



OPEN MEETING – Tuesday 14th June at 7pm (via Zoom)



Road runoff and our rivers – threats and opportunities

Guest speaker: Jo Bradley, UK Director of Operations at Stormwater Shepherds.

Jo Bradley who spent 20 years with the Environment Agency and is now at Stormwater Shepherds, gives us a candid look at the danger road runoff poses to our rivers. Jo will also examine how Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) can help reduce the effects and leave our chalk streams like the Ver, in better shape.

Jo recently gave evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee and is regularly asked by the media for her expert opinion on preventing contamination of the country's waterways.

**Please book your place: <http://ow.ly/vkVk50J5pY0>
This event is FREE to all.**

After Jo's talk we'll have short reports on the state of the Ver and up-to-date news on any other significant local developments.



LATEST NEWS

100 days of sewage

The truth is out. The recent installation of an Event Duration Monitor (EDM) revealed that last year Markyate sewage treatment works spilled sewage into the headwaters of the Ver for 2,642 hours – that's over 100 days! We hope that this information will encourage Thames Water to address the problem that's been occurring for years – especially with high groundwater. It's recorded on the VVS website that in 1987 a Mr Timberlake said, "Nowadays, there is a lot of pollution from Markyate STW; on misty mornings the smell along the river is terrible and the banks are white with deposit."



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Thursday 20th October 2022 – AGM. St Michael's Parish Centre AL3 4SL or via Zoom, details tbc

Tuesday 21st February 2023 at Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW or via Zoom, details tbc

A splash of water in Redbourn, May 22



It's uplifting to report a good beginning to the Society's year.

Our core activities are thriving with the Society's volunteers to the fore as always. As well as the bailiffs, Riverfly monitors and Action Group volunteers, there is a whole raft of incidental volunteering that makes the Society tick. Among others, thanks to Melanie who has been working on another bench, at Redbournbury this time. A thumbs up to a midweek team who took the plunge and gave the spilling at Redbournbury Mill a spring clean and to Lee who designed our Invasive Species leaflet. A pat on the back for John and Pierre, our sprightly Barn Owl box team, who continue to encourage the owls to nest; thanks go to Jo who carried our banner to the SAS sewage protest in London, Martin spent time preparing a Society response to the application to build houses near the Red off Gaddesden Lane and so the list goes on...



Prep work on the bench ©Melanie Woods; (left): an extra session at the Mill; (right): Good for another thousand years?

Historic sights!
©Alison Debenham



Now back to the river itself. It seems perfectly simple. Restore the flow and many of the river's challenges will evaporate. To that end, I've been lending the Society's support to the Chalk Streams First initiative which advocates testing the principal of ceasing abstraction at the head of the rivers in the Chilterns and taking the resultant additional water from downstream in the Thames Valley instead. (This would be a pilot which, if successful, could be rolled out in the Lea Valley as well.)

Groundwater games

The precise reduction in water available via this scheme is hotly debated, with Affinity Water now tending towards a very pessimistic figure. The good news is that many wise chalk stream heads have a much more optimistic view is the logical conclusion and further data is being prepared to undeniably demonstrate the case. Part of the issue is the length of time any signal tests run for (measuring groundwater/river recovery after abstraction reduction) – usually it's a matter of weeks while 2019/20 demonstrated it can take many months, even years for recovery to take place. When the time comes, we may well ask our members to voice their support. Similarly, Water Resources South East announce their Best Value Plan in early autumn and Affinity Water will produce their draft Water Resources Management Plan for 2025-2030 – we may suggest you make some noise!



Quality control

The water we do have should be of the highest quality to support a thriving chalk stream ecology. The recurring sewage spills at Markyate STW are a disgrace. No matter what barriers have prevented Thames Water from investing to solve the issues in the past, there is every opportunity to act now. Chalk streams are recognised as 'high priority sites' in the Government's Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan. Even if it takes 10 years, a solution should be quite possible. Our pursuit of Thames for action continues.

Verulamium Park

I suspect that no one will be surprised but the frustrations continue with further delays and differences of opinion. We are no nearer to a public consultation on a revised plan. More news when we have it, of course!



EVENTS PROGRAMME

2022 activities

Please check the website for full details but there's an Archaeologically inspired walk along the Ver in St

Albans on 17th July. A Bat Walk on 20th August and a September Water Vole Walk are all being planned at present.

Brown algae and mayfly mystery

VVS Riverfly Report Spring 2022 (January – April)

The Riverfly monitors have been swinging back into action this year with reports in for nearly every sampling spot along the Ver. In the main the invertebrate counts have been good, although Max Hebington at Redbournbury has had to work hard to come in above the trigger score, especially with water quality there on the poor side. The bright sunshine of early April and the high nutrient levels in the river has produced a coating of brown algae which smothers the insect life. Not surprisingly, the caseless and cased caddis numbers are low. Olives on the other hand, have been emerging from the river at every opportunity. An adult large dark olive was spotted on the first day of February, a fairly early record even for this species.



