



Notice of 45th Annual General Meeting

Thursday 21st October 2021 at 7pm

Online Zoom

Guest speaker:

Josh Kalms, HMWT
with a Water Vole update.

AGM



Water Vole release day
©Alison Debenham

To get us back in line with the Society's constitution, it's two AGMs in one year! The evening will feature reports from the Chairman and Officers with plenty of opportunity for questions and answers. One of the most exciting events of 2021 has been the reintroduction of water voles to the Ver. Typically, our guest speaker will be Josh Kalms, HMWT Water Vole Officer who will not only give us an update on the reintroduction but share some of the fascinating footage that's been captured on the project's trailcams – not only water voles of course, but some other rare and surprising creatures too!

Book your place at the virtual AGM by using this link in advance: <http://ow.ly/CEOn50GbWot>

As per the Society's constitution "at each Annual General Meeting the Officers and Executive Committee shall retire but may be eligible for re-election.

Nominations are invited.

These should reach the Secretary, Joe Randall, by Thursday 14th October. Proposer and seconders will be required.

LATEST NEWS

Queen's Award

Another highlight of 2021 was the Society receiving the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service at a formal presentation in September. Robert Voss CBE CStJ, Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire presented the crystal award and certificate to the Society in the presence of many of the volunteers whose work over many years had led to the accolade. It is a fantastic achievement and honour to receive the highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK.



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 30th November 2021
at 7pm (Webinar) – Wood & Water. Guest Speaker Mike Blackmore, Wessex Rivers Trust. See details on page 2.

Tuesday 22nd February 2022
– Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW. Guest speaker tbc

Please note: all meetings are free entrance to members and non-members. Please check our website or social media a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. We welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 per person.

Summer highlight



It's covered elsewhere in this newsletter but what a joy it was to be part of the Water Vole reintroduction week in August. There were so many happy,

smiling faces enjoying the whole experience. About 50 volunteers, from 8 to 80 took part over the week! I wish the voles well and hope that we can give them a home with plenty of clean chalk stream water where they will thrive on the banks of the Ver.

Water quantity

The abstraction reduction story drags on...Affinity Water continue to highlight their desire to cease abstraction from the top of the catchments of a number of Chiltern chalk streams and the Ver has been mentioned by name. But until it makes it into the 2025-29 Water Resources Management Plan, nothing is certain and the voles are left wondering.

Water quality

As we went to press last time, we were about to contact Thames Water concerning sewage fungus downstream of Markyate Sewage Treatment Works and various problems in Redbourn. It transpires that to varying degrees these were exacerbated by groundwater ingress – with groundwater higher than for many years it was adding to the volumes the sewer network had to cope with. The residents of Redbourn

speak in glowing terms about the actions of Thames in the past few months – reducing the ingress, arranging camera surveys of the pipes and arranging for pipes to be relined. The issues of raw sewage seepage and an over-stretched network appear to have been solved in the village.

Markyate Sewage Works is another matter entirely. It transpires that the works had been spilling sewage regularly from February until June. Again additional groundwater meant that the works simply couldn't cope with the volume of sewage arriving, there was no quiet period to treat anything stored in the storm tanks, so any additional volume resulted in barely treated sewage exiting the works and straight into the Ver.

This is a problem that many small sewage works face – extra sewage from new housing over the past 40 years with precious little additional capacity added = spills on a more regular basis. There's no quick fix, Thames argue that they are operating within the law and the Environment



Agency appear unlikely to take action. It's down to us volunteers to try and change the system for the benefit of the River Ver – one of only 225 chalk streams in the world and home to the nationally rare water vole.



We've invested in a VVS Phosphate checker and levels as far downstream as Redbourn Golf Club have been over seven

times the recommended level, before returning to a more acceptable level at Redbourn (thanks due to Sue Rowe who has been doing the fieldwork.)

I can't believe so much has happened since the last newsletter!

Water Vole release ©Lee Wood;
Phosphate Testing ©Sue Rowe;
Thames Water tanker;
Full and crusty storm tank at Markyate STW



EVENTS PROGRAMME

Wood & Water – improving chalk stream habitat with trees, we have a bonus online event on **Tuesday 30th November at 7pm.**

Mike Blackmore, Wessex Rivers Trust will explain why trees are one of the best natural materials available and describe some of the techniques for using them to improve habitat on our chalk streams. It should prove invaluable not only for our Action Group volunteers interested in what a healthy chalk stream should look like. Book your place using this link:
<http://ow.ly/3nMS50GbWur>



Hinged tree in the margins ©Wessex Rivers Trust

Our event is in support of the *Remarkable World of Trees* exhibition at St Albans Museum 17 Sep – 23 Jan 2022, which was inspired by VVS member Kate Bretherton.

