



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 80
SUMMER
2017



©PTES

The (not so Common) Hazel Dormouse

The hazel (or common) dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) is distinguishable by its furry tail, large black eyes and golden brown/ginger colour fur. It's about the same size as a wood mouse. The lifespan can be up to 5 years. 1 or 2 litters of 3-7 young per year is usual.

Breeding nests are built in shrubs or trees and are structured e.g. with woven strips of honeysuckle bark at the centre and a leaf outer layer. With a diet of pollen, flowers, berries, nuts and insects; it mainly inhabits deciduous woodland and hedgerows; but can also be found in conifer plantations, scrubland and even gardens. It is nocturnal, spending much of its time in trees and shrubs – descending to the ground to hibernate typically between November and April.

So how common is the hazel dormouse?

People's Trust for Endangered species (PTES) leads the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme (NDMP), and reported in 2016 that their

distribution and number appears to be contracting. In 1885 dormice were present in 49 counties; today they naturally occur in 32, almost entirely south of a line between Shropshire and Suffolk. Analysis of data collected by NDMP nest box sites has revealed counts of dormice in steady decline since the mid 1990s.

The decline is attributed to loss and fragmentation of woodland and hedgerows; changes in woodland management, including a reduction in traditional coppicing; and a changing climate with unpredictable weather.

Managing hedgerows for dormice

The presence of dormice at Elm Farm, Hamstead Marshall was established

in 2013 when dormouse gnawed hazelnuts were found. The West Berkshire Conservation Volunteers have been helping with the management of some of the hedgerows. The aim is to minimise the impact on the dormouse population but maintain a habitat for them into the future. The work is to be carried out over a number of years. It has included selectively coppicing some overgrown hazel stools along a neglected hedgerow. The aim is to enable the hazel to regenerate and to let more light through to encourage the growth of a rich understorey. This wide hedgerow has some specimen trees including oak; as well as hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose and bramble. *Continued on page 4 >*

Inside this issue



» p3



» p7



» p8

- 3 Conservation Volunteers Round Up
 - 5 Ride Widening
 - 7 Never Work with Children & Animals
 - 8 Centuries of History Fill the Gap
- Plus lots more...**

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 (upstreameditor@btinternet.com)
.....	
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
July 2017		
Tue-04-Jul 10:00	Sulham Water Meadows, Home Farm, Sulham, SU642 759	Continuing ragwort control on this SSSI. Parking at Sulham Home Farm, SU643 758.
Tue-11-Jul 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-Jul 10:00	Winterbourne Woods, SU447 717	Clearing bracken from Primrose Ridge. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue-25-Jul 10:00	Ashampstead Common, SU587 751	Raking previously cut grass in woodland glades. Meet at car park, SU587 751.
August 2017		
Tue-01-Aug 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage, SU511 739.	Butterfly meadow cutting and clearing grass. Parking in the new Village Hall car park
Tue-08-Aug 10:00	The Malt House, West Woodhay, SU395 637	Hedge maintenance. If you wish to enjoy the lunch provided for us at The Malt House, please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcdonald@btinternet.com by the end of 3rd August.
Tue-15-Aug 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield, SU584 723	Woodland management and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.
Tue-22-Aug 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.
Tue-29-Aug 10:00	Wychwood, Hermitage, RG18 9TD	Tools sort out and BBQ. Parking TBA. Please check for details on the website diary nearer the date.
September 2017		
Tue-05-Sep 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield, SU584 723	Woodland management and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.
Tue-12-Sep 10:00	Winterbourne Woods, SU447 717	Cutting and clearing bracken and grass from Primrose Ridge. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue-19-Sep 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-26-Sep 10:00	Elm Farm. Organic Research Centre, Hamstead Marshall, SU414 654	Coppicing and thinning along the stream. Parking on opposite side of the road from the main building in track leading to barns.

Conservation Volunteers Round Up

West Berkshire Countryside Volunteers enjoyed dry and often sunny conditions for their weekly environmental tasks, with attendances regularly around 20 people.

On a new site at **Masons Farm, Hamstead Marshall**, we cleared an area of vegetation and dead wood to help create a woodland classroom. Dangerous trees were removed and others thinned out. Wood and brash, along with material from coppicing hazel, were used to create a substantial dead fence around the classroom. Rotten and surplus wood was stacked as log piles for wildlife habitats. The classroom will introduce young people to nature, to environmental matters and encourage them to enjoy the countryside.