Mayfly discovery

In the centre of St Albans at Sopwell Nunnery, Keith Reynolds made a fantastic discovery when sampling in March. Gazing into the tray he discovered a mayfly (Ephemera Danica) nymph. There hasn't been a report of a mayfly in the recent past, that's for sure. Did the eggs wash downstream or a mayfly fly upstream? It's a mystery. That spot was dry riverbed in September 2019, which makes the find even more encouraging.



Little and large

The caddisfly family has nearly 200 members in the UK and the kick sample at Bow Bridge demonstrated its wide diversity.

Here's one species at 2cm long with a smart case of vegetation and next to it its 2mm cousin with a case made of tiny grains of gravel – they are a real challenge for our Riverfly monitors to spot in the bottom of the sample tray!

And finally, a warm welcome to Nathan Budd who joins our Riverfly team this month!

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.

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

Welcome aboard!

Membership numbers remain buoyant with thanks, and a warm welcome, to our new members: John Turkentine, Charlotte Day, Julena Niehoegen-Burke, Martin Ede, Sol Plant, Martin Mylott, Sandra Taylor, David Bolton, Pauline Thomas, Gillian Thornton, Caroline Coombs, Hilary Rogers,

Malcolm Waterton, Dee Feasey, Alix Seeley, Lucy Standen, Robert Breeze and Julia Hastings. I hope you will get pleasure from your membership as well as from the river and its environment. You are very welcome to become an active part of the society in protecting, improving and promoting our rare chalk stream.



Flow remains above the long-term average but is dropping rapidly below last year's measurements, reflecting the relatively dry year. Contiguous flow dropped, as a winterbourne does, to Luton Lane. Oily pools remain above here, reminders of the supplementary road runoff and potential for pollution when the river rises again. Sadly, with nutrient rich water and sunny weather, filamentous algae is widespread.

Water-scoured gravel

As sediment settles with little rain the riverbed condition can be seen. Gravel, important for the river ecosystem, is heavily silted in places. This can happen when the littoral zone becomes devoid of plants, the channel then widens, slows flow and reduces scouring of the riverbed.

Marsh Marigolds, Water Forget-me-nots and even reeds, although disparaged, are coming back in spring to enhance the river's habitat. If Water Crowfoot can hold on, it creates small channels where the river weaves and scours.

Spring flowers are attracting early butterflies and bees. Green-veined Whites feed on fragrant Garlic Mustard, Cuckoo Flower and Watercress in damp ditches and riversides. Brimstones emerge in leafy disguise – a larval foodplant is the Buckthorn of chalky soils. The beautiful buttery colour of the male



Brimstone may have given rise to the word 'butterfly'. The humble Nettle hosts Small Tortoiseshells and Red Admirals and Yellow Archangel guides bees on its amber runway lines.

Hiding from view

Familiar feathered friends are busy. Juvenile Moorhens from previous broods sometimes help parents with nesting and Gadwall take cover in thick bankside undergrowth, their subtle fine patterning giving them a princely air. Water Rail search for shrimp, snails and fish but are more likely to be heard than seen.

Magnificent Brown Trout and coppery Chub are glimpsed occasionally but the heroes of the river this spring are Sticklebacks in the dubious standing water by Markyate Sewage Works... nature often surprises in the face of adversity!

Top: Oily pools ©John Fisher; Garlic Mustard ©Melanie Woods; Marsh Marigolds by the Ver. Below: Bailiff Dick and his measuring stick; Water Rail seen! ©Alison Debenham.



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 members@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Sue Rowe	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

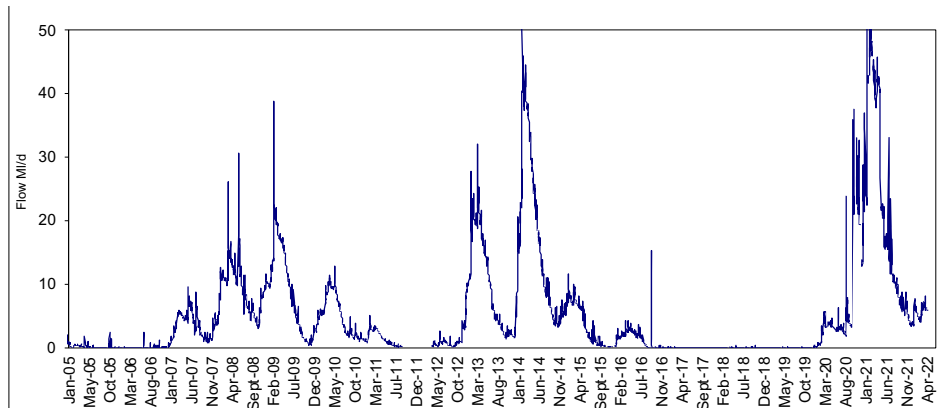
A dry spring

Although March and particularly April have been dry, February was wet and that is reflected in the groundwater at present and the fact that flows are holding up, although beginning to fall back. In my opinion, it doesn't hold well for the Ver this summer unless we have a wet May. Rothamsted figures show a rain deficit for 2022, to the end of April, of nearly 75mm.

