

Action for the River Kennet River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

Time to bring back the beavers?

ARK's 2019 AGM attracted a packed audience to learn about beaver reintroduction in the UK.



Photo credit: Nick Upton

With re-wilding gaining so much traction and increasing evidence of beaver benefits, it was a good opportunity to hear first-hand from people living alongside beavers and to think about the implications of reintroducing this large (think spaniel-sized) vegetarian mammal to the Kennet.

Beavers were hunted to extinction around 400 years ago but until then played a critical part in shaping our rivers by tree felling and dam building. It's probably thanks to beavers that species we value like ranunculus, starwort, brown trout, eels and water vole found habitat that suited their needs. As Peter Marren observes 'Beavers modify

their landscape to suit their own needs. In the process they create wildlife habitat, much as we might try to do on protected sites'.

All our speakers confirmed that where beavers have been reintroduced in trial enclosures the result has been improved water quality, reduced downstream flood risk, increased fish population and an explosion of biodiversity. And that's apart from the joy of seeing a large native mammal in the wild, which has created a new form of tourism.

Currently there are no beavers in Wiltshire or Berkshire (either enclosed or wild), but

they are already in Somerset, Gloucestershire, Dorset and Devon so it is likely only a matter of time before they reach the Kennet and the Pang. What is certain is that we need effective funded management to allow the beaver and people to co-exist again, reaping the benefits of their natural engineering skills without threatening the homes and infrastructure that have been built since beavers were last here.

Many thanks to our visiting speakers, James Wallace (Beaver Trust), Ben Goldsmith (Conservative Environment Network), Chris Jones (Woodland Valley Farm Truro), Jonah Tosney (Norfolk Rivers Trust) and to all those who contributed to the debate both during the meeting and afterwards.

Charlotte Hitchmough



ARK's Summer BBQ

Don't miss this fabulous fundraising event courtesy of Ramsbury Estates. It's on Saturday 4 July and you can find all details on the back cover.

News from the Chairman

A change of government; leaving Europe; new legislation; new ways of supporting farming: there's lots happening.



It's not only a fresh government, but we also have a brand-new secretary of state for the Environment in the form of George Eustice. In her first week in the job, back in July, his predecessor Theresa Villiers spoke on Countryfile Live about the joy of escaping to one of the UK's many stunning rural landscapes, saying...

"Whether it's the towering fells of the Lake District or the moors and beaches of Northumberland or the rolling fields of Wiltshire dotted with monuments dating back millennia. I count myself truly blessed to live in a country which contains such superb natural beauty."

Let us hope Mr Eustice also remembers the natural beauty when he's making his future decisions.

To new legislation...

Already this year we have seen the return of the Agriculture Bill. It will pave the way for the replacement of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with a new Environmental Land Management system (ELM).

The Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) tell us it's their vision to have a scheme by 2024 that supports agriculture by 'rewarding public goods with public money,

which will in turn lead to a thriving, self-reliant and resilient farming sector where there are trusting and productive relationships between farmers and government'.

The public goods it seeks to see protected include:

- clean and plentiful water
- mitigation of, and adaptation to climate change.
- thriving plants and wildlife
- beauty, heritage and engagement.

Now we come to the Environment Bill that aims to replace the EU's nature laws with a new 'green watchdog' that ensures environmental protection as we leave the EU. In the government's own words the Bill will seek to:

- Ensure the environment is at the heart of all government.
- Establish a new independent Office for Environmental Protection to scrutinise environmental policy and law, investigate complaints and take enforcement action.
- Place the bold ambition of our flagship 25 Year Environment Plan on a statutory footing and create powers to enhance nature and habitats and combat the

devastating effects of plastics on our natural environment.

- Improve air quality by introducing measures to reduce pollution.
- Restore and enhance nature through 'biodiversity net gain'.
- Transform the way we manage our waste through powers that enable us to require producers to take more responsibility.
- Protect precious water resources by increasing sustainable water management through securing long-term, resilient water and wastewater services.

