



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 95
SPRING
2021



Adult Little Ringed Plover © Debby Reynolds

Plovers at the Pang

As far as we know, 2020 was the first year in which two pairs of Little Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius dubius*) – LRPs – successfully produced a total of six chicks in the Pang Valley at Bucklebury. They are a rare breeding bird species in Berkshire. There were several reasons for this success:

- a suitable wetland habitat on agricultural land was created by exceptional weather and adopted by two pairs of LRPs

- the two pairs attracted to the flooded field were observed by local people who were spending more time at home due to the coronavirus lockdown
- local birders, landowner and farmer shared the plan to enable nesting and feeding
- Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund provided a grant to delay cropping of the field until breeding was completed.

Suitable wetland

Winter 2019/20 saw an exceptionally high level of rainfall. The high level of the river Pang itself, saturated soil and high groundwater table made two fields near Bucklebury Ford into spectacular freshwater lakes. Geese, swans, gulls and egrets were seen. By May, the standing water on one wheat

field receded slightly and created bare areas of stony beach on which the two pairs of plovers were found.

The LRP, rather rare in UK, is a summer visitor to England and has special protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Most years just 10 to 20 pairs breed in Berkshire. Typically, they nest on bare ground near water, often around gravel workings. But their nest sites are prone to flooding. In 2020 almost all the usual sites were unusable and the Pang provided two of very few successful pairs.

Local observers

Local birders quickly appreciated the importance of this site; especially when it became clear that one pair, visible from the road, had created a scrape and began to incubate a clutch of eggs.

Continued on page 2 >

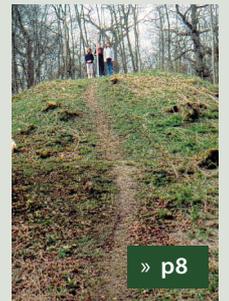
Inside this issue



» p3



» p4



» p8

3 Annual Barn Owl Report

4 Otters on the Pang!

8 Bluebell Walk in Hampstead Norreys

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, Webmaster & Enquiries:

Membership Secretary:

Upstream Editor:

Hon President:

Tony McDonald

Jathan Rayner (membership@westberkscountryside.org.uk)

John Salmon (upstreameditor2017@btinternet.com)

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

Future Events

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

Continued from page 1.

Shared vision

Between us we created an ambitious vision to protect at least part of the field as a breeding area for the plovers. This meant communicating the significance of these LRP's with the landowner, farmer and a few local residents. The main challenge was to delay any agricultural operation to harvest the wheat crop until after breeding was completed. In addition, we received mixed advice on whether the plovers would remain as water levels fell in the drier spring and summer months. Finally, human disturbance of a roadside site and predation by the crows, weasels, cats and so on were possible. Success was not guaranteed.

Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund

Flooding of the wheat field already had damaged the crop but it was likely to be harvested, or at least cultivated, as water levels receded; disturbing the birds. It was imperative to secure a period of about three months with no agricultural operation. This was achieved at record speed. The landowner and farmer, frustrated

by the flooding, were excited by the news of the new occupants and amenable to a conservation project. A proposal was submitted to the Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund. This fund was established by the Berkshire Ornithological Club from sales of publications and public donations. The Charity collaborates extensively with landowners and farmers, carrying out surveys, providing advice and help on bird conservation issues.

The wonderful news of a grant was received within a few days. This fast and helpful response was a vital piece of the jigsaw. All that remained was for the plovers to succeed.

Breeding success

Three chicks from the first brood were seen near the first scrape at the end of May. By the end of June, a second brood of three chicks were seen and the family of four adults and six chicks were completed. By this stage, the wheat field was dry and becoming rather inhospitable. However, the second field, a grass paddock, now provided a rich feeding area. It had been completely



Immature 1 month old LRP © Debby Reynolds

flooded, but water was receding more slowly and left muddy edges laden with invertebrates. Adult birds commuted between guarding chicks and feeding at the paddock. Eventually the immature birds fed there too.

