



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

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www.riverver.co.uk

President: Peter Fox, MBE



A yellow wagtail posing perfectly for John Fisher's camera.

July Open Meeting

The "northern reaches" are being catered for this month, please note date and time:

Tuesday 22nd July - 7.30 pm
Markyate Village Hall

For those not familiar with this venue, turn off Markyate by-pass and enter the southern end of the village. Head north along the High Street (former A5). About halfway through take sharp (and narrow) left turn into Cavendish Road. After about a half-mile the village hall is signposted to the right. [Members needing transport should contact any committee member, we will do our best to make suitable arrangements.]

After the usual business and refreshments, local naturalist and author **Ian Gamble** will speak on *The Natural History of Chalk and Limestone Downland*. There are sure to be many references to the local Chilterns habitats. See also our website.

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

The VVS Committee has now agreed new membership subscription arrangements to come into force in September. After very many years service, John will be handing over as Treasurer in September to Rachel Young, who is already acting as Membership Secretary. John and Rachel are working hard to achieve a smooth hand-over and set up the changes. VVS owes John a considerable debt of gratitude for all his work in both these rôles over the years. We are working to produce a new membership brochure reflecting the changes to come into force also in September.

We have also been busy preparing our display boards and many other materials to enable us to take part in three "River Days" in Verulamium Park. These were organised by SADC, with many organisations taking part, to take place on the last Saturdays of May, June and July. Sadly the May event was washed out but perhaps some of you came to the one in June which despite mixed weather was very successful with many interested people attending or maybe you will be able to come on 26th July. See photos on page six.

New Treasurer, New Subscription rates

John Cadisch

After a lengthy period as Treasurer and Membership Secretary I will be handing over fully to Rachel Young on 1st September, she is familiar with such work having been treasurer in another capacity.

The VVS committee has agreed some important changes to Subscriptions which will take effect from the same date. No longer will there be a Five Year option although naturally all who have joined on that basis will have their subscriptions honoured. Instead we will be asking **£8** for **Annual Membership**, reducing to **£7** annually for those who take out **Standing Orders** (forms available on request). Until 1st September subscriptions at the old rate can be accepted but after that date new members - and renewals - will be at the new Annual rate as described above.

Rachel's address etc. is given elsewhere - you can expect to hear from her when your subscription expires.

Verulamium Park Notes

John Cadisch

The paved area outside the "Fighting Cocks", where some coping stones had fallen into the river, has been restored to a good standard. This key location had been enhanced in 1993 when Sheila Burton was mayor and was overdue for an upgrade. After 21 years the "solid wood" seats provided are now in poor shape and will need to be renewed.

At last work on new signage for the Park is in hand, in co-operation with the CMS and under the close supervision of St Albans Council's Green Spaces Officer (Daniel Flitton). Interpretation panels, with watercolour pictures by our talented committee member, Ernie Leahy, will be installed at park entrances, these will help to maintain its Green Flag status. In addition, new finger-posts will assist visitors by pointing the way to key features. Meanwhile, a good idea as to how the panels will look can be found in the July "Hertfordshire Life" (pages 76/77), thanks to Jon Collins, CMS Project Officer, for his two-page feature article.

The lack of rainfall in early June caused an algae build-up on the surface of the large lake, it is unclear what action (if any) is being taken to disperse it.

A small group of volunteers recently applied mulch to consolidate a newly-planted hedge parallel to Bluehouse Hill, it was hard work on a swelteringly hot day!

Future Open Meetings

Ernie Leahy

The following dates have been confirmed:

28th October: ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, plus speaker/s. St Michael's Parish Centre, St Albans, 7.30 pm. Nominations invited.

28th January 2015: Open Meeting, Redbourn Village Hall, 7.30

The high aquifer after the wet winter kept healthy flows through the dry months of March and April, both had only about half the average rainfall (see table) but May was well above average so flows are still good into June but reducing. The aquifer is still four metres above the average although it is becoming a little lower each month through the summer as is to be expected. At the end of May there was still a small flow from Markyate Cell which has now ceased, with just a little standing water in the channel. The head of the river is now south of Markyate. On the whole paths that were flooded have now dried out well although there are still a few boggy places in Verulamium Park.

Month 2014	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
March	139.70 [132.79]	28.2 [-22.57]
April	139.61 [132.38]	31.5 [-23.54]
May	138.63 [134.1]	82.8 [+28.14]
June	137.49 [133.32]	[Not yet available]

The relatively mild winter has meant that all vegetation had an early start and growth is now quite prolific, so that the river channel is becoming quite blocked in many places with reeds, watercress, grasses etc so although flow can be seen measuring flow is not possible for all bailiffs. Where fallen trees and branches have still to be cleared, blockages cause build up of debris and rubbish. Some of the paths are quite overgrown with rampant nettles, burdock and hogweed.