Continuing Improvement

VVS Riverfly Report April – July 2021

During lock down reporting of Riverfly has been somewhat erratic, but the reports I have received from the river Red, Redbourn, Redbourn Mill, Redbourn Fishery, Prae Close, St Michaels Village, Holywell Hill, Cotton Mill Bridge, Frogmore Bridge A5183, Drop Lane and the Ver Colne confluence have been useful and on the whole show a healthy level of invertebrates in the river.

Mayfly magic

It was certainly another good year for mayfly (*Ephemera Danica*) in the Drop Lane area where excellent Riverfly counts were observed both here and at the confluence. Members and visitors alike enjoyed the Society's fascinating guided walks on this stretch in late May and early June.

My thanks to Fran Burrows for her efforts as a Riverfly monitor, but unfortunately she has had to give up her sampling on the Ver. We would be delighted to recruit more volunteers so that we could cover some or all of the following locations on a regular basis; Luton Lane, Dolittle Mill, Chequers, Verulamium Park, Sopwell Nunnery, St Peters, Hyde Lane, Frogmore Pits and Frogmore Home Park.

I am assured that the EA have been grateful for our monthly reports on Riverfly along the Ver. The coverage we have on a monthly basis, gives a fairly good idea of the health of the river. Although pollution incidents can occur at any time and may not be picked up immediately, we do have the back-up of the Bailiffs and regular walkers along the river.

Riverfly invertebrate monitoring is a form of Citizen Science in which trained volunteers monitor the health of rivers across the country. Each site has a trigger level set dependent on the number of species and their usual abundance. If the score falls below the trigger level this usually indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

(Pictured from top left) Mayfly hatching in the sampling tray @Peter White; a male Stickleback in breeding colours; Adult Mayfly, its exoskeleton to the left; Caddisfly sheltering from the rain



MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

Summer of support

Our membership continues to grow. A warm welcome to those who have joined over the past four months: Christine Bennett, Adam Hillier, Christine McDermott, Tracy Logan, Jane Purdon, Andrew Gardiner, Vicki Law, Bethany Wilson, Elizabeth Cleary-Rodriguez, David Miveld, Melanie Jackson, Kerry Wilson, Gail Thomas, Lesley North, Malcolm Holliday, Andrea

Eaves, Luke Greysmith, Robert Cohen, Treena Greany, Bryan Hanlon, Liz Macleod, Kathryn Bennett, Alison Shipperlee, Karen Halls, Liz Jernigan, Jude Ruff, Francesco Lazzara, Debbie Worrall, Hazel Bentall and Stephen Wiltshire. I hope you will enjoy being part of the society as it seeks to protect and promote our rare chalk stream.

Clean gravel

Good news, last season's rain has kept the aquifer topped up but we're cautious as the flow steadily drops and the head of the river has become Markyate Sewage Treatment Works. Issues with sewage fungus and phosphate levels have been highlighted in the upper valley and overflowing storm drains and road run-off persist in lower sections. One positive is that gravel beds remain widely exposed, some areas are enjoying a carpet of Ranunculus although in places sediment persists. The river continues to find a channel through abundant marginal growth. Conditions on the River Red tributary are a mix of silt, prolific growth and some gravelly patches.

The river gives life

Stickleback, Minnow and Water Boatmen now inhabit the winterbourne section of the valley! Lighting up a grey summer, Chub flash silver underbellies and Bullhead seek cover along lower stretches.

Insect numbers have been low but metallic Damselflies put on a glittering display at the confluence. Mid-valley pockets of undisturbed pasture provided habitat for fickle Summer Chafers to complete their 2 year life-cycle.



Prolific Ranunculus ©Melanie Woods



Peacock on the riverbank



Pyramidal Orchid; Lizard Orchid ©Melanie Woods.



Small fish have been found here ©John Fisher

Cooler temperatures interrupted butterfly behaviour but Purple Hairstreaks flitted along Oak tops, Peacocks rested at the riverside, Commas caught the eye and a Holly Blue on nettles perhaps hankered after nearby holly!

