

Letcombe Brook Project - 2023 Year End Report

Wildlife Highlights

Birds I finally got another sighting of a water rail on the Letcombe Brook – this one was from a trailcam left between Letcombe and Wantage which recorded it feeding over several nights. When placing the camera I also flushed a couple of woodcock which were nice to see (briefly!) Kingfishers do seem to have been a bit more elusive – although I had a few sightings in both Hanney and Letcombe areas there seemed to be less activity along the brook despite out attempts to provide extra nesting opportunity (another nesting site was created in November).



Spotted flycatcher were present in Letcombe Valley Reserve (pic left) and also reports came in from Warborough Road and Gramps Hill. The Letcombes do seem to support more birds than most of the surrounding area. Little egret seem to be present in Wantage more often with one juvenile bird present for several days near Betjeman Park. Although slightly off patch, the new pond complex created by Freshwater Habitats Trust down by Venn Mill, Garford does seem

to be starting to draw in a few waders and is worth keeping an eye on.

Mammals Otter continue to do well on the brook with various trail camera clips shared by local residents along the brook and its tributaries. I regularly find spraint or footprints along the brook but the animals themselves remain highly nocturnal with very few people managing to set eyes on one. They use the whole brook and surrounding waterbodies and travel for miles each night so you never know where they might be active. Water voles also seem to have had another good year with survey signs found on most stretches of the brook except the areas upstream of Wantage Old Mill – this seems to remain a barrier to them being able to recolonise the upstream sections.

Reptiles and Amphibians We received a few more grass snake sightings over the year and I came across one in the Letcombe Valley reserve. Areas of shelter such as log piles and compost heaps are important for all amphibians and reptiles giving them shelter from both predators and inclement weather. Toads remain fairly numerous in Letcombe Regis but unfortunately many get squashed on the Bassett Road and Warborough Road when trying to return to their spawning ponds in late winter. Its great that locals have started a Toad Patrol going in this area to help sustain this important local population – they are such a good gardeners friend after all. The aim of getting some extra wetland features at Willow Walk, Wantage has been taken on by VWHDC Drainage Engineers who have put in a funding bid with a bit of support from us – we hope its successful.

Dragonflies/Inverts No new species were spotted this year and fewer Willow Emerald damselfly were recorded, possibly due to



it being a less favourable year in terms of weather but the brook and wetland features in its corridor (they soon colonise the new Suds) remain good places to look for the many species that can be found in this area.

Invasive Species 2023 proved to be a frustrating year with much more Himalayan Balsam present along some sections of the brook. We delivered our usual eradication programme but didn't get to some areas until plants had started seeding so no doubt we will still have plenty to do next year. Please do pull the plants or notify us if you can't get to them – we really want to deal with every plant we can before it seeds! Tom removed some more skunk cabbage from the Manor Road tributary but we haven't yet found it on any other stretches of the brook or tributaries. Japanese Knotweed remains a problem at Grove Railway with some pretty ineffectual treatment by the landowners not helping matters. Again we have not trapped any mink but they remain a concern with animals located on other nearby watercourses including the Childrey Brook. American signal crayfish remain a problem (with no effective means of eradication yet) with densities seeming highest between Wantage and Grove.

Volunteering Activities

Our regular volunteering work parties continue with habitat management work completed at several locations in the Letcombe Brook corridor. Many thanks to our regular volunteers who worked hard during 2023. We've carried out some habitat improvements on the brook at Willow Walk Nature Reserve, Smiths Wharf and Mably Way in Wantage, Grove Green and Marygreen at Grove and Millennium Green at Letcombe Regis. We also carried out a fair bit of litter picking with something like 45 sacs of litter removed from the brook corridor during 2023. We have a great core group of volunteers that come out regularly but have room for a few more so please get in touch if you would like to join in – more info on our website in the "Get Involved" section of our website at www.letcombebrook.org.uk



We did manage to deliver an "Outfall Safari" in partnership with Thames Water where we checked the more urban section of the brook for outfalls that may be polluting the brook. Thankfully we didn't find any new ones causing concern (pic of volunteers opposite).

