



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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www.riverver.co.uk

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EA "Floodline": 0845 988 1188
EA Customer Service: 0870 850 6506

April Open Meeting

We particularly look forward to welcoming "southern end" members on:

TUESDAY 1st MAY 2012
(7.30 pm)

**This will be held at St Stephen Parish Centre, Station Road,
Bricket Wood (near "Gate" pub), large room downstairs**

After Chairman's report, question-and-answer and a break for refreshments, we have booked a speaker from the Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust. He is Tom Day, Head of Living Landscapes, we will also be hearing about how the H&MWT works.

Accompanying Tom will be newly-appointed Charlotte Bell, their Living Rivers project officer.

Some tips on water saving with aquifer Levels so low

- Limit time under the shower (use egg-timer)
- Don't wash hands/clean teeth with running water
- Use toilet "short flush" button only
- Save water run off before "hot" comes through
- Don't even think of using a hosepipe!

To underline above points, Rob Sage, Veolia Water's senior Asset Manager, will be coming to our Bricket Wood meeting. He will certainly be reminding everybody that our part of the country uses more water per head than anywhere else (190 litres per day per person). Abstraction at Bow Bridge pumping station has been reduced which helps the river a little.

Next Meeting

Please note that an error occurred in the last Newsletter. The next Open Meeting will be at 7.30 pm in Markyate Village Hall with Allen Beechey as guest speaker - but the correct date is **Thursday 26th July**.

The AGM at St Michael's is unchanged, 7.30 pm, St Michael's Parish Centre, **Tuesday 23rd October**. [AGM voting - only paid-up members.]

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

The slight silver lining of low river flow has enabled our volunteers to reach parts of the river normally inaccessible to us. This has enabled us to remove a great deal of litter ranging from deck chairs, various plastic boxes, to the usual selection of bottles and cans along the river. Another advantage is that we have now cleared most of the dead overhanging blackthorn at Riverside and working with the St Albans School Conservation Group, removed many of the sapling ash trees.



*Action Group at work, Riverside Way (Rachel and Jane)
(Sue Frearson)*

This compliments the work of the HCC contractors who have now cleared about 200metres of overhanging vegetation below Halstead Spring, in order to allow more light to reach the river and the banks and so increase biodiversity. So far members of the public have been very complimentary about this experimental section, so we can hope that this will encourage HCC to remove some more of the Ash trees to open up this area.

Work has also been done to provide a circular walk through the adjacent willow coppice area, and so enhance the nature reserve. With the encouragement of an information board it is hoped that more people will divert from their walk along the river to explore this area. Whilst there recently we heard Chiff Chaff, and saw Tree Creepers, and Brimstone and Speckled Wood butterflies.

Our work for this season is now complete, apart from some possible litter clearance and removal of Japanese knot weed, that should not disturb the wildlife.

If you would like to join our volunteers please e-mail me sue.frearson@which.net so that I can inform you of future activities. The website should also carry information about future tasks, which will include the Sopwell section of the river and more work behind the Chequers in Redbourn.



*Same location, with St Albans School volunteers
(Sue Frearson)*

Contacting members via email

John Cadisch

New members, and those renewing their subs, often notify their e-mail addresses at same time. We hold this information securely in case there is a need between Newsletters to notify a walk or a talk or similar event. Rest assured that the details will only be used for that purpose.

Those people who have not so far provided this information are invited to do so. Please let me know in the first instance, I will then pass them in batches to our Webmaster.

Membership reminder

John Cadisch

Most members have renewed the subscriptions that became overdue as from last September, following the reminders sent out in February. For those who haven't, this will have to be their last Newsletter. *If in doubt, contact me!*

The VVS Annual Accounts were approved at our AGM, let me know if a copy is wanted.

Firstly an apology that I am having to write this in mid March before I fly off to USA for Easter with family, so by the time you read this some things may have changed.

All the Bailiffs are very worried about the state of the river after this exceptionally dry and generally mild winter. Many have no water to measure and all are concerned about the build up of debris and rubbish since there is no flow to wash it away. There is some continuous flow from about Dolittle Mill to the south of Redbourn but it is exceptionally low and unlikely to last much longer unless we get some exceptionally wet weather soon. As you can see from the table below, so far this year the rainfall has been well below average and first half of March seems to have been no better. The tributaries, the River Red and Hanstead Brook have only been flowing intermittently after heavy rain. The groundwater continues to diminish at a time of year when normally the aquifer is recharging; the recharge this winter has been only about 6% of normal and so the groundwater was at all time lows for Feb and March. You may have seen my comments about the situation in the local press, when I emphasised the need for everyone to use water as sparingly as they possibly can.

