LOCAL WILDLIFE SITES newsletter

Herts and Middlesex

NEWS FROM YOUR **HERTFORDSHIRE LOCAL WILDLIFE SITES PARTNERSHIP 2017**

Welcome...

to the 2017 Local Wildlife Sites newsletter. In this issue we are looking at rivers including the management of these habitats, the threats on our waterways and how we can ensure local wildlife thrives.

What are Wildlife Sites?

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are sites of substantive nature conservation value and although they do not have any statutory status, many are equal in quality to statutory Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). There are more than 40,000 Local Wildlife Sites in England overseen by 65 Local Sites systems, covering contrasting landscapes in coastal, rural and urban situations. Hertfordshire currently has 1,575 habitat LWS. Together with SSSIs, LWS support locally and nationally threatened species and habitats. They play a critical role in forming the building blocks of ecological networks and Living Landscapes.

We want to hear from you!

Comments or suggestions for future articles are welcome. If you would prefer to receive your newsletter via email please contact Carol Lodge:
carol.lodge@hmwt.org

photo: Tim Hill

What's special about **wetland Local Wildlife Sites?**

The term 'wetland' covers a diverse range of habitats. Within Hertfordshire alone this includes rivers, streams, springs, watercress beds, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, sewage works, marshes, fens, swamps, wet grassland and carr woodland. These wetlands are hugely important for both wildlife and people. Many of the wetlands in Hertfordshire, especially open water, have been created by human activity, and all have been influenced by human activity to some degree. In many cases this is due to the range of benefits they have provided – food, drinking water, power, transport and leisure opportunities – as well as their natural purifying and flow regulating functions.

All types of wetland habitats – still or moving – support a myriad of species including specialist plants, rare and protected mammals, such as water voles and otters, as well as many birds and invertebrates.

The majority of our wetlands are associated with the catchments of the River Lea and River Colne. The Lea Catchment has recently been designated as a 'Nature Improvement Area' where a partnership of organisations, landowners and individuals are working together to increase biodiversity. The Lower Lea Valley is of international importance to wildlife and has been designated as a 'Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site'. In addition, many wetlands in Hertfordshire are of national importance and have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Many wetlands of county importance are classified as Local Wildlife Sites and their interest, conservation and management are the focus of this newsletter.

As an owner or manager of a Local Wildlife Site, you are contributing to conserving the biodiversity of Hertfordshire and the UK.

LOOK OUT FOR **Low water levels**

Please keep an eye out for extraordinarily low river levels! Winter aquifer recharge rates were particularly poor leading into 2017, and we are on watch for fish in distress and dry reaches for the year ahead.

Climate change has always been a real concern for the future of our rivers, particularly in how they cope. One way to help build resilience into our vulnerable rivers is to build in habitat features, to create and enhance shelter and refuge for fish as well as invertebrates.

If you observe fish in distress, disconnected reaches of river or have habitat enhancement ideas please call the Environment Agency on 03708 506 506.

photo: Tim Hill

River Mimram SSSI Project

There are 15 main rivers in Hertfordshire, many of which are rare chalk rivers, though currently none of these receive any protection through legal designation. The River Mimram is one of the finest examples of a chalk river in the county, once known as the 'Jewel of Hertfordshire', and for a number of years there have been calls from stakeholders to designate it as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Despite this, the river remains undesignated due to Natural England's strict criteria that a river must meet before it's even considered for designation. This includes a requirement for natural flow conditions – something which most of Hertfordshire's chalk rivers fail to achieve due to the impact of ground water abstraction.

In an attempt to protect at least some of the River Mimram, HMWT has looked to its own Tewinbury nature reserve. Tewinbury borders the River Mimram and was itself designated a SSSI in 1984. The site covers an area of 7.3 ha and consists of a series of alluvial meadows and marshes bordering the River Mimram, alder woodland, as well as swamp and tall fen in the wet areas near the lagoon. Despite bordering the River Mimram the river is not included in the SSSI designation.

