



West Berkshire  
Countryside Society

# UPSTREAM

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*Vespula vulgaris* worker  
© S.Falk www.buglife.org.uk

## In praise of wasps

Developing an allergy to wasp stings has led me to ask the question 'What is the point of wasps?' They buzz around picnics uninvited and cause distress to anyone they settle on.

It is this very nature of arriving within minutes of food appearing that is their real value; they are part of nature's prime cleaning force. Their natural diet includes rotting fruit, nectar, other insects (many of which are harmful) and carrion; jam sandwiches are just a bonus.

There are many hundreds of different sorts of wasps from the familiar, social, common wasp to digger wasps and parasitic wasps that lay eggs, into soft bodied insects, or

even into trees causing a variety of growths such as galls. Wasps are members of the order Hymenoptera; the membrane-winged insects that include bees and ants. The wasp that I want to respect with this article is the common wasp *Vespula vulgaris*.

In common with bees a colony consists of a queen, who lays eggs in the nest, as well as workers and males. Unlike bees, it is only the queen wasp that survives the cold weather in order to create the following year's colony. Initially, she needs to do all the raising of the offspring until there are enough workers to take over. Males come from unfertilised eggs; a phenomenon known as haplodiploidy. Female workers have the ability to lay eggs but only unfertilised ones. Thankfully,

wasps do not increase colonies by swarming. Bee's nests are made of wax whereas wasps, who have no wax glands, make paper nests by chewing wood into pulp and forming beautiful chambers. Within the nest, young wasps are fed purely on carrion as opposed to bee's nectar and pollen.

Whilst adult wasps feed on sugary carbohydrates their larvae require protein rich food. This comes from the invertebrates and meat fed to them by the foraging workers. Their larvae are able to convert protein into sugary carbohydrates which, in turn, they secrete as a food for the adults. By the end of summer the colony has no more young to feed and the adults turn their attention to discarded Coke etc. for their sugar fix.

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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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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  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Jan 2019                   |  |  |
| Tue 01 Jan                 | Public Holiday                               | No Task  |
| Tue 08 Jan<br>10.00        | Basildon Primary School                      | Woodland classroom maintenance. Park along Ashampstead Road. SU592 763   |
| Sun 13 Jan<br>10.30-13.00  | Bucklebury Common                            | Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688  |
| Tue 15 Jan<br>10.00        | Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury                    | Coppicing to refresh the hazel stools and open up the woodland canopy. Parking at Holt Lodge Farm House near Kintbury. SU387 648   |
| Tue 22 Jan<br>10.00        | Elm Farm. Organic Research Centre, Kintbury  | Ongoing maintenance at the Organic Research Centre. Parking on opposite side of the road from the main building in track leading to barns. SU414 654   |
| Tue 29 Jan<br>10.00        | Stanford Dingley                             | River bank clearance #2. Clearing selected trees and scrub along the riverbank of the Pang to allow light into the bed of the river. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm. SU566 716          |
| Feb 2019                   |  |  |
| Tue 05 Feb<br>10.00        | Sulham Water Meadows                         | Coppicing bankside trees by the stream. Parking at Sulham Church. SU642 742  |
| Sat 9 Feb<br>10.30-13.00   | Bucklebury Common                            | Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU550 688  |
| Tue 12 Feb<br>10.00        | Furze Hill, Hermitage                        | Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent. SU511 739  |
| Tue 19 Feb<br>10.00        | Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Lambourne           | Hedge laying. Parking at the red barn SU349 816 soup and rolls will be supplied for lunch. Do NOT use sat nav for this site.   |
| Tue 26 Feb<br>10.00        | The Malt House, West Woodhay                 | Hedge laying (visit #1) on the site we have worked on for several years. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House SU395 637, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcDonald@btinternet.com by the end of the day on Thursday 21st February. |
| Mar 2019                   |  |  |
| Tue 05 Mar<br>10.00        | Ashampstead Common                           | Veteran Tree Halo Polishing. Help us maintain the glades that help our veterans prosper. We will be cutting back bracken, bramble and small saplings. Meet at The Cottage, Ashampstead Common. SU5765 7512   |
| Sun 10 Mar<br>10.30 -13.00 | Bucklebury Common                            | Heathland management. Join the Bucklebury Heathland Group to help maintain this important heathland habitat. Meet at Angels Corner. SU 550 688   |
| Tue 12 Mar<br>10.00        | The Malt House, West Woodhay                 | Hedge laying (visit #2) on the site we have worked on for several years. If you wish to enjoy the delicious lunch provided by The Malt House SU395 637, then please confirm your attendance to tonyjmcDonald@btinternet.com by the end of the day on Thursday 7th March.     |
| Tue 19 Mar<br>10.00        | Stanford Dingley                             | River bank clearance #3. Clearing selected trees and scrub along the river bank of the Pang to allow light into the bed of the river. Park on the Byway which runs South from Bucklebury Road in Stanford Dingley opposite the entrance to Pangfield Farm. SU566 716         |
| Tue 26 Mar<br>10.00        | Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield | Woodland management, coppicing and ride widening. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. SU584 723   |





