West Berkshire Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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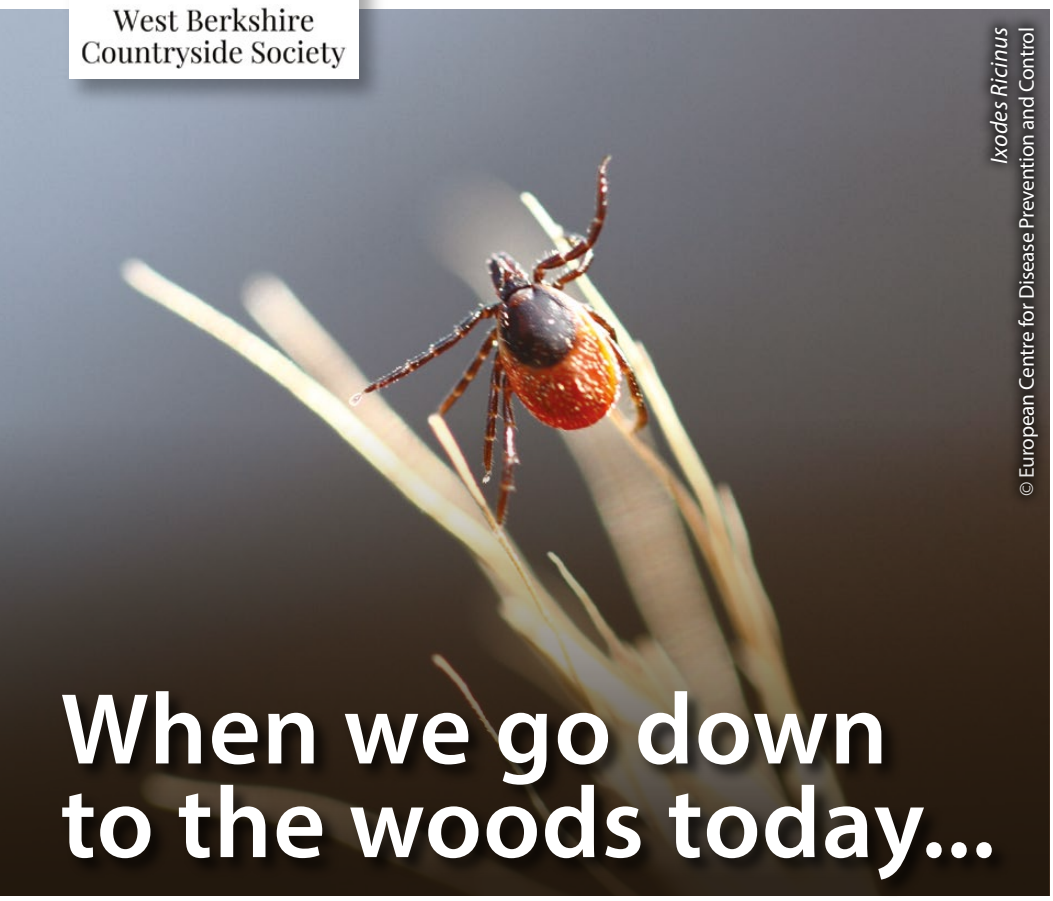

Ixodes Ricinus

© European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

When we go down to the woods today...

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Lyme Disease seems to roll off peoples' tongues while knowing very little about it. It was first identified during a study in the 1970s in Lyme, a small outback town in Connecticut, USA where several people had fallen ill after being bitten by ticks.

Ticks are numerous in the USA and South Africa and are common in areas of Europe especially the Black Forest. But they are significant in parts of the UK as well. The Western Isles and the New Forest are our more important areas as is (most relevantly) the area of East Wiltshire and West Berkshire. The Tick is quite fussy, needing warmth above but a dampish area, say leaf litter, below. This is why it is more common in woodland and pastoral Berkshire rather than the wheat fields Oxfordshire.

The insect is a blood sucker - the front pair of its eight legs are hooked. The female attaches to a variety of warm-blooded animals during the summer. Once sated she drops to the ground then ovulating thousands of eggs. Within the damp litter over the winter these evolve through larval stages eventually emerging as small recognisable ticks. In the Spring these climb up plant stems to give a launch site to any blood source passing by. Roe deer, pheasants or your dog make common targets, but your uncovered arm or leg will do just as nicely. The front jaws penetrate our skin painlessly. Most people's skin reacts in a classical way – the bite encircled by an area resembling target – but this is not always so.