The water industry regulator, OFWAT, had insisted that water becomes cheaper. This reduces the ability of water companies to invest in essential infrastructure to reduce pollution, leaks and over abstraction. Reducing water bills makes it harder to persuade everyone to use less.

Finally, you can have your say on the future of the water environment by taking part in the Environment Agency's 'Challenges and Choices' consultation which runs until 24 April 2020.

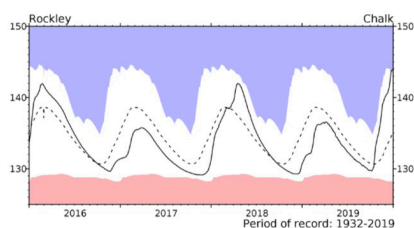
[Richard Clarke](#)

Groundwater

The Kennet begins its life emerging out of the ground as clear, cool springs.

The quantity of spring water available to feed the river depends on the groundwater level in the aquifer (combined with how much water we abstract from the same aquifer). In turn, the ground water level depends on how much rain we receive and when it falls. Rain in the spring and summer is quickly used by plants and trees, and evaporated by the sun, but autumn and winter rain soaks down into the aquifer.

Autumn 2019 was wet, and the rain fell at a good time for aquifer recharge. October 2019 was the second wettest in the Kennet area since 1985 and in the boreholes at Rockley and Draycot Foliat we saw some of the fastest groundwater recharge ever recorded.



Graph: Aquifer level in metres at Rockley (solid black line) compared with maximum (purple) and minimum (pink) recorded since 1932.

In many ways this is good news. A full aquifer sets the river up with strong reserves to keep it flowing through the summer. Furthermore, when the winterbournes are flowing, the river network almost doubles as streams stretch as far upstream as Winterbourne Monkton, Upper Lambourn and Draycot Foliat; and new tributaries like the Hungerdown Stream feeding the Og emerge from dry valleys. These winterbournes



Photo: Water from the new Hungerdown Stream (top) runs cleanly through permanent pasture, but at Shalbourne (right) a winterbourne in a ploughed field is full of sediment.

quickly spring to life, colonised by invertebrates that have remained dormant in the bed sediments, and providing important spawning habitat for wild brown trout. However, wet winters can be difficult to manage. After two dry winters some farmers were caught out, having ploughed and seeded fields with winter wheat, only to see rivers spring up in the middle of the crop, washing valuable soil and seed downstream.

The sewer network, too, has struggled. Sewers are not sealed units and the influx of groundwater has overwhelmed the capacity of pumping stations and sewage treatment works, flushing raw sewage onto the street and into the river. Particularly hard-hit have

been East Kennet, Aldbourne, Lambourn, Froxfield, Bay Bridges and Shalbourne. Thames Water try to keep on top of the problem by pumping sewage into tankers and driving it to treatment works which have capacity. Despite significant investment in sewer lining in Aldbourne and East Kennet the problem of sewer overload persists, polluting our streams.

Please report pollution to the Environment Agency on 0800 807060 and Thames Water on 0800 316 9800; you can also report muddy runoff from fields and tracks via our Muddy Walks App. There are details of how to do this on our website www.riverkennet.org

Charlotte Hitchmough

Corporate Fundraising

As a charity it's always top of our priority list.

It's competitive and it's increasingly difficult to find 'pots' of money that not only cover the projects we need to complete, but also contribute towards our core running costs.

To do our work we rely on charitable grants, government grants, funding from catchment partners like Thames Water, local support, individual donations, our members, and corporate donations.

Co-op

Co-op Local Community Fund offers its members the chance to donate to local causes when they shop in Co-op stores. Each member can select the cause they want to donate to via www.coop.co.uk/local-causes

Last year the Co-op members in the Reading area raised an incredible £8,000 to enable ARK to take their River School education programme into schools in the area. The programme is aimed at primary age children and gives an insight to our rivers, how they work and how

important they are to all of us. The programme also teaches children the importance of using water wisely and how they themselves can make a difference. Thank you to all the Co-op customers and staff who made this possible.