Walking the banks of the Mimram from Tewinbury to Hertford it is clear that areas of habitat found within the Tewinbury SSSI are repeated in pockets along the river bank as far as the eastern extent of Panshanger Park. With this in mind HMWT produced a report on the potential to expand the Tewinbury SSSI to include the areas of Archers Green, Poplars Green and Panshanger Park where a mosaic of similar habitats are linked together by the River Mimram wildlife corridor.

As all sites included in the report are Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), we were able to draw a wealth of information from the LWS reports in order to confirm initial assumptions. Additionally we were able to use the LWS compartment maps to confirm that a complex habitat mosaic of alder woodland, marsh grassland, swamp and fen, open water, neutral grassland and acid grassland is present. We were also able to draw information from the LWS reports on the presence of important species such as the locally scarce Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage. By combining this information with species data that is held by the Herts Environmental Record Centre, as well as their Herts Ecological Network Mapping information and additional data that was provided by the Environment Agency and HMWT's Water Vole Project, we have been able to produce a robust report which argues the case for the designation of not just the River Mimram but also the surrounding habitats as a SSSI. This report has since been submitted to the Environment Agency and Natural England for consideration.

David Johnson,
Living Rivers Officer, HMWT

River Lea Catchment Partnership

Bringing together groups in the Lee Valley which have a stake in the local rivers.

photo: Charlotte Hussey

The Trust has hosted the River Lea Catchment Partnership since 2014. The partnership brings together stakeholder groups in the Lee Valley that have an interest in the River Lea and its tributaries. The partnership has identified objectives for each river and developed catchment management plans in order to deliver these.

In October 2016 the first River Lea Catchment Conference was held at Bayfordbury to review the successes of the catchment partnership so far. Over 50 people attended with talks on Slimy Wrigglers, the local riverfly monitoring hub, the River Beane invasive non-native plant control project, Affinity Water's river restoration scheme, as well as updates from the Environment Agency and Lee Valley Nature Improvement Area.

Over the past three years the partnership has achieved significant accomplishments; the Slimy Wrigglers project has seen eel passes installed in the Lower Lea, opening up three km of river and 55 ha of good quality still water habitats to the critically endangered European eel; water voles were reintroduced to the River Stort at Thorley Wash in 2015, with consistent signs of breeding success ever since and a range expansion as far as Sawbridgeworth Marsh; and there is a fantastic level of shared knowledge across the whole partnership.

The partnership provides training to local communities to enable them to take action to protect and enhance their local rivers. In 2016/17 six river habitat restoration workshops were run on the River Stort, giving 50 individuals the skills to develop and deliver small scale river enhancement projects. The local riverfly hub has now recruited over 100 volunteers who actively monitor rivers every month for signs of pollution in over 60 locations.

Catchment Conference

On the River Beane, the River Beane Restoration Association (RBRA) has been trained in River Corridor Survey methods, allowing them to embark on an exciting project to investigate the potential to reintroduce water voles to the river. In addition HMWT are now training providers for the new Modular River Physical Survey (MoRPh), developed by Queen Mary University London and the Environment Agency, expected to be rolled out nationally in the near future.

Looking forward, the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) are now developing a funding bid led by HMWT that will deliver a landscape scale project for the Stort Valley. Work is also underway within the catchment partnership to develop an action plan for barbel in the Lower Lea whilst HMWT continues to deliver on projects planned for the rivers Mimram and Ash.

David Johnson
Living Rivers Officer, HMWT

FRAPs and working with the EA

A piece about the new permitting process for works around main rivers and how the Environment Agency can support you.

DID YOU KNOW?

Any planned work that occurs within eight meters of a main river, including temporary works, will require a permit from the EA. Works within the flood-plain may also require a permit.

What used to be referred to as Flood Defence Consents, have been superseded with Flood Risk Activity Permits (FRAPs), since April 2016. The new permits are in place due to an amendment to regulation and adoption into the Environmental Permitting Regulations.

The new process for permission is much the same as before, and could be seen as an improvement with a streamlined approach.

There are four categories of permit: Exclusion, Exemption, Standard Rules and Bespoke.