If you spot the Tick, it is easy enough to lift away with a pair of tweezers. But if it is clinging to an area harder to see, the back of an arm or a leg, then this gives it longer to cause extra problems. The saliva of the Tick often contains the Borellia bacterium. While the saliva is injected to stop the blood source clotting the Borellia goes in with it. If left to circulate in the blood stream this is what makes us unwell, the so-called Tick Bite Fever or Lyme Disease (Lyme Borelliosis).

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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: **Tony McDonald**
Membership Secretary: **Jathan Rayner (membership@westberkscountryside.org.uk) NEW!**
Upstream Editor: **John Salmon (upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com) NEW!**

Hon President: **Dick Greenaway MBE RD**

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

Volunteers' Task Diary

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

Date/ Time	Venue	Details
Jul 2018		
Tue 03 Jul 10.00	**Sulham Water Meadows, Home Farm, Sulham.**	Continuing ragwort control on this SSSI. Parking at Sulham Home Farm. SU643 758
Tue 10 Jul 10.00	**Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury. SU387 648**	Clearing bracken. Meet at Holt Lodge Farm House near Kintbury.
Tue 17 Jul 10.00	**Winterbourne Woods. SU447 717**	Bracken clearing. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue 24 Jul 10.00	**Ashampstead Common.**	Raking previously cut grass in woodland glades. Meet at car park RG8 8QJ.
Tue 31 Jul 10.00	**The Malt House, West Woodhay. SU395 637**	Protecting previously coppiced hazel stools. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcdonald@btinternet.com by lunchtime Thursday 26th July.
Aug 2018		
Tue 07 Aug 10.00	**Furze Hill, Hermitage. SU 511 739**	Butterfly meadow cutting and clearing grass. Parking in the new village hall car park.
Tue 14 Aug 1000	**Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield. SU584 723**	Woodland management, ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.
Tue 21 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 28 Aug 10.00	**Wychwood BBQ & Tools check RG18 9TD.**	Parking details to be confirmed.
Sep 2018		
Tue 04 Sep 10.00	**Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield. SU584 723**	Woodland management, coppicing and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield.
Tue 11 Sep 10.00	**Winterbourne Woods. SU447 717**	Cutting and clearing grass on Primrose ridge. Park in the entrance to the wood.
Tue 18 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 25 Sep 10.00	**Elm Farm. Organic Research Centre, Kintbury. SU414 654**	Coppicing and brash clearance in dormouse hedge. Parking on opposite side of the road from the main building in track leading to barns.

Conservation Volunteers Round Up

The pleasant weather that blessed our mid-winter work did not continue far into 2018. Snow and rain forced tasks to be cancelled or re-scheduled, with sites being waterlogged and dangerous to work on.

But we pressed ahead with one task that we might have been forgiven for abandoning – at **Furze Hill, Hermitage**, where it was pouring with rain, freezing, muddy and altogether very hostile. But the work had to be done – 240 whips (small hedge plants) had been purchased and needed to be put in place without delay. Despite the weather, thirteen volunteers turned out, digging up turf for the hedge line, laying a membrane, holding it down with some of the turf and then starting planting. Better weather greeted our return visit in late April, when we re-located seats for a pre-school woodland classroom, weeded a hedge and cut up and moved logs from a felled infected tree.

We continued for a second year to lay the hedge alongside the road at **Malt House Farm, West Woodhay**, working on two days. Hedge-laying requires a lot of stakes and binders, and we had cut plenty of these when coppicing hazel in the winter. The binders are woven between the vertical stakes at the top of the laid hedge, and if cut too early they can dry out and become brittle and liable to breaking when used.

However when, after a break of several years, we returned to **Sheepdrove Organic Farm**, high on the Lambourn Downs, we laid a hedge in what, for us, was a new way, without stakes and binders. This proved to be quite tricky as the hedge had to be robust enough to withstand strong winds and blending in the stems effectively was vital. It will eventually form part of a much longer wildlife corridor in keeping with the farm's organic principles.

On **Ashampstead Common** we cut back bramble and undergrowth that were competing with trees of noted splendour for the precious resources that have kept the latter flourishing for many years. At the bottom of Sucks Lane we cleared nettles and other growth to encourage Spring flowers to put in their annual appearance and to be enjoyed by those passing along Yattendon Lane. We also helped repair a footpath handrail

One re-scheduled visit was to **Emery Down** woodland classroom in Upper Basildon, where several large trees had suffered serious storm damage. We cleared substantial broken branches and debris as well as smaller trees and scrub, burning the brash, creating log piles and improving overall access and safety in the wood.