The invasive Japanese knotweed seems slightly less prevalent following some attempts at control last year and the Action Group will soon be having another working party to tackle Himalayan balsam (see Sue's report). However there are many nicer plants doing well on the banks, meadows and in the hedges alongside the river among them lots of elderflowers, dog roses, flag iris, ragged robin, water mint and forget-me-not as well as crowfoot in the stream.



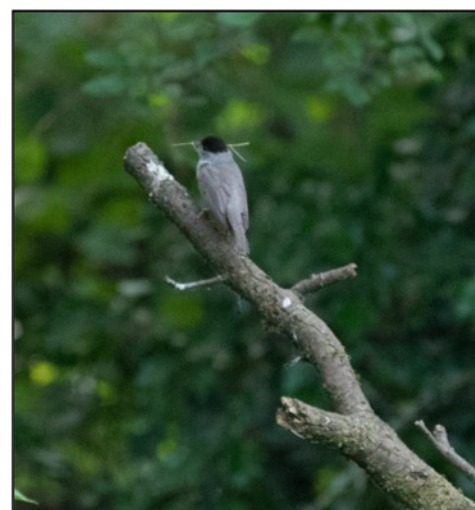
Yellow flag. [Jane Gardiner]

Birds and butterflies have also been doing well. Notably our bailiffs have reported breeding pairs of redshank, gadwall, lapwing, and little egrets, a first in the area (see photos with John Fisher's bird notes).

Other bird reports have included tufted duck with young, little grebes, pochards, grey wagtails, treecreepers, kingfishers, blackcaps, whitethroats,

chiffchaffs, skylarks, green woodpeckers and nesting greater spotted woodpeckers, parakeets, buzzards, red kites, a cuckoo, swifts, swallows and martins among many others. (See John's Bird Notes for more on birds).

A good variety of different fish have been reported; as well as brown trout there are lots of bullheads, minnows, sticklebacks, chubb and even a stone loach and gudgeon.



Blackcap. [Paul Foster]



Among the insects most of the common butterflies have been seen as well cinnabar and hawk moths. Dragonflies and damselflies, especially the beautiful banded demoiselles are regularly reported. Mayflies and lacewings have been flying and those bailiffs who are doing regular riverfly monitoring report generally positive results, all of which indicates we have a very healthy chalk stream in the River Ver this year.

Banded demoiselle. [Jane Gardiner]

Although we have become used to seeing little egrets along the Ver Valley in recent years, for the first time ever they have actually bred in the valley. Many people had seen them on and around the willows on the island heronry in Verulamium Park this year and it was wonderful to hear that four chicks were ringed in June by Barry Trevis, who has ringed about 350 young grey herons from the island colony since 1996. From here I quote from Barry's report:



*Four Little Egrets on the Verulamium lake island.
[Keith Smith / Barry Trevis]*

"They have bred for the past few years on islands at Amwell Nature Reserve, near Ware, also at Stockers Lake Nature Reserve at Rickmansworth. They mainly breed amongst grey heron colonies, although they start to nest much later in the spring than their larger counterparts. It was considered only a matter of time before they explored the heavily vegetated island at Verulamium with its long-established heronry (currently 14 nests) and would attempt to breed. Up to eight egrets have been seen around the islands in 2014 and it is anticipated this spectacular bird will be seen successfully breeding in greater numbers at Verulamium Park over the next few years.

We discovered the nest high in the large hawthorn on the SE end of the island, next to three of the heron nests, on 31 May 2014 with four recently hatched chicks inside. We returned on June

9 and ringed all four. We also added colour-rings, which is part of a Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust national scheme to monitor the spread of the species and their survival rates. Although I have ringed six full grown little egrets at Lemsford Springs Nature Reserve over the past 11 years and Rye Meads have ringed one, these are the first little egret chicks to have ever been ringed in Herts. Observations of the colour rings on little egrets would be most useful. The rings are fitted on the tibia (above the 'knee') on each leg. Observers need to note the ring colour and a digit inscribed on each ring. So it is a 'scope job unless the bird is very close. They can email me at trevis1@tiscali.co.uk if they want to report a colour-ringed egret in Herts or via the BTO at Thetford".

Last year was a poor one for the Ver Valley barn owls, almost certainly because the vole population had crashed and they were deprived of their main prey. I always hoped that although there was not enough prey for them to get into breeding condition, sufficient adults would survive to continue the Ver Valley population. This is obviously what has happened as we are seeing a fantastic recovery as three pairs have already raised a total of eleven youngsters who should be fledging in mid July. We are now up to 63 barn owls and eight little owls since our first success in 2006.

