

## Letcombe Brook Project - 2022 Year End Report

### Wildlife Highlights

Huge thanks to the many local residents and wildlife enthusiasts that have shared their sightings with us over the past year, with many posting on our popular Facebook page. Recording wildlife seen helps us illustrate the importance of Letcombe Brook as a Priority Habitat and wildlife corridor for many species. Use of trailcams has given us other insights into the wildlife using the brook, particularly at night.

**Water voles** Despite a slow start in the spring, water voles seem to have had a great year in 2022 with sightings from many sections of the brook but particularly in East Hanney where we were invited to film a segment for Pam Ayres' TV series "The Cotswolds and Beyond" which aired on



Channel 5 in September. Several young were spotted in Hanney during the year and in the Autumn several were seen feeding on willowherb growing in the brooks margins. Great to see increased vole activity in areas where we carried out habitat improvement works as the riparian habitat recovered. Again, no confirmed sightings from upstream of Wantage Old Mill. Disturbance by dogs in the brook continues to be a concern and we continue to monitor for the presence of the problematic American mink.

*Photo Jo Cartmell*

### Otters



Otter activity has again been recorded along the full length of the brook and we regularly find signs of their presence although sightings remain rare with activity remaining very nocturnal. The above picture taken from a trailcam recording shows a mother and pup on the brook north of East Hanney. A mother and pup of a different size were caught on trailcam at Letcombe Regis also during December so we do indeed appear to have 2 breeding females on the brook.

Our trailcams also revealed the presence of another mustelid, the **polecat**, which seemed to be hanging around at Letcombe Regis. This animal may well be a ferret/polecat hybrid, its very hard to be sure, but polecats have been making a good recovery nationwide for some years. The trailcams often also pick up stoat which are always nice to see, the brook seems to be an important corridor for them.

## Birds



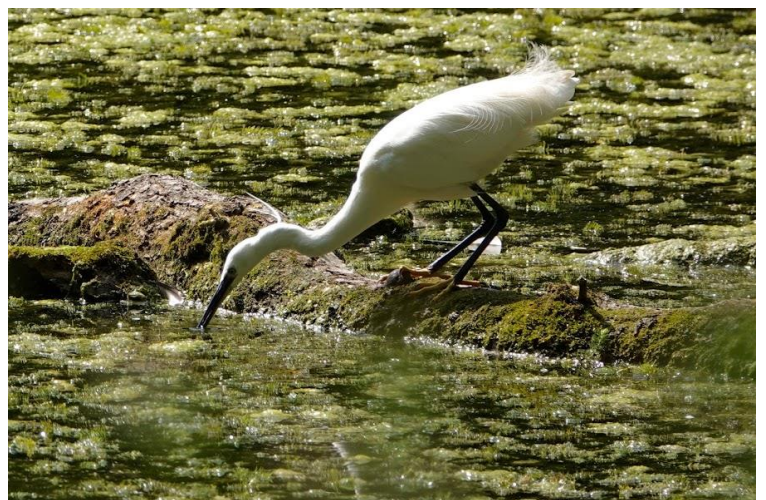
Regular sightings of kingfisher both in the Letcombes and in East Hanney indicate they continue to do OK on the brook. Fewer sightings were made in Wantage and Grove but they are still about. The river downstream of the iron bridge in East Hanney and the BBOWT reserve remain good spots to watch for them. We recently added some artificial nest boxes to try and help them on the brook. 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.

*Photo - Kingfisher on Letcombe Brook by Stephen Burch*

Grey wagtail and little egret were regularly seen along the brook along with grey heron. One was spotted by Stephen Burch in the process of devouring a water shrew, not something many people witness!

I didn't receive any reports of water rail this year but please continue to look out for them. Mute swans fledged young at both Letcombe Regis and East Hanney and were seen on the pond at Kingside, Grove during early winter. Occasional sightings of Woodcock and snipe were made and a green sandpiper was seen in Letcombe Bassett but wading birds remain



short on the ground. The creation of more wetland areas such as the one being created by Freshwater Habitats Trust down at Garford will hopefully improve their chances.

Spotted flycatcher were seen in Grove, Letcombe Regis and East Hanney but remain a rare bird to see in this area. An even more unusual sighting was of a black redstart near the brook in Grove during December, the bird stayed for several days. They have also been seen in Letcombe along with the slightly more numerous common redstart. Nuthatch and treecreeper again bred on BBOWT's Letcombe Valley reserve and bullfinch seem to be regularly sighted there now. As part of our biodiversity work, we installed several barn owl, tawny owl and kestrel boxes plus some treecreeper and bat boxes along the brook corridor

### Reptiles and Amphibians



I managed to spot grass snake at a few locations during 2022 with my first sighting at Letcombe Valley and a lovely encounter on private land north of East Hanney (see pic) This snake was hunting in the river, they are excellent swimmers, but then emerged to rest on the bank close to where I was sitting. I also got a lucky clip on a trailcam down by the fish pass at East Hanney. Please do keep an eye out for them and let us know if you spot one! Leaving habitat piles and large

logs for shelter and basking sites can help both reptiles and amphibians which get preyed on by many animals including cats and dogs.

