

Action for the River Kennet

# River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

## The joy of nature

We'll remember the spring of 2020 for a very long time.



*A freshly emerged male orange-tip butterfly at Marlborough's Stonebridge Wild River Reserve.*

It was the sunniest spring anyone can remember, and also, for lots of us, the saddest. Many, especially the elderly, died during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, and the rest of us were locked down, stressed and fearful. The spring was an extraordinary drama of sunshine and shadow, of life and death, and perhaps, a grim reminder that there are some things that we, with all our power and technology, cannot control.

For many of us, nature was a great consolation, perhaps the greatest. In the daily exercise which the government allowed us, we could

observe the spring unfolding on our home patch as perhaps never before. We could watch the trees turn from winter starkness to the pastel green of the opening buds, the spray of catkins on the oaks and the brush of purple stamens on the ash, to the unfurling of soft, tender leaves, and that brief moment of spring freshness when the whole landscape seems new minted.

Perhaps the being that captures that moment most sweetly is the orange-tip butterfly. I saw my first one on 9 April fluttering by the opening garlic mustard flowers on our lane, and the last around the

end of May – nearly two full months of bright butterflies with, as the French say, the rising sun in their wings.

Orange-tips are such charming companions on a walk. They flutter along ceaselessly at about walking pace and waist height, blithely ignoring us as they seek a flower or a mate. And when at rest with their bright wings closed they magically blend into the foliage with the help of their dappled-green undersides.

Butterflies make versatile emblems. In some ways we see them more as winged spirits than real insects. We respond to their beauty and apparent freedom by placing their images on greetings cards, or calendars, or biscuit tins. They are used to advertise products, and in 'green' therapy.

They embody our strong, if half-buried, feelings for nature; in the certainty that nature is good for us, and never more so than in the April and May of our plague year 2020. Butterflies make us happy. Go out and experience a little of that simple happiness while the summer lasts.

**Peter Marren**

# News from the Chairman

## I bet you can't wait for things to get back to the new normal!

Well in some ways yes, in other ways no. And then again, I am not entirely sure. I would imagine hardly anyone won't be happy to see family and friends again; go to the pub for a beer or eat out in their favourite restaurant. Humans are social animals and if the last four months have taught us anything it is that we thrive in the company of others.

skies with cleaner air; the peace associated with quieter, less busy roads and even rivers such as the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, where fish can once again be seen in the clearer water.

And what about the 'I'm not entirely sure' category? My own hesitancy is mainly driven by what a 'new

He also went on to bemoan the slow rates of house building in the UK and say 'I tell you why – because time is money, and the newt-counting delays in our system are a massive drag on the productivity and the prosperity of this country and so we will build better and build greener but we will also build faster'.



And then there is 'the maybe not completely back to normal'. We have all heard the stories about how reduced human activity has allowed nature to return to places where it has not been seen for decades. Whether it is peregrine falcons nesting in the ancient ruins of Corfe Castle in Dorset, or orcas in Strangford Lough, wildlife has come back; let us hope it stays.

Our wider natural environment has benefited too – brighter, bluer

normal' might mean for our natural environment. I am particularly troubled by 'Project Speed'. This was introduced by the PM at the end of June as the mercurial answer to how the UK is going to bounce back from the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on the role models of the Nightingale Hospitals, Oxford University's efforts to find a vaccine and British industry building thousands of ventilators, Boris Johnson explained that with speed and efficiency the UK can recover.

This is the essence of the problem I have with Project Speed and what a new normal might be. I am seeing a subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – shift away from the promises made in the 25 Year Environment Plan to leave the environment in a better condition for future generations and towards a future in which we build our way back to prosperity at any cost.

So as we emerge bleary-eyed from the gloom of the past months and stare up at the brightest bluest skies, breathe the clean air and enjoy the beautiful River Kennet we should remember some of the positive experiences of lockdown – and refuse to accept a new normal that is not better than the one we had before.

And by the way, according to a 2018 review by Sir Oliver Letwin it's not newt counting that holds back house building rates, just old-fashioned market forces!

[Richard Clarke](#)



# Strolling with the voles

Getting to know one of the Kennet's best-loved residents.



Photo: Paul Hancock

*"Thank you for a wonderful walk this morning. The children and I took so much away from this morning. We went for a walk later in the afternoon and then, rather wonderfully as we peered over, Edward pointed out a Water vole he had spotted to us. So, we all got to see a water vole!"*

**Vanessa Minchin**

## Water vole field signs

Water voles need a healthy river corridor, lots of continuous marginal vegetation, a flowing river and the invasive non-native predator the American mink to be controlled.

