

## Letcombe Brook Project - 2021 Year End Report

### Wildlife Highlights

Covid-19 continues to have an impact on our lives, and it's been another strange year for the Letcombe Brook Project but the wildlife on Letcombe Brook continues to carry on its busy lives and we have been lucky enough to capture glimpses of the many creatures that frequent the brook.

**Water voles** Despite being unable to work with BBOWT, LBP managed to get the water vole survey of the whole brook completed during 2021. This was quite a challenge with some sections very wild or silt-laden! The good news is that signs of voles were found on all sections of the brook from its



confluence with the Childrey Brook upstream to Wantage Mill. Some sections had very few signs whilst others appear to be supporting very healthy colonies. No confirmed signs were found upstream of Wantage however and my theory is that the Old Mill provides a barrier to voles repopulating the upper stretches. Mink seem to have completely eradicated voles in the upper section some years ago. You don't often get to actually see voles whilst surveying as they hear you coming but I sat out on the banks on other occasions and managed some nice photos (left).

Disturbance by dogs in the brook continues to be a concern and we continue to monitor for the presence of the problematic American mink.

### Otter



During the year otter activity has been recorded along the full length of the brook and we found many signs of their presence whilst carrying out the water vole survey. I finally got a glimpse of one in the river near Mably Way during December which was a real highlight for me! The above picture is from a trail camera that was set next to a regular sprinting spot up at Letcombe Bassett.

We continue to gather sightings on our trail cameras but they are all night time clips which indicates the otters are highly nocturnal on the Letcombe Brook. In Scotland they are much more active during the day and some individuals do seem to be less cautious but that doesn't seem to be the case here. I am aware of one daytime sighting in East Hanney but don't expect to come across one whilst walking along the brook.

## Birds



*Kingfisher on Letcombe Brook by Stephen Burch*

Kingfishers remain active along the brook and I became aware of one nest between Wantage and Letcombe Regis. I also had regular sightings in East Hanney and the BBOWT reserve in Letcombe but did not see them so much in Grove this year. Good spots to watch for them include the Cressbeds at Letcombe Bassett, around the lake area at Letcombe Valley Reserve, Grove Green and the iron bridge at East Hanney. Please remember they are a fully protected bird and it's illegal to disturb nesting activity. If you do become aware of a nest (situated in a burrow in the bank) please move immediately and carefully away from the area and notify me of its location.

Grey wagtail were regularly seen along the brook and I watched one feeding on newly hatched damselflies in Willow Walk Nature Reserve during the summer. Yellow wagtail were spotted at a few locations close to the brook and the Ridgeway. It seems likely that they breed somewhere near Letcombe Regis with juveniles spotted in that area, including the cricket pitch.



Another bird I did see on the BBOWT reserve and at Willow Walk in Wantage was a water rail. You tend to hear these more than you see them as they like to skulk about in reedbeds. A nice surprise to find one out in the open, but it was soon startled and ran for cover, I had to crouch quietly for

some time before managing to get this photo. Woodcock were also seen at a couple of locations, no doubt taking advantage of the soft margins of the brook in search of food.

Spotted flycatcher were seen both in Grove and Letcombe Regis but remain a rare bird to see in this area. More surprisingly a pied flycatcher was located briefly in the BBOWT reserve during the spring migration period, perhaps on its way through to the Forest of Dean or somewhere similar.

No sign of the great bustard yet this winter, perhaps it has returned to the main drove at Salisbury Plain? Do look out for it though, it did seem to like Letcombe Regis!

### **Reptiles and Amphibians**

Reptiles remain a rare sighting in the brook corridor but grass snake and common lizard were recorded during 2021. Juveniles in Letcombe Bassett (see pic below) would appear to suggest successful breeding is occurring so let's hope they spread out along the brook corridor. A slow worm was also recorded very close to the brook at Grove, again once common but now not something you see in this area very often.



Frogs and toads tend to prefer ponds to rivers but the Letcombe does seem to be an important area, particularly for toads, which can be seen in large numbers in Letcombe Regis during their migration back to ponds during late February and March. Many were squashed on the road at Warborough Rd and Bassett Road in Letcombe Regis during this period last year so it would be good to set up a "toad patrol" to help them return to their ponds in one piece (More info on that to follow on the Letcombe Brook Facebook page). They seem to be using the lake at the head of the Warborough Road and the one at Richmond to spawn in as that seemed to be the main directions of travel. Although some



toads spawn in backwaters and slow margins of rivers, they much prefer a lake or pond and may well use some of the other ponds in the headwaters of the Letcombe Brook. Look out for breeding activity this coming spring. This good-sized toad was found in the BBOWT reserve whilst scything the grassland. Toads tend to flatten themselves against the ground and remain unscathed when the scythe passes overhead. I don't think a lawnmower or tractor mounted topper would give the toad such a good chance of survival.

