



# Ver Valley Newsletter



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[www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

April 2009

## April Open Meeting

With April here again, we are back at Bricket Wood, details as follows:

**Monday 20th April 2009, 7.30 pm**

**at St. Stephen Parish Centre (upstairs room), Station Road, Bricket Wood.  
(Next door to "Gate" PH)**

Ample parking. Bricket Wood station ("Abbey Flyer") 3 min walk away.

After usual reports and discussions on the Ver and its valley, there will be a break. With few volunteers coming forward, we will only be able to offer limited refreshments - but there is a coffee/tea machine at the Parish Centre.

To conclude the session, our good friend Isabel Crozier from the Countryside Management Service (HCC) is to tell us about "CMS Activities in the Ver Valley". Isabel should be able to comment on any problems experienced on the river-side walk/s as maintained by her organisation.



*Little ringed plover - Ernie Leahy*



*Golden plover and wheatear  
Ernie Leahy*

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

As reported in January, this important project, which will have significant benefits in helping the VVS to promote appreciation of and protection of the River Ver, was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant in December 2008. Match-funding is now in place, and we have been given "permission to start". The breakdown of the various grants/monies is as follows:

HLF (Your Heritage")	£49,500
Chilterns Chalk Stream Project	2,000
Watling Chase Community Forest	4,500
HCC (Capital projects, via R.O.W. office)	22,000
SADC	2,500
Lafarge	13,850
VVS	8-10,000

For our own contribution, we have resolved to use some of the money from the Phyllis Hammon bequest which the VVS received a couple of years ago.

The project will be officially launched on Monday 30 March at St Michael's Bridge & Ford in St Albans; as well as VVS Ctte and CMS representatives, various "partners" and dignitaries have been invited to attend a photocall for local newspapers so that we can get some early publicity..

The River Ver Walk will be lengthened (from "Source" to "Confluence") and a new leaflet will be designed; eight new circular "Ver Valley Walks" will be established, each with its own dedicated leaflet; a presentation pack, in some sort of clear holder, will be available to purchase, whilst the individual leaflets remain free (the presentation pack will include an introductory booklet too); this information will also be available from our website; the website will also contain new material, feature memories of the river Ver, and other historical information; a new exhibition will be constructed; all the above Walk routes will be properly waymarked; stiles will be replaced with kissing-gates; some footbridges will be replaced, and other improvements relating to accessibility will be undertaken.

I am currently researching and writing the material needed for the leaflets and website; I have also agreed to undertake the "audits" for each new walk, including the linear river Ver route. We now have a tentative launch date of 22 June 2010 (St Alban's Day) but I hope leaflet and other work will be completed before this.

So, all-in-all a lot of work is involved, and I am worn out just thinking about it! But, the benefits for the Society and our River Ver are potentially huge. We will give members regular reports of our progress.

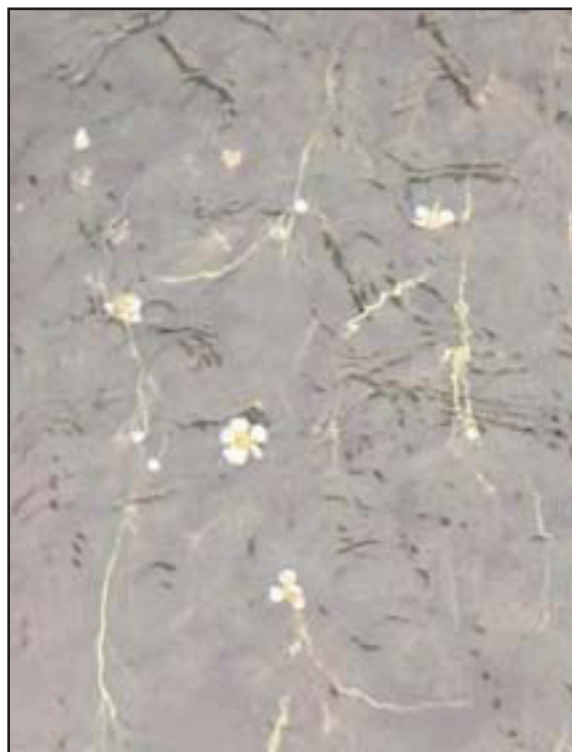
## **Ver Valley Calendar 2010 ?**

We have received a most interesting offer from a local firm to print a 2010 calendar for us, one month at a time, wire bound at the top edge.

The cost is likely to be very reasonable, ensuring a good return for the Society. The problem is, twelve/thirteen high-quality photos will be needed.

Are there any photographers out there, not already known to us, with files of suitable photos?

Ideally it needs to go to press no later than August and to maximise sales should be available in September. We have never brought out a calendar before.