# Conservation Volunteers Round Up

Our first of two visits to **Winterbourne Woods** saw us using chainsaws and hand tools to cut up fallen large trees. We stacked the timber for fuel or to become natural habitat, improved a path and built protective wattle fences around coppice stools. On our second visit we continued coppicing, protected hazel stools resulting from previous visits and opened up a new path to link two tracks. We were pleased how well stools worked on in recent years had regenerated.

It was also good to see the success of our efforts last year to halt the regeneration of willow and silver birch on **Decoy Heath near Tadley**. This October we cleared a fresh area near one of the ponds and pulled out a goodly amount of Scots pine – which came up easily following recent rainfall. One side of the pond area was cleared completely.

Our August task at **Furze Hill, Hermitage** is traditionally in hot weather, and this year the sun proved oppressive as we cleared a quarter of the meadow with brush-cutters and hand tools, raking up the arisings into two very large heaps. We also created more scallops in the butterfly “larder” area.

Some years ago, part of **Bucklebury's Upper Common** was weed-wiped commercially to eradicate the new growth of birch. This involved heavy machinery criss-crossing the Common towing a wiping device which deposited a treatment agent. Some stretches around the edges were missed, leading to modest saplings going into sizeable trees

– which we were happy to remove, leaving the results to be burned later.

Our visit to **Rushall Manor Farm, Bradfield**, saw us continuing the extensive programme of widening woodland rides, so letting in more sunlight to make walking though it more pleasurable and to encourage plants and flowers to flourish on cleared verges. Another task saw us at nearby **Rushall Farm**, again in woodland, tackling scrub and trees close to paths and burning several piles of brash stacked by other work parties.

At **Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead**, we cleared scrub from two crescent rides off the right of way and from around the bench, as well as haloing some staked trees – and washing the bench and information boards.

We paid two visits to the water meadow at **Cleeve Court, Streatley**. During the first, we pollarded willows and raked up mown grass with the intention of storing it in heaps to be taken away for animal bedding. Unfortunately, a lack of suitable transport prevented removal, so on the second visit we began burning it, along with large amounts of brash. We also converted willow, previously cut by a contractor, into stakes and filler for the dead hedge along the Thames towpath.

November saw us make our annual visit to **Kents Down Farm, Midgham**, an organic complex with wild meadows, lovely woodland and fine views. We started clearing an area overgrown with small oaks, bramble, scrub, and immature ash trees, many of which were suffering from dieback, leaving the best young oaks room to develop.

At the **Organic Research Centre, Kintbury**, we cut and cleared grass, willow saplings and brambles in the Donkey Field, a meadow that is no longer grazed. This will encourage the growth of wild flowers next Spring. In another field, we partially coppiced hazel trees, removing older branches to allow more light to the base of the trees and encourage regrowth.

We continued to lay the long hedge alongside the road at the **Malt House, West Woodhay**. Gratifyingly, a section laid previously years had grown and thickened. We also laid a shorter hedge nearby.

**Terry Crawford**



Healthy regrowth in Winterbourne Woods

© Tony McDonald



Continued from page 1.

I once had a tray of Dame's Violet *Hesperis matronalis* seedlings (a member of the cabbage family) that were completely covered in cabbage white butterfly larvae and, being a gardener first and a conservationist second, I put the tray outside a



Wasps often nest on roof timbers

© Charles Gilchrist

known wasp's nest; within an hour all the caterpillars had gone. It may amuse anyone with an allotment to watch wasps patrol back and forth along the lines of vegetables looking for caterpillars and aphids to clear away. Professor Adam Hart (University of Gloucestershire) has calculated that predation by wasps in the U.K. accounts for 14 million kilograms of insects a year that would otherwise be harmful to crops and gardens – a vital ecological role.

