



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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Another Good Year for Barn Owls

In 2019 the WBCS's Barn Owl Group recorded 108 barn owl chicks fledged from the 187 nest boxes monitored in West Berkshire. An improvement of 1 chick on 2018. All the statistics for 2019 were remarkably similar to 2018. It was a slightly early season. While this was our third highest total over the last 18 years, it fell well short of the 173 chicks from 125 boxes in our record year – 2014.

Nearly all the chicks came from early breeding. However, we did have two second broods, both of which were unusual in that they followed failed first broods. The weather early in the

year was mild, but rain in early July probably prevented the males from hunting at a critical time and this caused several broods to fail. Our average brood size was 2.63 chicks. This parameter is a clear indication of the condition of the female prior to laying. In 2019 it was comparable to recent years but well short of the 3.84 chicks per brood achieved in 2014.

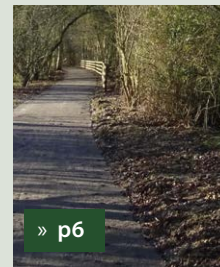
The figures come from survey sheets compiled by our volunteers. We use 'fledging' (taking their first flight) as the milestone for recording. A chick which dies before fledging is not included in the count. The number of boxes monitored was the same as last year. For the second year running we were asked not to survey 5 boxes on a farm near Kintbury, due to the continuing consequences of an outbreak of bovine TB. We sympathise with the farmer.

Ready to Fly © John Dellow

Inside this issue



» p5



» p6



» p8

- 5 Lets Plant Trees
- 6 Transformation of a Disused Railway Line
- 8 West Berkshire BirdRace
- Plus lots more...**

If a box has not shown any barn owl interest for five years, then it is unlikely to ever be successful. We have recently taken five sites off the survey list. They were put up with optimism but have not been used by barn owls for more than five years.

Probably the most interesting and exciting intruder found in our boxes this year, was a tawny owl chick found at Brimpton. This was ringed without mishap despite the reputation of tawnies for being aggressive. It was a rare encounter with a bird which has recently been added to the amber list of birds which are "of conservation concern". Several other species have been found in our boxes. Little owls are of interest to most of us. We monitor 12 little owl boxes two of which were successful. This was welcome after a blank year in 2018.

Continued on page 4 >

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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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
April 2020		
Tue 07 Apr 10.00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Cutting silver birch and Scots pine saplings. Help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner SU550 688.
Tue 14 Apr 10.00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road SU593 812.
Tue 21 Apr 10.00	Winterbourne Wood	Stool protection and woodland maintenance. Park in the entrance to the wood SU447 717.
Tue 28 Apr 10.00	Rushall Manor Farm, Bradfield	Woodland management and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield SU584 723.
May 2020		
Tue 05 May 10.00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm SU440 777. 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.
Tue 12 May 10.00	Cleeve Water Meadow, Garden Cottage, Streatley	Ongoing maintenance of this important Thames side water meadow. Park in the recreation ground car park at the top of Cleeve Court Road SU593 812.
Tue 19 May 10.00	Redhill Wood	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking SU419 642 off road, park on entrance to the main ride.
Tue 26 May 10.00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Ample parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent SU512 740.
June 2020		
Tue 02 Jun 10.00	Working with BBOWT	BBOWT location TBA. Please check the diary page of our web site nearer to the date.
Tue 09 Jun 10.00	Kings Copse Bradfield Southend	Bracken bashing on this SSSI. Park opposite the bungalow just before King's Copse House. Accessed via Jennets Hill SU579 707.
Tue 16 Jun 10.00	Grimsbury Castle, #1 Hermitage	Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort. Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board SU511 723.
Tue 23 Jun 10.00	Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury	Clearing bracken. Meet at Holt Lodge Farmhouse near Kintbury SU387 648.
Tue 30 Jun 10.00	Grimsbury Castle, #2 Hermitage	Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort. Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board SU511 723.



Conservation Volunteers Round Up

Very wet weather made having bonfires a challenge on our recent Tuesday tasks. So much of the brash we had to get rid of was soaked, and it has taken up to 45 minutes to establish a fire. However, we haven't been beaten yet!