- Water voles eat 200+ species of plants. They chew them in a distinctive way. Look out for sedge along the riverbank that has been chewed at 45 degrees.
- Look out for droppings. About the size of a Tic-Tac sweet, usually green/brown and rounded at both ends. Sometimes these are seen on big stones that are poking out above the water.
- Burrows and lawns. Look out for holes within the riverbank. Rats make holes too, but these are bigger. You may come across burrows on top of the riverbank with a neatly trimmed area of grass around it. This is known as a lawn.

Water voles and their burrows are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. So, if you come across a water vole or think you know where one might live, remember not to disturb them.

**Anna Forbes**

## Water vole strolls

Wildlife is often all around us but can be overlooked. The river particularly can have a lot going on, in it, on it and by it; but you need to be lucky or sometimes have patience and know where to look to see some of our most endearing creatures.

As lockdown measures eased, our water vole strolls have been running. Individuals and families have been booking in advance to join us for a led morning walk along the riverbank at Stonebridge Wild River Reserve in Marlborough.

Social distancing is no problem at the 15-acre reserve! As well as learning about water voles, their requirements to thrive and field signs to spot, participants are taken around the water meadow to see the mix of habitats and what wildlife can be observed that day or might be spotted on a return visit.

The strolls are at a leisurely pace and waiting for water voles to make an appearance is a good opportunity to pause and enjoy the river. There is time to watch moorhen families busy hunting for food among the stream-water crowfoot, catch a glimpse of a flock of long-tailed tits which briefly land on a willow tree or in the river under the cover of an overhanging tree, spot the fine specimens of grayling; and of course, perhaps catch sight of a water vole.

For some strollers it's been the first visit, finding out how special the Kennet is. For others it has meant they've experienced the Wild River Reserve through a different lens.

## Feedback

*"Thank you so much for our most enjoyable walk yesterday. I was so pleased to discover that area and will visit again. It was great to learn so much."* **Nicola Fitzgerald**

# We need to talk about pollution

## Is it time for public health monitoring of river water quality?

The sparkling waters of the rivers in the Kennet catchment aren't always as sparkling as we'd like them to be, and this winter's high flows and summer storms have caused particular problems, leaving a legacy of sewage fungus, algal growth and cloudy water at the start of this summer.

When students from the University of Reading took water samples in February 2020 at eight sites on the Kennet from West Kennet to Reading, none recorded water quality that could be considered unimpacted by human influence. The top of the catchment was particularly polluted both above and below the sewage treatment works, showing that the pollution is coming from a combination of farm runoff, septic tanks and sewage treatment works.

Only two sites (Thatcham and Reading) had phosphate (PO<sub>4</sub>-P) concentrations which would meet Good status as defined by the Water Framework Directive, whilst at every site nitrate levels were alarmingly high, all falling into the categories of High and Very High levels of pollution defined by the Freshwater Habitats Trust, and significantly higher than the European average for nitrate in freshwater.

Data on water quality is sparse, and the role of citizen scientists is becoming increasingly important. This snapshot of water quality reflects a wider picture being formed by citizen scientists, including the Southern Streams farmers, whose spring sampling of the Shalbourne and Dun found none of the sites reached good status for both nitrate and phosphate combined.

In early July *The Guardian*, working with the Rivers Trust, revealed that



*Water gushing from a manhole beside the River Kennet at Town Mill in Marlborough*

in 2019 untreated sewage flowed into river in the Kennet catchment for more than 12,200 hours in 2,798 combined sewer overflow incidents. These discharges of untreated sewage are consented by the Environment Agency to allow treatment works to deal with unusually high flows, but it seems incredible that it occurs so frequently. Marlborough Sewage Treatment Works was one of the worst offenders in the Kennet catchment, despite extensive upgrades in 2013. You can explore the map by Googling 'is my river fit to play in'.

The published data on storm overflows does not include the problems in Lambourn and Aldbourne, where we watched sewage flowing into streams for months between December and April, nor does it include sewage overflows from the manholes during summer storms or September's catastrophic sewage pipe burst in Thatcham, which has been followed by three failures since.

It is clear that there is a great need for better investment in our sewage network, more targeted farm advice and incentives for river friendly farming, and stricter rules on septic tank management.

Charlotte Hitchmough



You can help reduce pollution by not flushing wetwipes, cotton buds or sanitary products. Products that can be safely flushed will have this 'Fine to Flush' symbol. If there is no symbol put it in the bin instead.

# A helping hand

Nature has always played a vital role in improving our mental health.



*Socially distanced litter pick in the Kennet*

During these challenging times many more people have discovered green and blue spaces, both in the countryside and in more urban settings. What's more, rivers are a key part of the reassuring powers of nature.