Wasps play a small role as pollinators; adults enjoy nectar very much, but their mouth parts are short and strong which is not suited to collecting nectar from all plants. They have few hairs on their body so are unable to collect pollen as a

bee does. However, ivy is one flower that is particularly attractive to wasps later in the year.

The design of the body and coloration is truly beautiful. Contrasting yellow and black bands, a warning sign to predators to leave alone, is mimicked by many other insects for their own protection. Wasps have sleek, aerodynamic bodies of military or shark-like efficiency. Markings on the thorax that give the impression of the face of a much larger insect is an example of a brilliant piece of deception.

If only they did not sting and annoy us, they would be the most perfect insect ever.

Charles Gilchrist

## The countryside looks after itself. Does it?

We all know our favourite West Country lanes with tunnels of hazel below which are drifts of primrose, wood anemone and celandines. Are they managed? Well, not much except that the hazel will need to be cut one day. But what if you are restoring a lane? Then it really is a case of intensive management. As WBCS volunteers know only too well, so much of today's countryside management is restoring the ravages of subsidised farming.

There is a 200m stretch of old bridleway above Winterbourne village which was impassable to vehicles before 1980. We cleared 2ft of mud and leaves out of

the lane and exposed the old flint and pebble surface, cut and laid the remains of the hedge and gapped it up with hawthorn and other species. And did it again in 2000, pollarding some of the ash trees to let more light in. Two years ago, we cut and laid it once more which produced prodigious growth of bramble and nettle - which is what happens when you let in the light.

There is a metre-wide west facing bank below the hedge, which is perfect for woodland wild flowers, so long as the bramble and nettle are kept under control. Which means strimming them at the end of the growing season. (We



Pollards & Primroses

© Charles Flower

unwisely put a muck heap near the hedge a few years ago). The species list is already quite impressive with 10 trees or shrubs and 50 wild flowers. Insect life is increasing and the dragonflies are more in evidence in the autumn. Species which have seeded across from the adjoining wood include herb robert, bluebell, moschatel, celandine and greater stitchwort. We had to give primroses a helping hand across the lane and they are now spreading well.

It's a ridiculously long-term project, slightly on and off but already going for 37 years with a finishing date may be in 2030 after 50 years. But that is exactly what countryside management is all about. If we want the wild flowers, we have to manage for the long term.

Charles Flower



Primroses

© Charles Flower

# Impact of Bovine TB in the Herd at Holt Lodge Farm

Holt Lodge farm, nestled at the foot of the beautiful West Berkshire downs, consists of 130 acres of permanent pasture and 30 acres of woodland with another 40 acres of grassland rented nearby. Traditionally the farm has been a livestock farm, running a suckler herd of 60 Cows, producing a calf a year which were reared for meat, fattened and then sold as heavy stores – animals about 18-22 months of age but not quite ready for slaughter. The homebred cattle were sold through Cirencester Market, as the farm did not have the resources to finish them for slaughter. The breed of cows were Hereford cross and the sire was a pedigree Charolais bull which produced a lovely continental cross calf.

In the Autumn of 2016 the decision was made to fulfil a lifelong ambition to change the herd for a pedigree Aberdeen Angus herd. The suckler herd and the Charolais bull were then sold. We kept back all the home bred calves which we could then sell and help with the cash flow over the following few years.

In February 2017 disaster struck and changed our lives. In our annual TB

blood test we had 7 reactors. Having never had TB in the cattle over three generations of farming at Holt Lodge, it came as a huge shock. The farm was instantly on shut down, not being able to buy or sell cattle. Of the 7 cattle that went to slaughter, following the post mortem they showed no signs of the disease. This as a farmer was most upsetting.

We were now in an unfortunate situation where we could not continue with our transition of buying in our Aberdeen Angus herd. Instead we were having a TB test every 90 days. Throughout 2017, we had more than 4 reactors in every test. Every time the TB post mortem came back that they showed no signs of the disease. It was a very difficult time for us not knowing which way to turn. Although we were compensated the market value for each animal that had to be slaughtered, it still meant that we couldn't buy in any replacement animals. All very frustrating!

By Christmas 2017, we were down to our last 20 head of cattle. In our next test in February 2018, over half the cattle tested positive and for the first time a couple of the cattle were



Cattle at Holt Lodge Farm

© Ian Freeland

showing lesions in their lungs and the blood test revealed the particular TB strain came from the local wildlife. A decision was then made by Animal Health to cull the remaining cows. This was a devastating blow!