What next?

2020 was a special event of Little Ringed Plovers breeding in the Pang Valley. The coincidence of factors was probably a one-off. However, it does prove that biodiversity can flourish with very little alteration to the existing environment. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme is receiving ambitious applications in our area. More habitat creation is urgently needed. The wildlife will follow and we can be sure that is capable of helping to secure a more biodiverse future.

Debby Reynolds, Tim Culley and Renton Righelato

Disappointing year for our Barn Owls

In 2020, we monitored 175 barn owl nest boxes, slightly down on the previous 3 years. We abandoned several unsuccessful boxes; the number of new and replacement boxes did not fully offset the losses. Despite the problems with Covid-19, all our nest boxes were surveyed at least once. We recorded 54 chicks fledged from 30 successful boxes – 17.1% of our boxes were successful. In the last 10 years, only 2013 and 2015 showed a lower success rate. The average brood size this year was 1.8 chicks per brood. This parameter is a good measure of the availability of food. 2013 was the only worse year when there was no breeding at all. There were no reports of successful second broods.

Why was it such a poor year? It must be related to the availability of food. The Barn Owl's diet consists mainly of small mammals, particularly field voles. There is a theory that good vole years come in 4- or 5-year cycles. If this applies, we are due for a good year in 2021. Another theory is that vole breeding was delayed by an exceptionally wet early spring.

Several other species have been found in our boxes. Little owls are of interest

to most of us. We surveyed 12 little owl boxes this year, but I have not been advised of any breeding, successful or otherwise. This reinforces the view that the species is in serious decline. Kestrels did not do badly in 2019 but they did even better in 2020 producing at least 15 chicks. Kestrels breed much earlier than barn owls so we may have missed some broods with birds fledging before we visited. Stock doves are an "Amber list" species which means that they are of conservation concern. Despite this, they are plentiful in West Berkshire and they continue to like our boxes!

Hornets and wasps took over a number of boxes. I am a great admirer of hornets; they are magnificent insects. I am not so keen on wasps as they can be a nuisance if you are relaxing outside with a cup of tea and a sticky bun in late summer. Neither species are likely to sting unless provoked by interfering with their nest or squashing them. A landowner advised me that one of our boxes had been taken over by hornets in mid-summer. We agreed to leave it be until winter when the hornets would have vacated and the nest could be cut out. Unfortunately, a member of the public, using the nearby footpath, complained to the Footpaths Officer at West Berks Council and I was asked to remove the offending nest. I reluctantly did so while wearing full protective gear and not getting stung. Sad!



Barn Owl near Avington © John Dellow

We have produced a glossy 8-page Barn Owl booklet. It provides some basic facts about barn owls and has been endorsed by David Ramsden of The Barn Owl Trust. Details of price and how to order are available on our web



Dealing with the Hornets Nest © John Dellow

site. There are currently 28 volunteers involved with barn owls in WBCS. If you would like to join us, please use the contact details in The Barn Owl Group section of the web site.

John Dellow



Chick Just Ringed

© John Dellow

Summary of Barn Owl statistics:

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Barn owl boxes checked	136	174	188	187	187	175
Estimated No. chicks fledged	31	100	114	107	108	54
Boxes with fledged chicks	15	39	40	41	41	30
% boxes successful	11.0	22.4	21.3	21.9	21.9	17.1
Average brood size	2.07	2.56	2.85	2.61	2.63	1.8



Otters on the Pang!

Over the last four decades the otter has made a steady recovery across much of England, following the phasing out of the toxic chemicals which were mainly responsible for their decline. In the first national otter survey (1977-79) there were no signs of otters at all on the Thames catchment. It was only in the mid-1990s that some evidence of otters started to be found. Since when, otters have slowly spread and are now present on much of the upper and middle Thames catchment, with evidence on the Thames as far downstream as Windsor and beyond.

