

Action for the River Kennet

River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

An Invisible Killer Strikes

As the Kennet flows through midsummer meadows it's hard to believe what's happened beneath the surface.

On 1 July our riverfly monitors discovered a major pollution incident that has decimated the insect and freshwater shrimp population of the Kennet between Marlborough and Hungerford. The source and long-term impacts of the disaster are still being investigated, it involved a discharge of a powerful pesticide through the Marlborough sewage

treatment works. See page 4 for more on this shocking story.

On a more positive note, ARK's small army of volunteers has been out and about cutting back the undergrowth, repairing the river banks and improving the waterside habitat all the way from Marlborough downstream to Kintbury. They have also been busily recording the animal and plant populations of the river and its surrounding meadowland, as well as continuing to spread the word about the magic of the Kennet and the importance of water conservation in local schools and around the wider community.



ARK Spring River Walk

On Sunday 28 April over 50 walkers turned up to enjoy our annual spring event, which this year took place along the banks of the Kennet from Ramsbury to Littlecote.

These river walks are always popular as they include stretches of the river through private grounds and are only accessible by kind permission of the owners.

In addition to the walk itself, there was a fundraising cake sale. The delicious cakes were made by Harry Forbes, and proved very popular as walkers reached the end of their walk.



Above: ARK's very own caddis-themed cup cakes, courtesy of Harry Forbes our River Fly Co-ordinator

Left: ARK volunteers visit Kintbury every month to work on a carrier stream, one of the side channels that run alongside the main river.

News from the Director

As belated spring turns to high summer, ARK has been busy on a host of fronts – from campaigning for chalk streams to organising our own practical conservation work.



Celebrating the launch of the Chalk Streams Charter on the river Beale in Hertfordshire.

Chalk Stream Charter

In May, I joined organisations from across England at the River Beane in Hertfordshire for the launch of the Chalk Stream Charter. The River Beane, like the Kennet, has suffered from over-abstraction for years, and even after the wet winter is still barely a trickle by the abstraction point in its upper reaches.

The Charter calls for a range of measures to protect chalk streams, recognising their status as a globally significant resource and calling on government to play its part in looking

after them. By joining together with other Trusts we can speak with a louder voice. The next stage is to take the Charter to parliament to get the backing of MPs.

State of nature report

The launch of the Chalk Stream Charter coincided with the publication of **State of Nature** – a report by 25 of the UK's leading wildlife organisations that contained the stark warning that far more species are declining than increasing, including many of our most treasured animals and plants. It's a reminder of the importance of ARK's projects, which are helping to reverse the decline of threatened species living in and alongside our beautiful River Kennet including water vole, wild trout and traditional meadow flowers.

Monitoring pollution

On the river we continue to be as active as ever, not least keeping an eye on the sewage overflows at Marlborough Sewage Treatment Works. As well as the latest incident involving the release of pesticide into the river, we are very concerned that the storm overflow is operating more frequently than it should, releasing untreated sewage into the



Kennet (see page 4). This is on top of the problems Thames Water have been experiencing over the winter at their sewage pumping stations (see page 7).

Meanwhile, Thames Water has published the first draft of their 25 year management plan for comments. John Lawson is reviewing their proposals in detail to ensure that these plans do not damage the Kennet or its tributaries.

Our wonderful supporters

May also saw the 100th volunteer joining ARK. Our riverfly monitoring scheme now has over 40 sites, including some on the Kennet tributaries, and the volunteers continue to be busy on practical tasks, with a full timetable of work the whole way through the summer.

Over the Summer, ARK will be out and about at summer fayres, fetes and open gardens, talking about the river, recruiting new members and distributing free water saving devices as part of our 'Care for the Kennet' campaign. I hope I might see some of you there.

Charlotte Hitchmough



News from Stonebridge

May saw the start of work to implement the management plans for the Stonebridge Wild River Reserve

Land management

The old barred wire fence has been replaced and the meadow is now split into four distinct areas. Two are for conservation grazing, while another at the far end is to be left as scrub for the benefit of a variety of wildlife, particularly warblers. The fourth will eventually incorporate a wildlife pond and a separate reed bed to prevent the road-surface run-off polluting the river.

Four-legged friends

Two Belted Galloway cows, Harriet and her calf Campanula, arrived to start grazing on the dominant plants and have already proved popular with visitors to the site. Over time more flowers and grasses should start to be found, improving the biodiversity.