Englefield Estate now manages the 100 acres of ancient woodland at **Rushall Farm, Bradfield**, which hosts educational visits for school-children, the wood itself offering magnificent springtime displays of bluebells. The estate advised that a tree-safety survey was needed on roads, tracks, footpaths and open-access areas for children, leading to 390 trees being identified for action. Most required skilled and very expensive top work to remove dead or dangerous branches, and some had to be felled, leaving clearing up to be done by volunteers. We cut up branches, piled up the resulting logs and burnt the left-over brash, leaving behind a much tidier woodland. On another visit we also continued the programme of widening rides, the success of which is evident from plants and flowers that are now flourishing alongside tracks where we previously worked.

At least these latter tasks were carried out in pleasant sunshine that was very welcome after the rigours of the preceding weeks!

Terry Crawford

Continued from page 1.

If left unrecognised for a long time Lyme Disease can indeed cause great trouble affecting nerves, joints, even hearts. But, I ran a medical practice with 13,000 patients for 44 years – we never knowingly saw Lyme Disease although clearly several patients must have been bitten. So, it needs to be taken seriously but it is quite uncommon.

Because it is so unusual, the level of suspicion by even the most competent GP is not going to be high. Like so many illnesses it starts off with general aches and pains, flu-like symptoms, easily dismissed as yet another viral infection. It is only when symptoms persist that the doctor is likely to take more notice. A confident doctor will value you telling them that you spend time felling trees, shrubs and bracken.

So how does this all affect our volunteer working parties? Remember this is a disease of the Spring and Summer. We often work where Ticks could be about. Possibly, we should make long sleeves and trousers mandatory? We do have a pair of Tweezers in the First Aid Box.

If I find that I have possibly had a Tick on me for more than a day, then I am off to see my GP. No great hurry. But I will be asking for the routine blood tests to be done and then taking an antibiotic starting on that day. Doxycycline has few problems and is very good at knocking out those Borellia bugs that my personal tick might have been carrying.

Chris Howlett


Tick Bite Rash © NHS

Dates for your Diary

Wednesday 4 July at 2030 – 2200 Bucklebury Common
'Nightjars and Glow Worms at Dusk'
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: SU550 688.

Sunday 8 July at 1400
'Heath, Botany and Bog'
Join Charles Gilchrist and Grahame Hawker for a short walk - about 1 1/4 miles or 2km - to explore the geology and wildlife of Snelsmore Common, especially the carnivorous sundews in the mires. Meet at the entrance to Snelsmore Country Park SU464 710. Dogs not advised since adders are not uncommon.

Sunday 16 September at 1400
'World War 2 at Haw Farm'
Join Dick Greenaway for a short 1 1/4 (2km) walk to look at some of the WW2 remains and to explore the wartime history of this important airfield near Hampstead Norreys on the B4009. Meet at the modern entrance to Haw Farm. SU549 768 RG18 0TP.

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

The Story of our Volunteers

Founded in January 1995, the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers met twice a month to: 'conserve, monitor and enhance the wildlife habitat of the Pang Valley; work closely with landowners, farmers, local authorities and conservation bodies; promote an understanding of the need for conservation and countryside management within the Pang Valley; and promote practical conservation through practical work.'

Over the intervening years there has been great change and a growing professionalism. Formal risk assessments, power tools and formal training courses, dedicated site leaders... have all contributed to a growing self-confidence and efficiency, gaining increasing respect from landowners and parish councils that ask for their help. Renamed the West Berkshire Conservation Volunteers in 2016 to reflect their increased geographic range, tasks are now undertaken almost every Tuesday of the year.

Dick Greenaway WBCS' Hon. President & Archivist has written a history of the volunteers which is now available to read & download on the society's new website.

Adders in the West Berkshire Heathlands

What is it about heathlands that invoke a sense of awe and appreciation? It could be the open expanses of pink heather and golden gorse, or the views from the top of a steep gully. It might be the sights and sounds of the specialist wildlife that have adapted to live here, or just a chance to 'get away from it all', if just for a moment. Whatever the reason, we are spoilt for choice in West Berkshire with areas such as Buckleberry Common and the BBOWT reserves at Greenham and Crookham Common, Snelsmore Common and Padworth Common. These contain significant areas of lowland heath, offering a chance to experience this ancient landscape that has been shaped by people over thousands of years.