Another new site for us was on the **Sulham Estate**, near St Nicholas Church. After crossing a very muddy field, we felled Alder trees on the banks of Sulham Brook with two volunteers donning waders to work in the water, all to improve sunlight penetration & consequently biodiversity.

Cleeve Court, Streatley, displayed a fantastic crop of Loddon Lilies – which were threatened with being overwhelmed by a mass of nettles that were springing up. We removed many of these, tidied up the ravages of winter and continued work carried out by Sonning Common Green Gym, including hauling and stacking logs.

We successfully reduced more gorse, pine and silver birch on **Bucklebury Common** – burning the resulting brash, taking great care to generate

only minimal smoke. On another day on the Common we worked in three groups, each requiring, transport, a task leader, a first-aider, tools – and refreshments. We cleared undergrowth from under the canopies of five trees all identified as significant and scheduled to become “veteran trees”.

We also divided into groups at **Furze Hill, Hermitage**, to tackle various tasks, including trimming and felling trees, removing bramble and saplings, widening paths – and preparing one of these for a further boardwalk to be installed.

At **Malt House Farm, West Woodhay**, we finished laying a hedge we had been working on for several years, and started laying another one 100 metres long by the public road outside the farm entrance. This hedge is fairly new and still displays tree guards from when it was planted. With it being relatively free of bramble and other unwanted undergrowth, work progressed quickly. However it does include blackthorn, so thick gloves were essential.

Our yearly visits resumed at **Grimsby Castle, Hermitage** to clear invasive rhododendron that is stifling other wildlife. The plants seemed less resistant this year and, with another foray planned for June, we dared to think that the site would soon be clear of the original growth.

Another task nearing completion is at **Rushall Manor Farm** where, in a series of visits shared with CROW (Conserve Reading on Wednesdays), we have progressively widened a ride up a

steep hill. The end is now in sight, and in May a fine display of bluebells on the cleared areas greeted visitors.

In **Winterbourne Woods** we restored and reinforced stool protection surrounding last year’s hazel coppicing, following damage by wind and rain – and by large deer living in the wood. We pollarded hazel at a height of five feet to see if the regrowth escapes the attention of deer – usually we cut as low as possible and then build protective fences of stakes, binders and brash.

At **Boxford Water Meadows** we continued to help create and maintain ecosystems that depend on groundwater to enhance biodiversity and wildlife on this Site of Special Scientific Interest. This time we cut back sallow and scrub regrowth and cleared wind-damaged trees and scrub, piling the resulting logs and brash to create further wildlife habitats.

These photographs show the fruits of our labours with primroses thriving at Winterbourne Woods & extensive bluebells at Rushall Manor Farm.

Terry Crawford



© John Salmon

The Renewal Project – River Lambourn, Newbury

The Renewal Project was set up in 2010 as a 3 year lottery funded community based project focusing on the urban 2km stretch of the River Lambourn as it runs through Newbury. The project was originally run by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) until its demise in November 2011. Since April 2012 it has been run by the Newbury Community Resource Centre and is currently based at the Furniture Project on Bone Lane off Hambridge Road in Newbury.

The Project's aims are to engage the community in the use and care of the urban stretch of the River Lambourn through a variety of means such as

public events, educational activities, training and volunteer task days, including our weekly volunteer work party which meets every Thursday from 10am – 12 noon.

We run river dipping sessions for the children at the Riverside Community Centre and use the Centre as a base for our evening talks (held quarterly). We have covered subjects including archaeology, bats, otters, photography, garden bird identification and more recently moth identification and trapping. Our annual river clean-up, an art sketching workshop and a talk on barn owls are planned for later this year.



River Kennet © Laura Proudfoot

To learn more, or to get involved visit the Renewal Project website: www.renewalproject.org.uk for all our events, or email lproudfoot@growing2gether.org.
Laura Proudfoot

Continued from page 1.

Species rich hedgerows provide a continuous sequence of flowers and fruits essential for feeding as well as places for nesting.

Features that are good for dormice include a good mix of tree and shrub species which are well interlinked and bushy undergrowth. Recommended management includes cutting a proportion of hedgerows on one side only in a year; encouraging wide and tall hedgerows and allowing outgrowth into fields; as well as coppicing in small patches. Honeysuckle can provide a valuable source of nesting material but it is not essential.

