Action for the River Kennet

SPRING 2018 | 38

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River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

A River Keepers' Day

Meeting the front-line guardians – the dedicated professionals who care for the Kennet's major fisheries come rain or shine.

As a Trustee of ARK, I felt it was extremely important to get to know the estate managers and river keepers who are the custodians of the beautiful river which we are all working to preserve.

Throughout the autumn, I worked my way downstream from Marlborough, eventually reaching the Wasing Estate, near Reading.

Without exception, I was given an extremely warm welcome and it was a privilege to be shown around some marvellous fisheries by a variety of dedicated, enthusiastic and generally optimistic people.

When asked their main concerns, there was much common ground, particularly the effects of over-abstraction of water, agricultural run-off, siltation and the impacts of the Kennet and Avon Canal.

River keeping can be a solitary occupation and like-minded people often work in isolation, albeit not that far from others doing the same job and facing similar challenges. At present we are fortunate that the Kennet is being cared for by a generation of extremely keen river keepers, many of whom are young, dynamic and ready to embrace change. In order to facilitate a social gathering, ARK organised a River Keepers' Day, kindly hosted by Avington Estate at their lovely fishing hut by the river.

Over sandwiches and a beer, there was wide-ranging discussion of the issues affecting the Kennet and its tributaries. After lunch, we collected a sample of invertebrates from the river and spent a couple of hours identifying them and marvelling at their adaptations. Several keepers have signed up for a formal Riverfly Training Course which will be provided by ARK in the Spring.

Moving forward, I hope that the vital link between ARK, the major fisheries and their keepers will be maintained. I am delighted that Rob Starr, river keeper for Hungerford Town and Manor, has become a committee member – he will ensure that all of our deliberations are relayed to the people at the bankside who live and breathe the Kennet.

Sean Dempster

News from the Chairman

Wow, haven't we had a lot of rain recently – but unfortunately still not enough!

On a recent train journey up to London I was struck by how soggy the Kennet Valley was looking. I felt this was a reassuring sign and boded well for the River Kennet in the coming year, but how wrong am I. The land along the river corridor may look saturated from a few days of rain but that does not mean that the aquifer has recharged. Fields under water don't guarantee a vibrant and full River Kennet this summer.

Chalk aquifers are like vast subterranean sponges soaking up the rain and releasing it into the chalk streams and rivers. The one that feeds the River Kennet will take many months of average seasonal rainfall to be replenished. Given that last winter was so dry and despite my rain-dancing during the spring we did not get a particularly wet summer. As a result, the latest hydrological summary shows that the aquifer is still below normal for the time of year, and this is reflected in below average winter river flows.

It might seem that we have had a very wet start to 2018, but in reality January's rainfall was not enough to compensate for months of dry weather.

Now that Thames Water's new pipeline is in place, the company has been abstracting less water from the Axford and Ogbourne boreholes, great news for the Kennet. They have also released their Water Resource Management Plan for consultation, which explains how they plan to meet customers' demand for water between 2020 and 2100.

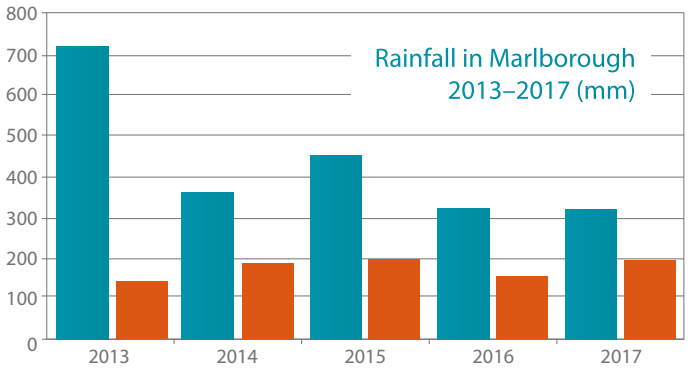
ARK generally welcomes the plan, which puts great emphasis on water efficiency and leakage reduction to meet demand in the short term, and includes options for new water resources, including a new reservoir from 2040 onwards. In the short term ARK would like to see greater use of the existing Farmoor resource to further reduce abstraction from the Kennet and its tributaries.

From the other end of the telescope it is interesting to note developments coming out from government. Last month it published Our Green Future: Our 25-year Plan to Improve the Environment. Centre stage of their policy is to 'become the first generation to leave that environment in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future'.