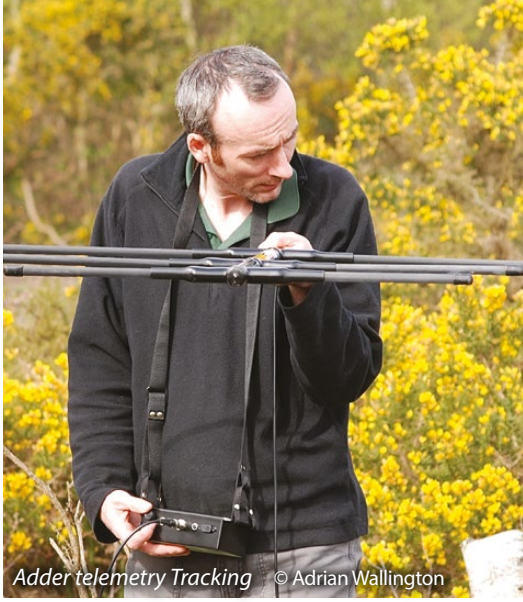
The changing seasons are particularly noticeable on heathlands as we move into summer. Heathers bake, and soft peaty soils and gravels have dried up. It's a landscape of heat hazes and coconut-scented gorse flowers. It's time for summer wildlife to move centre stage.

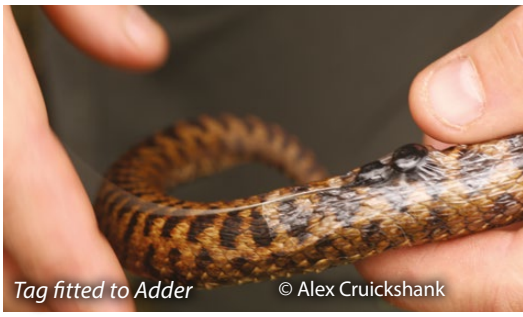
You'll need to look and listen carefully. The common lizard will scurry back under a log as you pass, the bog bush cricket stridulates from deep within damp tussocks of purple moor grass and a stonechat will clack from a perch before darting for cover. The nightjar's long, unusual 'churr' is an experience not to be missed.

Heathland requires a significant amount of practical management and as land managers, we need to ensure the work is delivered for the benefit of both the wildlife and the people who visit. A large part of the conservation work is ensuring there is variety in the vegetation structure. In areas of bare ground adders will bask, in mature gorse or heather Dartford warblers can nest, and by retaining individual trees, nightjar can perch. Thick scrub between the heathland and nearby woodland is used by nightingales and many other song birds.

There are myriad of niches that need to be constantly created and monitored. Our management strategy is constantly informed by new information – summer is a time of surveys. BBOWT set up an Adder Telemetry Project on Greenham and Crookham Common in 2015 and 2016 to gather more information about our local adder populations.

After training with the renowned 'adder whisperer' Nigel Hand, we found & tagged 25 adders (16 males and 9 females) on the Common – attaching tiny GPS trackers to them so we could map their movements. They were shown to be widespread across the Common but were isolated to distinct areas. The males travelled widely to seek females, but short vegetation and open ground were movement barriers. In contrast, the females remained very local, often staying within a few metres of where they were first located.