Letcombe Regis is clearly an important area for toads with many crossing both Warborough Road and Bassett Road during late February and March. It would be good to set up a "toad patrol" to help them return to their ponds in one piece so if anyone wants to help please get in touch. They seem to be using the lake at the head of the Warborough Road and the one at Richmond to spawn in and we often see them at Letcombe Valley and Millennium



Green when carrying out habitat work. Frogs are also regularly seen in these areas as well as Willow Walk in Wantage where we hope to be able to create some new ponds for them to spawn in. Please do contribute to the PondNet Spawn Survey being run by our partner Freshwater Habitats Trust – you can record all amphibian spawning sites including garden ponds and this helps us understand the declines taking place in their populations.

## Fish



Brown trout were recently spotted spawning in the Lower Mill fish bypass at East Hanney which is great news. They 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. We still haven't been able to find out much about the distribution of the more secretive fish living in the brook but

did get to witness roach spawning in the river at East Hanney during a river walk in May. As more coarse fish are now able to move up Letcombe Brook due to removal/bypass of blockages this will hopefully become a more common sight. Someone took a photograph of a dead eel in the brook but despite attempts we couldn't find out anymore about its origins (the photo or the eel!) -I suspect it was caught elsewhere and dumped in the brook. Please don't fish for the brown trout in the brook – they are wild fish, the river is not stocked for anglers and productivity is low so angling pressure will soon lead to a decline in this protected population.

## Dragonflies and Damselflies

Exciting news for 2022 was that a previously unreported damselfly was found in a couple of locations along the brook. The Willow Emerald damselfly (pictured below) was first spotted by our local dragonfly enthusiast Brian Walker down at Grove near the health centre and then later (October) in Letcombe Bassett by me. This species seems to be on the increase and spreading west so please let us know if you see any during 2023 – they are a very delicate species



so pretty hard to spot though! The new SUDS (ponds created as part of urban drainage systems) put in at both Grove and Wantage seem to be supporting good populations of dragonflies, including some more unusual species such as the small red eyed damselfly. The more wetland creation along the brook corridor the better, we will continue to look for other opportunities. You can record dragonflies you spot on the excellent iRecord App and also to Stephen Burch on his excellent website at [stephenburch.com](http://stephenburch.com)

## 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 during 2022 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** – There still seems to be no way to deal with this problematic species 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! Their burrowing into banks increases turbidity, they eat fish eggs and carry the plague that kills off our native crayfish – but at least the otters like to eat them.

## 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 and serotine are also present in the brook corridor. 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 held a couple of bat walk during 2022 including very successful ones with Wantage Guides and Sustainable Wantage. Look out for events advertised on the Facebook Page and website.

Further sightings of **Water shrew** were reported from the cressbeds at Letcombe (the individual caught and eaten by a heron!) and one of the roadside ditches at East Hanney. They are probably much more widely spread, just rarely seen as they are tiny, very fast and spend a fair bit of time hunting under water.



## Volunteering Activities

Work parties were held at all our usual spots - Letcombe (Millennium Green and BBOWT Reserve), Wantage (Limborough Rd and Willow Walk) Grove (Grove Green, Mably Way, Kingfishers) and East Hanney. Volunteering takes place on the first Saturday and third Thursday of the month – please do get in touch if you would like to join in, numbers have dropped since Covid restrictions reduced our



activities. Riverfly monitoring continued with dedicated volunteers out sampling monthly throughout the year. We might be able to sort out some training if anyone else would like to get involved with this please contact us. Volunteers helped with several events and some education sessions, its always great to have an extra pair of hands on such occasions! We will be looking for further help with these sessions during 2023. Volunteers carried out lots of litter picking. We know at least 78 sacs of litter were removed from the brook

but also know many people litter pick in their own time so no doubt it was way more!

Many thanks to the students that are continuing with river wardening surveys and litter picking as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme activities.

One volunteer has started monitoring water quality for us as we are aware the amount of monitoring by the EA has declined. Presently we can monitor for phosphate, nitrate, pH, conductivity and temperature but will soon also start monitoring dissolved oxygen. Data gathered last year indicates the brook has far higher levels of phosphate and nitrate than it should have and that temperatures got dangerously high in last summers heatwave.

Several volunteers got involved with the GrowWet Project run by our partners Freshwater Habitats Trust – aimed at increasing populations of endangered freshwater plants. You might not realise we also have a volunteer working hard to increase wildflowers and water plants along the Letcombe Brook by collecting seeds and cuttings and growing them on to then plant out along the brook corridor.

LBP would like to introduce you to Beth Snelling (pic opposite) – Beth is volunteering with us for her industrial placement as part of her studies at Sparsholt College, Hampshire. You might see her out and about doing some river wardening or working with us in the brook so do say Hi! It's the first time we have hosted a student from Sparsholt so we hope it goes well for Beth and she enjoys her time with us.



