



Three-hundred people visit ARK open day

Report by Sean Dempster, Head of Biology, Marlborough College

On Sunday October 3rd approximately three hundred adults and children came to see ARK's "Life of the River" exhibition. Thirty one children became junior members of ARK and they were issued with a pack containing an identification guide and a quiz to complete as they went around the laboratories.



Two young ARK members seeing for themselves what lives in the river.

In the first laboratory John Hounslow had assembled an amazing array of aquaria containing trout, grayling, bullheads, lampreys, stone loach, minnows and sticklebacks. A huge stuffed pike stared menacingly from a display case on the wall while, on the side bench, a mink leered at a nervous water vole.

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Annual General Meeting

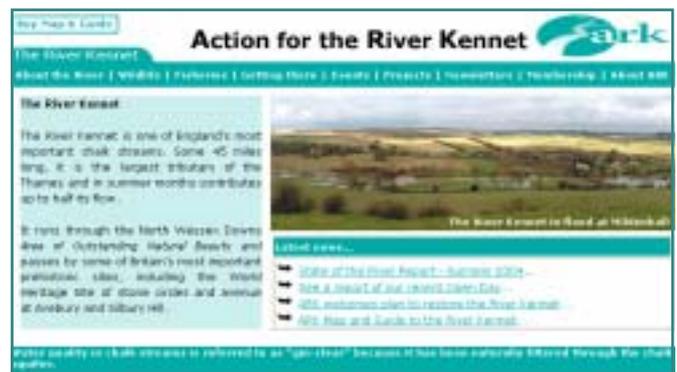
ARK's AGM will be held at the Wesley Hall in Marlborough on 9 December 2004. Starting at 6.30pm it will be followed by a [talk about the River Kennet and its wildlife](#) by John Hounslow and Peter Marren. We look forward to seeing you there.

ARK's new website:

www.riverkennet.org

ARK launched its own website in October. It is designed to keep members up to date with what ARK is doing on their behalf. It is also a useful source of information about the Kennet, its history and the threats to its health. It will supplement this newsletter.

Please take a look and let us know what you think.



Tottenham House Development

ARK has studied the proposals for this 276 double bedroom Resort Hotel with an 18 hole PGA standard golf course in the Savernake Forest. While not against the project in principle, ARK is concerned that insufficient consideration has been given to the fundamental question of irrigation and domestic water supply. ARK has made representations to the appropriate authorities and will continue to monitor the project's progress.

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Those with a botanical bent were able to quiz Peter Marren about the plant-life of the river and enjoy his display which ranged from algae to the increasingly rare *Ranunculus*.

Further down the corridor were two labs devoted to the invertebrates of the river. These were arranged systematically, commencing with the unicellular organisms such as *Amoeba* and ending with the aggressive American signal crayfish, which have decimated our native species. Once removed from the river it is an offence to return these lobster-like



creatures and rumour has it that they provided a tasty hors d'oeuvre at a dinner party in Manton!

Much credit for the invertebrate presentation goes to Colin Deady who was collecting specimens from the river at dawn. Thanks to Tony Hilliar, the senior science technician at the College, for setting up more than thirty microscopes, allowing people to marvel at the anatomy of the flatworms, leeches, beetles and various forms of insect larvae.

As coordinator of the exhibition, and a lifelong teacher, it gave me great pleasure to watch the young children expressing their wonder at the creatures on display. Too often their experiences of wildlife are second-hand images on television or video, whereas here it was flesh and bones biology!

After an hour or so people were ready for a well-deserved cup of tea provided by Charlotte Hitchmough and her team. Without Charlotte the event would never have got off the ground as she spent many hours on the publicity and information packs.

Hopefully we will repeat this event every two years so more local people can appreciate the wealth of wildlife that lurks below the surface of the river Kennet.



Val Compton takes a look at a stone loach

Living by the Kennet

James Dallas, ARK

There are many pleasures to be derived from living by a river, but to me the greatest of these is bird-watching. To catch a glimpse of the kingfisher as it arrows down the river, or to see a duck and her brood making their way into the water for the first time, or to hear the scratching and mimicry of the sedge warbler, are all ambrosia to the riverside twitcher. One of my predecessors at the Old Mill, Ramsbury, Sir Joseph Ball, in the 1940s kept a list of the birds he had seen there. They numbered over 70 species.