That first year we had a brood of five and mainly we get broods of three or four, but this year for the third time we had a five and when they were ringed, measured and weighed they turned out to be the heaviest brood we ever had, all weighing in at about 400 grams. This is a really good sign that the adults are finding plenty of prey in order to feed such a large brood.

Although the improved aquifer level and flows are of no benefit to barn owls, many other species have benefited from the wet conditions. I have not seen so many breeding pairs of lapwings along the Upper Ver for years, with displaying pairs all along the valley from Verlam End to Gorhambury. The huge pond just south of Pre Mill, which formed in January and is still thriving in July, was just about the best place to see lapwing chicks as they fed around the damp margins of the pool. There was also a pair of redshanks around this pool for several weeks this spring and it is possible that they bred. For a few days there were five little ringed plovers present and a pair did stay on to raise two chicks by the end of June. Other good sightings on this pond were a pair of dabchicks, as many as twenty tufted ducks on one day and a brood of 12 newly hatched gadwalls. Yellow wagtails which were present in great numbers last year have been seen less this year but a pair did take up territory near Scout Farm in Redbourn but as far as I know they not did breed. Pochards and tufted ducks both bred on the lake.



Barn owl youngster. [Paul Foster]

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

Some of our volunteers have helped with repairing and building more deflectors at Riverside. A very successful session occurred in May with the CMS and a corporate exercise with the usually office bound staff from the Environment Agency. More work was also carried out at Riverside with the Wednesday CMS volunteers and VVS helpers in early July.

Josh Kalms was recognised by St Stephen Parish Council for his hard work as a VVS volunteer at Riverside and Moor Mill by being presented with their Community Youth award. Our congratulations and thanks to him.

The deflectors, and the tree clearance along Riverside to reduce shading, do appear to be improving the invertebrate and fish population, with particularly high numbers of Mayflies and an amazing hatch of adult Mayflies in May. Hopefully we will see further improvements in the Sopwell Nunnery Green area as the work there comes to fruition.

St Albans School Conservation Group and some of our volunteers have continued to work on the hedges in Verulamium Park, finishing recently with mulching to suppress weeds. The mulch was paid for with some of the money from the former Friends of Verulamium Park.



Hedgrow mulching, Verulamium Park. [Jon Collins]

VVS Action Group Programme

- **Saturday 19th July** **10.00 – noon Moor Mill, Park Street,** removal of Himalayan Balsam.
- **Saturday 20th September** **10.00 – noon Sopwell Nunnery Green,** building deflectors or clearing vegetation around the Willow Tunnel
- **Saturday 18th October** **10.00 – noon River Red, Redbourn Common,** installing deflectors

As this programme may be subject to change at short notice, if you intend joining us, please contact me so that I can email you if there are any changes sue.frearson@which.net It is also helpful to know the numbers of volunteers intending to help so that I can borrow the correct number of tools from CMS.

An Orchid Walk in the Ver Valley

Ernest Leahy

On a cloudy Sunday 15th June - 35 enthusiastic walkers gathered to find some of the local orchids on a five-mile walk around Redbourn .The walk was jointly led by Roger Thornhill of the Friends of the Nickey Line and Ver Valley's John Fisher.

The first find was of a lovely group of bee orchids on a small roadside plot where many of us were able to take some close up photos of some of the 23 flowering plants.

The walk continued to Redbournbury Farm where John Fisher explained about the successful Barn Owl Project showing the regularly used nest box to the group. We walked on to eventually cross to Redbourn Lane to the recently reopened footpath finding many pyramidal orchids on the chalk embankment.

The footpath was recently cleared by members of the VVS Action group who had removed many of the encroaching brambles, saplings, and overhanging branches to reclaim a route along the top of the embankment down to the roundabout near the Redbourn by-pass.

Roger then concluded the walk with some interesting information about the propagation of wild orchids. During the walk several yellow wagtails and a green woodpecker was seen.



Bee orchid.

River Ver Day in Verulamium
Park, 28th June.
All photos by Sue Frearson



Our local water provider Affinity Water, has reached agreement with the Environment Agency to reduce the amount of water it abstracts by 42 Mld across it's region by 2020. In the Ver catchment area, they will be reducing abstraction by 14.66 Mld (3.2 million gallons per day in old money), and whilst not all of it will end up in the River, it will help across the area in maintaining the level of the aquifers.