Moth nights

ARK moth-trapping nights, which are open to the public and happen every month (weather permitting) until November, have already recorded six new species this year, including the aptly named Spectacle moth.

Counting the wildlife

James Shipman from Berks and South Bucks Bat Group has visited to check our bat boxes and advise on improvements we can carry out to help the bats already using Stonebridge. He will be back on Saturday 20 September to lead a very interesting bat talk and walk (see back page for further details).

Fortnightly reptile and amphibian surveying has not only shown we still have grass snakes and toads, but the mats are being used by water shrews. The largest British shrew, they are nocturnal and feed on cased caddisfly and mayfly larvae. Regular sightings of water vole very close to the boardwalk seating area have also been exciting.

Birds seen recently include nuthatch, treecreeper, bullfinch, kestrel, common whitethroat and barn owl. The two Black Poplar saplings planted by the river last autumn are flourishing, the river is flowing well and ARK volunteers are continuing with restoration work in and by the river. A final piece of good news is that riverfly monitoring at the reserve has this year yielded the highest score of any ARK site since recording began.

Anna Forbes

Water Saving

Our **Care for the Kennet** campaign, which we are running in partnership with Thames Water, has been taking the water saving message to local villages. Assessors from Climate Energy offered free water-saving retro fits in Aldbourne, Chilton Foliat, Ramsbury, Lockeridge and the Kennetts. Early figures suggest that they have completed over 170 retrofits over just a few short weeks.

If you missed us and would like to book a water saving makeover it is not too late! Simply call 0800 3586665 quoting 'kennet'.

Pollution Disaster Strikes the Kennet

Millions of river creatures are dead – and ARK is working to find out why

On Monday 1 July ARK's volunteer riverfly monitors were taking routine samples to the immediate south of the Elcot Lane sewage treatment works in Marlborough. To their horror they discovered that all the invertebrates in their collecting nets were dead.

After taking a second sample to verify the results an urgent call was put through to the Environment Agency who sent their own team out, and on the following day confirmed that a significant pollution incident had occurred. In subsequent days ARK's worst fears were realised. Although fish and birds were largely unharmed, the shrimp and insect population on which they depend for their food has been totally devastated Between Marlborough and Hungerford. Thankfully, the river upstream of Elcot was unaffected.

By the end of the week the pollutant has been identified as chlorpyrifos, a pesticide used on farms at this time of year but also present in some ant killers and sometimes used to manage grassland for golf courses or equestrian use. It has been confirmed that the chemical definitely entered the river via the sewage treatment works. Thames Water and the

"This is a disaster for the Kennet and its wildlife. It is vital that we find out how it happened, and how it can be prevented from ever happening again. It has shown the value of our riverfly monitoring team, who first detected it and acted so promptly to report it" – Geoffrey Findlay, ARK Chairman



Grey cloudy water – the cloudy outflow

Environment Agency are vigorously investigating its original source.

In coming weeks ARK will be pressing hard for reassurance from the Environment Agency (EA) that the strongest action will be taken against any breach of regulations. We will also working with the EA, Natural England, the Riverfly Partnership and other experts to assess the long-term damage to the river's ecology and the steps that we and others should be taking to restore it to its former health.

This is only the most recent of a disturbing series of incidents involving the sewage treatment works. In April John Hounslow, the river keeper at Mildenhall, noticed that the river had turned cloudy. Turning detective he scrambled through the undergrowth by the Marlborough sewage treatment works. To his alarm he found that the storm-water outflow was pouring out cloudy grey water despite it having been a relatively dry few weeks.

Thames Water employees explained that the works could not cope with



Crystal clear – the river as it should look

the amount of ground water feeding into the sewers because of last winter's heavy rainfall. As a result, they had been diverting sewage into their storm water system for months, meaning that untreated sewage has overflowed into the river on a regular basis. More recently the overloading of their storm tanks and breakdowns elsewhere in the local network have required them to use tankers to transport effluent into and out of sewage treatment works.

Thames Water can't confirm the precise amount of pollution discharged from the works in recent months but accept that it is almost certainly above the officially permitted level. The company has recently constructed an additional storm tank to help deal with the peak flows, although these have not yet been commissioned. ARK will not let up on its demands for the capacity of the sewage works to be increased to the level needed to meet the demands of a constantly growing population.

Martin Gibson



Ramsbury Triangle

If you go down to the Ramsbury Triangle you're sure of a big surprise. There are no teddy bears but a rather tired bit of riverbank that has been brought back to life.