Purple plants

Discarded moth wings near a handy perch signalled the presence of Long-eared Bats. Riverbanks were splashed with purple by Hedge Woundwort, Knapweeds, Nightshades and Vetches. Sedges and Grasses are abundant in rain-misted meadows. Trifid-bur Marigold was seen on damp lowland and a rare Lizard Orchid grew quietly on the verge of a drovers' track surrounded by other orchids high in the valley.

While Swifts, Swallows and Martins gather to migrate, feasting on 'air plankton' in preparation, past reports from John Fisher indicate that migratory Redwing will soon join Reed Bunting and Linnets on low farmland. Secretive Snipe and Lapwing might be seen wading wetland edges. The valley provides refuge for many species, some red-listed, an oasis in a busy world.

LIST OF BAILIFFS

Below is the list of the team and their stretches. Please say hello if you see them when you are out and alert them if you notice any issues.

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. R Colne to Moor Mill | Sue and Martin Frearson* | sue.frearson@virginmedia.com |
| 2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane | Dick Downs | d.downs2@toilets.org.uk |
| 3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill | Bruce Banfield-Taylor* | via mellorwoods@gmail.com |
| 4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill | Giles Harrison | gpharrison13@gmail.com |
| 5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill | Lee Wood | ember.designs@yahoo.co.uk |
| 6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill | Vivien Gates | via mellorwoods@gmail.com |
| 7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge | Roger Hall | via mellorwoods@gmail.com |
| 8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury | John Pritchard* | johnp@riverver.co.uk |
| 9. Redbournbury to Dolittle | Jane Gardiner | janegardiner@madasafish.com |
| 10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass | Robert May* | bmay@hoggend.com |
| 11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane) | John Fisher & Peter Hill | john.fisher@btconnect.com |
| 12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally) | Sue Rowe | members@riverver.co.uk |
| 13. River Red | Joe Randall | via mellorwoods@gmail.com |
| | | joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk |

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

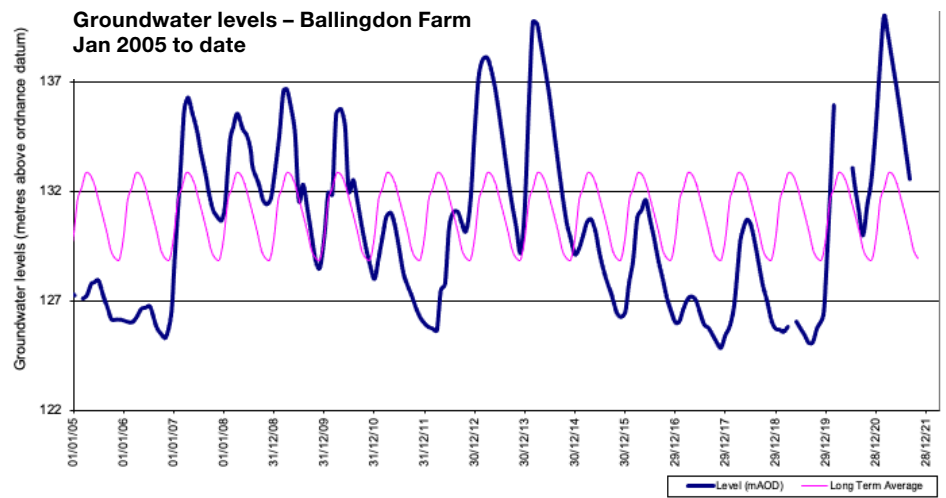
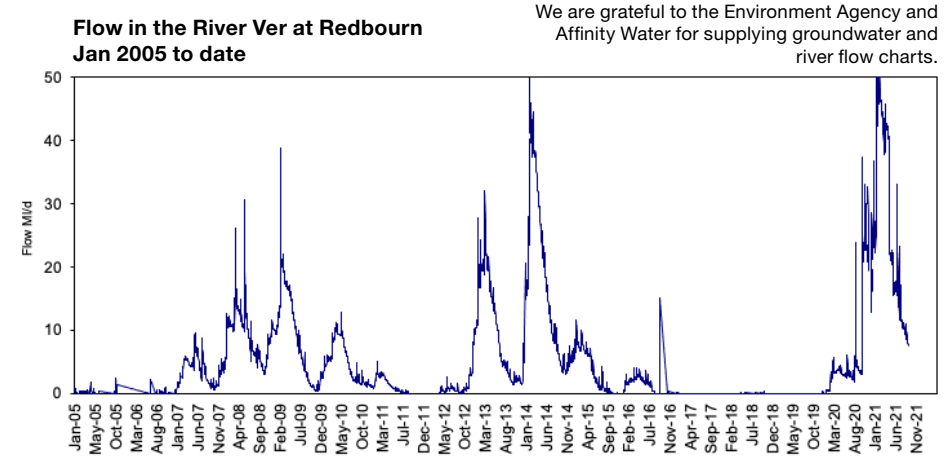
Wet turns dry