Sarsens Restaurant

Sarsens Bar and Restaurant based on the High Street in Marlborough is a fantastic example of support we receive from local businesses. Sarsens are an independent restaurant who pride themselves on their food being seasonal, local

and sustainable and who chose to support ARK by hosting a 5-course 'Supper Club' evening. As well as being a delicious meal, the event raised £450 for ARK. Many thanks to Nathan and his team for hosting a fabulous evening.

Corporate Membership

In April 2020 we will be launching a new Corporate Membership Scheme which will allow companies to pay an annual subscription and receive in return benefits such as acknowledgement on our website and in our annual report, the opportunity to sponsor a newsletter or our AGM, advice on water stewardship and access to our employee volunteer days. If you would like more information please contact linda@riverkennet.org

If you are involved in a company and have an idea of how you can help to support our work, please get in touch – we'd love to hear from you!

Linda Nemeth

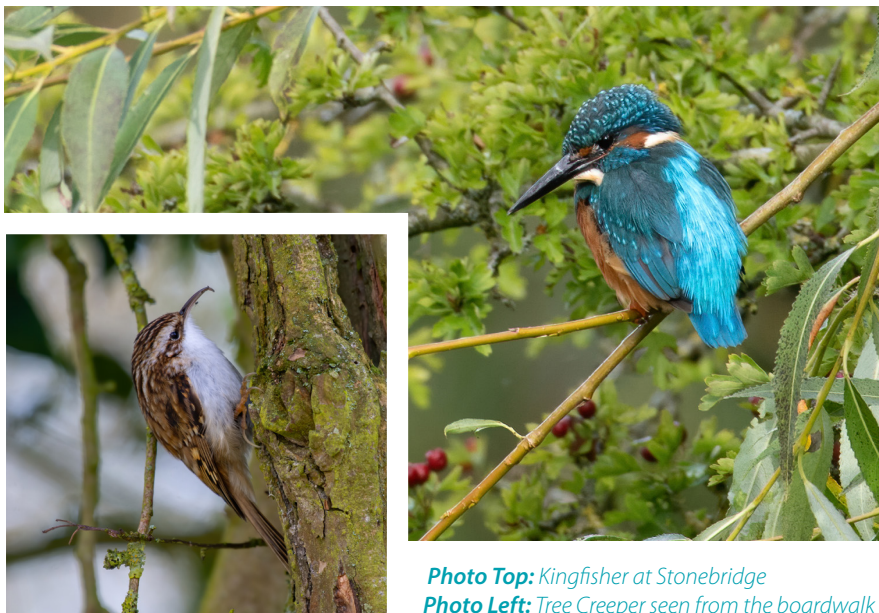
Twelve years of loyal service at Stonebridge Wild River Reserve

After 12 years of loyal service, the boardwalk at our Stonebridge Wild River Reserve was in need of little bit of TLC from our team of endlessly versatile volunteers.



Stonebridge Wild River Reserve

It's nine years since ARK and Marlborough Town Council jointly purchased Stonebridge Meadow



*Photo Top: Kingfisher at Stonebridge
Photo Left: Tree Creeper seen from the boardwalk*

In September 2019 we were again awarded the highest accolade of Outstanding by South West in Bloom. Lady Emma Fellowes (Patron of SW in Bloom) visited the reserve in July and met Project Officer Anna Forbes and many of our volunteers.

Kingfisher successfully bred on site and an adult otter with two pups was caught on our camera trap. In November a white willow tree was planted at the end of the wetland by the Marlborough Dyslexia Association to mark the special input of Gill Wallis and Janet Louth.

River Schools have continued to be in demand, with school, cub, brownie, beaver and scout groups having a great time developing their appreciation of the Kennet and the surrounding land.

A donation last year enabled our volunteers to install woven-willow bird watching panels by the bird feeder tree. The feeders are filled

up on a weekly basis by one of our volunteers and bullfinches, nuthatches, long-tailed tits and tree creepers have all become favourites with visiting photographers.

Japanese students visiting Marlborough spent a summer afternoon with us, learning about chalk streams and planting stream-water crowfoot and purple loosestrife. More recently, our volunteers have been carrying out the annual hedge and wetland maintenance.