Adder telemetry Tracking © Adrian Wallington

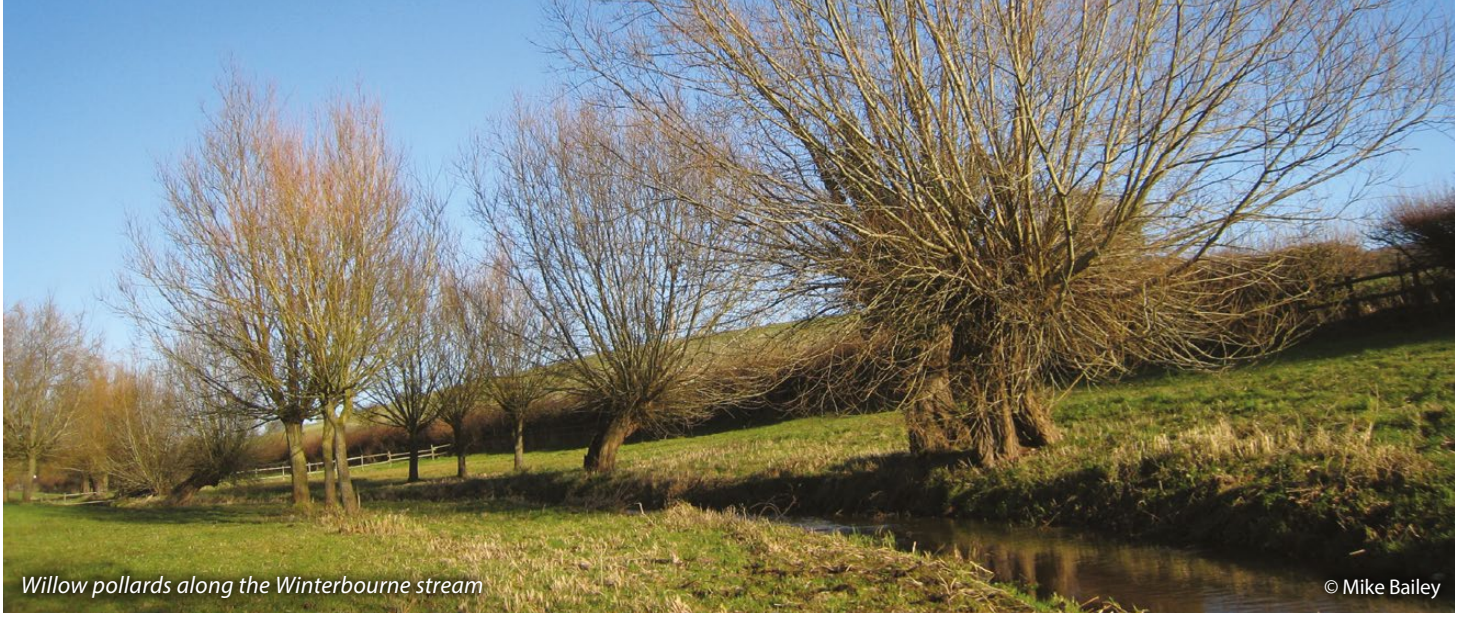

Tag fitted to Adder © Alex Cruickshank

Recommendations from the survey included creation of more hibernation sites, sensitive management around the areas where females prefer to stay and improving habitats to enable males to move between the isolated populations to ensure genetic health of the population. Where localised populations of adders were identified, sensitive smaller scale gorse and scrub cutting is undertaken. Where possible we do some tree felling around the edges of heathland to extend the areas that are available to adders.


Adder © Alex Cruickshank

Adrian Wallington

The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) Land Management Team



Willow pollards along the Winterbourne stream © Mike Bailey

Pollards and Wildlife

When did you last see a pollarded tree? In our parish of Winterbourne they remain along a stretch of the Winterbourne stream, because a previous owner decided to re-instate them. They have been cut at around 2m because a tall tree in water-logged ground would simply blow over. In medieval times, this regular cutting of oak, ash, beech and other species above the height cattle could reach yielded fodder for animals, fuel for the fire and poles for the homestead. Twigs and branches were an important source of fodder for cattle in winter and this continued until the advent of the scythe made it easier to make hay. Willow branches were particularly good for the bindings of cut and laid hedges. Pollards today are mainly restricted to commons such as Bucklebury and ancient wood pasture such as Windsor Great Park.

Pollarding achieves something else of the greatest value to wildlife. It creates rotten wood on which nearly half the 20,000 British species of insects depend. These seemingly useless bits of rot are crucial to some part of the life cycle of a large number of these species. Some of the very oldest trees in Windsor Park have some of our rarest wood-dependent beetles. We not only need to keep these magnificent old trees alive for as long as possible, but we need to create new pollards to take over from the existing ones. This is a project with an extraordinary time scale. If a beetle is restricted to a group of 400 year old pollards, what do we do when they fall apart? Much imaginative thinking will be required.

The process of decay is one of the most intriguing aspects of these pollards. Fungi enter the tree as soon as cutting begins and interact with beetles, this results in other species colonising, with good feeding habitat for wood peckers. In time this reduces the solid heartwood to a soft rotten substance. This enables the aerial roots within the tree to feed off the nutrients released by fungal action. This is developed further when the tree becomes hollow and the roots can feed off the decay, debris and leaf litter as well as birds' nests that fall to the ground. What then develops is a sort of arboreal compost heap, which recycles the nutrients. This decay simply removes heartwood which is not required any more by the changed structure. The tree remains healthy and as it becomes more like a hollow cylinder, it becomes structurally stronger, since the growing imbalance between the head of the tree and its root structure has been resolved. When the great gales of 1987 and 1990 ripped through southern England, scarcely a pollard was blown over while all around thousands of great standard trees lay prostrate.