What an up and down few months we have had. May and June were unseasonably wet and July and August drier than usual. The river itself has still been benefitting from the high groundwater levels caused by the wet autumn and winter. So much so, that every month this year the river has been ‘exceptionally’ or ‘notably high’ as officially described by the Environment Agency. With groundwater remaining 1.68m above the norm for September, whether we see minor flooding in the Ver’s water meadows this winter hangs in the balance.

A deep corner on Gorhambury July 2021; Good flow at Moor Mill in July; Cows on a misty Ver in June ©Melanie Woods; (bottom right) The Red running clear in July; Near Bow Bridge in August.



| Months 2021 | Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA) | Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead) |
|-------------|--|--|
| May | 137.97 [134.1] | 94.4 [+41.1] |
| June | 136.79 [133.32] | 77.6 [+22.8] |
| July | 135.24 [133.23] | 51.0 [-4.5] |
| August | 134.23 [132.56] | 37.0 [-35.0] |
| September | 132.55 [130.87] | Not yet available |





Water Voles

Group shot & BBC ©Peter White; Releasing voles (right) ©Lee Wood

At last, in August, 150 water voles were released on the River Ver - into an area that they haven't been seen in for over 30 years. The support from our members and friends was tremendous with over 50 volunteers playing their part to ensure a seamless release - it's up to the voles now!

The voles travelled up from the breeding facility in Devon and the following morning sibling groups went into holding pens on the bank for a few days. Here they acclimatised while being fed a daily diet of apples and carrots before the pens were opened and the voles allowed to disperse naturally. The BBC One Show filmed the day and by the time you are reading this the feature should have been shown.

In early September some of our members spent an afternoon undertaking vole survey training ahead of a census on the Ver next Spring to see if our voles are thriving. Latrines of small green droppings and vegetation chewed at a 45-degree angle are two of the top signs, apparently.

None of this would have been possible without the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust securing funding from the Debs Foundation and the Linder Foundation to pay for the voles and the support of a Water Vole Officer, Josh Kalms. Josh, who is also a long-standing VVS member, will be keeping an eye on our new rodent residents.



Beautiful Benches

Fantastic work over the summer has seen two more of the interpretive benches along the River Ver Trail benefit from the attention of Melanie, her sister Karen and a host of helpers. The Drop Lane bench was cleaned, reproofed and repainted though not without the added frustration of some unhelpful graffiti during the clean. At Porridge Pot north of Redbourn, a careful sanding and reproofing should see the solid oak bench good for a few more years yet.

Photo ©Elaine Tan



Rubbish!

Our bailiffs are always doing their best to keep the river and the Ver Valley in good shape. Sadly, this year has seen an increase in littering and fly-tipping. We've been picking it up and reporting the larger incidents to St Albans Council for special collection. The state of the lanes on some of the Ver Valley Walks is especially disappointing and we'll be organising litter picks early in 2022 when the vegetation dies back and all is revealed. Watch the website for details.



Barn Owl Project

2021 has been a mixed year with just two successful broods with three youngsters each. Watching one pair hunting to feed the young was amazing as they were catching prey about every ten minutes. Mainly field voles but also a few moles which I had never witnessed before. On the downside two boxes which had been used regularly for a few years were unoccupied and another box which had three newly hatched downy chicks seemed to have suffered from predation. A little owl box that had five chicks was found with two dead a month later and signs that the others had left the box too early before they could fly and probably fell victim to an opportunist fox. Pierre and I will be checking for late broods in September so there may be more to report next time. For the record since 2006 we have now ringed 131 youngsters from our boxes, mainly barn owls but a few little owls and kestrels. A good return on the VVS investment.