*Water crowfoot - Duncan Gardiner*

January was a fairly average month weather-wise. Over February as a whole the temperatures and sunshine were about average but precipitation was above normal, including considerable snowfall and frost in the first half of the month, and the aquifer was 2 meters above average. March has been mostly dry, warm and sunny but the aquifer is now nearly 4 meters above average. Groundwater from February melting snow slowly reaching the aquifer should result in the figure continuing to increase in April/May.

In mid February the snow-melt following heavy rains caused plenty of water in the Kensworth Lynch area and Markyate Cell lakes filled up. The water meadows from north to south of the valley had lots of lovely pools to encourage snipe to move in as well as little egrets, fieldfares, redwings, golden plover which arrived earlier in the winter though many have now departed.

Tufted duck and pochard joined the usual water fowl on Verulamium lakes and the RSPB viewing station enabled plenty of people to see them, as well as the nesting herons and a pair of great-crested grebes. Pondyards, Francis Bacon's 17th century fishing lakes in Gorhambury are now full of water (no public access).

2009	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
December 2008	131.62 [130.56]	42.0 [-28.1]
January	133.1 [131.36]	70.4 [+0.7]
February	134.62 [132.38]	73.9 [+25.1]
March	136.57 [132.79]	Not yet available

The growth of cress, weeds etc in the river has been curbed by the frosts and the winter/early-spring rains have enabled a clear channel to be re-established although of course high winds have blown some trees and branches into the river causing blockages and build up of rubbish in places.

Carpets of red growth noted on slower moving water in areas north of Redbourn has been identified fairy water fern, *Azolla filiculoides*. This does not seem to have diminished in the frost to which it is supposed to be vulnerable but EA are investigating a mite which may help control it.

Similarly eye catching and more pleasing are celandine and coltsfoot flowering on the banks and the first kingcup flowers were seen in mid-March. Plenty of healthy growth of water crowfoot has been reported and butterbur is now flowering profusely in the more southern areas of the valley - it is so called because its large, fleshy, pliable leaves were used to wrap butter in the days before fridges!

The sighting of a water rail near Park Street and a green sandpiper north of Redbourn are very pleasing. I have received a few reports of kingfishers being seen, also grey wag-tails, goldcrests, goldfinches, meadow pipits, and a chiffchaff in mid-March as well as many of the more common birds. We also seem to be getting jackdaws in our valley.

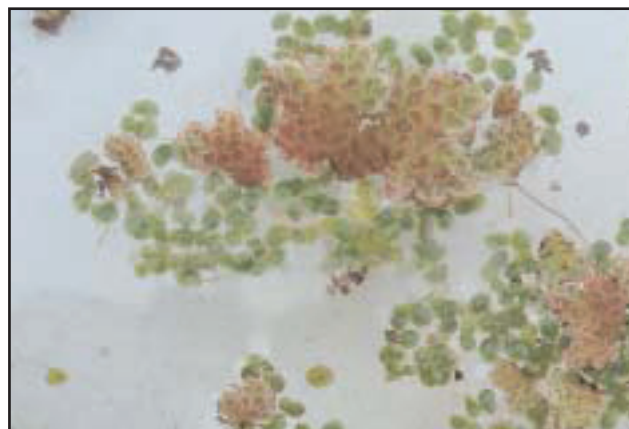
Most unwelcome was a report of hare coursing although I have subsequently had one sighting of a hare reported so perhaps they have not all been scared away.

Fish reports include chubb, trout, roach and gudgeon. A red admiral butterfly was recorded on 18th March.

We welcome a new Bailiff David Bunney to our team. He has taken over the stretch from Holywell Hill to the Alban Way replacing Roger Sansom whom we thank very much for his contribution over several years.



*Red weed in the Ver near former Dolittle Mill, March 2009 (Close-up of the flower below)  
- Ernie Leahy*





As I write these notes in late March we are at the time of the year when our winter visitors such as snipe, golden plover, fieldfares and redwings are leaving for their breeding territories in the north and our summer visitors are just beginning to arrive. So far I have seen wheatears, chiffchaffs and a little ringed plover (not strictly in the Ver Valley but close by) which along with sand martins and ring ouzels are traditionally the earliest arrivals. The annual influx is spread over quite a long period and it will probably be almost two months before late arrivals like spotted flycatchers turn up.

