

Action for the River Kennet

# River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET



## Yellow Fish campaign

Volunteers from St John's School, working for their Duke of Edinburgh award, have taken on the challenge of running a 'Yellow Fish' campaign in the Kennet.

With the support of the North Wessex Downs AONB, they are carefully stencilling a yellow fish alongside road drains that feed into the river, and distributing posters, information and signs to let people know why the yellow fish are there.

"People don't know that many road drains connect straight into the river, and this project is a fun way to draw their attention to our message – only rain down the drain."



## Pollution – the silent killer

It comes out of the blue, so we can never be too vigilant.

Of all the threats to our wonderful river, chemical pollution is the one that can do the greatest damage in the shortest space of time. Last year we witnessed the disastrous effects that the accidental discharge of a tiny quantity of chlorpyrifos pesticide had on the invertebrate population of the Kennet between Marlborough and Hungerford.

In this issue we report two more recent incidents – diesel fuel leaking into the storm drains that feed

into the river below Marlborough High Street and the discharge of 150,000 litres of fuel into the downs, threatening the chalk aquifer following an attack on the pipeline that runs from Southampton to Birmingham. In between times there has been the recurring problem of raw sewage being discharged into the Kennet and its tributaries as a result of heavy winter rainfall.

Events like these are not easy to predict, which is why it is so important that we are all on our guard for any tell-tale signs of trouble ahead – **0800 807060** is the number to ring if you spot a potential incident.

# News from the Chairman

Writing in the May spring sunshine it is hard to remember the weeks of rain we suffered through winter and early spring and the problems it caused.



## Coping with the floods

We lost many weeks of riverfly monitoring and were much restricted in opportunities for volunteers to work on the river. Stonebridge Meadow was flooded, as was the Ramsbury Triangle, which resembled a tropical mangrove swamp. Aldbourne endured weeks of flooding and had to pump dilute sewage straight into the Aldbrook winterbourne. This was the lesser of two evils, the other being raw sewage in the streets. Thames Water acknowledge that they faced the problem of "unaccounted inflow" or "infiltration", when ground water rises so high that it seeps into the sewage system and overloads it. They now have to work with the Environment Agency to find a long-term solution. On the plus side of all that rain means our precious aquifers are well filled and riverflows are healthy!

## Forging partnerships

I mentioned in the last Newsletter, that as hosts of the Kennet Catchment Partnership we want to work with other agencies, local environmental groups, riparian owners and local authorities downstream of Hungerford jointly to improve the river and the public's support for it. Richard Benyon (former Rivers Minister and MP for Newbury)

is backing this move and arranged a meeting for us with the new MP for Reading West Alok Sharma, who has agreed to convene a public meeting to kick this off. Martin Salter – former MP for Reading West and keen chalkstream campaigner – has also agreed to help.

## Controlling pollution

We have continued to follow up on last July's pesticide (chlorpyrifos) pollution incident. As promised at our AGM Richard Aylard (Thames Water Director) brought his team of pollution experts and sewage managers to a meeting with us and John Sutton, Head of Fisheries at the Environment Agency. Both parties agreed that things could have been done better and lessons had been learned – not least the need for a written protocol on the handling of such incidents in future. As a bonus, some of us were given a personal tour of Marlborough Sewage works. Fascinating and remarkably un-smelly; our thanks to Thames Water for the experience.

On the same occasion we were given an update on the North-South Swindon pipeline that will help to reduce abstraction at Axford. A simpler funding mechanism has been agreed and Thames Water now say that subject to successful

negotiations with third parties (eg land owners) they expect completion by the end of 2016. As a result, the Environment Agency announced on 26 June their intention to reduce abstraction from Axford Pumping Station and to stop abstraction altogether from the River Og – actions for which ARK has been campaigning vociferously for more than 20 years.

## Water Bill

Looking further ahead, the Water Bill was enacted on 14 May. We and other environmental bodies had lobbied for it to put more emphasis on protecting the environment. DEFRA states that it will make water supply 'more resilient', and help join up the national water network, making it easier for water to be traded between companies. We have submitted comments and our Technical Director John Lawson is actively engaged.