### **Fish**

Brown trout are present all the way along the brook but populations are impacted by the many obstructions present which prevent movement to better spawning areas, mixing of populations and movement away from low-flow areas or pollution.

Modification or removal of these obstructions remains a major aim of LBP and the EA.

2021 turned out to be a very busy year so we didn't find time to carry out any further investigations into Letcombe Brook's fish populations and distribution. We hope to be able to during 2022 as we would love to know if we have any brook lamprey or eels in the Letcombe. Both of these species are pretty secretive being either nocturnal or choosing to live their early years buried in silt. Bullhead (pictured right) and brown trout are well distributed along the length of the brook but we have only found stone loach and gudgeon down at East Hanney so far. We are hoping our project work to remove or bypass barriers such as mill sluices and waterfalls will enable more species of fish to colonise greater sections of the brook.



### **Dragonflies and Damselflies**

Beautiful demoiselle (pictured below) continue to spread along the brook with several seen in Willow Walk, Wantage and more down between Grove and East Hanney. Please let us know if you see any in other areas!

The new SUDS (ponds put in as part of urban drainage systems) put in at both Grove and Wantage seem to be supporting good populations of dragonflies. It would be great to be able to create other

areas of wetland in the brook corridor, so many have been lost in the past due to land drainage schemes.

Other species recorded on/near the Letcombe so far are:

Dragonflies- southern hawker, brown hawker, four-spot chaser, broad bodied chaser, emperor, common darter, ruddy darter.



Damselflies – azure, common blue, large red, blue-tailed, banded demoiselle, beautiful demoiselle (pictured above)

### **Invasive Species**

**Himalayan (Indian) Balsam** -We continue to remove this along the brook as its an invasive non-native and can lead to erosion of the banks and reductions in native species.

Please do remove any you find or let us know where it is if you are not able or willing. Many thanks again to the Hanney volunteers for their many hours of hand-pulling balsam, it is paying dividends as it now takes them about half as long as it used to!

**Mink** – Non-native American Mink remain a huge threat to the water voles on Letcombe Brook, one



female can wipe out a complete colony in no time as she can fit into the burrows. For this reason we continue to monitor for them using mammal monitoring rafts (picture on left). Although we did not find any last year they can travel long distances when looking for new territory so we must remain vigilant. Our work makes up part of a larger water vole recovery project run by your local Wildlife Trust (BBOWT).

**Signal Crayfish** – I continue to see large numbers of these in the Wantage section of the brook but few elsewhere although they are more active at night-time so perhaps are present more widely than would seem. There still seems to be no way to deal with them as they are just so prolific. Trapping only catches the larger ones which are cannibalistic, thus the smaller ones get a better chance to survive and soon gain size. A WildCru (Oxford Uni) research project spent several weeks removing 6,181 signal crayfish from two hundred

metres of the River Windrush – this resulted in their average catch per trap reducing from 8 to 6 – so illustrates how many were still left! Apparently signal crayfish densities can reach 10 or 20 per square metre of riverbed!

## Other species

**Bats** The brook is an important feeding corridor for several bat species including common and soprano pipistrelle and daubenton's bat. No doubt other species such as brown long-eared, noctule (pictured) and serotine are also present at times. The high levels of insects emerging from or attracted to the brook are an important food source and some of the larger trees along the brook act as roost sites. Good places to watch (or listen!) for bats include the BBOWT reserve at Letcombe, Wantage Mill to Betjeman Park area and Willow Walk in Wantage. We hope to be able to hold a bat walk this year and use our new Echo Meter 2 bat detector to find out more about local populations along the brook corridor. Look out for events advertised on the Facebook Page and website.



We found further evidence of **Water shrew** on the brook up at Letcombe Regis and Bassett. Surprisingly our trail camera picked up their nocturnal activity, even catching 2 of them having a scrap in front of a tunnel entrance! We also found remains of caddisfly cases crunched up in front of small tunnel entrances – a good sign of water shrew activity as they dive to catch aquatic invertebrates from the bed of the river and take them back to the bank to eat.

## Volunteering Activities

Activities have again been heavily impacted by Covid-19 but we managed quite a few work parties in 2021. Work parties were held at Letcombe (Millennium Green and BBOWT Reserve), Wantage (Limborough Rd and Willow Walk) Grove (Grove Green, Mably Way, Kingfishers) and East Hanney.



