

THE CHILTERN NEWSLETTER

From BBOWT Chilterns Group – supporting and promoting our local Wildlife Trust

Issue 109 Autumn 2024



Cover image: College Lake nature reserve

Wildlife Trust news, views and event information from the Chilterns Group, College Lake and around Bucks.

We are very grateful to all who take the trouble to send in material. If you would like to contribute to the next edition, please send your news, photos and features to juliebirch60@yahoo.com

Mick Jones enjoys moving forward and having a look back.



I joined the BBONT Chilterns Regional Committee in 1982, shortly after moving to Tring and getting involved with Dancersend Nature Reserve. Back then most of the Trust's activity on the ground was organised by 10 regional committees made up of volunteers. The staff had grown that year to a Conservation Officer, Field Officer, Administration Officer and assistant and two further part-time posts looking after finances and membership, working from a new office, in a repurposed shop on Church Cowley Road in Oxford. Everything else was carried out by volunteers, operating through a well-oiled committee structure.

I remained active on the Chilterns committee for another 15 years, chairing the Reserves Management Subcommittee for much of that time. I watched the range of activities grow, from coffee mornings and other fundraising events, like the plant and produce sales and film shows, to monthly wildlife talks, a guided walks programme and volunteer social events.

The Chilterns Group, as it became known once the regional structure faded away with BBOWT's rapid development, attracted a lovely mix of committed and energetic wildlife supporters, either on the committee, as event organisers or as 'foot soldiers' who were ready to help with all sorts of events. Many were also involved with practical conservation work across the Chilterns organisation. As other regional groups disbanded, the Chilterns Group kept going and has continued to provide a programme of promotional, educational, volunteer recruitment and fundraising events, delivering over £4000 each year for our local reserves.

A year after I first got involved, I was asked to produce the first Chilterns Region Reserves and Conservation Newsletter (later renamed the Chilterns Newsletter) [see illustration] and went on to edit and produce 25 issues. It is sobering to realise this as I now write my last leader for the Newsletter as chair of the Committee, having succumbed to invitations to return to the role in 2017 (on a temporary basis it was promised!!). It is finally time for me to step down from committee work. I now need more time for family matters and to swap meetings, minutes, plans, policies and risk assessments for binoculars, sweep nets, moth traps and microscopes – the wildlife recording activities that excited me back in 1982!

Mick Jones

College Lake report

I'm Katharine Walley the new Visitor Experience Manager at College Lake. I've been in the role since the start of May and prior to this was working at Whipsnade Zoo. As the Visitor Experience Manager, I handle the visitor centre side of volunteering as well as anything along the visitor journey. I have really enjoyed my first few months here and I look forward to finding ways to improve College Lake's volunteering and visitor experience. I'm also excited to see the reserve continue to change through the seasons.

Water, water everywhere...

College Lake is a very artificial reserve, being an ex-quarry system. It has been born of human influence, so human influence is required to make it function at its best.

It's interesting to reflect, from the balmy days of late summer, on the amount of water that the last 12 months has seen, precipitating its way onto, into and through the chalk bedrock of the Chilterns, arriving as groundwater in the quarry depressions of the site.

Like everything else here, the lakes are carefully managed, with water levels in the shallower lake (the 'Marsh') being kept high in the winter and dropped during spring and autumn to allow the creation of muddy margins for feeding chicks and migrating waders. This year however, the volume of water has been so high that the larger, deeper lake has spent much of the spring and early summer at capacity, preventing draw down of the water level in the marsh. In spite of the warmer weather in the later part of summer, this also appears to be the situation going back into winter.



The impact of this has been noticeable, both in breeding attempts and in breeding success of the birds that normally use the islands to breed. The black headed gull colony, so vocal and vibrant in previous years, did not bounce back from the losses inflicted by avian flu last season, with scattered birds arriving at the start of the season then abandoning us some weeks later. Equally, the lapwings have had a difficult year, with at least one nest lost to rising water in the face of an inability to lower the level.

Common terns have done better, though these have had most success on the tern rafts in the open water at the front of site. The new raft, built by several of our excellent volunteers, has mesh sides to prevent marauding Canada geese clambering up and trampling established nests (or indeed just getting installed there before the terns get back from Africa!).

It goes to show the impact of unpredictable extreme weather events, ever more likely in the face of climate change, and how dependent our reserves are on our being able to intervene at key times of the year.