There is almost no limit to the age that a pollarded oak can achieve. Some of the pollards in Windsor Forest are 1000 years old. This is the greatest good news for wildlife especially slow moving rare beetles which find it traumatic moving 5 metres to another pollard. A great assortment of other wildlife flourishes: ferns will grow in cascades down rain channels, mosses and liverworts will cover the north side of the trunk, lichens will abound and barn owls will appreciate the spacious lodgings.

The race is now on to create new pollards before it is too late. In many ways it is already too late, but great work is being done including at Burnham Beeches & Savernake. Cutting off huge limbs uncut for 1-200 years can prove fatal, so it is now being done with great care over a 10 year period or longer with considerable success. The lesson here is that once the pollarding process begins, it needs to continue.

Charles Flower

Pollarded willow with wood sorrel colonising © Mike Bailey

In Praise of Ivy

Some people take a zero tolerance view of ivy citing it pulls down trees and eats into brickwork; but I am quite a fan. Ivy (hedera helix) is a climbing member of the araliaceae family and is one of the few, native, broad-leaved evergreens. Considering its life cycle will help us understand its beneficial role in the ecosystem.

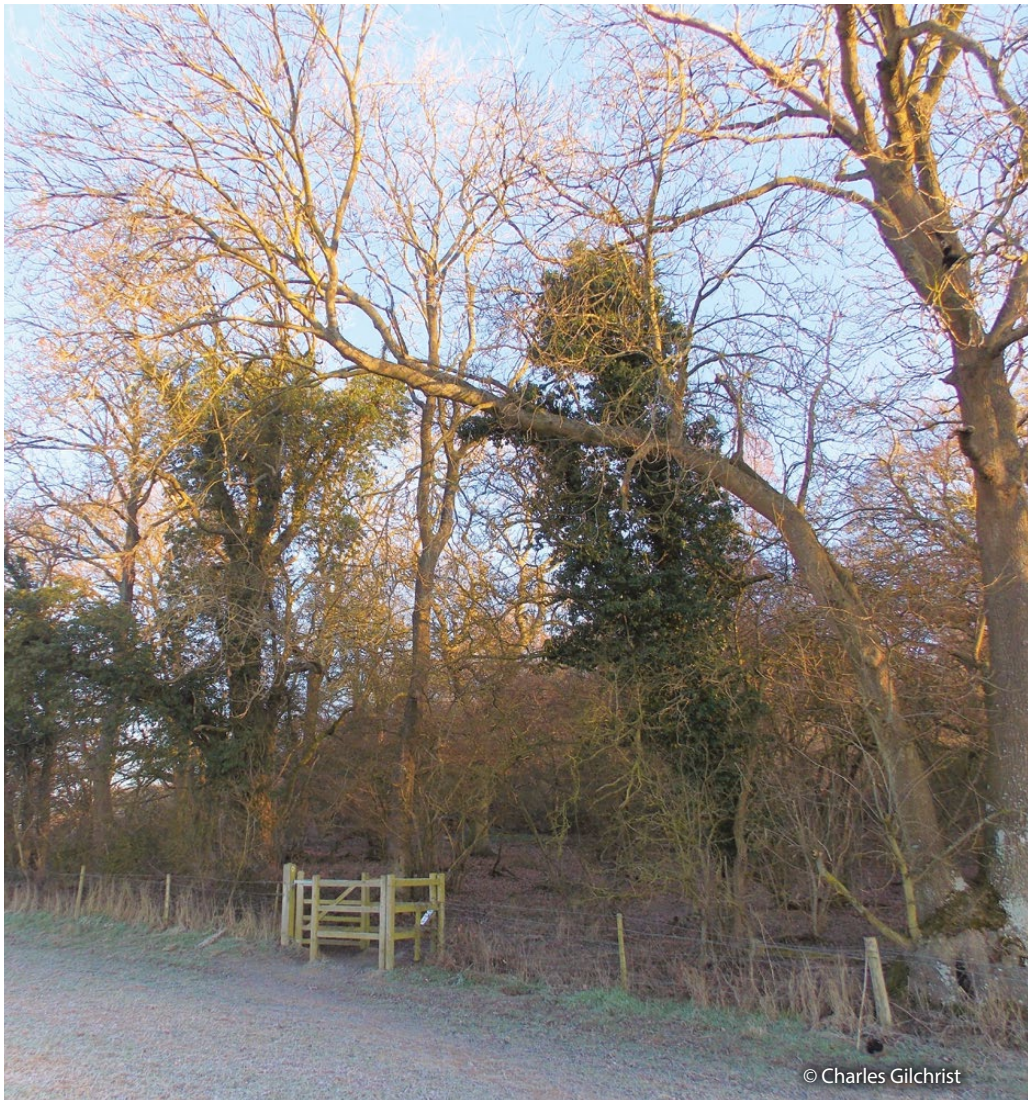
A seedling germinates on the forest floor putting out both normal roots into the ground and flexible shoots above ground. These fast growing stems are called adventitious shoots and are too weak to stand up by themselves so, to enable the plant to reach the forest canopy, they are adapted to be self-clinging. When they have reached a suitable tree to use as support they rapidly cover the stem and branches with a growth rate of about 1m a year. They cling on using small adventitious rootlets. When they reach the light, within about 2m of the canopy, the shoots turn into flowering terminal branches and stop growing. These stems then become arboreal and develop a thick head of side branches all terminating in flowers, followed by fruit. The leaves are no longer the familiar three lobed leaves but become entire and broadly ovate. As soon as the tree has grown some more and, in the process, shaded out the ivy, the shoots revert back to being adventitious again and continue to climb to the light.