In July 2020, Graham Scholey (Biodiversity Specialist at the Environment Agency and Chair of the UK Otter Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group) and I found otter spraint on the Pang upstream of Pangbourne. Despite the extent of activity on the main freshwater Thames, some of the tributaries such as the Pang have not had many records of otters, which may in part be due to the low level of monitoring being undertaken, with very occasional signs in the

last ten years. This is where our local community can help. We thought it would be interesting to know whether any of you have any recent records of otters on the river, are able to recognise otter spraint and are able to look for signs in the future.

Otters live at low density and have large, defended home ranges, so the Pang is unlikely to provide territories for more than a few animals. They feed primarily on fish but take a range of other prey as well. It is likely that any animal on the lower Pang is also using the Thames as foraging habitat. They are expert at avoiding detection and they and their places of refuge (holts) are fully protected by law. Predominantly nocturnal and crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk), the best evidence of otters is usually by finding their droppings, known as spraint. These are often deposited at prominent locations such as on bridge ledges, on concrete bag work, on the 'saddle' of trees overhanging the water, on fallen branches across the water and where a tributary meets the main watercourse. These are places where other otters will look for the signs of competitors.

Otter spraint is not unpleasant to smell, often described as either 'fishy'

or even like 'jasmine tea', and it consists primarily of fish bones and scales.

It can be confused with mink scats, but these are quite narrow, twisted, and smelly when fresh whereas otter spraint is a much looser gelatinous blob or 'spiky' streak of obviously bony material. When fresh, otter spraint is green to dark in colour. When old it often looks faded, grey like cigarette ash and can last a long time (months) if not swept away by floods or knocked off by people's feet.

If anyone thinks they have found otter spraint they may wish to send their record (with photo if you are able to take one) to Graham for verification at graham.scholey@environment-agency.gov.uk. There is no obligation to either handle or sniff the spraint! All confirmed records will be sent to the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. It would be useful to get more evidence of how regularly the otter may be using the River Pang, and indeed the Sulham Brook where evidence of spraint has also been found near its confluence with the Thames.

*Kay Lacey
Pangbourne Flood Warden & Chair –
Pang Valley Flood Forum*



Otter Spraint



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

Unusual first signs of spring

Birds starting to sing again, Hazel catkins, Primroses and Wild Daffodils, these are some of the familiar first signs of Spring, but in February and March a whole host of often overlooked plants and creatures are beginning to stir. A walk on Greenham Common now will reveal tiny white nodding flower buds of Common Whitlow grass (not a grass at all but a miniscule member of the cabbage family) which, as the days warm up, the buds open into deeply cleft 4-petalled star-like flowers. They are perfectly at home on the bare gravelly areas on the Common, where there is not much competition from other larger plants.

You may notice small red rosettes of 3-lobed leaves of another white-flowered plant, the 5-petalled Rue-leaved Saxifrage which flowers later in March; together with the golden yellow daisy-like flowers of Colt's-foot on a scaly leafless stem, long before the leaves appear. Many of the roadsides take on a pale lilac hue from the flowers of Danish Scurvy grass which starts to flower from February. A coastal plant in certain areas of Britain, it has rapidly spread across the country on salted roads. In fact, if you look at a distribution map for it you can pick out the road networks.



Capillary thread-moss

© Pete Creed



Buff-tailed Bumblebee Queen © Pete Creed

Mosses are particularly noticeable in the winter months, carpeting woodland floors and covering branches and tree trunks in a green blanket. Many produce spore-bearing capsules in the spring. Abundant nodding green capsules on long thin red stems of the Capillary Thread-moss emerging from cushions of tightly packed leaves are a common site on walls and bases of trees from February to April. Gravestones in churchyard are adorned with cushions of many different mosses in early spring, some bright green, others look grey because their tiny leaves end in a long silvery point, like the very common Grey-cushioned Grimmi.