It's an ambitious vision for the UK environment and we note its encouraging commitment to clean and plentiful water, the recognition of the impact of water abstraction and the opportunities for the greater use of natural flood management.

Achieving the ambition will require community catchment partners and Rivers Trusts like ARK to continue to work closely with businesses and water companies to turn the plan into practical action on the ground. All this is reliant on government support and new sustainable funding mechanisms to deliver cost effective action.

Richard Clarke



Source: Eric Gilbert, Windrush Weather

Despite occasional downpours, summer rainfall has remained close to the long-term average (183mm). By contrast, the winter rain that replenishes the Kennet aquifer has repeatedly fallen below its 34-year average of 411mm.

Giving roach a helping hand

For many years, anglers have been encouraged to see roach fry congregating in the shallow margins of the Lower Kennet.

Despite this, we have been frustrated by the lack of roach reaching maturity. There's a multitude of reasons for this, far too many to go into with this brief article, but predation, lack of suitable habitat for juveniles and summertime flooding are some of the more obvious ones.

Five years ago I became aware of a project called the Avon Roach Project. Although in its infancy, it was having huge success in giving the Avon's roach stocks a much-needed kickstart.

Taking their successes as inspiration, I concluded... if it works on the Avon, why not the Kennet? After all, the Lower Kennet was once famed for its large roach.

Once I'd paid a visit to Trevor and Budgie at the ARP headquarters, which is actually Trevor's back garden, I was beside myself with enthusiasm and was keen to get started with my own project.

The general principle behind the project is to remove roach spawn from the river and then place it in semi-controlled conditions within our polytunnel. Once the fry are strong enough, they are then moved into growing-on ponds for a further two years. They are then returned to the river as three-summer-old fish.

While in our care, despite the temptation to meddle, we go to great lengths not to interfere in the way a commercial fish farmer would. Instead we prefer to allow the fish to grow on as naturally as we can, which then will leave us with the strongest possible ones for release.

Now, five years on, a lot of lessons learnt, knowledge gained, help received (particularly from our Environment Agency fisheries team) and it's grown well beyond our expectations, with a total of around 20,000 roach across three different year classes.

With the theory now proven, I plan to expand the project to include more of the troubled species typically found in the lower river.

Del Shackleford
Reading & District Angling Association Fisheries Officer

Campaigning

Thank you to everyone who rallied to our call to respond to the Environment Agency consultation on increased charges for environmental permitting.

The Environment Agency (EA) is moving towards 'full cost recovery towards its work' and the proposed increased charges for flood-risk activity permits could make river restoration and enhancement schemes become cost prohibitive. This would undermine our ability to achieve the EA's water quality, flooding and habitat improvement targets that we set out to achieve in partnership.

The consultation is now closed and we wait to see how the EA will respond to feedback.

Charlotte Hitchmough

Eels on the Kennet

The traditional East London dish of jellied eels is often people's first thought of these amazing animals.

Over recent years ARK has been raising the profile of the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) through our annual Eels in School project. But it is not only the classes of children, who get to look after young eels for two months, who are amazed to see first-hand the early stages of the eel's existence and learn more about its complete life cycle. Teachers, parents and the wider community are being captivated too by the epic migration story of this unusual fish.

There are still many unknowns, but we do know that mature eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea, a region of the North Atlantic Ocean bounded by four currents forming an ocean gyre. Unlike all other regions called seas, it has no land boundaries.

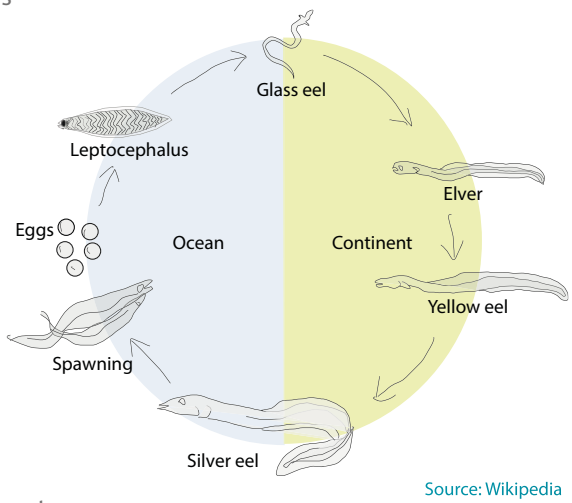
The female fish breeds only once in her life and lays between one and three million eggs and then dies. The eggs hatch out into strange, tiny flat baby eels called leptocephali that drift on the current and take up to three years to travel over 6,500 kilometres across the ocean gradually (if not eaten) developing into the next stage in the eel's life cycle, the glass eel.