The fantastic team of Riverfly Surveyors continue sampling for freshwater invertebrates each month at their designated sites. We have had a couple of surveyors hang up their boots though so we would like to recruit some new volunteers for this interesting task. The sampling can be carried out at a time to suit you, we will supply you with all the kit you need but we will need to get you trained up and authorised by sending you on a one-day course initially. Please do contact us to discuss this volunteering opportunity on Projectofficer@letcombebrook.org.uk

Our water quality monitoring aspirations were not quite realised despite some great work from one of our volunteers (thanks Paul!) as I struggled to find time to set up and support a more resourced project. We will try again this year as water quality still remains a major concern. Again, if you would like to get involved as a volunteer carrying out basic

water quality testing we can train you internally and provide you with some equipment so you can sample each month under your own steam.

Funded Projects

We had hoped to be able to deliver the Fish Easement Project at Dandridges Mill, East Hanney during 2023 but sufficient funding was not available from the EA for the full construction project. We ended up spending a lot of time delivering an Ecological Impact Assessment necessary to obtain full planning permission for this project. The full planning application was recently submitted, and the EA think they will be able to fund the project so fingers crossed for completion later in 2024.



Love the Letcombe (habitat improvement project) is coming to an end in April 2024. We have worked at various sites along the brook but have focused on areas of public green space. A large part of the work has been to increase light levels reaching the brook so that marginal and aquatic vegetation can recover. This has been achieved by pollarding and coppicing bankside trees and shrubs, selective bramble removal and nettle control (scything sections of bank). Generally, we have seen quick recovery of aquatic and marginal vegetation but we have also noticed negative impacts from increased use by people and dogs that have led to bank erosion in places. The attached photo shows some bank restoration work we completed where we had lost 2m of bank due to erosion from dogs and people getting in and out! The funding has also enabled us to carry out several feasibility studies over the 4 years, purchase water monitoring

equipment, bird and bat boxes and some extra tools. Many thanks to the Environment Agency for this funding.

Education Work and Events

We continued our education delivery programme this year and engaged with 5 Primary Schools, a total of 230 local children enjoying a trip to the river and a chance to learn about our precious brook and the wildlife it supports. We delivered a few classroom sessions too to follow up.

River dipping sessions on the brook were again delivered in partnership with the fabulous Vale and Downland Museum during school holidays.

Our contact with Secondary Schools remains more limited but we did host 3 students as part of their work experience programme and several students completed their volunteering aspect of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards with us.

Our events programme kicked off with the Letcombe Brook Project 20th Anniversary Celebration at Williams Racing in Grove on Saturday 22nd April. Big thanks to Marcus and the Williams Team for hosting us at their fantastic hospitality venue at Grove and to the many speakers that came along to make the event an interesting and inspiring one.

Early May found us at the lovely Betjeman Park at 4am for our annual Dawn Chorus Walk - 18 early risers came along to enjoy this national event.

We finally got the go ahead to run the Wildlife Discovery Day event in partnership with BBOWT at the Letcombe Valley Reserve – we think something like 110 people came along to enjoy owls, small mammals, Letcombe Brook beasties, bats, art and craft activities and den building. Big thanks to the Letcombe Volunteers that make this event possible (Sheila – you are a star!)

The Project Officer was able to provide talks to several local WI groups including a first “walk and talk with picnic” at Letcombe Valley for the Childrey WI. Other sessions were delivered for scout and cub groups.

Thank You

As always a massive thank you to all our funders, partners and collaborators – you know who you are! We wouldn't get a lot done without our fantastic team of volunteers – out in all weather helping deliver habitat improvement work, surveying for riverflies or water voles, picking up litter and testing water quality or helping with events. Thanks also to the many people that contribute to the fantastic Letcombe Brook Facebook Page – so many lovely photos and observations, it's a very positive place and worth checking out.

Wider Issues and Looking Ahead

We continue to tackle invasive species and to record as many wildlife sightings along the brook as possible and would encourage you to help with that aim. Using iRecord is an easy way to record wildlife sightings and the data is shared automatically with TVERC, our local Biological Records Centre which is really important. Records can also be provided directly to TVERC through their website. Its particularly important this year as we gather as much data as we can to feed into the



Nature Recovery Network consultation process. Do let us know if you see anything exciting or unusual! Pollution of our rivers and seas continued to receive a lot of publicity during 2022. Concerns about water companies dumping untreated sewage remains a big issue and the Governments response to this is really disappointing with them recently pushing back deadlines to clean up our rivers by 36 years!

