



Ver Valley Newsletter



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April Open Meeting

Members and friends are cordially invited to our "southern end" April meeting:

TUESDAY 19th APRIL 2011
at 7.30 pm

This will be held at St Stephen Parish Centre
(Tennyson room, downstairs), Station Road. Bricket Wood
(near "The Gate" P.H.).

The large room has been booked specially. Ample parking at rear.

After the usual reports and general discussions, we will break and then the speaker will be Haydon Bailey on "The Geology of Chalk".

Quote from John Fisher: "This may not sound an exciting subject but Haydon is an excellent speaker who knows all there is to know about the basic components of our valley. He was a major contributor to the recently published HNHS Hertfordshire Geology book."

AGM Report 26 October 2010

This was overlooked in our January Newsletter. There was a good attendance and the whole committee was re-elected for another year (!).

Most noteworthy item was the official launch of the Ver Valley Action Group under the enthusiastic guidance of Sue Frearson. Anyone keen to join one of her river/riverside clearances should get in touch with her for dates etc. Insurance cover is in place. (School groups may also be interested.)

Subscriptions

Most people whose subscriptions expired last September have renewed and we are grateful to them.

For those who haven't, this will be their last Newsletter. Anyone in doubt, contact me, please.

The subscription rates are unchanged, £20 for Five Years, £5 Annual.

River Ver Archive: St Albans Central Library (Local History Reference Section)
Over 1,000 pages of information

Midsummer Trail - "All the Way" 19 June

Andy Webb

To celebrate the launch of our new "River Ver Trail" on Sunday 19th June, Andy Webb and Bob Parrish will be walking from source to confluence, i.e. from Kensworth Lynch to Bricket Wood, approx. 18 miles (23 km), a real "dawn to dusk" walk.

Andy and Bob are seeking 20 - 25 friends to accompany them. Meet at 9 a.m. at the source culvert, Corner Farm, Kensworth Lynch. Bring sufficient food/drink to sustain yourself on the route but stops at various "watering holes" are planned. Also bring a small towel as a "mass paddle" in the river in at least one spot is planned - more if hot! Ring Andy on 01727 839573 to book your place. You will need to make your own arrangements for "dropping off" and "picking up" at the beginning and end, although we do have permission to park cars all day at "The Packhorse" pub on Watling Street near the source if required.

If you would like to accompany Andy and Bob for part of the route, please call 07837 040536 or 07771 626158 on the day itself to find out more precise timings. We hope to be at Redbournbury Mill some time between 12 - 1 for a break of an hour or so.

Ver Valley Access and Interpretation Project

Jane Gardiner

At last this long awaited project is coming to fruition with the official launch on Mon 16th May thanks to the considerable help and hard work of many people especially CMS personnel. New footbridges are in place, waymarking and bridge signs are being produced and eight specially designed benches have been commissioned, which with an outline map and pictures of local interest routed into the backs are works of art in themselves. Each of the eight Circular Walks and the whole 18 mile Ver Valley Trail will have an A5 leaflet describing the route with photographs and information as well as an open-out map in the centre; these will be down-loadable from the new pages on our website, which will also have links to more information and historical reminiscences etc.

On 16th May the morning will be for the Official Launch by invitation only and in the afternoon there will be a 3 hour inaugural walk of number 6, with a limited number tickets available from CMS being offered to stakeholders of the project. If any VVS Bailiffs would like to join this walk please contact me, and I will hope to get you tickets on a first come first served basis. [Please see below if you'd like to join Andy Webb at mid-summer to walk the whole Ver Valley Trail or perhaps just part of it.]

The HLF grant of almost half this £100,000 project was on condition that VVS provided 10% of the total and we were able to do this thanks to the very generous legacy we received from Miss Phyllis Hammon, for which we are most grateful.

Green Eye on St Albans

We have been contacted by Pete Stephens who is organising a "free to take part" environmental themed photography exhibition due to be first shown in July 2011 during the "Festival of Life" event in St Albans and he is looking for contributors. It may then be shown at other venues later on.