The best place to start FRA Permit enquiries is GOV.uk or through National Customer Contact Centre – enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk.

DID YOU KNOW?

All applicants get free pre-app advice.

For complex situations or schemes with multiple approaches we also offer a free site visit. We prefer to engage in person, and directly assess a situation so we understand the natural processes at play. Our advice will always focus on balancing objectives with environmentally sensitive and sustainable approaches – i.e. achieving what you want, without having adverse effects elsewhere in the river system.

DID YOU KNOW?

Not all bank protection options need to be hard engineered.

It is worth considering the benefit of natural materials and simple management changes, e.g. hazel bundles, willow spilling and ceasing of mowing to bank top.

Utilising natural materials can be cheaper and highly stable in the long term, not to mention also providing quality habitat and shelter for wildlife more than artificial means ever could. It also does not represent a permanent loss of natural bank.

In this way, a site visit is vital for informing discussions around the appropriateness of artificial vs greener options at your site.

DID YOU KNOW?

The staff from the Partnership and Strategic Overview team are the point of contact when in consultation for standard and bespoke permit applications.

Bespoke permits may be required for a number of reasons, including proximity to designated sites for conservation and protected habitats e.g. SSSI, Nature Reserves or ancient woodland and chalk rivers, respectively, or even proximity to manmade structures e.g. bridges and dwellings. If you feel your works might tick this box – please engage with us early on to ensure a smoother application process.

DID YOU KNOW?

The timeframe for permits to be duly made to determination can take up to two months, and can be made valid for up to three years.

So it's always a good idea to begin your pre-app discussions early! You don't even need full detailed designs ready, but an early chat on principle objectives and concerns is often enough to save you time later on.

Useful websites

GOV.UK – search for Flood Risk Activity Permits, Riverside ownership: rights and responsibilities.

Magic map – designated sites for conservation and more: magic.defra.gov.uk

What's In Your Backyard – for main river info and Flood zones: apps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby

RRC – Manual of River Restoration Techniques (see projects by technique) – therrc.co.uk

For queries relating to other river or waste concerns please contact: enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk.

DID YOU KNOW?

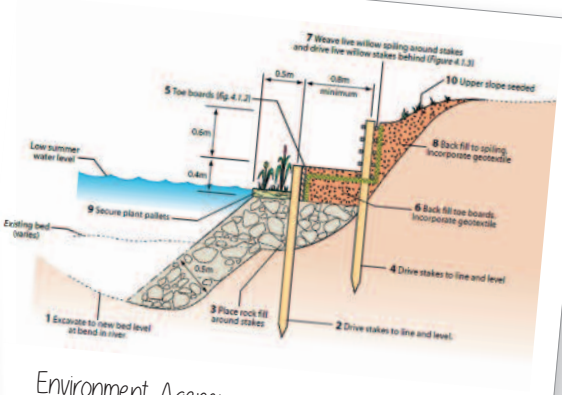
We work regularly and successfully with HMWT on river and wetland matters for the numerous sites they manage, thanks to a continuing partnership.

Samantha Ho
Biodiversity Officer, EA

Environment Agency

photos & illustration: Environment Agency

A well-vegetated bank one year after implementation



Environment Agency cross-section of woodspilling

Growth of root wads along bank after two years

Water voles on Local Wildlife Sites

I recently heard some good news from a team of my trained volunteer water vole surveyors after they were allocated a stretch of the River Gade that separates a Wildlife Site from a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). There had been no records of water voles on the Gade in the 21st century, but the habitat looked promising and it is important to monitor a geographical spread of sites to maintain a true picture of the presence and absence of water voles within Hertfordshire and Middlesex.

The Local Wildlife Site (89/002/02) is a long area of scrub almost 1km x 0.5km, between the Grand Union Canal and the river on the southern edge of Croxley Green. Local Nature Reserve 'Croxley Common Moor' is on the south side of the river (also a SSSI for its botanical interest).