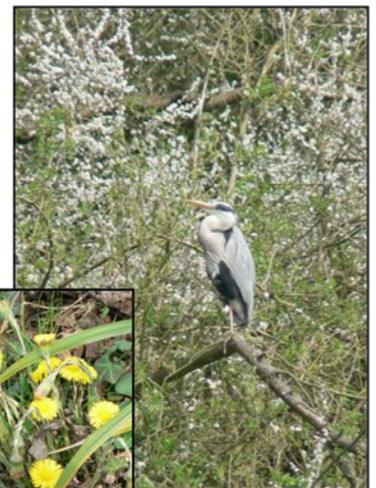
2011/2012	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
December	125.26 [130.56]	125.75 [132.79]
January	125.98 [131.30]	58 .0 [-11.97]
February	125.82[132. 38]	58 .0 [-11.97]
March	125.75 [132.79]	Not yet available

Some of our winter visitors were still around in early March, lapwings, fieldfares and redwings were being reported as well as some egrets and snipe but as they will go soon and our summer visitors should be arriving any time now, chiffchaffs and black throats are already here. Plenty of linnets, yellow hammers and skylarks are about and kingfishers are occasionally being seen. A little owl has been seen and there are plenty of water fowl about where there is any water. Herons are again nesting in Verulamium Park and are seen regularly up and down the valley. Wildlife other than rabbits and squirrels is not often reported at this time of year but moles are active, the occasional muntjac and a few hares have been seen. Where there remains some reasonably deep water at the southern end of the river, chub and brown trout have been reported and signal crayfish continue to be only too abundant. A few butterflies, brimstone and tortoiseshell, have been seen out of hibernation on warm, sunny days.



Lesser celandine.

On a lighter note, after all the gloom about lack of water, the spring flowers are really beginning. The blackthorn bushes are frothy with blossom, the red alder catkins and bright green weeping willows are decorating the banks, coltsfoot and celandines are appearing, the pussy willow buds are beginning to burst as are butterbur spikes (below left) and soon we can look forward to marsh marigolds (below centre) and lady's smock (below right) in the water meadows.



Coltsfoot (left), heron in blackthorn (above).



I have had several phone calls and emails this year and nearly all of them have been about concerns regarding the disappointing numbers of garden birds this winter. I think the main reason for this is that mainly it has been a mild winter and there has been an abundance of berries and seeds in the countryside so that birds have not had to rely so much as usual on garden feeders. I was away in a warmer part of the world in early February so I missed the sub zero temperatures and the snow. I understand that there was a massive influx of redwings in local gardens and I am sure this explains why my cotoneaster bushes, which were covered in red berries when I left, were stripped bare on my return. So I missed the redwings but I did get to see Magnificent Frigate Birds and White Tailed Tropic Birds – now you don't get many of those in the Ver Valley!

Rose ringed parakeets are now well established as a breeding bird in the UK and are gradually spreading out from the original colony in Surrey. They are of Asian origin but were kept as caged birds in most European countries and escaped birds have survived spectacularly well. There is an urban myth that the UK population stems from birds released by Jimi Hendrix in the sixties. With their bright green plumage, long tails and raucous calls they are unmistakable, but last month was the first time I have heard of one on garden feeders in Redbourn. In St Albans they are present most of the time at The Watercress Association's Nature Reserve, which is alongside the Ver at Riverside Road. If you have a spare hour in St Albans this place is well worth a visit. They regularly have siskins, redpolls, bullfinches, water rail and heron as well as the parakeets, which love them or hate them, are here to stay. Our winters are no problem for a bird that survives in the foothills of the Himalayas.

On the first Saturday in March Ernie Leahy and I led a group of Redbourn WI ladies on a bird walk along the Ver. We started off in drizzle at St Michaels but by the time we had walked through Gorhambury and arrived at Shafford the sun was shining and red kites and buzzards were soaring over the valley. We were treated to great views of several pairs of both raptors with one pair of kites flying very close to us. We also saw a few pairs of lapwings, green woodpecker,

kestrel, heron and little egret. Also impressive were several singing skylarks. The sad thing is that with the last two dry winters the Ver has been dry north of Redbourn for sometime and by mid-summer it is likely to be dry right through to St Albans.