In 2010 ARK and the parish council of Ramsbury and Axford bought a triangle of land, bounded on two sides by the River Kennet and crossed by two bridges. It lies beside a popular village path but walkers looking downstream saw only a rather overgrown area that had suffered with the winter floods.

Anna Forbes, the ARK volunteer co-ordinator, has masterminded a team of volunteers to remove the wayward trees from the river. The eroded banks have been repaired with carefully angled bundles of faggots and there is now a brisk bubbling flow either side of the triangle.

Some of the trees have been cut back to let in more light but still leaving some piles of woody debris as places

for animals to live. Branches trimmed to prevent then obstructing the river flow are still long enough to give kingfishers a perch. The aim is to work with nature rather than have a municipal park.

This is an area for everyone to enjoy, so when you are on your walk down Mill Lane come and see what the team have been up to. And if you would like help here or on one of ARK's many other projects, why not get in touch with Anna Forbes? She has an amazing supply of saws, hammers, waders and much more, so just bring yourself, however young, old or fit you are!

Rodney Owen-Jones



Our Wonderful Helpers

ARK has an ever-growing band of active volunteers who help us in all sorts of ways – from monitoring riverfly and surveying pollution incidents to holding tins at our street collections or joining our weekly river restoration and maintenance work.

In the past twelve months more than a hundred enthusiastic volunteers have freely given their time to ARK. The regular Wednesday afternoon team ranges from teenage students through to retirees, with every other age in between.

Some practical tasks are held on Friday and Saturday afternoons too. **If you would like to volunteer please contact Anna on 01672 511028 or email annaforbes73@tiscali.co.uk**

Anna Forbes



A newly hatched mayfly

ARK in the Classroom

We have been working closely with primary schools this term.

Charlotte Hitchmough and Helen Kelly had a fantastic trip to the riverbank at Preshute with Year 1. The weather was kind to us and the children were so enthusiastic to discover all the different types of tiny life forms in the river.

Nearly 200 infants at Hungerford Primary School took part in a water-saving assembly. To build on the topic of water and river life, Helen returned to run two classroom sessions for Year 2 students. Assisted by Rodney Owen-Jones, she let the children use scopes and pooters to really get 'up close and personal' with the larvae and the nymphs. The enthusiastic feedback from the children and the classroom assistants was extremely rewarding.

Mayfly in the classroom has been a huge success. We use this project to explain to school children the importance and value of water of life.

Helen Kelly

Himalayan Balsam

Not everything that lives and grows around the River Kennet and its tributaries is as 'natural' as one might imagine.

Over the next few months we will be turning our attention to an unwelcomed intruder – the pink-flowered Himalayan Balsam, which once it gets a hold can take over whole riverbanks – in Wales it even out-competes bracken!

The species was originally imported by the Victorians as an affordable alternative to orchids. Growing up to two metres tall with pink and purple flowers, it thrives in damp conditions. It also spreads very rapidly – not only can each plant can produce 2,500 seeds but its explosive pods can throw them more than 6 metres from the parent.

In June, our volunteer team have tackled infested stretches of riverbanks in Hungerford. If you see Himalayan Balsam by the river you



can report it to ARK or use the plant tracker app at:

<http://planttracker.naturelocator.org>

If you'd like to join our volunteer team, just contact Anna Forbes on 01672 511028 or email annaforbes73@tiscali.co.uk

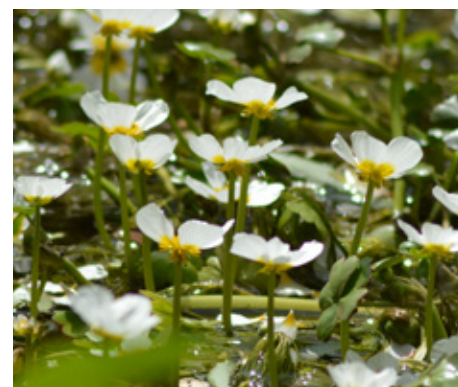
Charlotte Hitchmough

Helping the Water Crowfoot

Stream water crowfoot, or *Ranunculus* is still just in flower on the chalk stream sections of the Kennet and its bournes.

You can see its lovely white flowers floating above the river surface with streams of green leaves trailing under the water. Stream water crowfoot thrives in clean fast-flowing conditions, but it is difficult establish new plants. One reason is that swans love to eat it, and in the past ARK's efforts to plant it have been quickly undone by a few greedy swans.