The transparent glass eels that survive this impressive migration are still only centimetres long when they enter estuaries to migrate upstream into our rivers. It is here in freshwater that the eel will spend the majority of its life transforming from glass eel to elver, to yellow eel and finally silver eel. It is only during the three to four-month journey returning to the Sargasso Sea that the eel will fully mature, with females reaching about one metre in length.

Fish that start life in salt water, migrate to freshwater and return to salt water are called catadromous; although not unique it is a very unusual cycle. Eels spend about twenty years living in our rivers and can move over damp land to reach other rivers and streams, before eventually returning to the Sargasso Sea. Females remain in our rivers longer than the smaller males.

Historically the Kennet boasted rich populations of eels. The 18th-century poet Alexander Pope wrote of 'The Kennet swift, for silver eels renown'd' and the Bear Hotel in Hungerford was visited by two of the 17th century's most notable diarists, John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, the latter recording that he had partaken of 'very good troutes, eels and crayfish' there in 1668.

The Life Cycle of An Eel



Source: Wikipedia

Nowadays eels face many pressures. They are a Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Fish Species and are classified as critically endangered. Barriers such as weirs prevent upstream migration and hydro-electric turbines chop the eels up.

Eels rarely turn up in Environment Agency (EA) surveys on the Kennet, not only because of limitations in the efficiency of electrofishing surveying techniques but also the precarious state of eel populations.

How far upstream eels migrate depends on how many other eels are following them and therefore competing for food and habitat. An eel's diet comprises invertebrates and fish, so a healthy river that supports these species is vital. If there is little competition there is no need to move further upstream to what could be a less bountiful territory.

EA records from 2003 to 2005 show eels, not great in number but large in size, from County Weir in Reading upstream to Woolhampton. In the following years they stopped catching at Woolhampton and the highest upstream record was Burghfield, 10km to the east. In the most recent survey that is available the EA only caught eels in the stretch of the river from Foudry

Brook, a further 5km downstream, to County Weir. So it looks like the eel population is slowly retreating out of the Kennet.

Darryl Clifton-Dey, Senior Technical Specialist, for the EA explains 'This sounds quite depressing, we are losing eels from the Kennet; but there are some grounds for hope. We are building more eel ladders in the lower River Thames, which allows the eels that do come up from the estuary to more easily get further upstream. At the same time, we are working with businesses to reduce the numbers of eels that are killed in the river by water intakes and the like. This means that the eel population in the Thames should be growing (slowly) and should be moving upstream (slowly). Eventually it will start to come back into the Kennet naturally. That is my hope and that is what I am working towards'.

Darryl would love to hear if people know of eels in the Kennet, or see them, or catch them. If you do, please email darryl.clifton-dey@environment-agency.gov.uk

Anna Forbes

Belted Galloways join the Stonebridge Meadow team

Thanks to the generosity of Sir Martyn Arbib ARK's Wild River Reserve now has new four-legged helpers.

Sir Martyn Arbib, who has one of the best herds of Belted Galloways in the UK living on the water meadows at Ramsbury, last year very kindly donated two young pedigree heifers to ARK to graze Stonebridge Meadow in the summer. Belties are very attractive with a snow-white belt with jet black front and back. They enjoy rough grazing and mature slowly which gives them a depth of flavour that butchers and customers love.

ARK are working with our treasurer Martin Gibson at Grove Farm, Stitchcombe. He looks after the cows and calves over winter and also uses artificial insemination to get them in calf to Belted Galloway bulls without having to own a bull. This will enable ARK to expand our little herd that graze in the water meadow at Stonebridge as well as producing high-quality pedigree calves which can be sold to breeders.

A team of ARK volunteer livestock-lookers work on a rota system to check on the cows and sheep everyday, both at Stonebridge Wild River Reserve and at Cooper's Meadow.

Martin Gibson and Anna Forbes

A Fisherman's View

Savernake Fly Fishers have fished the reach of the Kennet between Elcot, just downstream of Marlborough, and Stitchcombe since the 1960s.