*A third of adults are more interested in nature during the coronavirus pandemic.*

## National Trust opinion poll

We humans are social animals and it has been unnatural for many of us to be so isolated and have restrictions on going out. Nature can reduce stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness, whether you are someone who suffers long-term with your mental health or it is something new brought on during the coronavirus pandemic.

Getting outdoors provides us with vital vitamin D and physical exercise. What's more, as one city visitor to Stonebridge Wild River Reserve commented to me, the wealth of bird song along the riverbanks and creatures going about their lives as usual in a 'Wind in the Willows like

setting' can be calming and hugely positive on the mind.

Natural England have recently released new data on people's enjoyment of nature in April this year. Nearly 87% of adults agreed that being in nature makes them feel happy.



Sadly, our volunteer team had to halt activities during lockdown. There are a multitude of reasons why people volunteer to help the Kennet catchment, but simply being in or by the river makes them feel good. In a restricted 'new

normal' our team are now back, and although it's a little bit different it's clear that our volunteers are now getting even more out of their experiences at the river.

*My river work was always a step toward helping my mental health. I think the river was almost medicinal to get back into!*

**One of our riverfly monitors resuming kick-sampling on the Kennet.**

*I needed a good start as today is the 10th anniversary of my brother's death. It felt life-affirming to be able to hear the river.*

**A volunteer back out checking mink rafts for us on the Kennet.**

*Stonebridge is sublime, an ecological jewel. Home of the otter, water vole and stoat, old lady and sallow kitten! It is indeed a fine thing to walk in rapture with one's spirit invigorated by the unceasing river. Stonebridge is for me an arena for contemplation, where one can give rest to a mind in tumult.*

**A volunteer getting great value from visiting Stonebridge Wild River Reserve, while regularly litter picking.**

Doctors in some areas are social prescribing, or if not prescribing strongly recommending, getting involved with conservation groups to enhance wellbeing. Employers have also found that staff who volunteer for environmental charities are happier, more productive and more engaged.

Our rivers are a natural health service, so let's look after them the way they have been looking after us.

**Anna Forbes**

# First wet, then dry

2020 has been a strange year for water.

The wet winter kept groundwater well above average until April, driving strong river flows through the catchment. Generally this is good news for river wildlife. Barriers to fish movement like small weirs and fords all become passable, allowing fish to reach the top of the river to spawn, and strong currents clear out sediment and stimulate healthy weed growth. On the less positive side, a huge amount of pollution was washed into the river (see article on page 4).

After all that rain, came COVID-19 lock down, and a sunshine-filled May produced only 8.2 mm rain in Marlborough. By June the river level had already dropped back to normal and our dramatic change in lifestyle put an extraordinary strain on drinking-water supplies. Water companies across the country reported that demand grew 25% on average and 40% at peak times.

Water in the Kennet Valley comes directly from the aquifer that feeds the river, or in Reading, from the river itself. Every drop you save will leave more in the river to support the wildlife that needs it.

In a hard-hitting new report the Public Accounts Committee has warned that 'water shortages are an impending risk in the UK' and that urgent action is needed to ensure a reliable supply in the years ahead. The idea of running out of water sounds bizarre, but when shortages occur, all the rules protecting wildlife are abandoned to protect supplies. So if we want to enjoy lovely flowing rivers for years to come, we really must take this seriously.

Here are a few small ideas that have a big impact on water demand to keep the river flowing and water in our taps.



**Showers normally make up around 25% of an average household's water usage.**

Use the Waterwise Spotify Playlist and shower to just one four-minute track. If a family of four reduce their showers by one minute each they'd save 11,648 litres of water a year.



**Fill paddling pools only half way and, when kids and pets have finished playing in them, use the water to give thirsty plants a drink.**

Be aware how much water things use: for example the pool on offer at Aldi this summer uses 7,500 litres – that's two and a half weeks water consumption for a family of four.



**Find your leaky loo**

One in 20 homes has a constantly flowing toilet which uses up to 400 litres of water per day. Look carefully for a steady trickle of water down the back of the pan, and if you find it, get it fixed.



**Stop running the tap until the water gets really cold.**

Storing a jug of tap water in the fridge is a better way to keep it cold and refreshing. Alternatively, pop some ice cubes in your drink which will help lower its temperature.



**Skip the rinse – don't rinse dirty dishes under running water before putting them in the dishwasher.**

Dishwashers don't need pre-rinsed plates, and if you have an older dishwasher pre-rinse the crockery in a bowl of water instead.

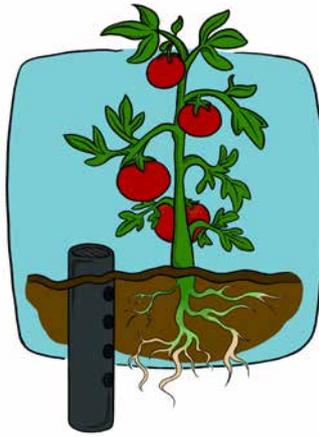
## Butts are brilliant!