Looking forward, we are planning to build a new footbridge that will create a circular walk from the end of the wooden boardwalk across the river into the water meadow.

One of our members has also kindly donated hundreds of fritillary bulbs which we will be planting this season.

Anna Forbes

St Michael's rain garden was unveiled on 15 November

The pupils and staff invited parents, volunteers, members of ARK and Wendy Allen (Garden Designer) along with the Reverend Sue Rodd who gave a blessing.



Alison Edmonds, Chair of Aldbourne Parish Council, performed the official opening and Simon Knighton, Chair of the Governors, thanked everyone involved in the rain garden project which had amazing support from the local community, Thames Water, Thames Rivers Trust and The Revere Trust. The children have already been enjoying the new play features while learning how the garden slows the flow of rain to our rivers and how important it is to conserve our water.

The project was our most ambitious rain garden so far but the feedback from the children and their teachers has proved it's been a great success.

Linda Nemeth



A nuthatch spotted near the Stonebridge bird feeder. Photo credit: A Thompson

Little Bedwyn Community Project

A great improvement on hard engineered banks!

ARK recently led a project with Little Bedwyn Playing Field Trust. They'd been in touch wanting advice on their stretch of the Dun, which led to four days of community river restoration.

It's been a real pleasure to see how enthusiastic the villagers have been to find out more about and help restore their river, as well as seeing the riverbed emerge:

"When I was volunteered to help in the project to restore the river Dun in my home village of Little Bedwyn, it was with some shame that I realised I knew very little about the existing rich diversity of flora, fauna and wildlife and how it would be enhanced by this work. Anna and her hard-working team of lovely volunteers from ARK welcomed me and a small number of local villagers and patiently taught us the skill and hard work involved in the art of faggot-making, before we helped to restore the river banks, install the faggots in the river and plant a huge number of water-loving plants.

Nearly three months on and we are already starting to see the benefits of all this hard work and my thanks go to Anna and her merry band of volunteers for helping us to start saving our river!"

Hugo Shipley
Little Bedwyn resident

ARK Trout and Eels

Twelve years and counting!



Launched in 2008, the programme is continuing to inspire primary school children to value and enjoy their local rivers, what lives in them and (above all) how they can help preserve them.

This year we've set up tanks of newly hatched trout in school classrooms at Whitley Park (Reading), St Nicholas Junior School (Newbury), Ogbourne Primary, Inkpen Primary and Shalbourne Primary schools.

We support classes for over three months with hands on workshops in which the children learn about the brown-trout life cycle, their requirements to survive and the pressures their rivers are under. Our Invertebrates in the Classroom workshop has also received amazing feedback from students, teachers and parents. This is the day we take live samples of the tiny creatures that form much of

a trout's diet into the classroom. We discuss where our water comes from, how to save it, the impacts of abstraction and how to prevent pollution.

Geoffrey the stuffed ARK otter has gained celebrity status and children ask which visit will Geoffrey be coming to? He helps us explain apex predators and food chains.

Trout in School and Eels in the Classroom are part of our Water Matters project currently funded by Thames Water. We would also like to thank Berkshire Trout Farm for their ongoing support with this project.

ARK Eels in the Classroom 2020 starts after the Easter holidays, when we will be getting five more schools in the Kennet catchment excited about the critically endangered European eel.

Anna Forbes

Restoring the Lower Kennet

Local angling clubs have been working together with ARK to improve their river.

Following a sewage pollution incident on the Silchester Brook in 2014, Thames Water and the Environment Agency agreed on an Environmental Undertaking in reparation. A proportion of this money was 'to be disbursed in small scale improvement grants to angling clubs and fisheries in the Kennet Valley to improve angling opportunities and outcomes'.

The fund has been administered by Kennet Valley Fishery Association (KVFA) with the emphasis on improving recruitment and survival of coarse fish species such as barbel, chub and dace on the lower river.