The little ringed plover is one of my favourite birds not just because they are one of the first indicators of spring but also because they have a strong local connection. The first pair to breed in the UK was at Tring Reservoirs in 1938 but it was not until after the war that they became an established breeding species in the UK. On mainland Europe they had bred mainly on the shingle banks of rivers. In the UK they were helped considerably by the gravel workings necessary for the post war building boom which provided just the right ground conditions for them to form their nest scrapes. It still seems strange that they used these basically industrial sites. The slightly larger ringed plover can be seen throughout the year whereas the little ringed plover is very much a migrant but can hardly be called a summer visitor as it turns up in mid March. The little ringed plover can be distinguished by its yellow eye ring. Also it has flesh coloured legs and a dark beak, not the orange legs and beaks of ringed plovers. They are very vocal, especially around their nest sites and they are usually heard before they are seen

In 2001 four pairs of little ringed plovers and eight pairs of lapwings successfully raised broods on the flood plain on the western side of the Ver near Luton Lane. That winter the Ver was at its maximum flow in over 30 years and this winter we have conditions approaching this with some huge flood ponds all along the Ver Valley, so it could be that little ringed plovers will breed again. 2001 was easily the best year in my memory for bird watching locally and hopefully 2009 will be as good. That spring ringed plovers, dunlin, common sandpiper, redshank, greenshank and even a marsh harrier were all seen.

This winter has been especially good for snipe with at least 30 resident for most of the winter and at least one green sandpiper feeding on the shrimps in the Ver. Apparently they need several thousand of these every day to survive. Although snipe used to breed in the Ver Valley up to the seventies they will all be gone by the time you read these notes.



*Water rail from the Burydell Lane Bridge  
- John Fisher*

My best recent sighting was a water rail from the Burydell Lane Bridge at Park Street. No doubt there are several water rails along the Ver as they betray themselves by their pig like squeals. However they are seldom seen but this one was feeding right out in the middle of the river and it obligingly stayed there while I got my camera out and took a record shot. Not the best photo in this newsletter but one I did not expect.

There is a list of birds seen along the Ver Valley on our web site. If you have any comments on the status or notice any omissions please let me know. Also if you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com).

## **"Handsome Herons and High Dramas in the Treetops..."**

Time is very short, but the RSPB is manning a (free) viewpoint in Verulamium Park to study the herons building nests in the tall trees on the "large lake" island. This consists of a caravan with free use of binoculars, telescopes etc. Times: 10 to 4, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays to 26 April. Andy Webb was told that there were 16 pairs of herons this year (23 pairs in 2008).

## **Subscription Reminder**

**John Cadisch**

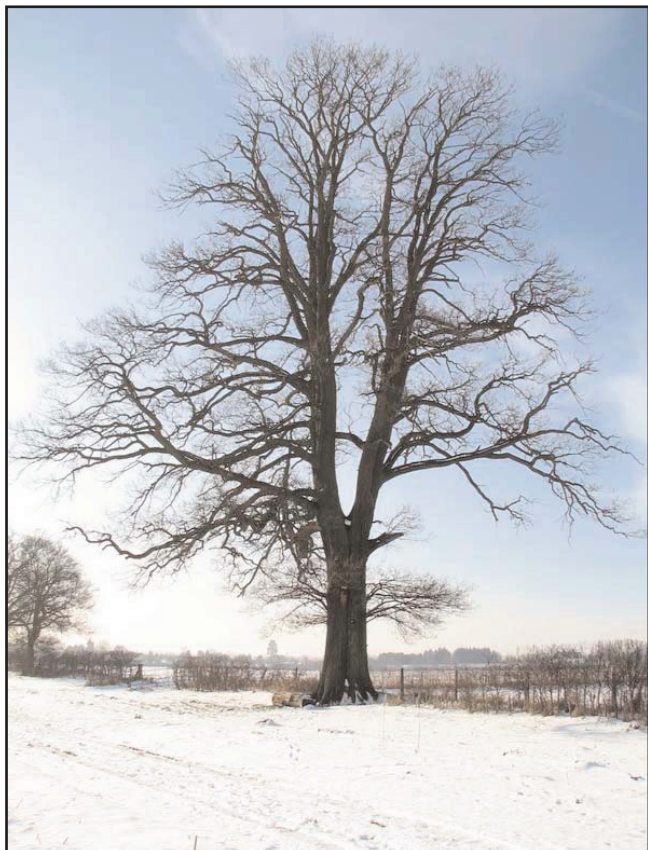
This will have to be the last "Newsletter" for those who have not renewed their Subs from last September. Reminder letters went to 40 people at the end of January, a small number are outstanding. The rates are unchanged, £20 for Five Years or £5 Annual Subscription.

Our website is quite comprehensive but paying the subscription ensures the latest news will arrive through your letter-box every three months.

## Printing and Despatch of "Newsletters"

We are pleased to confirm that Three Valleys Water sponsors the printing and despatch of our "Newsletter". Colour printing is available every time now, we are most grateful to Three Valleys Water for their support.

Particular thanks are extended to Mike Pocock, Rob Sage and Wilma Carr in the Water Resources Department.



*The Big Oak Tree - Green Lane to Porridge Pot -  
February 2009 - John Fisher 2009*



*Floodwater at Markyate Cell - February 2009  
- Bob Norrish*

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# Ver Valley Society