Another group of mosses, Bristle-mosses and Pincushions are epiphytes growing in cushions on branches of trees. In winter, the leaves of many of these look identical, but in early spring they produce capsules (surprisingly different in colour and shape), making identification of them much easier. But you will need to take a hand lens or magnifying glass with you to see the beauty of the small plants. Sometimes when looking closely at them you may notice movement within their leaves from tiny invertebrates such as mites and springtails.

On warmer days of early spring larger creatures may put in appearance. Several of our butterflies hibernate as adults and will fly if it is warm enough. The butter yellow Brimstone, known as the harbinger

of spring, is always a welcome sight fluttering through our woodlands. I spotted an unusual-looking Wild Daffodil once, but on closer inspection I saw that its unusual appearance was because a pair of Brimstones were mating in a daffodil flower. Some moths are also flying in early spring. The Herald moth can be seen in late winter into spring, and you may see the day-flying Orange Underwing moth moving remarkably butterfly-like, low to the ground, on a walk along the footpaths and open heathy areas on Greenham and Crookham Commons.

Finally, one of my favourite things to hear and see in spring is the buzzing noise of the first flight of a queen bumblebee emerging from hibernation. I watched Buff-tailed Bumblebee queens and the tawny, black and white Tree Bumblebee queens take short flights before landing and disappearing into the mossy undergrowth at Bowdown Woods last year. I cannot wait to see them again this year, they really lift your spirits.

Pete Creed
Wildlife expert, BBOWT



Common Whitlow grass

© Pete Creed

Lichen at Bucklebury Common

Looking up at Grimsbury Castle

Bucklebury Common

January in West Berkshire by Anne Sayer

Oak in Winter

Snowdrops

Looking West from St Mark's Church Cold Ash

Acorns Galore

Nobody will deny that 2020 was a terrible year. For me it had one redeeming feature. It was a great 'mast' year – especially for acorns. At times they covered the ground; you were literally walking on carpets of them, crunching beneath your feet. In recent years I cannot recall ever seeing such a bumper crop. But what is a 'mast' year? How and why do they happen?

Some years there seem to be little or no Oak and Beech seeds. Whilst every 5 – 10 years a bumper crop of fruits or nuts creates a thick carpet beneath the trees. One of the main theories of trees producing bumper crops is predator satiation – producing more food than predators can eat, which guarantees that some seeds will survive to grow into new trees. Research has shown that Beech trees synchronise across the whole of northern and western Europe. Unfortunately, how is still mystery. The weather, chemical signals and pollen coupling are all thought to play a part.

As an avid seed collector, I was unable to help myself. Temptation was everywhere. Very soon I was running out of pots and space for my collection of acorns. Eventually, I was using any receptacle I could find to sow seeds into disposable coffee cups, large yoghurt pots, orange juice cartoons and over-filling the large plastic pots I normally use. If all the seeds germinate, I will split and re-pot in the Spring.

Hard nuts such as acorns and sweet chestnuts should be floated off to check their viability. Discard any that float. Winged seeds and fleshy fruits should be stratified (over winter). In the spring, pot on germinating seeds. As I have learned to my cost, always cover pots on the ground with wire mesh to keep out predators.

In total I collected and sowed over 350 acorns; along with Sweet Chestnut, Sycamore, Field Maple and for the first time, Wild Service Tree. I am always trying to extend the number of species I grow. I tried to find Wych Elm seeds. But without success.

Next autumn, give it a go. Collecting seeds adds another dimension to a walk (or cycle ride). Where possible select seed from mature trees. And always collect responsibly, a few from each tree – especially in lean years.

As we face the twin challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. Plant trees and help save the planet!

Terry Davis



Any pot will do

© Terry Davis

Cold Ash's Wildlife Allotment Gardens (WAG) has a long history of providing benefit to the community. It was gifted to the parishioners of Cold Ash by the Church of England in the late nineteenth century, to provide allotments and grazing land for the poor of the parish. Since then, it has gone through several incarnations, including producing food to support the WWII war effort. The last major change was in the late 1980s, when a large part of the 7+ acre site was established as a wildlife garden for the enjoyment of the public. The WAG was then maintained by a group of volunteers. This ended over a decade ago, with much of the site becoming overgrown.