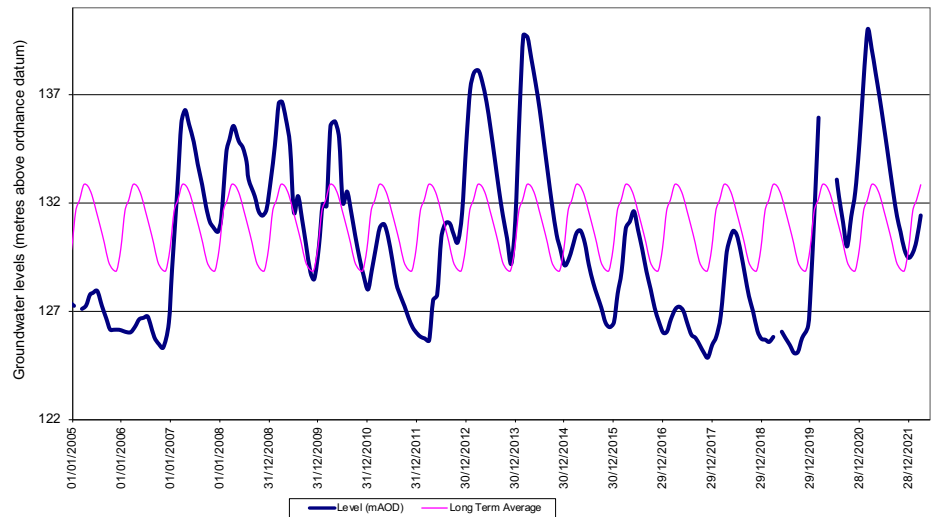
Months 2022	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Rothamsted)
February	129.46 [134.76]	79.0 [+22.04]
March	130.26 [135.58]	34.1 [-12.93]
April	131.41 [135.71]	20.8 [-33.19]
May	131.98 [135.30]	Not available yet



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



We are grateful to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

From top: Irish Weir stones on show April 22; Sopwell greening up April 22 ©Giles Harrison; Near Moor Mill February 22; Shafford Mill, resplendent in spring. March 22

Litter free walks

Punch Bowl Lane on Ver Valley Walk 4 was the venue of an inspiring litter pick in February. A big thank you to the sixteen volunteers who gave up a sunny Sunday morning to dive into the hedgerows and collect the rubbish others had the temerity to toss. Bottles and cans were separated for recycling and the bagged-up rubbish collected by St Albans City & District's contractor, Veolia, who also provided litterpicking equipment and bags. It was a collaborative affair with Veolia Redbournbury providing convenient parking and the Park Street Pickers loaning their unmissable safety signs. We'll definitely be repeating the exercise on another Ver Valley Walk to improve the outdoor adventures of members and visitors alike. Do come and join in!



St Michael's Ford initiative

In conjunction with the Society of St Michael's and Kingsbury (SSMK), we have put in a bid for a Herts Community Trust grant to reinvigorate the large ford apron on the southern side of the historic St Michael's bridge. We are seeking £3,500 in funds to turn an unsightly muddy area into an attractive riverbank, populated with colourful native wild plants that will be good for wildlife and enhance the biodiversity of the Ver in the area. There will be an opportunity for our volunteers to redistribute the sediment, deposited over the past two wet winters, creating new banks and beds. In cooperation with the local community, existing plants will be supplemented with native species and, as part of the on-going management plan, early spring and autumn work parties will ensure the ecological benefits are long-lived.

Allen Beechey, Chiltern Chalk Stream Project, will be commissioned to draw up plans for this eco project which will also give us an opportunity to incorporate a fitting memorial to long-time committee member, John Cadisch.

Invasive Non Native Species (aka INNS)

We are giving it a big push in the Park Street area this summer to rid the Ver of Giant Hogweed and Japanese Knotweed. Our leaflet will be distributed to households in May to tell them what to look out for. And with INNS funds provided by Affinity Water we will be able to contribute to chemical treatment to eliminate the aliens. Our usual Himalayan Balsam Bashing events will take place this summer too – see p8 for details.