But there is one bird he does not record and which has been a frequent visitor in the last few years. This small brown bird is rarely seen; it skulks about at the fringe of the river usually low down in the dense undergrowth. It took me a



Cettis Warbler

long time to catch my first sight of one. It's most distinctive characteristic is its call: an explosive "chetti chetti chetti", which in terms of volume to size puts even a wren to shame and has a faintly tropical tone to it. In the 1915 edition of A.Thorburn's Book of *British Birds* there is reference to only two recorded sightings of this bird in 1904 and 1905; both in Sussex. In 2004 there are an estimated 100-200 pairs breeding regularly in the south of England. It is, of course, the **Cettis Warbler**. For those who subscribe to the theory of global warming, the movement of the Cettis Warbler seems good evidence. The bird has taken advantage of the warmer climate and extended their range north and we in the Kennet Valley are the lucky beneficiaries of this change in migratory pattern. A win for us in the Kennet and I believe a win for the Cettis Warbler, for where better to spend the summer months?

If further evidence were needed of the change in climate and the accompanying change in bird life, in August our resident heron was replaced, briefly, by a little egret. How long before the ring-necked parakeets, now firmly established within the M25, make their way west to adorn the gardens and hedgerows of the Kennet Valley?

ARK committee

The third in a series of brief biographies and news of the ARK committee



Alastair Service, pictured here with dogs Venus and Boris, loved his family's river as a child, even when he was made to swim in it in Scottish temperatures. He and his brother used to try to catch hydras in moorland pools and later he became

a trout fisherman on the Gala, the Tweed and the Taw. As an experienced writer of books and campaigner for law reforms, he was a natural first Honorary Secretary of ARK in 1991 and ran it for two years. Alastair lives in Avebury and remains an active member of the committee.



James Dallas is a City solicitor. He lives with his family in the Old Mill at Ramsbury and takes great pleasure in watching the river through the seasons. He contributed the article on page 2.

News



ARK's naturalist, Peter Marren has just published a new book. Entitled 'Twitching through the Swamp' it is based on past columns in British Wildlife and The Countryman, and takes the form of a satirical commentary on our dealings with the natural world. It is illustrated

with cartoons by David Carstairs. Peter has written fourteen published books. He writes for the Daily Telegraph and The Independent. Peter will be one of the speakers at the ARK AGM on 9 December (details on page 1).

ARK members can purchase signed copies from Swamp Publishing at 122, Derwent Road, Thatcham RG19 3UP priced £12.50 including p&p.

Obituary

John Lees-Millais (obituary 2004). It is with sadness that we report the death of John Lees-Millais. John was the owner of Rockley Manor and Rockley Well (an official aquifer water level measure). He was a founder member of ARK in 1991 (the founders were Jack Ainslie, Neville Mutter, Alastair Service and Roger de Vere) and for the first year the ARK committee meetings were held at Rockley Manor.

State of the River – Autumn 2004

Report by John Hounslow, River Keeper

The river is still suffering the effects of the low winter rainfall last year. Despite a relatively wet summer and autumn the groundwater levels are still as low as they have been in the last 14 years.

Rainfall during the relatively wet summer was highly localised. In August and September more moisture left soil than went in to it through rainfall. This is because moisture was taken out by evaporation, abstraction and plant growth, so there was nothing left to percolate down into the aquifer which feeds the Kennet. October was extremely wet, with 130 mm rainfall in the catchment. However this rain is still making up the soil water deficit and is not yet recharging the aquifer. Steady rainfall for the next two months is needed to recharge the aquifers and get the springs flowing again.

Water Quality and river clarity is good.

Fly life on the river this year has been very poor, especially in August. There were hardly any flies surfacing and fishermen found it very difficult to catch fish on a dry fly. Flies have been poor through the whole season and this seems to be a nationwide characteristic. Studies into decline of fly life are ongoing. Global warming causing climate change, agricultural pollution and general pollution could all contribute to an environment and ecology that is difficult for these small invertebrates to survive in. ARK will be represented at the forthcoming Riverfly Conference at the Natural History Museum, London.