The wider unpredictability of the last year's weather has meant unusually low numbers of cornfield annuals in the arable plants wheat field, likely due to persistent wet ground and the massively high numbers of slugs hampering successful germination. Equally, the lack of sun in early summer meant that many insects simply didn't have the warmth to become meaningfully active, with early season butterflies, moths, dragonflies and hoverflies (among others) all notably invisible until the sun showed its face. Thankfully things have been picking up in August, with chalk hill blue appearing on cue, a female even showing up in the scrape on the chalk bench to the north of the site, a tantalising possibility of a new colony!

It all goes to show that, regardless of how in control we like to say we are, the rhythms of the earth and its natural cycles can still scupper the best laid plans. Let's hope for a brighter one next year!

Events update Sept, Oct, Dec

Our nature clubs are back! We have Nature Tots aimed at preschoolers and their adults filled with outdoor nature play, crafts and stories. Then we have Young Rangers for 8 -11 and Teen Rangers for 11-17 which is a fun way to get involved in wildlife identification and habitat management.

- Nature Tots is running from 10:45-11.45am on Tues 10 and Thurs 12 September, Tues 22 and Thursday 24 October, Tues 19 Thurs 21 November, Tues 10 - Thurs 12 December
- Young Rangers from 10:30-12:30 and then Teen Rangers 13:30-15:30 both on: Sat 7 September, Sat 19 October, Sat 16 November, Sat 14 December

For October Half Term we have a 'Bump in the Night' family trail running Tuesday 29 October - Sunday 3 November. Our Nature Explorers Day Camp is back on Tuesday 29 October for 7-10 year olds to explore the great outdoors! We also have a family craft and activity session on the morning of Wednesday 30 October called 'Nocturnal Creatures' where you can find out more about what's out and about at College Lake at night! Finally, we have a 'Sensory Tale' in the afternoon of 30 October where we explore nocturnal creatures through an interactive sensory story.

To find out more about all these and book please visit bbowt.org.uk/events!

Volunteering roles available

We're currently looking for volunteers to help us with either our Visitor Welcome or in our Shop. Both these roles involve interacting and engaging with the public as well as some practical skills of money handling. To find out more information or to apply please email collegelake@bbowt.org.uk.

Katharine Walley

Wildlife Sightings

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this list, beginning with Colin Williams the senior ecology officer at HO, Adrian Bayliss the volunteer bird recorder at College Lake and Philip Townsend the warden of Aston Clinton Ragpits. Additionally, we heard from members, staff and volunteers who have sent in some recent sightings like Debbie Latimer, Nick Bowles, Arne Bale, Barbara Polonara and John Sumpter. All this is in addition to the many species reported by Mick Jones in his Dancersend News (below) - with observations by Sue Taylor, Linda Wells, Martin Harvey and Neil Fletcher.

Colin writes: this year has been a terrible year for most invertebrates as many of us already know. This is highlighted by the very poor numbers of butterflies recorded on our long-running butterfly transects. Many of my volunteer butterfly surveyors have confirmed it is the worst year they can remember, and I would agree. It is currently the flight season of one of the specialities of the Chilterns, chalkhill blue** and the Upper Thames Butterfly Conservation Branch the Species Champion for the butterfly confirmed to me last week it has been a disastrous flight season so far this summer. Many sites with previous small colonies have recorded none at all and the more productive sites have recorded very low numbers, e.g. Yoesden and Grangelands.**

To reinforce the above, I was also very aware of how few grasshoppers and bush-cricket I was seeing whilst undertaking habitat condition assessments of some of our Chiltern's chalk grassland reserves.

Keith Boseley and his team have done another fantastic job monitoring the orchids at Warburg this year but unfortunately they have concluded it was a very poor year for most of the species. Due to the wet weather earlier in the year, slugs were a major problem. However, a good variety were still recorded, including narrow leaved (3) and violet) helleborine (5), birds nest orchid (13), greater butterfly orchid (13) and fly orchid (14).

The Ecology Team monitored the monkey orchids and hybrids at **Hartslock** at the end of May. We are still to analyse the data but I can confirm monkey orchid numbers were very low with even fewer were in flower. The hybrids appeared to be doing well.

At **Swain's Wood**, John Sumpter reports:

I counted 370 flowering military orchids this year. That number will be an underestimate of the number that attempted to flower, because considerable mollusc damage occurred this year. At a guess, somewhere in the region of 40 to 50 plants were lost to molluscs.

Just 2 greater orchids flowered this year. Some flower in most years, but it is always few. There were also a few flowering fly orchids. I found about half a dozen flowering bee orchids, but I didn't do anything like a careful search, so there may well have been more than that. A reasonable number of both fragrant orchid and common-spotted orchid flowered this year, although it was not a particularly impressive year for either species. As always, there was a good number of flowering twayblades.