There is promising news on the Balsam front, apparently the Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International (CABI) has sourced a new rust strain from Kashmir that should be suitable for treating the Himalayan Balsam at Frogmore pits. We await the results of summer testing.

Thanks to Lee Wood for designing the leaflet. You can download a copy and read more at riverver.co.uk/alien-plants-have-you-seen-them



WATER VOLES

No newsletter would be complete without a water vole update. They have been keeping a low profile through the colder months but we know that they are there. Mostly venturing out at night, just about all we have seen is the classic sign – water vole poo!



Breeding Peregrines

We often get peregrines along the valley, usually in the winter, particularly if we get a big flock of golden plover which are a favourite prey of this raptor. They bred last year at sites in Welwyn Garden City, Watford, Hemel Hempstead and Wymondley. Single peregrines have been seen in and around St Albans in the last few years but this year there is a pair sitting on eggs and both birds are being seen regularly on and around St Albans Cathedral. To a peregrine a cathedral is just like a cliff which is their natural nesting site. The priority is that the nest is out of reach from land-based predators and cathedral towers fit the bill exactly.

These birds certainly seem to have an ecclesiastical bent as they have nested and raised young on many cathedrals for several years, including Norwich, Ely, Liverpool and Wakefield. Some of these have live webcams to view online. My favourite is at Chichester where you can sit outside a pub watching the peregrines with a nice lunch and a pint!

There is a benefit for these buildings in that they catch feral pigeons and to some extent keep them away. They also catch parakeets and unfortunately some wading birds such as plovers and even woodcock. So, watch out for a real spectacle this summer if you are near St Albans Cathedral.

"Thanks to Barry Trevis who constructed and fitted the nest tray on the cathedral and for the facts about and the pictures of the peregrines"
JF



Male Peregrine ©Barry Trevis



Male Peregrine in flight ©Patrick Wainwright



Hérons and Egrets

It looks like being the best year ever on Heron Island in Verulamium Lake for little egrets. Barry Trevis has let me know that in early May there are no less than eight little egret nests with six small young and twenty-two eggs. They first nested here in 2014 and the number of nests has increased from just one or two in the early years to this record number in 2022. There are also seven heron nests this year.



Great-crested Grebes on Verulamium Lake, 1 point ©Steven Brown

Ver Valley Footsloggers

This was the name of the VVS team that entered the inaugural Herts Bird Club "Local Patch Weekend." It took place over 23/24 April weekend and the team was John Pritchard, Alison Debenham, Alan Winn, and me. We each covered a stretch of the Valley and because we managed to do it all on foot and bike, we earned twenty bonus points for "zero fuel miles." Between us we saw eighty-five species which gave us 136 points and second place of the eleven teams. First place went to the "Wilstone Wanderer" with 140 points.

Basically, for most birds you got one point with 2, 3, 4 and 5 points for more unusual or rarer birds. For example, a puffin would have earned us five points but despite searching over the two days we did not find a single puffin!

Some of the good sightings were whinchat, wheatear, bullfinch, lesser redpoll, and water rail. We did get some extra points for seeing three owl species barn, tawny and little. Also, we managed five raptors red kite, buzzard, kestrel, sparrowhawk, and the Abbey peregrines for more extra points. We all had a fun time trying to see as many species as possible along the valley and it showed what a good birding area we have on our doorstep.

Greylag Goose, 1 point ©Steven Brown



The year started at Frogmore where we continued to clear the west bank of the river of the dead and overhanging trees to allow more light into the area. As you walk along this section of the Permissive Path you can now see the river and get a better view of the closed off area that provides a corridor for wildlife.

In February we had a similar task at Sopwell Nunnery Green thinning the bankside undergrowth where the river circles around wet woodland. The in-channel team tackled obstructions at the top of this stretch just below the bridge, then we all joined together below the Alban Way bridge to remove encroaching trees and branches brought down by the storms.

I suspect March and a session based around the Irish Weir and Veolia will become a regular fixture in our future calendar. We were able to shape, by hand, a channel through the reeds to ensure there is a steady flow of water down towards the Mill which should keep the water voles happy. If you

walk the footpath adjacent to Veolia you will see that we have pushed back the undergrowth to create mini-glades and add some variety to the walk. The blackthorn through the tunnel was also thinned out!

For Easter we went to the Chequers, not for a drink, but to clear the debris that had had accrued on the River Ver and the Red. Many of the trees at the edge of the plantation had been damaged by the winter storms with a lot of small broken branches and fallen trees in the river. Before we could work in the river we had to clear areas where we could build our brash stacks. If you look at the river behind the Chequers you will see that the gravel is clear where our Membership Secretary did an excellent job!



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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