In 2019, the Parish Council took stock of the situation and, recognising that the site represented a special space in the heart of the parish, decided that work was needed. The initial plan was to open up an area of the site that had not been accessible to the public for many years. This set-in train several activities including the installation of disabled access; creating an education-zone with picnic benches and reptile surveys; tree planting, tree management, removal of invasive Himalayan Balsam and reducing the amount of the site covered by brambles and nettles.

The various initiatives were being coordinated by the parish council in concert with local groups, including parishioner volunteers and the local Greening Group. A local contractor undertook the technical work – putting in new gates and repairing bridges over the small watercourse. The Greening Group secured over 100 trees for



The Cold Ash WAG

One Area of Tree Planting © Anne Sayer

planting from the Woodland Trust. The parish volunteers started clearing the site, but it soon became clear that there was insufficient manpower to clear the site required for the tree planting, within the required timescale. WBCS was approached by the parish council and agreed to support the initiative.

In September 2020, the WBCS volunteers spent a day in the WAG. They cleared several sites for the tree planting and undertook general countryside maintenance around the allotment. This was key in maintaining the relationship between the wildlife gardens and the original tenants of the site – the allotment holders. WBCS members also supported the volunteers and the tree planting initiatives with advice, guidance and hands-on support.

The various initiatives have been a great success. In particular, the tree planting attracted c.50 local parishioners, who planted the trees and labelled them with their own names. Ages ranged from the more senior members of the parish down to babes in arms – with parents or grandparents planting and labelling trees for them.

These initiatives have sparked renewed interest in the area, which is becoming a very popular venue for family walks. It has also encouraged the parish council to invest further in the site, with the introduction of some woodland sculptures, carved by a local artist, including a wonderful bench that was carved from a tree that needed to be felled. Further funding is being sought to develop these into a sculpture trail to attract more visitors. Hopefully, once the summer is here, the picnic benches and other areas will be used by the public for picnics and other countryside initiatives.



New Bench

© Anne Sayer

The ongoing involvement of WBCS in the site will be a key element to its success, with members providing knowledgeable input and their volunteers providing the manpower to keep on top of the larger tasks, that are beyond the capacity of the local volunteers. West Berks Countryside Society's work in Cold Ash is a great example of working with a local community for the benefit of the environment, local wildlife and members of the public.

Ivor McArdle



Clearing the site

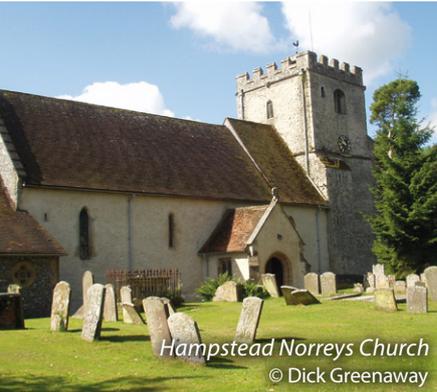
© Tony McDonald

A walk around Hampstead Norrey's fascinating woods to admire the bluebells and to look at the local history

About 1½ miles/2.5 km

The walk starts and finishes at the Village Hall car park. There are two short, modest hills on this walk. Paths are generally sound but may be muddy and uneven. *There are both a pub and a café in the village.*

1. The Village Hall and Dean Meadow. Walk down through The Dean to the Play Area. ('Dean' means 'a Hollow' in Anglo-Saxon). *Go though the gate and cross the track to visit the church.*



Hampstead Norreys Church
© Dick Greenaway

2. St Mary's church is thought to date from Saxon times (pre-1066). It has a fine timber roof; a single medieval wall painting and part of a medieval stone grave cover showing a charging knight. Outside there is the base of a preaching cross and the cast iron Lousley family tomb.

After your visit return to the track and turn left ignoring the framed misleading Reconstruction Drawing. At the top of the short hill take the right-hand fork to a 'T' junction and turn right.