## The ARK team

Finally, and as always with great pleasure, I thank our Director Charlotte Hitchmough for her terrific work in leading our growing team of staff and volunteers to produce the impressive range of activity that you will read about on the following pages.

Geoffrey Findlay



# Marlborough's precious scrub habitat

It is not only the river that is important – its adjoining floodplain is also home to a wealth of wildlife.



At the far end of ARK's Stonebridge Meadow wildlife reserve lies a modest area of scrubland – to the uninitiated eye a patch of unloved wasteland but in reality an important area of biodiversity.

As well as providing a corridor between other wildlife habitats, scrub is a valuable environment in its own right. It not only provides nectar, seeds and nesting sites for birds but also offers shelter for many species of small mammals and invertebrates. The tall herbs and grasses at the edges are hunting grounds for barn owls (look out for them just before dusk) and kestrels. Bats also use these edge-lands to hunt for moths.

Unusually large numbers of butterflies, bumblebees and moths (all of them important pollinators)

are found here because the scrub caters for every stage in their lifecycles. They include no fewer than 142 different species of moth, including the endangered grass rivulet, and 11 of Britain's 24 hard-pressed species of bumblebee.

Migrating birds use the scrub area as a feeding station and nesting ground. Birds recorded in the area include the cuckoo (an RSPB Red List Species which means its populations are in big trouble), whitethroat, sedge warbler, reed bunting and the grasshopper warbler (another RSPB Red List Species).

In the expert opinion of the County Recorders who have visited Stonebridge, our scrub habitat is of high conservation value – not least because our regular survey work has

## Take part now...

A six-week public consultation was launched on 21 June for people to see what has been achieved to date at Stonebridge Meadow and to seek opinions on the next phase.

For more information and to have your say by filling in the Stonebridge Meadow Survey visit the Marlborough Town Council website.

shown that it supports a colony of water shrews, a protected species in the UK and is also listed under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species because so much of its habitat has been lost through drainage and land improvement.

Contact with nature has many proven benefits for people's health and well being, but according to the RSPB's 2013 State of Nature Report, "today's children have less contact with nature than ever before". Stonebridge Meadow, and particularly the scrub habitat area, provides the people of Marlborough and visitors from further afield with the chance to explore nature at first hand – and perhaps to experience one of those special encounters that will inspire them for the rest of their lives. When 2nd Marlborough Scout Group had a guided tour of the reserve it was in the scrub habitat that some of the group saw their first common toad and "were thrilled to see a grass snake".

Only by managing this habitat sensitively we can ensure future generations can discover and enjoy it too.

Anna Forbes

## Muddy walks

As part of its work with Natural England to promote Catchment Sensitive Farming in the Kennet Valley ARK has been running a series of 'muddy walk' events for local residents.



The idea of these training sessions is to help people learn how to spot sources of sediment (from tracks, gateways and road verges), nutrients (for example phosphate from sewage outflows) and other domestic and commercial effluents that pose a pollution risk to the river. We also look out for non-native species which are affecting our river habitats, including; Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed, Floating pennywort and Water fern.

Anything untoward should be reported straight away using the ARK 'muddy walks' form which can be found at [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org), so that our farm advisor can arrange a visit to assess the problem and discuss with the farmer how it can be resolved.

Karen Davies

## Eels in the classroom

Spring 2014 has seen some exciting developments in ARK's schools programme.

Having safely released our trout in to the Kennet at Aldbourne and Stonebridge in April we are on to pastures – and species – new. In conjunction with Severn & Wye Smokery and Thames Water our 'Eels in the Classroom' project has delivered tanks of baby eels (elvers) to classrooms at six local schools.

The response has been incredible. The children have engaged with the species on every level. The journey of the elvers from eggs in the Sargasso Sea to their arrival in the tank and then release back into the Kennet is a story we will never tire of sharing.

Numbers of eels in UK rivers have decreased drastically over the last few decades, which is why we are extremely excited to play our part in returning these wonderful fish back into the Kennet.