He is looking for photographs that tell a story or comment on our local environment within the ST ALBANS district only.

Photos are to be submitted direct to Pete on a disk or via email - minimum size 1mb jpg. Prints can not be accepted. You should include your name plus a caption and mention that you are a VVS member.

Photos will be selected by a committee and printed with your name and the Ver Valley Society together with a caption embedded on the photo. Pete will produce the prints and have them framed at no cost to the contributors.

You can submit up to three photos and Pete will offer advice - he a professional photographer.

Deadline is the end of May

For more information www.pspictures.co.uk/commuinity.html.

Firstly I am pleased to report that we are able to welcome a new volunteer Bailiff, Bruce Banfield-Taylor, to our team replacing Ian Jinks for the stretch north of Park Street. Bruce suggested he would like to have a badge to wear while walking his stretch which I have produced and I have some others ready for any other Bailiff who would like one to collect at the next Open Meeting.

The training Bailiffs and others are being given by HMWT for spotting signs of water voles will be on Wed 20th April and Sat 13th May from 10.30 at Tewinbury Farm nature reserve [Hertford Road (B1000) nr Welwyn, AL6 0JB]. Several people have already signed up for one or other date but there are a few more places available so if you are interested please ring me. The news about a reintroduction programme on the Ver is not so positive (it would be very costly) but might be possible next year. I hope to have discussions with the new HMWT Chief Executive soon.

As you can see from the table the fall in groundwater level through the autumn continued into the new year but at last the aquifer is showing some recovery but is still well below average. Rainfall in November and December was low and although January and February were both a little wetter than average, March has been dry with some lovely warm sunny days in the latter half. Flows being measured by the bailiffs this month are not good for the time of year and the head of the river, (ie from where there is continuous flow), is now just to the north of Redbourn.

2010	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
December	128.68 [130.56]	35.3 [-34.8]
January	128.00 [131.36]	84.6 [+14.6]
February	128.86 [132.38]	56.8 [+6.66]
March	129.82 [132.79]	Not yet available

Most of the visiting winter birds have now departed although some snipe, egrets and waxwings were still about in early March. Other birds are busy nesting; there are 14 herons' nests in Verulamium Park where RSPB have set up an observation point and there are still some tufted ducks and pochards on the lake with the usual water fowl. A pair of great crested grebes have been reported on Frogmore Pits and other sightings include kingfishers, green and greater-spotted woodpeckers, goldfinches, red-legged partridges and of course buzzards and red kites.

Other wildlife reported include a hare and a stoat, and some interesting road kills (see Ernie Leahy's report). Tortoiseshell and brimstone butterflies have been emerging after the winter, and white- and orange-tailed bumble bees are very active. Fish reports are mostly of minnows, chub and brown trout, some of these are said to be over 2lb.

The hazel catkins and snowdrops which made great displays beside the river earlier this year have been replaced by snowy displays of blackthorn, yellow pussy-willow, ruddy alder catkins, and on the banks coltsfoot, celandines, and butterbur



spikes, which can be actually in the water. Flag iris and king cups are just beginning to show. Although some rain would be welcome spring is just lovely as I write!



A gorgeous bank of celandine.
[Jane Gardiner]

Coltsfoot - [Jane Gardiner]

First some sad news. One of the owlets we ringed at Redbournbury on 30 June last year was found "freshly dead" at Luton Airport on 1 September by a staff member of Luton Airport Operations Ltd. She sent the ring into the British Trust for Ornithology who keep the records of all birds ringed in the UK and our ringer Peter Wilkinson got a report of the recovery. It would seem that it had been hunting over the rough grassland next to the runway and had been struck by a plane. It had only lived 63 days but had travelled about 10 km from its nest box. However the positive from this is that one of the VVS birds successfully fledged and was able to find new territory.

Another barn owl casualty was seen by VVS member John Pritchard who phoned me to say he had seen a dead barn owl by the side of the A5183 on his way to work. I collected this one within a few minutes of John's call and it was obvious it had been hit by a passing vehicle while it was hunting along the grass verge. As it was near Shafford I initially assumed it was one of the VVS barn owls but once I had reported the ring number it was quickly established that it was a barn owl which had been ringed at Radlett last summer. The sad thing here is that it was probably going to use one of our boxes this year.