At **Weston Turville Reservoir** there was again a good showing of early marsh orchids (1879) plus over 200 southern marsh orchids and a growing population of marsh helleborines. Thank you Chris Trew.

Wendover members Arne and Janet Bale, noticed an unusual moth in their garden (insert photo of Jersey tiger). Mick Jones confirmed it was a Jersey tiger moth, a species which was formerly confined to the south coast but this year has been widely reported in Bucks.

At **College Lake**, Bernard Warner (trailside ambassador) reported to Katharine seeing three hobbies over the Marsh in the morning of 16 August. They were hunting dragonflies, fattening up for their migration flight to Africa.

Debbie Latimer, visiting College Lake with a grandson snapped this lovely common lizard on the low fence by the welcome hut. In spite of their name they are not common in Bucks but have been encouraged to breed at College Lake by the provision of refugia.



Adrian Bayliss has summarised the spring and summer bird highlights as follows:

The very wet spring had a significant impact on the breeding waders. With very high water levels in the Lake, the pump used to produce the muddy margins around the marsh islands, vital as feeding areas for young lapwing, had to be switched off mid-season, meaning only three birds fledged this year. Once again redshank, a rare breeding bird in Bucks, saved the day by fledging two youngsters.

Additionally, the plentiful rainfall produced dense vegetation on the islands making it difficult for the oystercatchers, who failed to successfully breed again this year, and the complete abandonment of



island nesting sites by both the black-headed gull and common tern colonies. Disturbance by deer swimming to the island was also likely to have been a factor. The terns, however, moved on to the two rafts and did fledge some chicks.

It was not all doom and gloom thankfully as cattle egrets are becoming more common in the UK but are a very unusual visitor so it was great to see one on the Marsh on the 4th of May, obligingly posing next to a little egret for comparison. Only the second record ever for the reserve. Photo shows little egret right and cattle egret left.

A colourful and elegant addition to the bird life at College Lake this spring was a beautiful black-winged stilt. A very rare migrant to the UK which caused much excitement among the local birding community one Sunday afternoon. It is what keeps us on our toes. You just never know what will turn up.



Volunteer surveyor, Linda Clark and other volunteers have been undertaking bat surveys at **Warburg** and have recorded barbastelle, noctule, natterer's, 45khz pipistrelle and 55khz pipistrelle. In addition, they also undertook an emergence count from one of the trust buildings next to the carpark and recorded x32 noctule, x12 natterer's and x10 45khz pipistrelle. On their June survey they also recorded a female glow worm.

**Fortunately, the species champion happened to be visiting College Lake on 16 Sept and Phil Bruss was able to show him a pair of chalk hill blues which promptly proceeded to mate, a good augury for next year. See Nick Bowles's separate note on the chalk hill blue.

Thank you everyone and please keep looking, keep recording and keep reporting.

News from Dancersend

It has been another challenging year at Dancersend with March and April being so cold, wet and cloudy, contributing to a dearth of insects, followed later, when the sun finally appeared, by record levels of vegetation growth. It has been a struggle to prevent grasses from swamping many of the good wildflower areas, to control the spread and vigour of scrub, and to maintain easy access for visitors. I have been very grateful for good numbers of volunteers at our work parties even if the conversation was often gloomy in relation to the poor showing from some of the reserve's special wildlife.

Despite this, there have been a few highlights. greater butterfly, bee, pyramidal and common spotted orchids were all recorded on the reserve Extension, where a vigorous patch of adder's tongue fern was also found – remarkable given that these fields were growing cereals for over 50 years. Additional young plants of meadow clary appeared in one of the chalk scrapes on the Extension despite the main patch of this rare plant, in the Meadow Plots, having a very poor year.



Also on the Extension, emperor dragonflies, broad-bodied chasers, ruddy darters and azure damselflies were observed laying eggs in the new pond and **three striped lychnis caterpillars** were found on dark mullein plants, constituting a small extension to the distribution of this rare moth in the county.

At the Waterworks end of the reserve, it was a surprise recently to find a plant of common gromwell (far from common in Bucks) appearing after scrub was cleared and the ground disturbed by Thames Water construction work. This backs up a mention of this species being seen at Dancersend some years ago by a keen Chesham botanist.

As in previous years, I have received tremendous support for recording insects from Martin Harvey, Neil Fletcher, Sue Taylor and Linda Wells and despite the concerns about insects this year they have still managed to make some interesting records – including at least three new flies for Bucks; a series of Ichneumon wasps new to the reserve; a very local inconspicuous ladybird *Scymnus interruptus*; and a number of scarce solitary bees including bryony mining bee, large-headed resin bee and the **large scabious mining bee** *Andrena hattorfiana* photographed by Sue Taylor.