Water Voles seem to be making a good recovery. Using materials developed by The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust we have now trapped 26 mink from Marlborough down to Hungerford. If keepers and landowners continue the trapping programme hopefully these predators will be eradicated and the native wildlife can thrive again.

American Signal Crayfish are abundant throughout the river system. There is evidence that they cause a decline of caddis larvae. Caddis larvae cannot escape these large predators in the water. More research needs to be undertaken into the impact of Signal Crayfish on the ecology of our river systems.

Graphs of river flow, groundwater levels and rainfall are included on a separate sheet with this newsletter. The graphs are regularly updated in the "State of the River" section of ARK's website: www.riverkennet.org.

Environment Agency 'Kennet Chalkstream Restoration Project' makes progress

In the last newsletter Geoffrey Findlay reported on the Environment Agency's initiative to restore the River Kennet to good health. ARK are pleased to say that preliminary funding for the project has been secured.

From April 2005 the Environment Agency and the British Waterways association will each contribute £25,000 a year until 2010. It is hoped that Thames Water will contribute a similar amount. This will be an essential first step to meet the long-term objective of restoring the Kennet to full health. The complete project will require substantial additional funding, which will be sourced during the first stage.

ARK will be one of the stakeholders who will be consulted during the process. John Hounslow gave the chairman of the Environment Agency, Sir John Harman, a personal tour of stretches of the River Kennet shortly before the launch of the restoration project and was able to explain the particular problems facing the upper Kennet.

The Environment Agency have recognised that the river is 'ecologically vital but fragile' and that 'the Kennet was one of England's finest chalkstreams and its restoration is a high priority'.

Marlborough College Fishery improvements

Last autumn Marlborough College started work to improve their stretch of the Kennet and the trout ponds. One hundred tonnes of gravel, and various natural features, were added to the river to improve flow rates and the growth of *Ranunculus* weed. Meanwhile the ponds were dredged to remove thirty years' worth of accumulated silt.

This summer the impact of these improvements was immediately obvious. The three gravel deposits attracted large numbers of both trout and grayling. The latter have reappeared in great numbers having been very scarce recently. The three V-shaped deflectors are doing a great job of scouring out decent pools in previously featureless stretches of the river, and there are often trout lying downstream of these wooden structures where the turbulence adds oxygen to the water. At present there is no noticeable increase in *Ranunculus* but this may re-establish itself in the future.

The trout pond ecosystem has pretty much re-established itself and it is good to see kingfisher, little grebe, mute swans, herons, tufted duck, moorhens, coots and mallard returning. The only problem we had was preventing ducklings from being washed down the overflow pipes from the ponds and we are currently designing some grills to overcome this.

What's the difference between a Brown Trout and a Rainbow Trout?

The river Kennet contains two species of trout: the **Brown Trout** (*Salmo trutta*) is the native and it is characterised by large, rich red, brown or black haloed spots on its back or flanks. Feeding on small crustaceans and insects, Brown Trout grow rapidly in the rich chalk streams of southern England where they provide excellent sport for the discerning disciple of the dry fly. In less productive rivers a proportion of the trout will make an annual migration to the sea to feed, returning as silvery "Sea Trout", which are usually fished for in the dead of night. Trout spawn in the gravel bed of the river in winter and the "alevins" emerge after a few months and feed off the yolk sac before maturing into "parr". Mortality rates are high and very few survive to adulthood due to predation by herons, pike and even their cannibalistic cousins.

Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) were introduced from North America in 1884. Much easier to farm and catch than brown trout, they are now widespread in Britain but they only breed naturally in a few locations. They have a pinkish iridescence along the flanks and many small black spots. In their homeland some Rainbow Trout migrate to sea returning as "steelheads".



Brown Trout



Rainbow Trout

Sean Dempster, Head of Biology, Marlborough College

Keep sending in your completed quizzes and colouring from the open day.
Competition closing date is December 1st

This newsletter is published three times a year by Action for the River Kennet and is free to members.
For more information about ARK's work see www.riverkennet.org