## Funded Projects

LBP were successful in securing funding from the Environment Agency's WEIF and Chalk Stream funds for another 2 projects. Funding paid for developing the fish bypass project at Dandridges Mill in East Hanney and a feasibility study into wetland creation at Willow Walk, Wantage.



Additional funding (Year 3 of 4) 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. Work completed in previous years has resulted in riparian habitat recovering in sections of Wantage, Grove, Letcombe and East Hanney. This has in turn helped the water vole population. The fish pass created in 2020 at Lower Mill continues to look fantastic with water voles and spawning brown trout using it.

## Education work and Events

Thanks to funding received we were also able to provide education sessions for several of our local Primary Schools. In total we engaged with 270 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 further partnership work with the Vale and Downland Museum who organised some river dipping sessions on the brook in



Wantage which we provided and thoroughly enjoyed. We continue to support several Duke of Edinburgh students with their volunteering activities and we benefit from their work litter picking and wardening sections of the brook for us. A new collaboration with Fitzwaryn School saw students out litter picking the banks of the brook and enjoying some river dipping with us. 2022 also saw us take part in the King Alfred's Academy careers event where I was able to provide general advice on work within the conservation/ecology field. That resulted in us hosting 3 teenagers from KA's on their work experience week.

We were able to return to putting on some partnership and community events during 2022. We started the year with a photo exhibition at the brilliant Vale and Downland Museum who kindly let us use an exhibition room for a whole month (pic opposite). We followed that up with a dawn chorus walk in May, bat walks, guided river walks and a pop-up event at Willow Walk, Wantage in October plus river dipping events with the Museum during school holidays. We intend to do more of the same in 2023 - keep an eye on the Letcombe Brook Facebook Page, follow us on Twitter and keep an eye on the website for 2023 events.



### **Thank you Funders and Partners**

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 Banister Charitable Trust, Ecology Resources, Martin Wills Wildlife Maintenance Trust and MJ Camp Charitable Foundation. Thanks also to the Environment Agency, their funding for our larger projects enable us to carry out larger more complex projects. Being able to work in partnership brings many benefits so a special thank you to the Vale and Downland Museum, Sustainable Wantage and Freshwater Habitats Trust.

### **Wider Issues and Looking Ahead**

We plan to start construction work on a fish bypass around Dandridges Mill in 2023 (funding dependent) and to carry out further feasibility studies on other obstructions along the brook. Our general habitat improvement work under the Love the Letcombe Project will continue as mentioned above. 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. Its particularly important this year as we gather as much data as we can to feed into the Nature recovery Network consultation process. Do let us know if you see anything exciting or unusual!



Do put **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> April** in your diary – we will be holding a **Letcombe Brook Project 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration** at Williams Racing in Grove. Further details to follow but save the date for now, we hope to be able to say thank you to our many supporters with an exciting programme.

Pollution of our rivers and seas continued to receive a lot of publicity during 2022. Concerns about water companies dumping untreated sewage remains a big issue and the Governments response to this is really disappointing with them recently pushing back deadlines to clean up our rivers by 36 years! Pollution can come from many sources, agricultural and road run off can both have a really detrimental effect. We will be carrying out further water quality testing, this will compliment nicely the riverfly surveying carried out by our fabulous volunteers. Last year was incredibly hot and dry and our monitoring highlighted the fact that water temperatures in the brook can get up to 19c – not good, particularly for the brown trout population. At high temperatures, dissolved oxygen, critical for many chalk stream species, reduces significantly and can be lethal for fish particularly.



2023 has started with the launch of Thames Waters' EDM Map (<https://www.thameswater.co.uk/edm-map>) Please do keep an eye on this, it will let you know if untreated sewage is being or has recently been discharged into the Letcombe Brook – something we are concerned will only increase with the amount of new housing in this area adding to capacity issue at Wantage STW. A tour of Wantage STW in November raised a few concerns – despite having phosphate stripping capacity, they are licenced to discharge at 2mg/L – a level that will undoubtedly be having a negative impact on the river – we are asking the EA to review this discharge licence. We are also asking that Wantage STW be upgraded before all the additional housing is built, otherwise this will result in more dumping of untreated sewage into local rivers at a rate of 30 tonnes for every 100 new houses.

There continues to be a raft of applications for new development in the Letcombe Brook corridor with proposals for a large solar farm and a large anaerobic digester facility alongside all the additional housing. All this in an area identified as a Nature Recovery Zone in the draft Nature Recovery Network. We will continue to carry out wildlife surveys and encourage you all to submit wildlife records via iRecord or other recording schemes, its crucial we highlight how important Letcombe Brook and its green corridor is for so many species at a time of ecological crisis and biodiversity decline.

We will continue to work as hard as we can to look after our fabulous chalk stream and protect it from the many threats it faces. Thank you for your support, keep in touch and enjoy our fabulous river and the community green space alongside it.

All the best,

Mark Bradfield, Project Officer

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