Does ivy smother and pull down trees? Generally no. It is true that a weak tree laden with ivy has more wind resistance so that a storm will blow the tree over. However, if the tree is dead or dying and will come down eventually anyway; it is not in the interests of the ivy to pull down its host because it wants to flower up in the canopy. Ivy will not smother a living tree no matter how fast or slow either plant grows in relation to each other because, as soon as it reaches the light, it stops growing. In the case of a hedgerow ivy can cover the hedge because the new growths of the deciduous hedge plants are cut off annually exposing the ivy beneath. Provided the length of the hedge is only 20-30% covered the presence of such a useful winter habitat for birds, insects and small mammals should be welcomed.

Adventitious rootlets are only about 1mm long so they do not eat into brickwork. If the mortar is powdery and loose then ivy will find its way into a crevice and grow from there, possibly rooting into a new plant. This is especially a problem on old lime mortar walls. Ivy is also a problem for the paint layer on woodwork such as on window frames because it sticks hard to it and generally peels the paint off. I have seen huge walls, partially covered in ivy, where the covering has protected the brickwork and mortar from the effects of weathering; the uncovered part had the worst conditioned mortar.

Because of its late flowering time ivy is a useful source of nectar for insects in the autumn. Wasps especially feed and pollinate the flowers. A late brood of larvae of the Holly Blue butterfly will also eat the flower buds of ivy. Fruit during the winter is a scarce resource for many birds and small mammals. A tree trunk covered in ivy provides summer day time roosting sites for bats as well as good nest sites for blue tits, robins, blackbirds and thrushes. Any bird or animal that can make its way up into the arboreal clump will find perfect habitat all year round.

Charles Gilchrist



I have walked past these trees every day for the last 16 years and the ivy has never caught up with the tree canopy.

Volunteers Help Keep Country Paths Open

Walkers of every ability are catered for by West Berkshire's fine variety of paths – which take you through shady woodlands, alongside waterways, over open downland and on top of escarpments offering panoramic views.

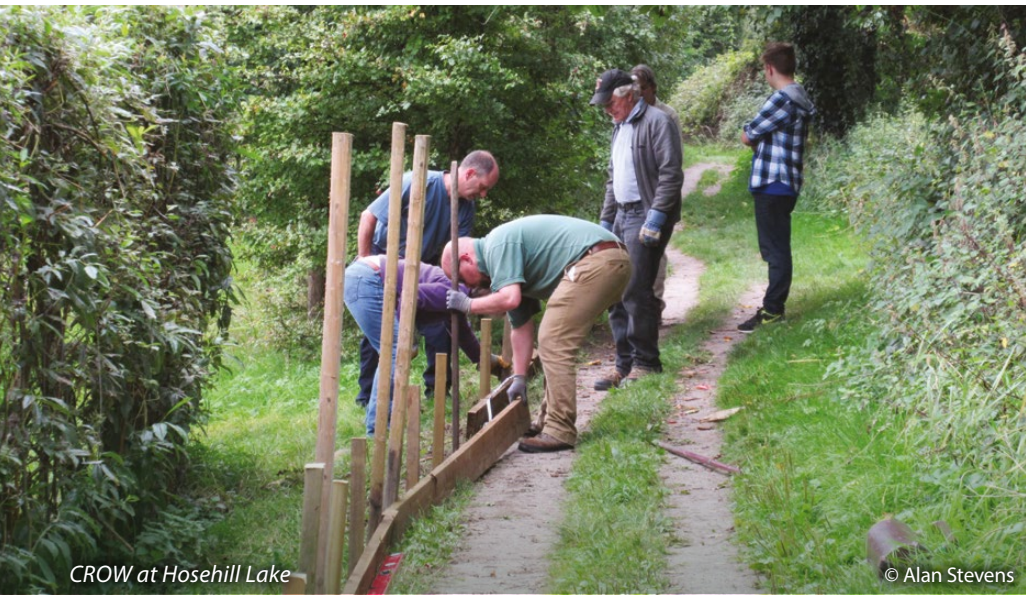
The district's public rights-of-way are generally well maintained and signed, which is not always the case elsewhere, with some routes marked on maps no longer evident on the ground and with ramblers occasionally encountering a barrier of crops with no way through.