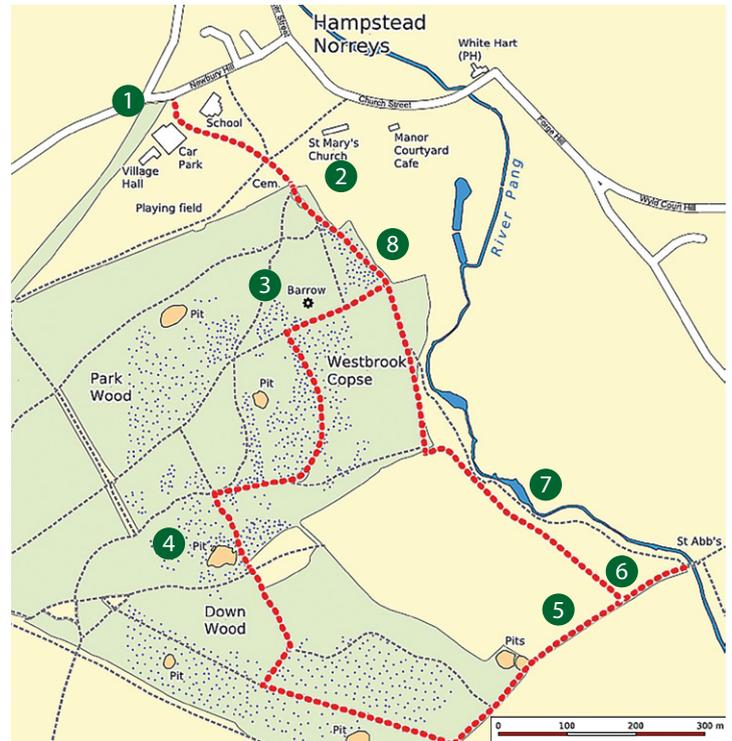
Hampstead Motte
© Dick Greenaway

3. Bronze Age burial mound. Known as a 'Barrow' it dates from around 2500 BC – about the same time as the Egyptian pyramids! It is a survivor of many that once existed scattered around the area but which have been deliberately destroyed by ploughing.

Continue up the short hill and turn left along a wide curving track. At the next track junction turn left down a gentle slope and look for the quarry on your right. Afterwards continue on down the track.

4. A Chalk Quarry. There are many similar quarries in the local woods. The soils in the area lie on top of the chalk but are very acid. Historically large amounts of raw chalk were spread over the fields from these quarries and ploughed in to reduce the acidity so that cereals could be grown. Imagine the sheer physical hard work involved! This excavation was dug by men with picks and shovels and moved in horse-drawn carts! *At the next track junction turn right and then left along Point 5.*

5. Parish Boundary. Parish boundaries in this area were in place by at least the late 800s. They often used existing features to



avoid making new markers, so people have been using this lane for at least a thousand years!

6. St Abb's Mill (site of). There was a watermill here listed in Domesday Book (1086AD). Small rivers could not drive a mill, so water was collected in a pond and then released through the mill. The rough and uneven field was once the pond.

7. The River Pang. This important chalk stream is fed by springs in the chalk rock. Its clear even temperatured alkaline water hosts very special fish, plants and creatures of kinds not found in other rivers. It is a bourne meaning that it regularly and naturally dries as the water table in the chalk falls below the spring levels. There are only 200 chalk streams in the world and England has 80% of them. We do not treat them with the respect they deserve!

Return along the Parish Boundary and turn right along the footpath. This will take you all the way back to the Village Hall and car park – and the café and pub!

8. Flower rich area. If botany interests you, pause just beyond the next major track junction. In the wood on your left, you will find bluebells, wood anemones, violets, dog's mercury, sanicle, moschatel, wood melick, yellow archangel and many others – all indicators of ancient woodlands!

Many more interesting local walks are available on our website: www.westberkscountyside.org.uk