We are also rolling out the 'use water wisely' message to an even younger (and more captive!) age group by running short interactive sessions with local preschools. Preschool children can get their wellies on to appreciate the wonder of the cased caddis and the sheer energy of the freshwater shrimp. In the process they begin to understand their own role in preserving the environment to make sure that there is enough of our beautiful chalk stream for us all to share.

Helen Kelly

## Down memory lane

Lady Kennet (Elizabeth Young) has written to tell us of her own pre-war memories of eels.

How nice to think of the Kennet being home to baby eels who will have come all the way from the Sargasso Sea, the other side of the Atlantic Ridge. If we pick them up in our fingers we will find them covered in a gelatinous coating, the Gloucestershire name for which is 'vomp' – or used to be, seventy years ago, when I remember catching a few hundred of them with my soon to be brother-in-law, Peter Scott, at Slimbridge, where they were moving upstream from west to east. Our B&B landlady had offered to make us elver stew for our supper. She kept a nasty old blanket for rubbing off the vomp.



# A bewitching world

Rodney Owen Jones reflects on memorable days spent beside a very special stretch of the Kennet.

Three shrill peeps made me look up from the riverbed as I took my riverfly samples. The harsh winter sun had broken through a few minutes earlier and sparkled off the frosty grass on the banks. Then I saw it. A tubby flash of colour barrelled past my left shoulder rolling over in the bright light with the sun hitting the greens, blues and browns of the kingfisher as it darted into the trees.

The cold fingers and dripping nose were forgotten. The magic of the Wilderness made that November morning a joy and a privilege. This bewitching world stretches from the Kintbury railway line to the A4 and its name belies the care that is taken to manage it so that nature is gently kept in check. The Kennet criss-crosses the meadows, sometimes in little streams that a child could jump across and in other places as a proper grown-up river. It only works due to the skilled care that generations of keepers have invested there. Nature is coaxed into place not driven or chastised. There are sluice gates to even out water flow and revetments are carefully placed to help the banks.

The ARK volunteers have been doing some great work here on one of the side streams, turning an overgrown

tunnel of vegetation and scrubby trees into a pristine chalk stream with good flow and weed growth but still leaving enough cover for the fish and birds. Were it not for the management of these chalk streams they would be no more than muddy fields.

In years past I have been lucky to fish the Wilderness. I can still hear the chuckles of the old boys as they watched the trout defy my clumsy efforts. A few hours spent on one of the many little back streams was fishing as it should be, with the often wild trout proving that the fisherman is not as clever as he thinks he is. After a day's efforts we would repair to the hut where over a glass or two tales were retold as the evening rise was awaited. At the height of the season the evening sky was full of the dancing embraces as the mayflies packed their lives into a frenzied twenty four hours. This was not a Wilderness to me but the magic of a healthy chalk stream.

**Rodney Owen Jones**

*The Wilderness is not open to the public. ARK volunteers work with the river keeper to improve the habitat for the benefit of wildlife.*

## Making the Kennet a better place for fish

While Bullhead and Stone Loach, are quite happy to sit under the same stone for most of their lives, most fish need to migrate between the habitats they need for different stages of their life cycles.

With this in mind ARK are working to clear or work around obstructions to fish movement throughout the catchment.



Our fish passes by Marlborough's Town Mill have settled down nicely – the new channel was even used by trout for spawning this spring. The next challenge has been to open up the Environment Agency gauging station under the Pewsey Road Bridge. Helped by funding from the Catchment Restoration Fund and using a new technique called 'Low Cost Baffles', fish will be able to swim up the existing structure while still allowing it collect vital information about river levels.

**Charlotte Hitchmough**



# Pollution alerts

April turned out to be the month of oil threat to the river around Marlborough.

Early in the month the mid-line pipe carrying oil from Southampton to Birmingham was damaged by fuel thieves, resulting in the leak of 150,000 litres of oil into the surrounding soil on the edge of the Downs. The pipe was quickly fixed but it is possible that oil could travel through the aquifer and reach the river via the groundwater. There is a strategy in place to quickly minimise its impact and the Esso team are monitoring the river daily.