At **Upper Basildon** we worked with Friends of Emery Down to refurbish the primary school's woodland classroom, clearing fallen and felled timber and removing several "hung up" trees. We replaced tree-trunk rounds in the seating area and burnt brash, including that generated from preparing an area for a new hazel coppice. Gratifyingly, our clearance of a boundary a year ago had enabled a new fence to be erected and a mixed native species hedge to be planted.

At **Holt Lodge Farm** we cleared brambles and scrub from a field where cattle had not been grazed, leaving the scrub uncontrolled. Brambles were spreading from the edges, the banks of the stream and from patches in the field itself. One group tackled the brambles and scrub with a brushcutter and hand tools, a second felled and logged invasive sycamores in the woods.

We continued the Christmas tradition of joining with Conserve Reading on Wednesdays at **Paices Wood**, where we collected stakes and binders for future hedge-laying; removed

intrusive rhododendron; and burnt it and previous arisings. CROW provided potatoes to be baked in the bonfire and other seasonal fare.

Baked potatoes also featured at **Grove Pit, Leckhamstead**, where we cleared and burnt dead elm trees and scrub adjacent to the byway. A few unbranched tree seedlings (whips) were planted and guarded, and haloing carried out around staked trees. Dead bracken was also removed.

Two visits were made to the **Boxford Water Meadows** sites. On the first we cut back scrub and brambles around the perimeter and took down potentially dangerous tree branches overhanging the road through the village. Further into the site, we removed invasive willow and other scrub. On the second (very wet) visit, one team cleared scrub and opened up the canopy to let light onto the public footpath running through the site. The other team cleared back scrub and bramble that was encroaching onto the water meadow at the western edge. Resulting brash was made into wildlife habitat piles.

At **Furze Hill** we continued the battle against brambles and ivy, thickened a dead hedge and removed excessive growth along part of Eling Way, the new travel route to Hampstead Norreys. Scallops were re-cut in the



© Tony McDonald

vegetation providing the "butterfly larder".

At **Redhill Woods** we continued clearing brash from the edges of two woodland rides. It had been piled there for a long time and was a tangled mix of branches of various lengths and thicknesses. To aid disentangling and moving them, we cut them into shorter lengths.

On **Ashampstead Common** we exposed a newly discovered windmill mound, removing fallen branches, scrub and other debris so that this historic feature is now more visible. Close to the Yattendon Road we cut up and removed a large fallen tree and cleared growth to encourage Springtime bluebells. We cleared bramble, as well as bracken around several veteran trees to give them better access to nutrients.

We made our fifth visit to the banks of the **River Pang** between Stanford Dingley and Bucklebury to reduce overhanging vegetation and so increase the amount of sunlight reaching the river and surrounding flora. Since starting in December 2018 we have progressed along a half-mile of the North bank and now plan to work along the South side.

Terry Crawford

Continued from page 1.

Kestrels did not do badly in 2018 but they did even better in 2019 producing at least 12 chicks. Kestrels breed much earlier than barn owls so we may have missed some broods with birds fledging before we visited.

We now have 28 volunteers involved with barn owls in WBCS. If you would like to join us or would like further

information please contact enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk. We have produced a glossy 8-page Barn Owl booklet, providing some basic facts about barn owls which is available to volunteers, landowners & potential new recruits.

John Dellow, WBCS Barn Owl Group

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. barn owl boxes checked	125	136	174	188	187	187
No. barn owl chicks estimated to have fledged	173	31	100	114	107	108
No. boxes with fledged chicks	45	15	39	40	41	41
% boxes successful	36.0	11.0	22.4	21.3	21.9	21.9
Average brood size	3.84	2.07	2.56	2.85	2.61	2.63



Tawny Owl Chick

©John Dellow

The Annual General Meeting of the West Berkshire Countryside Society

will take place in the Oak Room, Upper Bucklebury Memorial Hall, RG7 6QH

Friday 29th May 2020
7:00pm for a 7:30pm start

All items for discussion during AOB (any other business) should be submitted to the committee by sending a brief description by email to enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk by Friday 22nd May at the latest. Items received after this date will not be discussed.