Savernake Fly Fishers is a non-commercial fishery with 34 members. In the 1980s our then-Chairman, Roger de Vere, became very concerned about the effects on the river of the effluent from the Marlborough Sewage Works. After mobilising expert opinion on the subject, he eventually managed to pressure Thames Water to install a phosphate stripper at the works. His experiences – battles one should perhaps say – led him, with Jack Ainslie, Alastair Service and John Hounslow to set up ARK in 1990, so our attachment to ARK and its philosophy goes deep.

Fly fishing is based on our imitating, with our artificial flies, the aquatic insects on which trout feed. These insects depend on weed growth and good water quality. The catastrophic Chlorpyrifos pollution that entered the river at the Sewage Treatment Works in 2013 totally wiped out all the aquatic insects for 15 kilometres downstream. With tremendous help from ARK volunteers, insect reintroductions from unaffected water upstream were made. It is not lost on us that it was the ARK Riverfly Monitors (among them fishermen) who raised the alarm in the first place and who continue to document the slow recovery. But with the run-off of agricultural sediments, fertilisers and other pesticides, much work remains to be done.

Keeping a watchful eye on the river is John Hounslow, our water keeper since 1978. He lives by the river at Werg and maintains the river bed, banks and hatches. From his trout farm he stocks the river for the fishing with triploid trout which are sterile, so do not breed – any wild fish that we catch are returned to the river. John was the inspiration behind the large habitat-restoration project, funded by Thames Water and the Environment Agency, that was undertaken under ARK's project management recently. This has transformed the canal-like stretch above the Mill at Durnsford and well illustrates what can be done when everyone who holds the river dear works together.

We sometimes have vacancies and anyone interested can contact me on 01453 882277 or John Hounslow on 01672 512607.

Peter Kelly

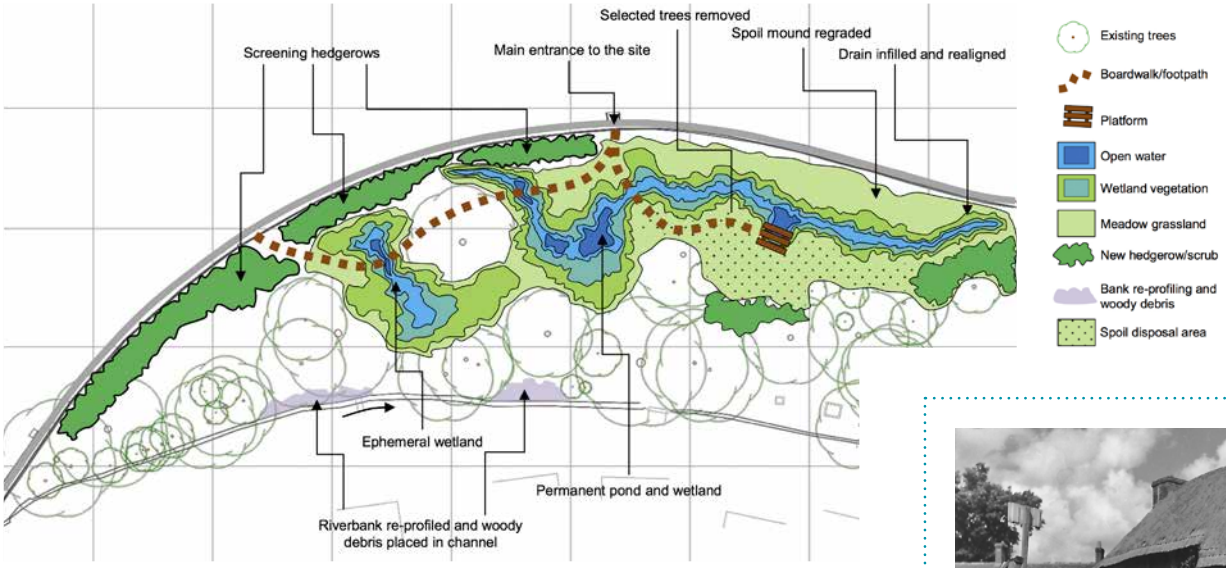
Welcome on board!

Martin Kent is the new Project Officer for the lower River Kennet. With a background in the Armed Forces and project management, Martin joined ARK in 2018 following roles supporting the Fisheries Officer at Reading & District Angling Association and as a Site Foreman for a fisheries management consultancy.