During COVID-19 many of us have turned our attention to our gardens, and having invested so much money, energy and time no-one wants to see their green-fingered efforts go to waste. We've put together a few ideas to make sure you have a flourishing garden and a flowing river.

A typical roof collects 85,000 litres of rainwater a year. If you can collect some of that in a water butt your plants will do better than if you use drinking water. A 150 litre water butt costs as little as £25 complete with a tap, but you could think creatively. For example orange-juice drums in steel or plastic will store 200 litres and can be bought for as little as £20, while industrial Intermediate Bulk Containers (IBCs) will store 1,000 litres and there is plenty of choice online from new, reconditioned or recycled.

Unless it's attached to a water butt, put your hose away! A hose uses

a whole week's worth of drinking water in just an hour. Replacing the plastic tap on your water butt with a



proper brass outdoor tap is a simple swap that allows you to easily clip your hose to your water butt to save lugging watering cans around.

Watering plants in the evening will minimise evaporation. Directing water to the plant roots is most efficient. It's easy to replicate ancient

'deep pipe' methods using a piece of plastic pipe with holes drilled into the sides and duct tape to block off the bottom. Simply set the pipe about 30 cm into the ground near the seedling.



Alternatively 'porous pots' made out of terracotta flower pots will successfully support water-hungry crops like tomatoes through the summer. Both techniques take a bit of setting up at the start of the season but make watering much simpler all summer.

Charlotte Hitchmough

## Filling the data void

Citizen science is becoming a crucial part of monitoring and understanding the health of our rivers, both to protect them from pollution and to target resources at the parts that need improving. ARK's riverfly volunteers are a model of how valuable regular, reliable and accurate monitoring is. We'd like to expand our monitoring programme to record:

- Chemical water quality
- Barriers to fish passage
- Invasive species
- Pollution
- Physical habitat and river naturalness

We're working with the Rivers Trust to make this happen, and for the data



that volunteers collect to be included in national as well as local datasets so that the evidence can be used to direct funding.

It's early stages and we're hunting for funds now. You can help by making a

donation or signing up as a potential volunteer so we can let you know about future training.

Charlotte Hitchmough

# ARK People

## Tim Marriott



I have a lifelong interest in the natural world and also like to try to use some practical skills. ARK gives me the chance to do both. I can do some 'citizen science' through riverfly monitoring and exercise some DIY skills volunteering on the Kennet and in school rain gardens. What I like is that everyone is so open to sharing their knowledge.

## Hazel Keen



As a child I adored paddling in water with my mum searching for creatures that lived there and exploring nature out on the farm. With over 25 years' experience in the educational sector, I now organise free educational farm visits for Ramsbury Estates, some of them in partnership with Anna and the ARK team. What a joy and privilege it is to see students' faces light up when they visit and put their classroom theory into practice.

## Jimmy Hill



As far back as I can remember the Kennet has played some part in my life, whether walking along its lower reaches with my grandparents or fishing its clear waters closer to the source. When something has given you such a great deal of pleasure you feel you owe it something back. My keeping role on the Kennet through Hungerford goes some way to achieving this and I hope others will feel and see the benefits too.

# Dates for Your Diary

The current COVID-19 situation means that many of our events and activities have had to be postponed, though we will be bringing them back as soon as it safe for us to do so.

## Monday 16 November

This is the date on which we will be holding our annual AGM, though it's too early to confirm whether we will be able to welcome you to a traditional physical event or may instead need to resort to virtual meeting. Either way, keep the date in your diary and watch out for further details!

## Membership

And finally, a gentle reminder that membership renewals were due on 1 April 2020 – £20 for an individual or £30 for a family membership. For more details please contact [linda@riverkennet.org](mailto:linda@riverkennet.org)



Learn how you can support ARK every time you shop online just visit:

[www.easyfundraising.org.uk/arkactionfortheriverkennet](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk/arkactionfortheriverkennet)

# Websites Worth Visiting

The Rivers Trust Schools Hub will take you on a journey down the river. Learn about exciting wildlife that call these habitats home, investigate why and where our rivers are not clean and healthy, explore how rivers are created and their effects on our landscape.



To find out more please visit:  
<https://schools.theriverstrust.org>



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If you'd like to find out more about ARK, volunteering opportunities or membership please visit our website at [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org) or email [anna@riverkennet.org](mailto:anna@riverkennet.org)

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter and if you have any comments or ideas for future issues, do please pass them on!

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Printed on 100% recycled paper