How to look for evidence of dormice

The easiest way is to carry out a Nut Hunt, in a publicly accessible woodland or hedgerow. Dormice eat hazelnuts up in the trees and then drop the shells at random to the ground. The best time to look is August onwards – before the leaves fall – though you may find them any time of year. If you think you find a dormouse hazelnut PTES would be very pleased to hear from you. You can email a photo or post the nut(s) to susan.sharafi@ptes.org for verification.

How to identify a dormouse gnawed hazelnut

Dormice, wood and yellow-necked mice, voles, birds and squirrels each have a different way of opening hazelnuts to access the kernel inside.

A hazelnut opened by a dormouse has the following features: the hole is usually circular; it most often cuts through the scar at the top of the nut; the inner rim has a smooth, turned edge; the tooth marks on the outer edge are usually at an angle to the hole.

Or come along and join in a nut hunt with local volunteers at Elm Farm hedgerows, Hamstead Marshall.

Dormouse gnawed hazelnuts were found in autumn 2013, 2014 and 2015 – so the site joined the NDMP and 50 dormouse nest boxes have been set up. As dormice are a protected species the boxes are checked, by a small group, led by a surveyor with a Natural England dormouse licence. So far birds (notably blue tits), wood mice and yellow-necked mice have been recorded.

For more information or to take part contact: sally.w@organicresearchcentre.com
Find out more about dormice at: www.ptes.org/campaigns/dormice

Corinne Sreeves



Dormouse in torpor © Corinne Sreeves



Dormice in nestbox © Lauren Alexander

Ride Widening – Woodland ride management and species diversity

When I wrote about our 25 acre wood on the north end of Snelsmore Common in 2014, I used a list of 48 significant wild flowers to demonstrate why the rides were important as an insect nectar source. Of these 48 species, 5 grow all over the wood such as bluebell and wood anemone because they flower before the leaves come out on the trees, so there is no problem with these. It is the remaining 43 species (90%) which were not doing so well because the rides were too narrow and were not being well managed.



Bugle © Charles Flower



Dog Violet © Charles Flower

The 29 woodland species (60%) which require shade include primrose, dog violet, bugle, foxglove, herb robert, early purple orchid and sweet woodruff. These live in that twilight zone where insufficient light reduces grass competition, but where the bramble needs to be cut each autumn. Dog violet is in a class of its own, being the food plant of the pearl bordered fritillaries. Lack of management in our woods nearly brought about the extinction of these beautiful butterflies, as lack of light led to a rapid decline in dog violet. Dog violet is also the food plant of the silver washed fritillary. The 14 grassland species (29%) depend

totally on the rides being cut every year and these include selfheal, betony, cuckoo flower, water mint and common spotted orchid.

Our widest and most diverse ride faces east-west, with a downhill slope towards the west. We have kept a close watch on this and new species seem to be appearing. The ride nearly closed up altogether about 20 years ago and since then it has been topped every year, usually in the autumn. Ride width has been maintained at about 10 metres so there is plenty of light. A single clump of fleabane appeared three or four years ago as did marsh birdsfoot trefoil and lesser spearwort. Why did we not see them before? Or were they there all the time and had been grazed by the deer to the point where it was hard to identify them. Some years earlier, I can recall seeing a single clump of ragged robin and square stemmed St Johns wort, both of which have now increased.

A sequence of events can be suggested by which these grassland species appear. The ride management is the first requirement, letting in the light and keeping the bramble at bay. This may activate dormant seed, but molehills and badger rooting could also assist. Badgers only spread to the wood 10 years ago. Once dormant seed has been activated, muntjac nibbling



Fleabane © Charles Flower

could suppress flowering for a few years until the plants are strong enough. Most plants are perennials and fleabane is also rhizomatous so it will go on spreading regardless of flowering.

If we have five species which have emerged because of more effective ride management as well as animal activity, will there be more? Are these grassland species the first to disappear when ride management declines? It certainly encourages us to keep up the ride management.

However much the ground flora of a wood is surveyed, it is only the longer term studies which show up these trends. The fact that we have started to manage the wood more actively in recent years with species reappearing gives hope to anyone bringing woodland back into management, and if the number of grassland species can be increased, this boosts the nectar supply which will be great for insect life, especially during the summer months.

Charles Flower



Ride Widening at Rushall Manor Farm

© Tony McDonald

'Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!' – A Brief History of Rabbits

In Britain, rabbits were native before the Ice Age, but never returned after the climate improved. The European wild rabbit comes from the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, where the Romans farmed them for meat and fur, keeping them in fenced enclosures. The practice appears to have gone with the Romans, as there is no Old English word for the creatures.

