually deepens and taller trees such as oak, elm, ash and pussy willow form the canopy. Hazel trees are common and so are squirrels who are already stripping off the unripe nuts; which must be the most serious threat to dormice as there can be very few hazel nuts left for winter. A solitary *Viburnum lantana*, the Wayfaring tree, with its gall encrusted leaves struggles with being swamped by overgrowth. Also a stand of a few crab apples; the fruit now starting to colour up.

Birdsong is generally more silent in the height of summer but I did hear and see Blue and Great Tits, Blackbirds, Wrens (alarm call), Pigeons, Rooks and Buzzards.



Cinnabar Moth Caterpillars on Ragwort

© Anne Sayer

As the cutting became deeper, especially north of the bridge, and the trees became taller there was not much light on the ground and the steep banks were covered in ivy, punctuated with the odd Hart's Tongue Fern and with Clematis lianas hanging from the trees. Clematis vitalba, (Old Man's beard or Traveller's Joy), is often a sign that the soil type is becoming chalky and this is very evident where the rabbits have dug out the banks. How appropriate that a railway should have both the Wayfaring tree and Traveller's Joy along its route. Wood Avens, (*Geum urbanum*) is also present here, being an herbaceous member of the rose family, is a food plant, along with Agrimony, of the Grizzled Skipper, said to be resident in the meadow at Furze Hill.

Further along the line, and further from the road, is another small opening in the canopy where light gets in. This time the hawthorn-lined track is on an embankment, higher than the road, through wheat fields - in the process of being harvested- much to the delight of recently released, young pheasants. White dead-nettle, scabious, yarrow, thistles and mullein appear on the scarp for these few yards for the benefit of more butterflies such as the speckled wood. Once past this small clearing there are a few clumps of privet, blackthorn and dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*).

Once past the bridge over a field gate, is a high embankment, crossed



Knapweed, Yarrow, Hypericum and wild Basil

© Anne Sayer

by a footpath near a few cottages. In this area is a pit – possibly for chalk extraction – above which a group of fully mature beech trees overhangs. Beech is again an indication of the chalky nature of the soil in this section.

At the point where the railway line touches Hampstead Norreys Wood some typical woodland plants appear such as Sweet Woodruff, Dog's Mercury, woody nightshade (more poisonous than deadly nightshade), Self-heal (Prunella), honeysuckle and bugle.

As the journey gets closer to the village Hall at Hampstead Norreys the trees once more remind us of the past use of the track as a railway line because large Field Maple and multistem Sycamore that have been stooled in the railway era have become enormous. It is envisaged that, in future, the trees within an 8.5m wide section of path be kept stooled or removed and the hedgeline trees outside this retained as a continuation of the unmanaged nature of a disused railway.

Charles Gilchrist



Yarrow & Scabious

© Anne Sayer

Don't Plant Trees Here!

I enjoyed Terry Davis' article on "Let's Plant a Tree" in issue 91. We are going down a similar route in Winterbourne, talking to landowners and working out which areas of land are possible tree planting sites.

A frequent problem arises from the fact that many of our remaining hedges, footpaths or bridleways are home to telegraph poles and all the wires. These are, of course, exactly where we would like to plant trees! Additionally, it has brought our attention to those remaining trees which are a feature of the landscape.

Winterbourne has four reasonably sized ancient woods (two of approx. 50 acres and two of 25 acres) with few trees between. However, these single trees which still survive are very important;

ancient oaks, old field maples, willows, some magnificent limes and a few fine sycamores. All are probably at least 150 years old and will not live for ever.

Our picture shows a sycamore and an ash tree; the latter may succumb to the ash disease. Our first priority should be to plant 2 or 3 replacements for each of these old trees, but it is always easier said than done, especially if the trees are surrounded by grazed fields. Keeping off sheep is one thing – 4 posts a metre apart and some stock fence will do the job, but horses are different altogether, bigger, stronger with a great reach. 8 posts may be needed with 4 x 3.6m rails and stock fence. The learning curve may be quite steep!

Charles Flower



Sycamore & Ash

© Charles Flower



Tree Protection

© Charles Flower



Keep an Eye Out for this Invasive Plant

Floating Pennywort obstructing a weir
© Debbie Cousins

Floating pennywort is an invasive, non-native, aquatic plant first recorded in the wild in England in 1990 that has since become established in the Lower Kennet catchment and on the River Thames downstream of Reading. We need your help to eliminate it and reduce its flooding and health and safety risks.

Originating from North America, floating pennywort is most likely to have spread into the wild in England from plants discarded from garden ponds. It can grow up to 20cm per day and when left unchecked forms large rafts in ponds, lakes and the slower margins of rivers and canals; often causing serious problems. In some watercourses, such as the Kennet and Avon Canal, there

were places where it had grown from bank to bank, outcompeting our native aquatic plants – disrupting both angling and navigation. It can increase flood risk where it grows against weirs and other structures; becoming a safety risk where it has grown across the entire channel, obscuring the edges of the river bank.

The source of floating pennywort in the Kennet catchment is thought to be from a lake close to the M4 motorway south of Reading, first appearing over ten years ago. It has since spread to the Foudry Brook and ultimately into the River Kennet/Kennet and Avon Canal downstream of Fobney Lock. Efforts have been made by a number of organisations to control its spread since its discovery. In the last two years, this effort was stepped up after warm, dry weather conditions favoured its growth with it spreading into the River Thames as far as Marsh Lock in Henley. The Environment Agency, Reading and District Angling Association, Green Park and the Canal and River Trust have made it a priority to control the invasive plant on the Lower Kennet. We have been working together in a coordinated way and have greatly reduced its amount and extent. Our

aim is to have eliminated it from the Kennet catchment within the next two to three years.

To date, we are not aware of any floating pennywort in West Berkshire, but there is always the possibility that it could spread upstream of Fobney Lock in Reading, for instance inadvertently by boats. We need the help from people in West Berkshire to look out for this plant so that we can eliminate it completely from the Kennet catchment.

Please can you look out for this species in the River Kennet, the Kennet and Avon Canal and other watercourses, as well as in ponds, lakes and ditches? If you do find any, please can you report it to enquiries_THM@environment-agency.gov.uk together with the date, its location and a photograph if possible? If you are not sure please do still tell us and we will be happy to confirm its identification. Look out for its shiny, kidney-shaped leaves (up to 7cm wide) with a crinkly edge, held on fleshy stalks that can be both floating and emergent.

Debbie Cousins
Biodiversity Officer
Environment Agency



Close up of Leaves

© Debbie Cousins



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