Common snipe (John Fisher)

Nest month we are looking forward to taking two colonies of Redbourn Beavers on bird walks around Verulam Lake mainly to see the heronry on the lake island. The RSPB have their "Heron Watch" in place again this year which finishes in mid April but there still should be some activity during late April - well worth a visit. In early March, nine nests were occupied, and at the end of March one nest had three well developed young. This is a disappointing as in previous years there have been as many as 15 nests. I have heard that up to four

pairs of herons are nesting at Frogmore Pits so possibly this accounts for the low number on Verulam Lake.

For the last few years we have seen huge flocks of golden plover sometimes numbering 2,000 along the valley. They always seem to favour the field between Redbourn and St Albans usually opposite the old Punch Bowl pub and just right at the end of March my old friend the VVS President and I found a flock of about 200 in the usual field. They blended in well with the freshly ploughed earth and were resting before flying north to their moorland breeding territories. I saw a similar small flock in the autumn on their way south so it seems this field is like a golden plover transport café.

The committee have just approved the purchase of another two barn owl boxes and these will be put up during the summer, ready for the 2013 breeding season. Last year only one box was used so I am hoping we have another really good year. Barn owls are a fantastic conservation success story with numbers recovering to levels not recorded for decades. It is reckoned that as many as 75% of barn owls now nest in boxes. When I was out the other day I found a little owl perched on the platform of one of the VVS barn owl boxes so I am really hoping it may use it for nesting. We will have to wait and see.

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

To our recent knowledge we have just the two reptiles surviving in the Ver Valley. We have small populations of slow worms and grass snakes which are both harmless and infrequently encountered. Both species are protected in the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981.

Slow Worm colonies are known in Redbourn and in the Watercress Wildlife Reserve in St Albans although they are likely to be found in suitable habitats like allotments in the southern end of the Ver Valley. The slow worm often mistaken for a small snake is in fact a legless lizard sometimes found warming up its cold blooded metabolism on sunny days, usually in a dryer location after hibernation which is from October to March. Most of their lives is spent in small groups under natural debris but often they prefer large articles of human rubbish such as corrugated iron sheets for shelter.



Slow Worms (Ernie Leahy)

Adult slow worms are about 40 cm long and their shiny skin colour is a soft grey-pink though females have a brown dorsal line. Up to 20 young are born live and are 6 cm long usually darker brown taking three years to reach breeding maturity. Their diet is mostly slugs, worms and spiders. If you encounter one it will probably slowly slide away.

Grass Snakes have been infrequently reported in the Watercress Reserve, the adjacent fishing lakes, Park Street Pits, Frogmore and the Moor Mill area. They also hibernate in concealed underground holes from October to March to emerge on a warm spring day sometimes seen in

a pre-mating inter-twined group. They have an affinity for water as their favoured prey are frogs and tadpoles but they also have a fondness for Short Tailed Field Voles. The colour of the majority of these snakes is a pale olive green upper with black markings spaced laterally along the body. The head has a darker crown over yellow and black cheeks. Up to 40 eggs are laid in warm decaying vegetation before the 15cm long hatch in late summer though they will take about three years to reach about 80cm and maturity. The most likely sighting is of one swimming away but if you attempt to catch one you will encounter its foul smell which is emitted to deter enemies.



Grass snake - painting by Ernie Leahy

Access and Interpretation Project (“Discover the River Ver”) John Cadisch

The Walks folders, with which we were heavily involved in conjunction with the CMS, continue to receive favourable mention. “Walks Packs” are still available from Jane Gardiner and other committee members, we ask for a small donation and/or a year’s membership for new people.

Andy Webb, our ever-active Chairman, is on the short list for “Environmental Champion of the Year”, we wish him the best of luck. In another category, “Community Project of the Year”, our “Discover the River Ver” project is in the final three, we are hopeful here too.

Andy has recently moved to London Colney, his new address is on the front page.



Social networks are an easy way of communicating to others what you are doing, passing information and opinions and advertising events, whether you're an individual, business or group. They have taken over the world, or some people's worlds. Facebook is one of the largest social networks.

The Ver Valley Society is still a well kept secret! To spread the word we are setting up a Facebook site, so others can enjoy our walks and talks!