Rights-of-way are public highways and are legally protected in the same way as roads, and West Berkshire Council invites the public to report any local problems via its website. Its main duty is to ensure that they are kept free of obstructions and that landowners meet their responsibilities to allow the public to "pass and re-pass". This means carrying out regular maintenance such as clearing vegetation and repairing surfaces, with the Council being grateful to its large network of committed volunteers who deal with vegetation and other issues on a regular basis. In return, West Berkshire Council Rights of Way Team provides training, equipment and advice, enabling volunteers to be self-sufficient as far as practicably possible.

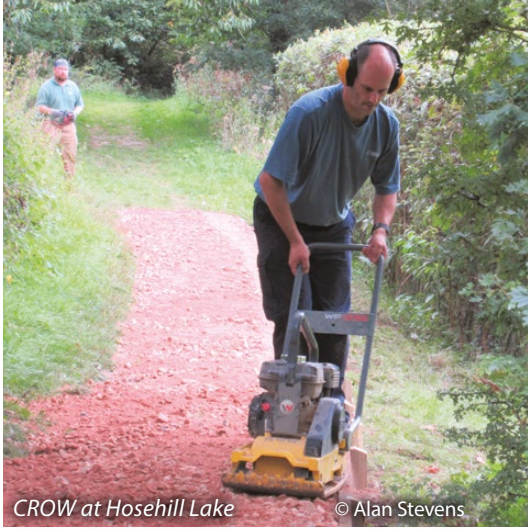
Who better to monitor rights-of-way than West Berkshire Ramblers? Formed in 1967, its Rambling Working Party has just started its fourth circuit of walking every footpath in West Berkshire's parishes. Its gate group has already put in 276 gates and will continue to install one more each month. Recently some members were trained to use strimmers and hedge-cutters and cleared a blocked path at Aldworth in record time.

Environmental groups' tasks also benefit rights-of-way and permissive paths (access to which is allowed by the landowner). Conserve Reading on Wednesdays (CROW) and West Berkshire Countryside Society have enhanced rides and paths at Rushall Farm, near Bradfield, not only making them easier to use but also encouraging wild flowers – not least bluebells – alongside them. Both groups do similar work at Paices Hill Country Park, near Aldermaston.

The Society has also worked on paths on commons at Ashampstead, Grove Pit, Boxford and Bucklebury, with undergrowth and trees being cleared from those at Holt Lodge Farm and Leyfield Meadow, near Ashampstead. Boardwalks have been laid over muddy sections at Elm Farm and



CROW at Hosehill Lake © Alan Stevens



CROW at Hosehill Lake © Alan Stevens

Furze Hill. Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) organise groups of volunteers to maintain the footpaths on Snelsmore Common.

Theale Area Bird Conservation Group runs Saturday working parties at Hosehill Lake, where regular tasks include upkeep of the perimeter path. Parts of this get very muddy in winter, and to make walking it easier undergrowth is being kept cut back and tree canopies reduced to encourage wind and sun to dry it out. Two of the worst stretches have been much improved, with volunteers using a muck-truck to transport hoggin and a "wacker" to compact it after it has been laid. Likewise at Moor Copse Nature Reserve, Tidmarsh, a team's monthly duties include keeping the paths clear.

West Berkshire has, of course, three famous features popular with walkers running through it – the Ridgeway, River Thames and the Kennet & Avon Canal. All have their own volunteer maintenance groups.

Hundreds of volunteers help the National Trail Team look after the 87-mile Ridgeway National Trail. Some have adopted a stretch of the Trail, walking it regularly and checking for problems. Others carry out physical repairs, such as vegetation clearance and signage work. And yet others help with publicity, environmental research and administration.

So next time you're enjoying a walk in the countryside, please spare a thought for all those people who give up so much time to keep the paths and tracks useable!

Terry Crawford