As this was a relatively undamaged specimen I was asked to keep it in our freezer for a few days while a special return package was being sent to me. It has now been sent to the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme at Lancaster who will perform an autopsy. They like to get good specimens so they can establish what contaminants are being digested by predators which are at the top of the food chain. Unfortunately barn owls evolved long before the days of planes and motor vehicles so they do have any innate defence against these modern threats.



Little egret along the Ver at Redbourn.

This winter we have put up two kestrel boxes, a tawny owl box and a little owl box and we have resited a barn owl box which had been used by grey squirrels every year since 2005. Hopefully they will not use it again as it is a "lousy" job clearing all their debris at the end of the season.



Everyone's favourite, the spectacular waxwing.

We now have a total of 80 boxes for small birds like tits, robins etc. This included ten along the river near Drop Lane which we only put up in March this year. 60 of the older boxes were checked this year to remove the old nest material and it was good to find that over 40 showed signs of being used.

As I write these notes in mid March our early summer migrants such as chiffchaff, wheatear, sand martin and little ringed plover are due to arrive on our shores from their winter quarters in Africa. So far all I have seen are chiffchaffs. At the same time our winter visitors are gathering to leave for their northern breeding grounds. I have seen huge flocks of up to 200 fieldfares and smaller ones of redwings. This year must have been the best ever for waxwings and they have been seen in big numbers in St Albans and Hemel Hempstead throughout the winter. If you did not get to see one enjoy the amazing sight of the one in the photograph.

Residents like skylarks and lapwings are displaying in readiness for the breeding season and in their very different ways they are a great sign of spring after a hard winter. Other interesting

recent sitings include water rail, a pair of grey wagtails and a little owl.

If you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.

The Action Group have had two Friday afternoon sessions at Drop Lane Bricket Wood, where we have helped to support the new management plan for Riverside Way, devised by the warden Stephanie. This land is owned by HCC, running parallel to the river, with in addition a small nature reserve, accessed from the bridleway.

Six members worked with the warden and a contractor to remove and burn small ash saplings, blackthorn and bramble from the river bank, to improve the view and allow more light to reach the ground flora. We had a brilliant bonfire, despite John Fisher's hat catching a spark!

On returning in March, we discovered that much more work had been done by contractors, along the river bank, removing dangerous and overhanging branches. We worked with the St Albans School Conservation Group, who were very enthusiastic and took out more of the ash saplings. Several habitat piles were made in addition to the log piles left by the contractors.

Meanwhile Jane Gardiner collected three bags of miscellaneous litter near the stepping stones and confluence. Unfortunately, the river was too deep to cross to remove more plastic bottles along the Ver and the Colne, but we hope that other volunteers will come forward later in the year to help with this work.



Safety work along Riverside Way.

J o h n
F i s h e r

and Ernie Leahy as well as helping with the vegetation removal, put up ten bird boxes along Riverside Way, which we hope will be used this year.

We hope that more of you will join our activities along the Ver. At the time of writing, a litter pick behind the Chequers Inn, in Redbourn on the 2nd April will be the last activity until the Autumn, to avoid disturbing wild life.

Let me know of any areas that you know of that might benefit from our activities, so we can gain permission from the landowners.

If you would like to join us please contact me on 01727 761878 or sue.frearson@which.net. I will produce a new programme for next Autumn and publish it on the website and in the Newsletter. Our thanks to all those who have helped to make a difference along the river.



St Albans School Conservation Group helping along Riverside Way



The new Riverside Way sign board.

Deadly Secrets in the Ver Valley

There are many creatures living in the Ver Valley rarely seen alive, but unfortunate road casualties sometimes reveal mammals of which we were unaware of their presence. Often when driving on faster roads like the A5183 we note a dead fox, hare or even badger but occasionally I have found other dead mammals which were a surprising find.