Don Harris has designed a cunning new bit of kit to help protect the growing plants from swans. We will be trialing it at several sites this year, and we'll let you know how we get on.



Charlotte Hitchmough

Sewer Flooding

Electronic monitoring systems are among the solutions being considered to help prevent sewer flooding in the Kennet Valley.

Watching the Kennet flow serenely between its midsummer banks it's hard to remember last winter's unprecedented rainfall. One particularly serious side effect of the rapidly rising water table was that groundwater began to seep into low-lying drains, leading to the horrible problem of sewer flooding.

To cope with the problem tanker lorries were deployed, round the clock in some places, to relieve flows in the overloaded sewers and pumping stations. Once groundwater fills the sewerage network, noisy tankers are often the only way to prevent sewage flooding into people's homes and businesses.

After a similar episode in 2000/1 Thames Water relined 95km of sewers to guard against future groundwater infiltration. This time, groundwater infiltrated from other parts of the network, including the 'lateral' pipes,



which connect customers' properties to the main Thames Water sewers.

With the help of the Aldbourne-based Drainage Improvement Group (DIG) Thames Water is developing new Infiltration Reduction Plans that will help to make the sewerage network more resilient in years to come. Amongst the options being considered are:

- telemetry-linked observation boreholes to monitor groundwater levels
- overflow storage tanks to hold excess wastewater from overloaded sewers
- further relining, or resealing, of sewers/drains to prevent groundwater infiltration.

Simon Evans – Thames Water



Riverfly Visit

Every month ARK's riverfly monitoring data is forwarded to the Environment Agency

Because our scheme has grown to forty sites on the Kennet, Og and Dun, the new Environment Agency regional co-ordinator, Inger Jennings, visited the Upper Kennet on 13 May. During her guided tour of the riverfly sites between Manton and Ramsbury she met several monitors at their sites including ARK Director Charlotte Hitchmough and Ramsbury River Keeper Eddie Starr.

Harry Forbes

From the ARKive

Twenty years ago this pair of heavy horses were brought all the way from Dorset to harrow the floor of the River Kennet between Marlborough and Ramsbury.

This traditional method of breaking up encrusted silt in advance of the winter trout-spawning season had not been used in living memory and John Hounslow, the local river-keeper, was interested to see whether it was worth reviving. In the event, the reduced water flow of the modern Kennet was too weak to wash the debris downstream in the way intended and so the experiment has not been repeated. The photograph was taken by the late Julian Rogerson of Ramsbury – keen fisherman, lover of the Kennet and early supporter of ARK.



ARK People

Kevin Light



I run a landscape and environmental planning consultancy and use my skills to help the diverse team that make ARK so potent. My favourite time on the Kennet is early morning, when the wildlife reclaim the man-managed landscape for themselves.

Derek Pinchen



Watching kingfishers from his kitchen window as a child developed into a lifelong interest in wildlife and the Kennet. Derek is a regular Wednesday afternoon ARK volunteer, assists with reptile and amphibian surveying and submits muddy runoff and wildlife records.

Michelle Haveron



Michelle lives in Marlborough and describes the Kennet as 'nature on your doorstep'. She volunteers on Wednesday afternoons because she feels it's important to give nature a helping hand. She's helped restore riverbanks, plant water crowfoot and remove Himalayan balsam, as well as allowing her car to be filled with tools and waders!

Dates for Your Diary

Saturday 17 August

ARK is holding a wildlife walk around Stonebridge Wild River Reserve from 2–4 pm. We will be looking for water voles, kingfishers and grass snakes, as well as identifying invertebrates and plants in the meadow and river.

The walk is free, but booking is essential (phone 01672 511028 or email annaforbes73@tiscali.co.uk). Accompanied children are very welcome, but not dogs as they may frighten some of the more secretive wildlife we hope to see.

Saturday 20 September

Stonebridge Meadow bat walk. Meet at the start of the boardwalk, Stonebridge Lane at 6.30 pm.

Thursday 7 November

ARK's 2013 AGM, will be held this year in Hungerford Town Hall.

Websites worth visiting



The Wye & Usk Foundation is a charity dedicated to restoring the habitat, water quality and fisheries of the rivers Wye and Usk. Through partnership projects it aims to remedy problems such as:

- habitat degradation
- poor water quality
- barriers to fish migration
- over-exploitation of fisheries.

To find out more please visit:

<http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org>



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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 or contact Carolyn White at carolyn@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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