Society Publications

The Society has a number of excellent publications available for sale. Most notably, Dick Greenaway's latest book, 'What's in a Berkshire Wood? And how did it get there?' Full details can be found on WBCS website.

All publications can be obtained from rg.greenaway@btinternet.com



Dates for Your Diary

Sunday 19th April at 14.00:

'Woodland flowers, bluebells and disused railway line' walk with Charles Gilchrist

We will be looking at the natural history of a disused railway line as well as ancient man-made agricultural and forestry landscape features. Park in Hampstead Norreys village hall car park. Grid ref: SU527 762

Wednesday 17th June,
21.00 - 22.00:

'Nightjars at dusk' with Tim Culley

Tim leads an evening walk on Bucklebury Common looking at nightjars. Meet at the Crossroads on Bucklebury Common at 9.00pm. Grid ref: SU556 961



Let's Plant Trees!

Hazel Coppice Location
©Ivor McArdle

Tree planting is seen as one element in combating climate change and the biodiversity crisis; highlighted during the recent election campaign with all parties pledging to plant millions. Mass tree planting is essential, however local initiatives are equally important. Whether as an individual or coming together as a community, we can all support the planting of trees.

The village of Cold Ash is setting a great example of what can be achieved. Cold Ash has a Greening Group which monitors green issues and explores opportunities to improve the village. One of its ideas, linked to the Woodland Trusts public tree planting initiative, was to plant trees. The idea was taken to the Parish Council who agreed to explore the opportunity. Land owned by the council was offered and, following a review, space for a 100 native trees, was identified in the Woodland area. A second orchard and a Hazel coppice will also be planted, without encroaching on meadowland and other environmental assets. Planting is expected to take place in November & December 2020. This project will show what a voluntary group, local government and a national body working together can achieve.

The photographs show sections of two areas in the process of being cleared; one for the planting of 70 trees and the other for a Hazel coppice.

Is there another Cold Ash? Is your village considering planting trees? What else could we do? Support tree planting charities or consider dedicating a tree or area of new woodland, as part of an anniversary or celebration. If space permits plant a tree or two in your own garden. There is a tree or shrub for every garden. Sweetgums such as Liquid Amber are particularly good at carbon sequestration. If you have a hedge, tag potential trees, cut round them then leave them alone. Let them grow to their full potential.

Free trees are available from the Woodland Trust. For schools and community groups, packs range from 30 to 450 saplings. The largest pack is enough to cover a football pitch or create a double row hedge 85 – 100 meters in length. Packs can also be purchased. This is a popular source and demand is high, so get your orders in early.

Tree planting peaked at 30,000 hectares in 1918. Since when it has consistently fallen. Only 13,400 hectares were planted last year. Our own local council West Berkshire have declared a climate emergency, held a climate conference. Surely one action will be to plant trees. Currently West Berks are hoping to have planted 400 street trees this winter. They are also seeking new funding to plant more trees. If successful these would be planted, probably next winter.

I am reminded of a couple of truisms. "The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to rest". Or, "the best time to have planted a tree was fifty years ago, the next best time is now". Newly planted trees absorb very little carbon to begin with. It remains to be seen whether we have missed an opportunity since 1989 to get trees into the ground, which by now would be established and working for us. Let's not waste another 30 years. We need to get planting, if not for us then for the sake of future generations.

Finally let's not forget trees are beautiful we should plant them anyway. They enhance our lives and well-being. Let's stand up for trees. Stand up for the planet.

Terry Davis



Location for 70 Mixed Trees ©Ivor McArdle

The Transformation of a Disused Railway Line

The Newbury to Didcot Active Travel Route (ATR) is a long-term project along a stretch of the old Didcot, Newbury and Southampton railway line that closed in 1964. Since then, the route has been largely unmanaged except as an informal footpath with occasional pruning undertaken by users. For many years, the idea of converting it into a community asset has been discussed. The ATR – a permitted path intended for use by walkers, cyclists and horse riders – is now bringing that concept to life. It aims to preserve the heritage of the old railway in providing a safe, attractive traffic free path, avoiding the busy, narrow & twisty B4009 whilst also giving wheelchair access to the open countryside.