The Normans re-introduced them, making rabbit farming popular by the Middle Ages. French monks kept them for meat after Pope Gregory deemed laurice, new born rabbits, to be

classed as fish, and so could be eaten during Lent.

By the twelfth century, warrens were found within deer parks, which are still seen as a series of pillow mounds on the soil. Rabbits were highly prized and became subject to attacks by armed robbers, and so the homes of warren keepers were built like small fortresses. The walls of Thetford Warren Lodge in Norfolk are over a metre thick, and feature parapets to watch out for predators and poachers.

The keeping of pet rabbits by the Victorians became a middle-class

hobby. Some became part of our literary heritage, such as Beatrix Potter's rabbit, Benjamin.

After the Second World War, breeding rabbits for meat at home was encouraged as an easy and nutritious way to economise.

During the 1950's, the Myxomatosis virus devastated the wild rabbit population, which impacted the food chain to reduce stoat, buzzard and owl populations, and is thought to have caused the extinction of the large blue butterfly.

Hannah Piekarz

Full House for Ridgeway Talk

On 29 March around 70 members & non-members enjoyed a fascinating talk by Eric Jones on the 'History & Artistic Connections of the Middle Ridgeway' at the Memorial Hall, Upper Bucklebury. The talk was illustrated by maps, old prints & paintings by his daughter – the artist Anna Dillon.

Having grown up in Goring & now an academic at Exeter University, Eric has been studying the Ridgeway (often referred to as Europe's oldest road) since 1972; using source material from fieldwork, economic data, ecological data, artefacts & literature. His visualisation of the Ridgeway draws upon the work of topographers, artists, map makers & photographers.

He spoke most interestingly of the Ridgeway's long standing role as a

Drovers' Path for livestock from as far afield as South Wales & Somerset to the ever expanding market of London. I particularly warmed to his story of drovers from South Wales who were known to send their sheepdogs home unaccompanied so that they could enjoy the hostelries of London for a few days before returning home themselves!

An important point that has shaped the landscape has been the constant ebb and flow of land usage between grassland and cultivation as the prices of crops fluctuated. Eric highlighted the current situation whereby there is a far greater diversity of landscape but a much reduced diversity of wildlife.

Our thanks to Sally Wallington for organising such an enjoyable event.

John Salmon

Membership Subscriptions

Membership of the Society costs just £15 for a family & enables us to fund projects which benefit both the wildlife and the people who live and work in West Berkshire. Please remember to send your subs when due, or better still (if you don't already), pay by Standing Order which makes administration easier for us and removes the need for you to remember to send us a cheque at the due time each year. Thank You.

Jathan Rayner, Membership Sec.
wbcsmembership@gmail.com

WBCS AGM

As we go to press, the West Berkshire Countryside Society held its AGM on 1st of June. At the AGM, Chair Kay Lacey delivered her annual report and Ed Cooper was appointed as the Society's new Chair. The full text of Kay's AGM report will appear on the WBCS website shortly after the AGM.



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

Never Work with Children & Animals

The John Simonds Trust based at Rushall Farm in the Pang Valley has been doing just that for over 30 years. Rushall Farm has always been a mixed farm with the mainstay of the farming business being sheep, beef cattle and cereals. John Bishop the then Farm Manager spotted that children were becoming detached from the countryside and where their food came from so started the trust in an effort to reconnect school children to the wonders of the natural world. Over the years, as so much of life is viewed through a screen, this connection with the outside world has become more vital than ever. Currently over 14,000 children visit the farm and the Pang Valley each year with their schools, nurseries, pre-schools and Brownie packs.

Some of them camp for a number of days. They might learn team building skills by herding sheep or they might build a shelter in the woods. They'll spend their evenings around a campfire and then with the help of a bat detector they'll learn how bats echolocate and how hilarious the raspberry noise is when they catch a moth.

Many schools bring their children to learn about farming. This might be

as simple as nursery children getting to hold a lamb to secondary school children learning about soil types and crop rotation. Of course all the children and young people, regardless of age, enjoy a ride on the tractor and trailer.

Visits are generally curriculum based and many schools take the opportunity to visit Rushall Farm as part of their science studies to look at wildlife and where it lives. Others are here to learn about the geography of this beautiful valley and the chemical, biological and physical attributes of the Pang itself. What an amazing opportunity and how times have changed. I vividly remember my one and only school trip. We went to Canterbury Cathedral. It was memorable for being one of the most boring days of my childhood. I'd have much preferred a day standing in a river in waders learning the dark art of kick sampling with a net.