A Steering Group including representatives from ARK chose four projects for funding:

- Selective removal and management of marginal trees to increase light for macrophytes and reduce bank erosion on the Kennet below Hambridge in Newbury (Civil Service Angling Society).
- Re-profiling and extending an existing drainage channel to provide a fish refuge during high-water events on the Holy Brook at Southcote (Prospect Angling Club).
- Restoration of an historic oxbow meander of the Kennet at Theale (Mr P Stratton) together with reconnection to the main channel to provide a fish refuge.
- Restoration of a carrier of the Kennet at Padworth to improve

natural flows, and gravel cleaning (Central Association of London and Provincial Angling Clubs, Thatcham Angling Association and Reading and District Angling Association).

All four projects are now complete and will hopefully assist in halting the decline in some coarse fish species on the lower river.

Although the fund was administered by KVFA, ARK's expertise, through Lower-River Co-ordinator Martin Kent, was a vital element in achieving these aims.

Keith Johnson
Kennet Valley Fishery Association

Getting involved

Just by being a member you are already helping us...

...but there are also ways in which you can get more hands-on.

You can help us to collect useful data to bring about positive change, using your smart phone.

Himalayan balsam is an invasive species that produces exploding seed pods that float downstream and colonise other stretches of river. By reporting your sightings on the [ARK Himalayan Balsam Tracker App](#) we can liaise with landowners and deploy our volunteer teams to tackle the balsam.

Heavy rainfall often causes pollution to flow directly into our rivers. Our [ARK Muddy Walks App](#) is a simple way of reporting runoff from fields,

tracks, drains, septic tanks and sewers. If you see it, log it on our app.

Most recently launched is the [ARK Redd Spotter App](#), which allows our trained volunteer brown-trout nest spotters to log redds as they walk their allocated stretch of the river.

To set up the App on your phone download Epicollect5 and look for the ARK Apps.

We would also like to thank Chilton Estate and their river keeper Sam Marshall for hosting two redd spotting mornings earlier this year, giving an insight into the spawning season of wild brown trout on the Kennet.

Anna Forbes



ARK People

Toby Hudson



Since starting work as a river keeper on the Avington Estate in 2015 I have really grown to admire the diversity of the Kennet's wildlife, not only in the water but in the surrounding lands. It holds a special place in the memories of everyone who has worked and lived around it and this is something we must strive to uphold.

Sharon Pawlaczek



I am a Year 4 teacher at Marlborough St Mary's where we have formed a strong link with ARK. Our classes visit Stonebridge and learn about the river with the help of Anna and her wonderfully knowledgeable volunteers. As a school, we thoroughly enjoy and value our outdoor learning experiences and always look forward to the next visit.

Sara Bladon



I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of my engagement with ARK and the River Dun restoration. Confirmed townies like me don't often get the chance to make faggots and spend the morning in waders! Great fun ... and a lovely atmosphere among all those villagers who mucked in.



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

www.easyfundraising.org.uk/arkactionfortheriverkennet

Dates for Your Diary

Saturday 4 July, 5–9pm

We are delighted to announce that Ramsbury Estates are kindly hosting an exclusive fundraiser BBQ event for ARK at their Shoot Lodge in Hungerford. It promises to be a very special evening with stunning views and the Estate's local beef on the BBQ.

Tickets are £25 each and places are limited. A paying bar will be open and there will be raffle tickets for sale. Advanced booking and payment are essential.

For more information and to buy your tickets contact anna@riverkennet.org or call 07780381709. The deadline for booking places is 24 June.

To pay by bank transfer, include your surname and BBQ as a reference **and email Anna to enable us to confirm your payment and places**. Our details are: Action for the River Kennet, Sort Code 40 52 40, Account 00031368.

For more details on this and other events see our website or contact linda@riverkennet.org

Websites Worth Visiting

The first beavers to return to Essex for over 400 years now live on the Spains Hall Estate. Their home is a 4 hectare (9.8 acre) woodland, surrounded by a special fence to keep them safe. They are being given free rein to build dams, flood areas and generally do what beavers do, with scientists collecting data on their impact.



To find out more please visit:
www.spainshallestate.co.uk/nfm_beavers



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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 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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