In a year, we had gone from having a healthy herd and a profitable business to no herd and an uncertain future. The hope is to buy in and restock sometime in 2019.

Ian Freeland



Cattle removal

© Ian Freeland

## Date for Your Diary

### Identifying Trees in Winter

Join Charles Gilcrist at 2.00 pm, on Sunday 17 February for a walk entitled 'Identifying Trees in Winter'. The walk is about 2 miles in woodland conditions; we will be travelling at a very easy pace. Meet on Ashampstead Common at post code RG8 8QT or OS grid reference SU576 751.



Don't forget our website!  
[www.westberkscountryside.org.uk](http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk)



# An Introduction to Sharpening Conservation Tools



## Loppers, secateurs:

Only sharpen the outer side of the cutting blade.



## Bill Hook:

Sharpen both sides of both edges.



## Grass hook/sickle:

Sharpen one side only.



## Shears:

Sharpen both blades, but outer edges only. They should cut paper.



## Three stones:

Coarse carborundum  
Fine Carborundum (grey)  
Fine India (pinkish)



## Diamond particles:

Nickel plated onto a perforated steel plate, supported with a plastic backing sheet.

Most "edge tools" used in conservation work need to be sharpened regularly during use. Traditionally these would have been sharpened with a hand-held block of natural stone. Artificial or synthetic stones (such as Carborundum and India stones) have the advantage of being more uniform in their composition. Effective artificial stones made from industrial diamond compositions are very effective.

In the past larger cylindrical grind stones were mounted over a water trough. As the stone was turned, by hand, the grindings were washed off and the stone kept clean. There is a large, mounted, communal village stone on the outskirts of Longparish in Hampshire. Keeping the stone free of grindings today is equally important as a stone blocked with particles is ineffective. Scythe users can dip stones in small water reservoirs that hang on the belt.

## Key principles of sharpening edge tools:

- To make an edge sharp some metal must be removed
- On site, the easiest way to do this is with a hand-held sharpening stone.

- In the workshop an electric grinding wheel is faster but can be dangerous if misused
- Coarse hand-held stones are used when a lot of metal must be removed following damage to the blade or to re-establish the profile following many light sharpening's
- Medium or fine stones are used to lightly sharpen and improve an existing reasonable edge
- To use a stone hold it almost flat on the blade and then lifted an extra 5° to contact the edge
- Gloves may be useful if working into an edge

## Tips for individual tools

**Shears, loppers, and secateurs:** are better sharpened with a medium or fine grit. It is important with these three tools to identify the side that needs sharpening. With shears it will be the outside edges. Some shears only have one blade that does the cutting the other blade is purely for support. This also applies to "bypass" loppers. Anvil loppers have only one blade to sharpen. In each case a hand-held medium stone used at a sharpening angle of 50 will be

sufficient. It is critical that with shears and loppers that the inner edges that meet are not worked on. Doing so renders the tool useless as the gap that is formed negates the shearing action.

**Scythes, grass hooks(sickles):** are sharpened on one side of the edge often with a finishing stroke on the underside to remove any burr that make have been created. Unless serious damage has occurred these two tools will only need a medium or fine stone.

## Some dos and don't

- ✓ Do carefully check which edge(s) need attention – sharpening the wrong edge may make the tool in effective.
- ✗ Don't struggle with blunt tools – sharpen it or get it sharpened.
- ✓ Saw blades – if in doubt fit a new blade. Their hardened teeth and cannot be sharpened although their performance can be improved by resetting their teeth.
- ✗ Avoid any contact of any sharpened edge with soil, it makes a sharp blade blunt in an instant. That includes standing shears with their blades stuck in the ground!

Chris Genge

# Beware Tawny Owls!



Tawny Owl chick

© John Dellow

The story of how Eric Hosking lost an eye in 1937 is well known in birdwatching circles. He was a pioneering photographer, probably the first to make a living predominately from photographing birds. The accident happened as he was returning to a tawny owl hide late at night - he was struck in the face by the owl and suffered a claw in his left eye. Subsequently, the injury became infected and his eye had to be removed. Despite this disability he continued his pioneering work for another 54 years before dying in 1991 at the age of 81, being awarded an OBE for his work.

The message from this story is that tawny owls are aggressive and can often attack an intruder if their nest or young are threatened. I have been attacked by a tawny owl while searching for a chick that had been reported to have fallen out of its nest – an unnerving experience.