Of course all of this work requires a lot of kit and with the numbers of children we see it tends to wear out pretty quick. The West Berkshire Countryside Society has been a big help in providing funds for educational materials. Last year



© Cliff Marriott

they helped us purchase many pairs of waders, tents and a brilliant virtual bee hive as well as materials for improving our education centre. Their volunteers are regular visitors to Rushall Manor Farm for their Tuesday Conservation tasks; most recently to perform some much valued 'ride widening'.

Cliff Marriott



© Cliff Marriott



© Cliff Marriott

WBCS Funds Charcoal Mini Kiln

The WBCS has made a new donation to the John Simonds Trust – the funds to purchase a new Charcoal Mini Kiln which, whilst compact (31" x 25") can consistently produce about 15-20kg of charcoal from oak, birch and sycamore.

JST demonstrate charcoal burning to the school groups that visit Rushall Farm. This is relevant to their STEM (Science, Technology,

Education and Maths) curriculum; the Design and Technology subject; and for the KS3 and KS4 (basically all of secondary school) farming topics the charcoal burners are an integral part of the farm diversification activity. The use of charcoal burners really enhance the experience & leads onto discussions on woodland management, lost skills, sustainability and carbon neutrality.



Centuries of History Fill the Gap



The Pang Valley between Theale and the Thames is known as the Sulham Gap. Originally the Kennet and Pang rivers flowed through it to join the Thames at Pangbourne, together cutting a wide flood plain and depositing gravel terraces on either side.

Land heave at the end of the last Ice Age diverted the Kennet and turned the Gap into a swamp, later known as "Tudda's Marsh". The marshy area at Theale was probably crossed by a boardwalk (Theale in old English means "planks"), and the winding road between Tidmarsh and Sulham almost certainly runs on an ancient causeway.

Reading Abbey drained the swamp, most likely in the 12th century, to make very valuable grazing and hay meadows. The Pang and Sulham Brook were embanked and led down the Gap's west and east sides respectively, with a joining grid of channels. Watermills were inserted at Pangbourne, Sulham Home Farm – and Tidmarsh (where milling ceased in 1937 after at least 700 years of operation), though the large stones remain for passers-by to see.

During World War Two an anti-tank ditch was dug along the Gap and concrete gun-emplacements built as part of a 'stop line' against invasion and an advance on London. The

emplacements would have housed two-pounder guns, supported by Bren machine-guns. How effective these would have been was luckily never tested, but the "pill boxes" are extremely solid and generally land-owners have not tried to demolish them. Indeed when volunteers tried to turn one into a home for bats the concrete proved too tough for their drill bits.

Annually for nearly 20 years, the Society and its predecessors have cleared Oxford ragwort from a Site of Special Scientific Interest close to Pangbourne. The ragwort seeds are said to have escaped from Oxford Botanic Garden to the city's railway stations, finding a new habitat in the railway lines' clinker beds and spreading to other parts of the country.

Recently the Society has helped maintain coppices west of Sulham Lane and worked in the water meadows close to Home Farm, clearing trees overhanging Sulham Brook to improve biodiversity.

We have also held well-attended walks led by local experts to explore the Gap's varied geology and history. A 3.5-mile route, including a brief incursion into Sulham Wood, includes twenty-nine points of interest.

Dick Greenaway and Terry Crawford

Dates for your Diary – Walks & Events

Wed-12-Jul 8.30pm Bucklebury Common – Nightjars and glow worms at dusk SU550 688. Tim Culley leads an evening walk looking at heathland restoration and some of the specialized wildlife associated with this habitat. Meet at Angel's Corner, by the Scout Hut on Bucklebury Common at 8.30pm. Grid ref: SU 550 688.

Sun-23-Jul 2.00 pm 'Flowers, Barrows and Butterflies' – walk: Join Charles Gilchrist, Sarah Orr and Graham Hawker for a short walk (0.5 mile 0.75km) around the Lambourn Seven Barrows Reserve. The Reserve is noted for its abundance of chalk grassland flowers and butterflies and, of course, for its large number of Bronze Age Barrows. This will be a joint walk led by the Society in conjunction with the 'Festival of Archaeology'. The walk will also visit the Neolithic Long Barrow a short distance to the North. Meet at the Reserve car park on the B4001 SU3298 2827.

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