In a second but unrelated incident, a bus caught fire in Marlborough High Street and leaked the contents of its fuel tank into the drains leading to the river. ARK and the Environment Agency (EA) were inundated with calls from vigilant locals who could see and smell the oil on the river. However, it turned out that the agency no longer has the resources to send teams to 'Category 3' incidents of this kind.

As a result, we have begun discussing with the EA how groups like ARK can respond to Category 3 incidents in future, perhaps by having spill kits at key locations with groups of trained people on the ground ready to respond to low-level incidents.

If you would be interested in attending first-response pollution training please drop Carolyn an email ([carolyn@riverkennet.org](mailto:carolyn@riverkennet.org)). And if you ever spot oil on the water, don't hesitate call **0800 807060**. You are the eyes and ears on the river so please be vigilant.

Charlotte Hitchmough



## From the ARKive: Watercress in Ramsbury

Gilbert Mills, once the village butcher, reminded me the other day of the watercress beds there used to be in Ramsbury.

Hard to imagine these days. The late Barbara Croucher's excellent *The Village in the Valley* tells the story well.

Like many villages, Ramsbury lost much of its traditional agricultural employment in the late 19th and early 20th century. Local landowners sought to establish other sources of work, one of which was the watercress business. By 1933 the Wootton family had extended the watercress beds that had been started in the mid-19th century to a total of 14 acres (6 ha) along the Kennet valley, including beds near Whittonditch, Howe Mill, and Harbrook, while the Burdett family had beds at Church Farm, Axford. Variations in the water supply were apparently overcome by pumping water up from underground artesian wells – again hard to believe today.

Local Ramsbury girls worked in sheds (at 'Beeches', the Wootton's place in Whittonditch, and in Crowood Lane) to bundle up the watercress with raffia for packing in wickerwork baskets and despatch to Hungerford station. Barbara relates that in one particular week between six and seven tons of cress were sent to London, Birmingham and South Wales. It was the abundant Kennet water and the local rail connection that helped the industry flourish until the 'Beeching' cuts of the 1960s made it no longer viable.

Maureen Palmer, another native of Ramsbury, remembers as a child seeing the beds with their concrete dividers, on walks past Harbrook. But not the actual harvesting since that was done very early in the morning in order to catch the first train to London.

Geoffrey Findlay

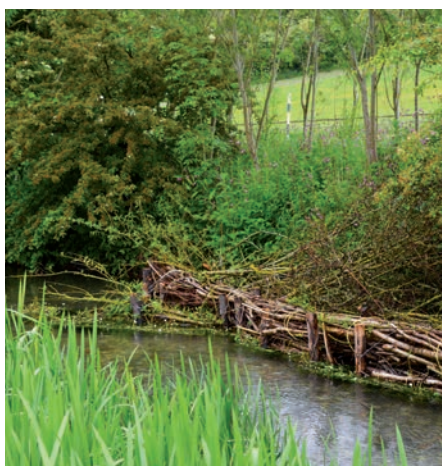
## River Og restoration project

Another conservation site for the people of Marlborough.

The River Og is a beautiful chalk stream tributary of the River Kennet that has a small population of wild brown trout. Working with Marlborough Town Council, ARK have increased public access to this area with the creation of a permissive path along the river bank, accessed from Tinpit.

In addition, we have recently completed a habitat restoration project aimed at increasing fish spawning and nursery habitats. This should result in more wild fish living in the river. Eroded parts of the bank have been repaired, and the creation of meanders and changes in flow will encourage a more diverse environment to suit a variety of species and life stages.

A combination of brushwood faggots and willow spiling (live willow rods woven between live willow stakes set into the affected bank) has been used to create strong bank protection and



dissipate energy, reducing erosion elsewhere. Replanted water crowfoot has taken root and is already flowering.

New fencing has been put in to keep livestock out of the river, thus reducing bank erosion and sediment in the water. This keeps the natural gravel bed clean, leaving it clear for fish spawning and healthy weed growth.

It is hoped that this project, funded by Defra's Catchment Restoration Fund, will be used by local schools as an educational resource.

Carolyn White

## News from Stonebridge Meadow

Throughout the wettest of winters work continued at Stonebridge.