If you use a computer, Facebook is easy to join and use. We have set up the "Ver Valley Society" Facebook page. If you are a Facebook user search for "Ver Valley Society" and select the shown entry. On your first visit please "Like" the page, you will then be shown any postings (entries that we make on the site) on your News Feed. You can then, at any time, search for the site and read any of the content, which will be updated routinely with any information we wish to issue. You can post your own comments on the page that all subscribers will be able to see. When you post comments on the page all your Facebook friends will see your posting. You should encourage your Facebook friends to "Like" the "Ver Valley Society" Facebook page, and hopefully, they will then be aware of our society and its splendid published walks, talks, and led walks!

We, and any subscribers, can also add photos and video clips.

Our river stretches (every 25 years) for almost 18 miles and there are a lot of great events taking place over the year, which we can remind you of in a timely fashion, for example:

- Ver Valley Society talks
- Ver Valley Society led walks
- Ver Valley Society (Sue's) working parties
- St Albans Residents First Weekend
- St Michael's Street Folk evening , Wednesday July 4.
- St Albans Beer Festival, 26th - 29th September

So, Facebook has many advantages:

- It's free to use
- People can easily opt in to receive our postings
- Postings we make are immediate
- It is easier to maintain than a web site
- It keeps people up to date in between newsletters
- It is interactive, you can respond to ask questions, pass comment, post photos
- We will be global

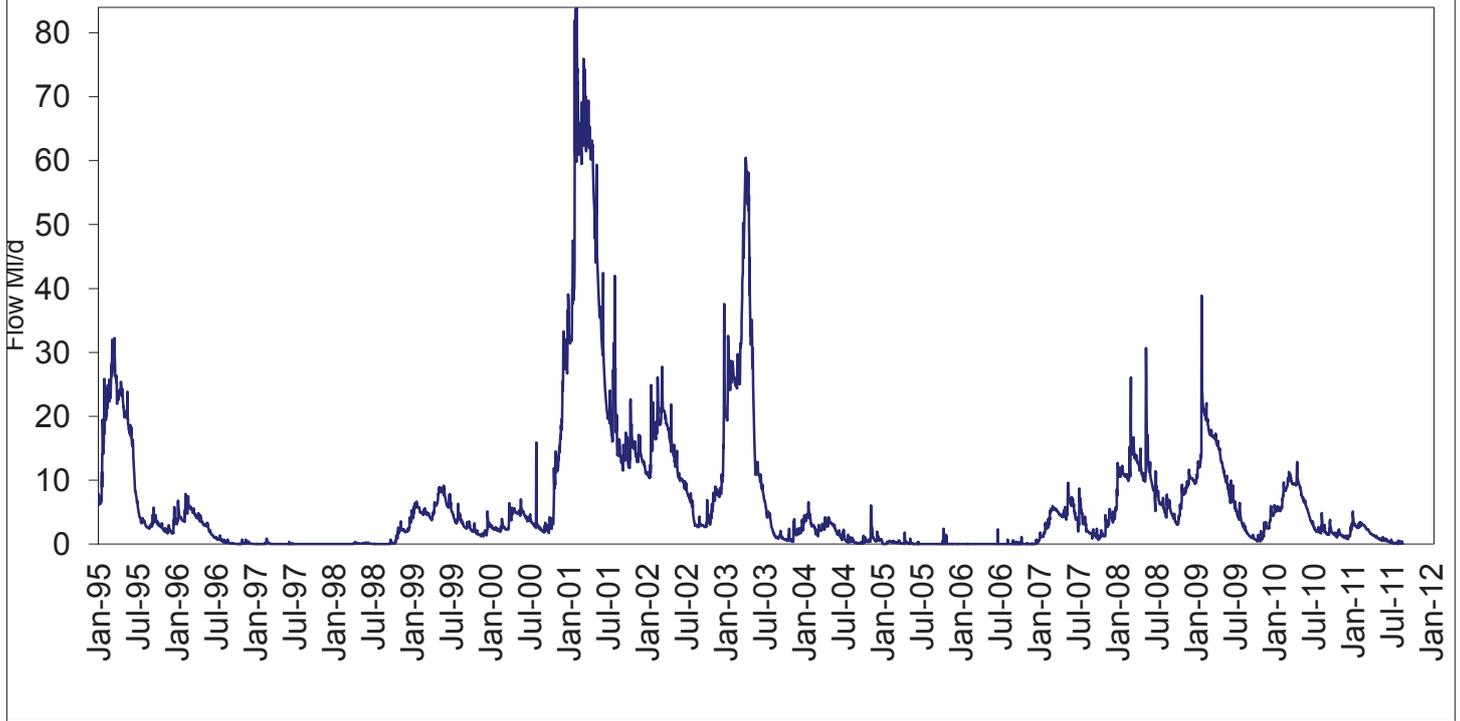
Please sign in to Facebook, search for "Ver Valley Society", select the shown entry, and clicks "Like"! Let the information flow!