A graduate in Fisheries Management and Aquaculture, Martin's primary responsibilities include working with partners and contractors in the eradication of invasive Floating Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*), the delivery of practical restoration projects and raising the profile of ARK within the lower catchment through the provision of educational activities and the engagement of stakeholders, partner organisations and the wider community.

Froxfield Village River and Wetland

ARK is delighted to be working with the village of Froxfield on a new community river and wetland project.



Froxfield is a small village between Marlborough and Hungerford. The River Dun runs through its centre and the parish council own a parcel of land between the river and the road. ARK has held two consultation events in the village to understand what the community would like the space to provide and Rob McInnes has created a concept design.

The fundamental principle is to enhance the nature-conservation values of the area and, by doing so, to deliver a variety of benefits for people. The proposals are being considered by the community and we are looking forward to starting work over the summer.

A new wetland would be fed in part from the road drainage and also from groundwater. The feature would help clean road run-off and be densely planted with wetland plants. It will replace the existing deep drain and by providing greater variation in slopes and edges it will create a range of microhabitats for wetland plants and animals. As well as providing a habitat for breeding birds, new hedgerows and scrub will reduce traffic noise and visual intrusion. The area adjacent to the wetlands will be planted with an interesting mix of lowland meadow plants.

Community volunteers will carry out small-scale local modifications to the river channel and banks, introducing woody debris to create a diversity of habitats and flow and increasing the variety and abundance of marginal plants. We are also proposing that a network of paths or boardwalks would connect to the existing footpath along the Bath Road at two points, thus allowing the site to be accessed throughout the year. In addition, a viewing platform would allow visitors to look into the pond area.

We have secured initial funding from the Patsy Wood Trust and Co-op and look forward to watching an exciting new project develop.

Charlotte Hitchmough

From the ARKive

Mill Lane, Ramsbury, as it was in 1950 – taken on the east side where the river runs under Moon's Mill.

The 1911 census records that the thatched cottage in the background was home to farm workers Walter and Elizabeth Liddiard. The house was known to flood and the family frequently moved to the upstairs floor. It's believed the cottage was derelict around the late 1950s and later demolished. Millbrook House now stands where the cottage was.

ARK People

Carol Adams

My journey with ARK began in March 2017 by making hazel faggots in the woods. Since then I have enjoyed donning waders and working with enthusiastic volunteers on exciting ARK projects and becoming a river fly monitor for Poulton Bridge. Working with the ARK team in our wonderful countryside is a real privilege.

Alastair Ewing

Water is the start of life... but it is also for many the quality of life. Living and working in this wonderful Kennet valley makes one realise how fragile sometimes ecosystems are. But nature has a wonderful way of evolving, so when all those who read this are no more, the River Kennet will still be as beautiful and bountiful as ever.

Ciaran Murphy

I approached ARK as part of my Duke of Edinburgh award to do volunteering. I really enjoyed all of the things I did from hedge cutting to faggot making but my favourite had to be my day spent in waders in the Kennet. The other volunteers are all friendly and kind and Anna was so encouraging and always had nice cakes and biscuits to keep us going.

Dates for Your Diary

Saturday 24th March
Have fun making hazel faggots for use in river restoration projects in 2018. Meet 1pm by the farm buildings, Grove Farm, Thickett's Lane, Mildenhall. Advanced booking essential. To reserve your place, please contact anna@riverkennet.org

Wednesday 13th & Thursday 14th June
ARK will be supporting the Englefield Countryside day for Schools, which is attended by over 50 local primary schools.

Thursday 21st June
ARK members are invited to an exclusive private fundraising evening at Ramsbury Brewery. Tour the brewery and distillery, meet the master brewer and sample award-winning ales and spirits along with fine local-smoked produce.

6:00pm for drinks (cash bar); 6:30pm tour starts; 9:00pm end. Tickets £25 each – all proceeds will fund future ARK projects that we'd love to be able to deliver later in 2018.

Places are strictly limited places, so advanced booking is essential. For ticket sales see enclosed letter or contact Anna – anna@riverkennet.org

Sunday 8th July
ARK will be at Newbury Waterways Festival, a great family day out.

River Walk
We will again be holding our members River Walk during the late summer. More details to follow, so keep an eye on our Facebook page and website.

For more details on all these events see our website or contact linda@riverkennet.org

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Registered charity number: 1120725

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 or email 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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