Like all of the Water Companies across England & Wales, Affinity Water are required by law to produce a Water Resources Management Plan covering the next 25 years, which is updated every five years. The current plan covers the period up to 2040, and has to take into account a range of factors such as population growth, water usage, climate change as well as the impact on the environment. Also within the plan are a number of objectives that they must adhere to, some of which include; ensure water abstractions are sustainable and do not damage the environment, take account of future uncertainties including higher environmental standards and to make best use of existing resources whilst maintaining water quality.

The Ver is considered to have a high conservation value, as well as having recreation value, but along with other chalk rivers in the area, is failing to meet Good Ecological Status. Four out of Affinity's seven sources have been shown to affect the river flows, and as well as the reduction of 14.66 Mld, there is also a requirement for morphological mitigation work. This work will include such things as deflectors, channel modifications or changing the shape of the river to improve the flow in certain areas. Provision for funding for these activities has already been included in the price adjustment agreed by Ofwat.

In addition to the above, the Environment Agency has identified further investigations and option appraisals for the Ver, so Affinity will be working on these to ascertain what further improvements can be made to the catchment. The Environment Agency has the Ver on its "Restoring Sustainable Abstraction List" for further investigation; the work to identify what can be achieved will be identified in the next planning period.

The reduction in water abstracted will be replaced by; reducing leakage by 14%, more ambitious water saving plans, better education of customers to reduce unnecessary water usage, and to provide additional water resources from surface water & transfers from neighbouring water companies.

Whilst this progress is very welcome, and Affinity should be congratulated on their plans, we believe that abstraction can be reduced further, and we will continue to discuss with Affinity how they can achieve this for the benefit of the Ver.



Healthy water indicator - water crowfoot. [Jane Gardiner]

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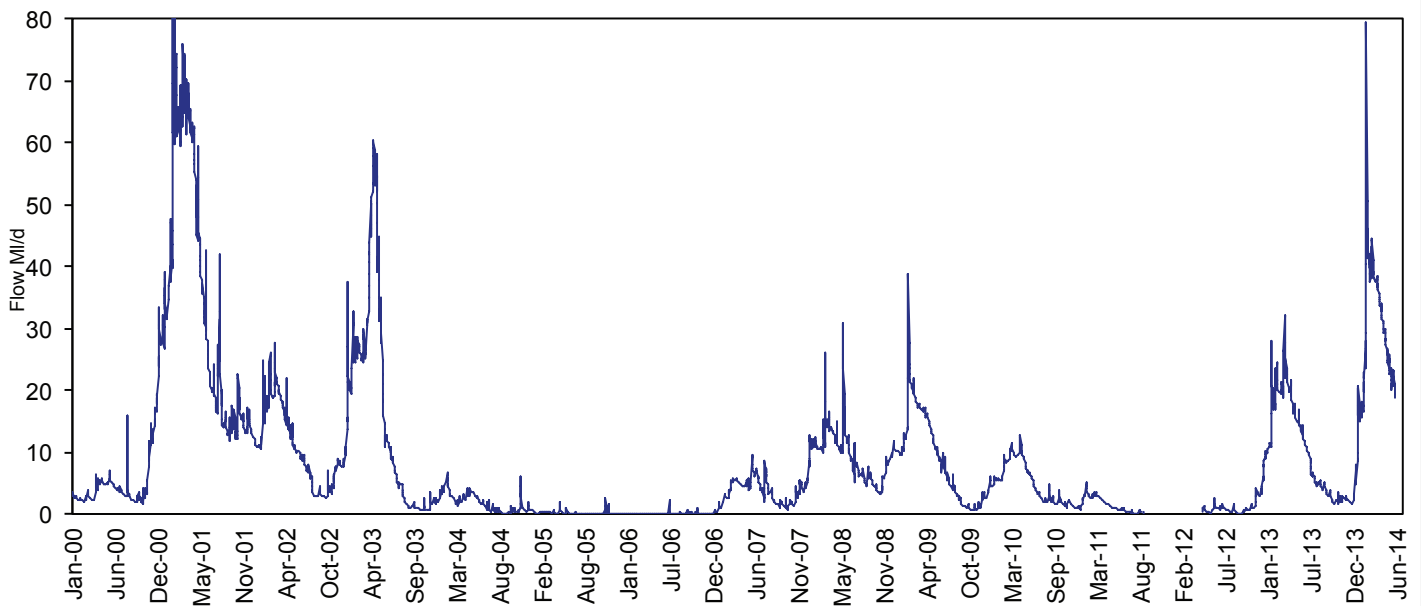
Newsletter Layout
John Trew
(Verulam Angling Club)

HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060
("Report all environmental incidents")
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188
"Cleaner District" (SADC):
0845 125 8000
Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325

We are grateful to Affinity Water for supplying periodic ground water and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental Services for printing and distributing these Newsletters.

**Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2000 to Date**



**Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 2000 - To Date
Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404**