Riverfly monitoring resumed and we managed to get one extra volunteer trained to take on 2 sites at Grove. No big events were held but we did manage to run some river dipping events for families back in the summer holidays and some education sessions which a couple of volunteers helped with. We will be looking for further help with education sessions particularly during 2022. Volunteers also helped with the Thames WaterBlitz water quality monitoring and carried out lots of litter picking

Also many thanks to the students that are continuing with river wardening surveys as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme activities.

## Funded Projects

LBP were successful in securing funding from the Environment Agency's WEIF funds for another 2 projects. Funding paid for feasibility studies at Dandridges Mill in East Hanney and the Old Mill, Wantage where we are investigating the possibility of creating fish passage and improving river function.



Additional funding for the "Love the Letcombe Project" has enabled us to carry out further habitat improvement works at several sections along the brook. We have continued to focus on pollarding bankside trees to allow more light to reach the brook and its banks. The work we carried out last year was very successful with riparian habitat recovering quickly in sections of Willow Walk, Grove, Letcombe and East Hanney. The fish pass created in 2020 at Lower Mill is looking fantastic

and has already been colonised by water voles. We are not sure how many fish have found it yet but trout have been spotted using it. Thanks to the funds received we were able to provide education sessions for several of our local Primary Schools. In total we engaged with 280 local school children and got them out investigating their local river and learning about the wildlife supported by this precious resource and how they can help look after it. It was also great to carry out some partnership work with the Vale and Downland Museum who organised some river dipping sessions on the brook in Wantage (see pic) which we provided and thoroughly enjoyed. Other ongoing projects include riverfly monitoring, invasive species control, supporting Duke of Edinburgh students and monitoring for pollution.



## Thank you Funders!

We would like to say a big thanks to our regular funders of the project – Letcombe Regis Parish Council, Wantage Town Council, Grove Parish Council, East Hanney Parish Council and Vale of the White Horse District Council. Williams F1 have also become a regular contributor to the project and we also received donations from Heritage Concern Foundation, Cumber Family Charitable Trust, Postcode Society Trust, Mr and Mrs J A Pye's Charitable Settlement and The Adrian Swire Charitable Trust. TOE (Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment) and the Environment Agency also funded specific project work. We could not carry out the work we do without this generous funding.

## Looking Ahead

We plan to start construction work on a fish bypass around Dandridges Mill in 2022 and to carry out further feasibility plans on other obstructions in the brook. Our general habitat improvement work under the Love the Letcombe Project will continue along various sections of the brook. We aim to get even more school children out exploring their local river, hopefully some of them may become future guardians. We continue to tackle invasive species and to record as many wildlife sightings along the brook as possible and would encourage you to help with that aim. Using iRecord is an easy way to record wildlife sightings and the data is shared automatically with TVERC, our local Biological Records Centre which is really important. Do let us know if you see anything exciting or unusual!

Please do let us know if you spot a potential problem or something that concerns you such as dead fish, pollution or an obstruction in the brook that could cause a flood risk. If you would like to help with some litter picking during your exercise walks do let me know and I can provide you with some equipment.

2021 proved to be a tricky year for events but if we get on top of Covid we will try and put on some small-scale events such as guided walks, river dipping or bat walks. We will be supporting BBOWT's Wildlife Discovery Day at Letcombe in July if it gets the go-ahead. Keep an eye on the Letcombe Brook Facebook Page, follow us on Twitter and keep an eye on the website for updates.

We hope to take part in the next WaterBlitz survey organised by EarthWatch as we are keen to keep an eye on water quality in the Letcombe Brook and its tributaries. We may also be able to carry out further water quality testing thanks to some funding from the EA to purchase equipment, this will compliment nicely the riverfly surveying carried out by our fabulous volunteers.

Rivers and chalk streams in particular received quite a lot of publicity during 2021 due to concerns about water companies dumping untreated sewage into them. This is an issue that concerns us greatly and is undoubtedly having a very negative impact on many of our rivers. You can be sure we continue to work as hard as we can to look after our fabulous chalkstream and protect it from the many threats it faces. Pollution can come from many sources, not just sewage treatment works as illustrated (right). This was the result of a housing developer washing down a construction site.

Keep in touch, be safe and enjoy our fabulous river and the community green space alongside it.

All the best,

Mark Bradfield, Project Officer

[www.letcombebrook.org.uk](http://www.letcombebrook.org.uk)

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