Towards the end of May participants in our latest Bat Walk had an unexpected surprise – a rare sighting of an otter swimming toward them before heading into a sedge bed for cover. It's too early to know whether this was just a passing visitor or evidence that otters are intending to set up permanent home in the Wild River Reserve, but either way it is a wonderful ecological compliment to ARK's years of conservation work. As local author and ecologist Peter Marren said: "the presence of otters is a kind of health check: clean water, abundant fish, sheltered, undisturbed banks, a stretch of river in fine working order".

On dry land, conservation grazing with Belted Galloway cattle has recommenced; Harriet is back accompanied by her calf Nettle and will soon be joined by Campanula.

ARK volunteers will be scattering additional wildflower seed in the area we are reverting to a wildflower meadow. Last year's seeds have survived the winter flooding and elsewhere in the meadow marsh marigold, lady's smock and comfrey are providing nectar for butterflies, moths and bumblebees.

Over the autumn we hope to start work on an exciting wetland project that will include a reed bed and large wildlife pond.

Anna Forbes

## Natural Access

Natural Access is a social enterprise formed to help countryside and heritage groups collaborate more effectively using our on-line tools.

Over the coming months Natural Access will be helping ARK to enable it to work with you, whether you are a riparian landowner, a technical advisor or a member of the public who wants to know more about the River Kennet. To find out more go to [www.naturalaccess.org.uk](http://www.naturalaccess.org.uk)

Richard Clarke

# ARK People

## John Lawson



My role as ARK's technical advisor combines my civil engineering background with my lifelong passion for angling and rivers. I have helped ARK to achieve a large reduction in abstraction at Axford and complete closure of the Ogbourne abstractions. Working with Charlotte and the Environment Agency, I am helping the river to achieve 'good ecological status' as required by the EU.

## Yolanda Vazquez



I joined ARK's volunteer team in 2012 shortly after obtaining my Masters in Biodiversity and Conservation. Having always had a keen interest in wildlife and our interaction with the natural environment, I saw ARK doing extremely worthwhile work right on our doorstep and wanted to be part of it. I have enjoyed it ever since.

## Paul Rouse



As a fanatical trout and salmon fisherman I've paused to look over the various bridges over the Kennet many a time – then one day I realised I should make a contribution. So, for the past couple of years I've been part of the volunteer army of fly monitors taking samples on the Og and the Kennet at Manton.

# Dates for Your Diary

## Saturday 19th July

### Join our Wildlife Walk at Stonebridge Meadow.

Starting at 2:00pm, we will be looking for water voles, grass snakes and a variety of birds, insects and plants. Free, but booking is required.

This walk is just one of a series of events at Stonebridge throughout the summer, including craft for children, movie making days and a guided walk with Peter Marren. Details are on ARK's website. Call 01672 511028 or email [anna@riverkennet.org](mailto:anna@riverkennet.org).

## Saturday 20th – Sunday 21st September

### ARK at the Royal Berkshire Show

If you are visiting the Royal Berkshire Show at Newbury this year, don't forget to come and say hello to us on ARK's own stand at this wonderful day out.

## Getting involved

Riverfly monitoring - if you are interested in giving about two hours per month we are looking for volunteers in **Stitchcombe, Hungerford or Shalbourne** – please get in touch with Harry Forbes on 01672 511028 or [harryforbes@talktalk.net](mailto:harryforbes@talktalk.net). (Training and kit is provided).

# Websites worth visiting

## The Non-native Species Secretariat (NNSS)



represents the relevant governments and agencies of England, Scotland and Wales and its website is designed to help anyone interested in finding out

more about invasive non-native species and what to do about them. Their separate e-learning site hosts five new online training modules in invasive species and their identification.

To find out more please visit:

[www.nonnativespecies.org](http://www.nonnativespecies.org)

[www.nonnativespecies.org/elearning](http://www.nonnativespecies.org/elearning)



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Members of ARK receive a copy of this newsletter either by mail or email.

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 contact Carolyn White at [carolyn@riverkennet.org](mailto:carolyn@riverkennet.org)

Have you visited our exciting new website yet? It's been designed for us by Mole Productions of Marlborough and you can find us here: [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)

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