By contrast barn owls are softies! They rarely put up a fight and frequently appear to go to sleep when they are handled or ringed. After many years of monitoring barn owls, I can only recall one occasion when I

have encountered a tawny owl in a nest box. Tawnies and barn owls live different lives. Tawnies nest in the middle of a wood while barn owls prefer the edge of a wood or in an old tree in a hedge line away from woods. Tawnies nest early in spring while barn owls are late breeders.

We had mixed feelings when Cathy received a call from one of our landowners in the middle of May. He thought there was a tawny owl chick in one of our boxes overlooking a grassy paddock near Peasemore. Our first reaction was that he must have made a mistake, but what else could it be? It was too early for barn owl breeding. To solve the mystery, we went to site armed with all the protective equipment we could find, especially eye protection. Cathy, as Group leader, was first up the ladder to apprehensively open the hatch, and sure enough, there was a tawny owl chick! Clearly, the female had heard us approaching and had slipped out of the box to watch us from a nearby roost. To minimise disturbance, we quickly took a couple of photographs and left the site without delay. It was a rare encounter

with a bird which has recently been added to the amber list of birds which are 'of conservation concern'.

John Dellow

## 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](http://rg.greenaway@btinternet.com)







# Monitoring Wildlife

*Inkpen Crocus Field*  
© Adrian Wallington

BBOWT strives to learn as much as possible about the wildlife and habitats on its nature reserves. An annual 'ecological audit' is vital if we are to protect and safeguard our biodiversity for the future. The Programme which has been running since 2002 has involved experienced volunteer surveyors undertaking many 1000's of hours of detailed survey and monitoring work. Its main aims are to: direct the management of nature reserves; direct future surveying and monitoring programmes; inspire, train and involve volunteers; and to contribute to national recording schemes.

The data collected each year is used to establish the presence or absence of wildlife on our reserves as well as the population trends of key species. This is essential to determine the habitat management strategies for our reserves. At the start of 2018, BBOWT drew up a list of over 250 priority wildlife surveys to be undertaken which included over 80 surveys on the 15 nature reserves we manage in West Berkshire.

From the heathland and important reptile populations on Greenham Common to the butterflies and wildflowers of the chalk grassland at Watts Bank, all our nature reserves are important for safeguarding our region's biodiversity.

Armed with binoculars, notebooks and field guides, staff and a fantastic army of volunteer surveyors have been out and about recording all aspects of biodiversity on our reserves. This can include monitoring protected species such as hazel dormice and great crested newts as

well as undertaking bird, butterfly and dragonfly transects. Staff have also been busy carrying out habitat condition assessments - 'health checks' to determine the condition of habitats and how they may have responded to recent management work.

Our annual monitoring of the Spring Crocuses at Inkpen Crocus Field recorded 9,174 flowering plants in our three sample quadrats. Encouragingly this is the highest count since 2003 suggesting the current levels of conservation grazing, which includes the occasional hard spring graze, is benefitting Britain's largest display of 'wild' spring crocuses.

Monthly hazel dormouse monitoring at Bowdown Woods, Newbury failed to record any activity, with no animals or nests found in any of the monitoring boxes. This is the first blank year since 2009 and reflects the recent national decline – estimated to be one third since the turn of the century.

Despite the apparently favourable summer weather, it has been a topsy-turvy year for our butterflies. The 'beast from the east' and the late spring delayed the emergence of several species, but then the hot settled weather in June and July allowed many to fly in greater numbers. This would have also increased their opportunity of finding a mate and laying eggs. However, it is feared the drought-like conditions later in the summer would have had an impact on many grassland plants which are important larval foodplants for butterflies.

It would appear many bird species have had another difficult year due

to the cold winter and late arrival of spring. Breeding birds found it difficult to find food to feed their hungry young at the critical time. Many bird boxes remained empty this year and it would appear barn owls have had a particularly poor breeding season.

We are always on the lookout for new volunteer surveyors to help with the annual monitoring programme. If you are a keen amateur naturalist and have good identification skills of at least one species group (particularly birds, butterflies or dragonflies) please contact me at BBOWT and I can provide you with more information and discuss opportunities. Surveys are carried out using standardised methodologies and full survey packs are provided.

**Colin Williams, Ecology Officer**  
(monitoring) Biodiversity Team at the  
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*Surveyors*

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