Herons and Egrets

Little egrets continue their progress along the valley with a record nine nests on the lake islands and they now outnumber the grey herons



A rare 2021 success ©John Fisher

which were down to seven nests this year. Barry Trevis ringed 7 young little egrets in early May but sadly 2 nests failed due to the cold period later. One of the coloured ringed little egrets was seen at Hickling Broad in Norfolk on 29th June. Not quite as far as one seen in South Wales a few years ago but still impressive. Barry has been unable to ring any herons for the last few years as the tree climbing has proved to be too dangerous.

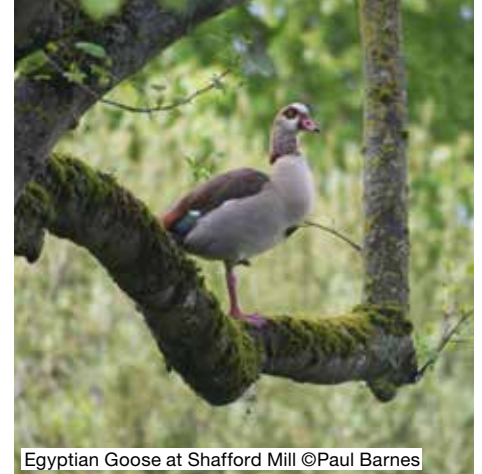
We have had a few great white egrets visiting the valley in recent years, but these have just been "one day birds". However, this year one stayed around for about two weeks and was seen by several observers both on the marsh by Shafford and on the big pool which formed by Pre-Mill.



Great White Egret takes off from the Ver ©Henrietta Buxton

Egyptian Geese

A pair were seen in Verulamium Park, at Shafford and around the Pre-Mill pool but as far as I know they did not breed. It's another species which is now established throughout southern England emanating from escapes from wildfowl collections. I think Holkham Hall in Norfolk was the main source. Just hope they do not become as successful as the Canada geese.



Egyptian Goose at Shafford Mill ©Paul Barnes

SUMMER NEWS

Secretary retires!

John Fisher hung up the Secretary's pen after 20 years of note taking and admin for the Society. On a sunny day in May, John was presented with his chosen book – *Restoring the Wild* by Roy Dennis as a small token of all our thanks. We look forward to many more 'Bird Notes' and Barn Owl boxes going up now that John has more time on his hands!





Photos ©Lee Wood & ©Liz Jernigan



The Covid controls on group activities

have eased over the last 3 months which makes the organisation of working parties simpler.

In June we visited the Gorhambury Estate for the first time. Earlier in the year flooding had virtually closed the footpath from St Albans to Redbourn and the task was to reduce the water level and the reinforce the bank to prevent further flooding. We had 2 teams one on the water clearing obstructions and a second team gathering material for the subsequent work. A reduction in water level was achieved but a second ad-hoc group returned to clear the rest of the blockages on this section and now the water level is definitely down. The bank reinforcement is something we returned to in September.

July saw a welcome return – a visit to Moor Mill for Himalayan Balsam bashing. There was less balsam than in previous years which meant the group was able to tackle the balsam in the next section of the river above Riverside Way. We finished, as usual, with a welcome drink at Moor Mill

The venue for August was Park Street where our volunteers worked in the area around Burydell Lane to remove the clusters of balsam by wading and walking the banks. High nettles added to the challenge.

Action Group sessions are always a good way to see stretches of the Ver that might be new to you. There are usually interesting finds from old bottles to fascinating wildlife too.



Autumn 2021 Programme

COVID restrictions permitting

Sat 16th October, 10.00–12.00

Venue and tasks tbc.

Sat 20th November, 10.00-12.00

Venue and tasks tbc.

Sat 18th December tbc, 10.00-12.00

Chequers Inn, Redbourn AL3 7AD tbc

We'll be clearing obstructions on the River Red and the Ver in the area near the inn. And afterwards for festive refreshments in the Chequers.

See www.riverver.co.uk for latest details and if you'd like come along contact Richard Wallis (see below).



YOUR COMMITTEE

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Committee Member

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HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline:
0800 80 70 60
(Report all environmental incidents)

EA Floodline: 0345 988 1188

Flytipping reports
St Alban's Council:
01727 809019
email:
wastemanagementservices@stalban.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325