The first section, to be known as Eling Way, will be from Pinewood Crescent in Hermitage to the Village Hall in Hampstead Norreys, using the old railway line owned by the parish council, a short stretch of the B4009 and land owned by the Gerald Palmer Eling Trust.

Work (which is funded by Highways England & supervised by West Berkshire Council) commenced in summer 2019;

initially connecting the route across both sides of the M4. Phase 2 involved a soft landscaping team clearing a 4m wide corridor of self-seeded trees and vegetation to make way for a new 2.5m wide unbound path. There are 3 old railway bridges along the route that require some minor repairs & the steeper embankments will be protected by new wooden post and rail fencing. We expect the route to be opened to the public early in 2020

A third Parish Plan Grant has recently been awarded to ensure that the Hermitage stretch is surfaced to the same standard as the rest of the route. The path will be managed by WBC. Hermitage PC will undertake vegetation management of this section in conjunction with several volunteer groups.

Ecological surveys identified the presence of Hazel Dormice within the woodland area. Tree clearance & construction has taken place in phases to comply with a licence issued by Natural England to mitigate the impact upon the dormouse population and to avoid disturbing nesting birds.

Such measures, which should actively encourage dormice, include the provision of dormice hibernation boxes, log piles to act as hibernacula (over-wintering habitat) and maintenance of the continuous tree and shrub canopy on at least one side of the track.

For conservation, a disused railway is important, providing a green corridor – a passageway for birds and animals connecting ecosystems such as the woodland areas in Hermitage and Hampstead Norreys and the grassland swards on Furze Hill. It is surprising how insects, such as beetles for instance, find it very hard to cross a road; communities can get cut off and fail to recolonise favourable ecosystems. Even birds do not like to cross empty fields for fear of being picked off by a sparrow hawk; they would rather flit from tree to tree along a hedge-line and the disused railway provides just such a safe place. There are several distinct zones along the line with various plants reflecting the differing geology and topography of each section. It can safely be assumed that none of the trees, apart from some of those in the hedgerows and some multi-stemmed trees, predate 1964.

Hopefully, the new track will eventually become softened by nature, be a beneficial environment for endangered plants and animals such as Dormice, Spurge Laurel, Grizzled Skippers and yet be a well-used cycle, horse riding and walking route. Each season in 2020, I will walk the new route between Hermitage and Hampstead Norreys creating a series of articles for Upstream based on my observations. These will be illustrated by Anne Sayer's photographs.

Charles Gilchrist



Path & Hazel Catkins

©Anne Sayer



Under construction

©Anne Sayer

Winter Walk January 2020



A sharp frost and sunshine made for one of those memorable January days of not being too cold, wet or windy making for a very pleasant walk along the railway line. I was particularly keen to see what, if anything, the wildlife had for sustenance now that the blackberries, holly berries and crab-apples had gone. Rose hips were still plentiful and should serve small mammals and birds alike. Ivy berries in all stages of ripening are common and this should give a continuous food-source for birds such as mistle thrushes for when things get tough. Ivy berries must be pretty unappetising as none has gone yet.

Despite the frosts it is remarkable how much activity is taking place in nature with Cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) and 'Lords and Ladies' (*Arum maculatum*) poking young shoots through the surface of the soil. Oak tree buds are starting to swell and will open when the soil temperature reaches 10 degrees C.

Nectar (and insects) are in short supply in the bleak mid-winter but some provision needs to be made for flies and moths, such as the winter moth, that are still out and about. The only flowers that I saw were two spurge laurels and a small number of snowdrops near the cottages which could feasibly have been garden escapes. However, Hazel catkins were starting to ripen and, although only produce pollen as wind pollinated plants do, pollen could provide some 'bread' for insects. Male and female Hazel flowers ripen at different times

on the same bush to prevent self-pollination. Flowering time is extended over a long period with nearby trees at various stages of ripening to ensure fertilisation is successful.

Winter-fruiting fungi, as well as playing an important role in the life cycle of decay and regeneration, can provide food for a number of invertebrates as well as mammals such as deer. Elder trees often sport the 'Jew's ear' fungus (*Auricularia auricula-judae*) rubbery but also tasty. Fallen birch trees were showing signs of root fungus which, although unidentified at the time, could have been Velvet Shank (*Flammulina velutipes*).