In August 2014 the volunteer team reported that they had found water vole latrines (places where water voles place droppings to mark their territory) on the north bank of the river in the Wildlife Site. This is the only example in recent years where a water vole survey has discovered water voles on a site that has previously been negative! There are extensive areas of sedge and reed fringing the river with plenty of cover extending back into the Wildlife Site – ideal water vole habitat. Similar habitat on the south, but the SSSI bank is much sparser, fragmented and disturbed because of cattle grazing and the area's popularity with dog walkers.

The site was surveyed again in May 2015 and more latrines were found. Latrines are the most important pieces of evidence to establish the presence of water voles. The river level dropped during the summer and the cattle were able to wade across and graze and trample the north bank of the river exactly where the water voles had been found. You can imagine the impact that an animal weighing in excess of half a ton has when it tramples on the burrow systems of the water vole and then proceeds to eat the vegetation that provides cover for water voles.

Water voles are tenacious creatures, but unfortunately surveys in the spring of 2016 failed to find any further water vole evidence. It is impossible to say if the cattle were the cause of the water vole loss. Water voles have a meta-population structure in which satellite populations will come and go. Nevertheless, there have been discussions with Three Rivers District Council about possible strategies to prevent cattle access to the Wildlife Site but there is no simple solution. We can hope that they might return to the site in future!

Martin Ketcher
Water Vole Conservation & Non-Native Invasive Species Officer, HMWT

photo: Simon Stebbings

Mink Trapping and Mink Police Unit

photo: MinkPolice, Alert House ApS

The Lee Valley is a stronghold for water voles *Arvicola amphibious* but unfortunately, as in other parts of the county, they are still susceptible to predation and possible extinction from the area by American mink *Neovision vision*.

Lee Valley Regional Park Authority (LVRPA) part-funds the Hertfordshire Water Vole Conservation & Non-Native Invasive Species Officer post, with the Environment Agency. This post has enabled coordinated mink monitoring and trapping across Hertfordshire, which has afforded our water vole colonies a degree of protection. The Lee Valley is intersected with numerous watercourses and lakes which present challenges in terms of coverage of our mink control programme.

Currently LVRPA has 21 operational mink rafts. The rafts are monitored regularly by both the ranger team and volunteers and, when any presence is noted, trapping commences. Over the past six years 92 mink have been caught and dispatched in Lee Valley Park. The area around Fishers Green and Hall Marsh Scrape is proving to be a hotspot with 81 of the 92 mink caught in traps here. With such excellent mink control in Hertfordshire the question has to be asked – where are these mink coming from? LVRPA has discussed this with the Essex Water for Wildlife Project Officer and is hoping to work with the project to increase the mink control programme in west Essex alongside the continued effort in Hertfordshire.

As technology advances there are a couple of pieces of equipment that aid us in our efforts to monitor and trap mink. Firstly, a trail camera on site monitors mammals, in particular otters. Footage from the camera has identified the presence of mink and shown how they use the site resulting in more effective trapping.

We have also recently acquired a 'Mink Police' unit; a waterproof, battery operated unit that sends out a message via text or email to alert you when the trap is tripped. The box works by a magnet attached to the door of the trap being pulled off as the door closes, the system will then notify you immediately. The unit sends out regular update messages to show it is still active and operating correctly, and so requires a mobile sim card. It should, however, be remembered that whenever traps are active there should be procedures in place for a swift dispatch of any mink caught. The unit costs around £200 and we pay a small monthly cost for the SIM card. Although our use of the unit has been delayed, we anticipate that using this system will enable us to trap more consistently in areas which have proven more difficult to check on a daily basis, which can only have a positive impact on the water vole population of the Lee Valley.

Cath Patrick
Senior Conservation Officer,
Lee Valley Regional Park Authority

The partnership

This newsletter has been produced by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust on behalf of the Local Wildlife Sites Partnership, supported by funding from the Environment Agency and Herts County Council.

The Wildlife Sites Partnership in Hertfordshire includes Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre, Hertfordshire Ecology, Natural England, the Countryside Management Service, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, Chilterns AONB, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency, and is coordinated by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust.

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