The only two American Mink I have seen in the valley were both road casualties found on the A5183 at Redbournbury one of which I photographed and made study drawings of in 2001. They are dark brown with a pale throat about the size of a large grey squirrel. Local conservation organisations claim the Mink has been eradicated from Hertfordshire waters but they are a resilient and mobile creature and could return.

Water shrew is another scarce mammal which I have only found one clean dead specimen of on the Nicky Line 200 metres from the Ver at Redbourn. This is our largest shrew with contrasting black upper and white underparts. I made a measured study drawing of this and forwarded the record to the Herts mammal recorder. These amphibious shrews dive in clear clean water like watercress beds to feed on freshwater shrimps. There may still be populations of this species at suitable locations on the Ver especially where the habitat remains intact. See the drawing accompanying this article.

My most recent find was of a dead polecat again found on the A5183 on 6th March 2011. There can be a confusion with this species and escaped ferrets but this specimen showed the clear typical facial markings of the polecat. I took 18 photos of this and again forwarded 3 with details to the Herts mammal recorder. Surprisingly looking at Michael Clark's book - Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of Hertfordshire (2001) the distribution map for this species shows evidence of its presence in many of the 2 km grid squares in mid Herts where in the nineties there was a successful re-introduction from Welsh stock. See the photo accompanying the text.

Little is known about bat species in the Ver Valley except that the pipistrelle is common and Daubenton's are seen in Verulamium Park so future finds of other species would be of interest. Other mammals we so far have not recorded in the valley which may exist are harvest mouse, edible dormouse (glis glis) and perhaps otter. I hope we find living examples instead of road kills.



Polecat [Ernie Leahy]

WARNING: It is inadvisable to touch or handle dead birds and mammals and typical hygiene procedures should be observed. Photo records are the best.

Any unusual records should be sent to the Herts Mammal Recorder via the website www.hnhs.org.

Open Meetings

John Fisher

Wednesday 27 July 2011 at 7.30 pm: Markyate Village Hall - speaker Isabel Crozier of The Countryside Management Services – “The Ver Walk Project” – The project launch is scheduled for May (see separate news item)

Wednesday 25 October 2011 at 7.30 pm: St Michaels Parish Centre – The Annual General Meeting followed by a talk by Stuart Hayes who is an E A Hydro Geologist.

Monday 30 or Tuesday 31 January at 7.30 pm: Redbourn – speaker Kate Bretherton on “Remarkable Trees”. The Transept Hall was rather cramped for space this year so we are looking at alternatives in Redbourn. Details later.

Very Important: All meetings are free entrance to members and non members. If you are coming to one of our meetings please check our newsletter or the web page a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. If you require directions to any of the venues please contact a committee member. (see contacts).

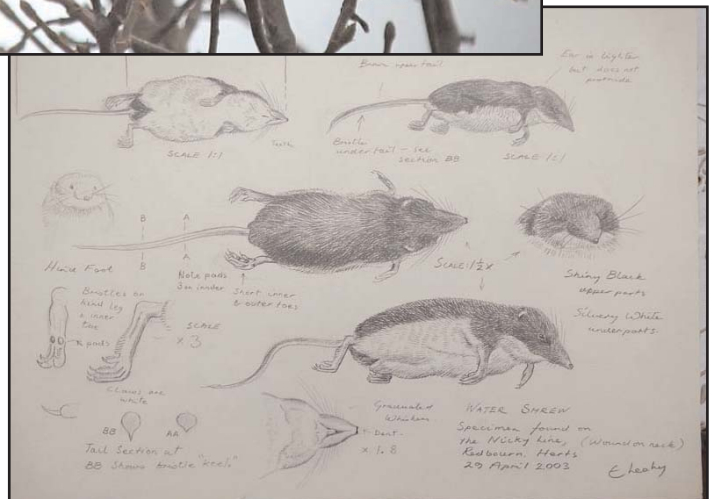


Confluence of Ver and Colne. [Sue Frearson]



John Fisher erecting No. 76 nestbox, Riverside Way. [Ernie Leahy]

Part of a flock of 90 waxwings, Chiswell Green, New Year's Eve [Ernie Leahy]



Water Shrew