Views of the Ver from Bob Norrish

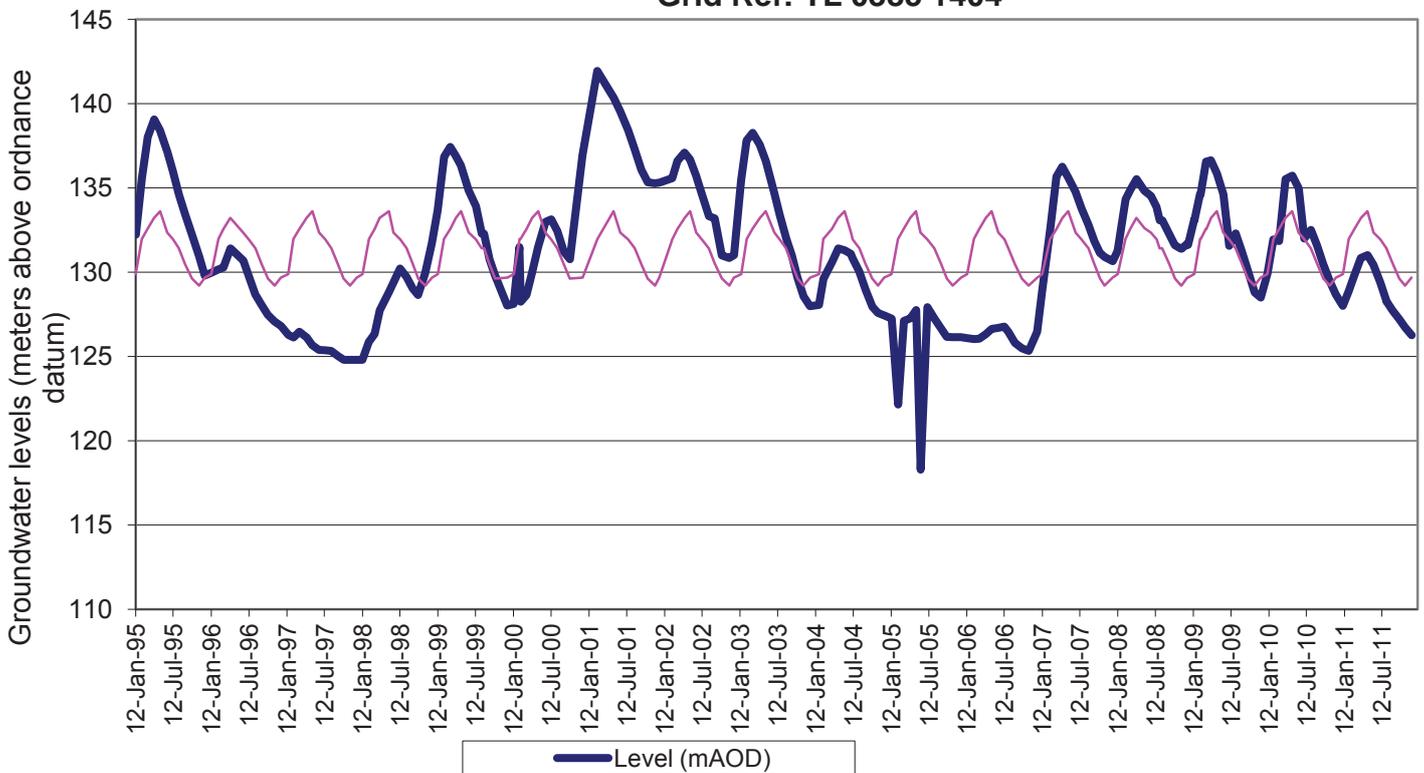


Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 1995 to Date



Actual level - Blue. Average level - Mauve

Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 1995 - To Date Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404



The Ver Valley Society would like to thank the following:

Veolia Water for providing the flow and ground water charts.

Veolia Environmental for financing the cost of printing and distribution.