The embankment becomes a cutting as it meets the woods at Hampstead Norreys. Here, last year, there was a good number of young Spurge laurel (*Daphne laureola*). Unfortunately, the construction works have destroyed the seedlings but two old shrubs remain each side of the Eling road bridge. Spurge laurel is one of only a few British native, broad-leaved, evergreen shrubs and it flowers in January. The flowers, though difficult to see even when looking for them, are sweetly and powerfully scented. This should not be confused with the Wood Spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*), also present on the track, which I will mention in the spring walk.

Just as important as food for wildlife in winter is shelter. We spent a good few minutes watching a mouse busily pulling an ivy leaf into a log-pile to make a nest.

For the most part ground cover is available in the shadiest parts of the track from the ivy (*Hedera helix*), ground ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*) and hart's tongue fern (*Asplenium scolopendrium*). The more open areas have grasses and summer flowering herbaceous perennials as a sward as well as decent clumps of brambles. Birds that appeared prevalent today were robins, great tits and wrens. Also spotted were tree creepers, dunnocks and long tailed tits. The odd buzzard could be heard circling above and a number of trees held clumps of twigs which are probably the work of pigeons and could even be the start of this year's effort already.

Charles Gilchrist



West Berkshire's 'BirdRace'

Since 2014 BBOWT (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust) staff, trainees and volunteers have competed in an annual BirdRace around the trust's West Berkshire Living Landscape. Every year on the first Sunday of December teams of participants head out on foot, at first light, from the Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham hoping for a day full of birds. Each team's aim is to record every bird species they either see or hear in seven hours of scouring the Living Landscape project area. To claim first prize - which is mostly just pride - teams need to record the most species. All wild bird species correctly identified count towards a team's total and inevitably includes a mix of the expected common types of birds as well as always a few bonus more unusual ones.

As well as enjoying a fun day out, with a hint of friendly competition involved, participants have helped gather a valuable data set of bird records. These records have helped BBOWT to better understand which species are to be found in the area; as well as give an indication of the success or otherwise of the habitat management work our staff and volunteers have been undertaking in recent years. An impressive 87 species of birds (at a quiet time of year!) have now been recorded since the first BirdRace and is a clear indication of the wide variety of habitats to be found in the Living Landscape.

Teams always visit as many habitats as possible to increase their chances of recording a big total. Lower Farm Gravel Pit, Crookham Pools, the Kennet and Avon Canal as well as

the River Kennet usually hold good numbers of wetland species, such as waders and ducks. Last year it was a delight to watch the throng of roosting lapwing and teal benefitting from the carefully managed margins of Lower Farm. The canal and river are also the spots where teams hope to tick off such species as heron, grey wagtail and kingfisher. Somewhat surprisingly, the latter species appears to be a scarce winter visitor to the area. Some years it fails to make it onto any of the team's lists.

Rotational cutting and careful water level control of the extensive reedbeds at BBOWT's Thatcham reserve has resulted in a habitat that is perfect for reedbed specialists such as the water rail and cetti's warbler. The inaccessibility of this habitat and the dense stands of reed always ensure these two species are difficult to see, so the BirdRace teams are always relieved when they give away their presence with their distinctive call or song. Is there a more unusual bird call than the pig-like squealing of a water rail?

Perhaps just as interesting as those species regularly recorded, are those species obvious by their absence. Despite everyone's best efforts, neither skylark nor yellowhammer have been recorded on a BirdRace. Both species are present in the area in the summer and are known to breed, so clearly leave the area to winter elsewhere. I wonder if there are any improvements we can make to their farmland habitat to encourage them to stay all year round?

It is safe to say quite a few of us at BBOWT will once again gather at



Cetti's Warbler

©Amy Lewis



Grey Wagtail

©Ian Rose

the Nature Discovery Centre at the crack of dawn on the first Sunday of December hoping not only to add to our understanding of the birdlife of the local area but also to be crowned winners of the 2020 BirdRace!

Colin Williams
BBOWT Ecology Officer
www.bbowl.org.uk



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