Concerns over flooding

Its been a very wet last 12 months which has given rise to several flooding incidents and much concern and heartache. We've been out collecting as much evidence as possible and trying to work out what has been happening. There is no doubt climate change is now starting to really impact us and the lack of climate adaptation work is now biting us in

the bum. So much part-built infrastructure in the local area and lack of road drain maintenance has

not helped. We will continue to try and support our local community and would again like to praise the brilliant Hanney Flood Group – without them things would have been much worse in the Hanneys. We really do need other community flood groups to be set up so that communities can help look after the most vulnerable and co-ordinate action on a local level to help with reduction of flood risk and damage caused. Do have a look at the Flood Hub website and flooding advice from OCC.

Pollution

We had hoped the launch of the Thames Water Event Duration Monitor(EDM) Map would help us keep an eye on discharges of untreated sewage into the Letcombe Brook – but the data it provides is very limited. A better site is available at [Sewagemap.co.uk](https://www.sewagemap.co.uk) which provides cumulative figures and year totals. Shocking to see that 517 hours of untreated sewage was dumped into Letcombe Brook in 2023. Some of that was necessary (at times of exceptional rainfall) but much of it was not.....please do keep up the pressure on the Government and Thames Water with this ongoing scandal!

Pollution from the outfall under Sainsbury's car park has been very intermittent. Despite genuine attempts by Thames Water to trace it, they haven't been able to ID the source. Please do remember road drains are just for water – many are linked directly to the brook or tributaries!

We also shouldn't forget agriculture – it is one of the biggest polluters of freshwater habitats. We continue to try and work with farmers to encourage good practice, ensure decent buffers are in place alongside our watercourses and point them in the right direction of funding and advice. We need to work together on this complex issue at a time of great change in farming subsidies etc

Built Environment

We are spending more and more time commenting and advising on planning applications and getting involved with advising on delivery of habitat restoration and management on major housebuilding schemes – there is so much development going on in the brook corridor!

The anaerobic digester facility proposed for Grove did not obtain planning permission and given the serious pollution incidents created by some of these facilities we admit to breathing a sigh of relief.

By working with David Wilson Homes and the EA we managed to get some decent habitat creation down at Grove with the creation of a new backwater (pic opposite). This will provide valuable refuge for fish in high flows and a great environment for development of juvenile fish plus feeding opportunities for many other species – we just need people to keep their dogs out of it! The next phase of DWH in this area will present other opportunities for river restoration work and we are advising on proposed schemes and habitat management plans.



We've also been asked to advise on the removal and redevelopment of the Crystalox building in Wantage at Limborough Road - this will be a tricky site as its right on the brook edge.

With so much development going on in the brook corridor at present this does raise concerns for the brook. Even as the actual building of homes finishes, the ongoing management of green space is often an ongoing problem with poor delivery and lack of follow up on planning conditions etc.

Change of Personnel at LBP

It's with a mixture of excitement and sadness that I let you know I will be moving on and that you will have a new Project Officer very soon. I finish end of April but the new PO, Judith Verdon will be starting late February so we will have plenty of time for a good handover. I worked with Judith (or Jude as she likes to be known) at BBOWT where she spent 5 years leading on their catchment hosting work in the Windrush and Cherwell catchments and setting up and running the Wild Banbury project, where she worked in partnership with Banbury Town Council and Cherwell District Council as well as a number of local organisations. She led on the planning and delivery of a restoration project on the Cherwell in Banbury. She also spent a happy summer helping out with river surveys in the Annan catchment in Dumfries & Galloway. She is looking forward to getting to know the Letcombe Brook and its people."



Judith Verdon

I am really pleased to be able to hand over to such a competent and enthusiastic new PO who I am sure will do the LBP proud. I will introduce her to as many people as possible before I go but please give her a bit of time to settle in to the role... Please note the change in email address for contacting the Project Officer its now Projectofficer@letcombebrook.org.uk Please delete the old email address from your contacts list.

Many thanks to all of you for your support, encouragement and collaboration whilst I have been in this role, its been a very enjoyable 6 years but time for some new adventures and hopefully a relocation to Scotland...

Mark Bradfield

Project Officer, Feb 2024