Over the past couple of years, Sue Taylor has built up a relationship with scientists from the Natural History Museum and been able to provide invertebrate specimens from Dancersend for their research. This gave rise to a two-day event at the end of May when a team from the NHM joined amateur enthusiasts from BBOWT and the Buckinghamshire Invertebrate Group to record species for a major national project.

The Darwin Tree of Life (DToL) Project aims to sequence the genomes of 70,000 species of plants, fungi, animals and protists in Britain and Ireland. With the handy indoor space of the BBOWT Volunteers 'Centre in the Forge at Dancersend Waterworks and plenty of wildlife-rich habitat just a few strides away, plus facilities for running moth traps overnight, the reserve was an ideal place to help the project team collect specimens they still needed for their research.



Horned Dor Beetle, *Odonteus armiger* (Sue Taylor).

From the hymenoptera (ants, bees and wasps) specimens alone the team were pleased with 16 species and 9 genera new to DToL and we were able to provide specimens of a nationally scarce beetle that is regularly seen at Dancersend, the horned dor beetle.

It is pleasing to think that the new level of understanding of the diversity of life on our planet will have been gained, in a small part at least, from a collection of beetles, bees, flies, bugs and moths found at Dancersend.

Mick Jones Volunteer Warden

Our swift installation at Hasker House, Woolley Firs (Berkshire Office)

While the Eras tour was in full swing, we have been having our fair share of Swiftie action at Woolley Firs! reports **Barbara Polonara, Community Wildlife Officer.**

Our existing swift nestbox had been up for a few years; however the associated call system (broadcasting the calls of swifts) needed some TLC to restore it to its former splendour. Call boxes have been proven to markedly improve nestbox uptake, and we were keen to test it again at our office, to see if we could attract some prospectors in search of a precious nesting site.

Swifts are amazing insect eating cavity nesters which spend all their lives in flight apart from a brief time spent touching ground when nesting; they feed, drink, mate, and even sleep in flight, and are nest faithful colony birds, migrating to Europe each year from Africa and covering up to 4,000 miles each way. They love to nest in crevices and openings under eaves in old buildings and are often confused with swallows and house martins.

With the expert help of Bob at Bisham Nestbox Group, the existing call system was repaired and promptly switched on, and lo and behold we had takers within a few weeks which is a staggering result given that it can take up to 3-4 years or even longer to see any interest.

Given the impressive outcome and noticing that many more birds were interested in the same box, we swiftly jumped to action and called Bob once again - he installed two more double boxes next to the existing one. The additional boxes were prospected within days, showing how important it is to provide a form of nesting support for these incredible declining, red listed aviators of the skies.

The reasons for their decline are multiple, and one of the main ones is loss of suitable nesting sites, as well as insect decline and climate change. If you would like to know more about how to help swifts in your area, join a local swift group. A list can be found on the [Swift Conservation website](#) Further information can also be found on the [Action for Swifts website](#).

We are confident that the Woolley Firs swifts will enjoy their new 5-star homes for many years to come! 😊

People news

At College Lake Katharine Walley is in full action as Visitor Experience Manager and is always pleased to hear from people who would like to help with welcoming and running the visitor centre shop (see the College Lake note). While on the conservation front, we are all sorry to say goodbye to reserve warden Phil Bruss who is moving to a temporary role in Oxfordshire. Emma Routledge from Woolley Firs is taking over his role here.

Laura Rushby, reporting to Liz Shearer, is our new Volunteering Manager and is busy getting to know her patch by meeting many of the volunteers spread over the trust's extensive geography. Locally she has visited College Lake and Dancersend and will be making the acquaintance of the Chilterns Group soon. She has a full plate including the Volunteer Awards Scheme, the Conservation Traineeships and 'Assemble' the new database. Sign up to Grapevine to get her updates. Wayne Brown and Ro Turan continue in their posts.

At head office, with the departure of Lis Speight, Kate Titford has been appointed Head of Communications and Media while we are pleased to learn that the ever helpful Chris Deaney remains our main contact for this Newsletter.

In the Chilterns Group itself, Mick Jones is retiring as chair, while continuing as walks organiser, and as volunteer warden of Dancersend Reserve. Also departing after many years of loyal service is

Belinda Catton, though she too intends to go on helping at events alongside husband John. Richard Birch will be interim Group Chair. We welcome Paul Niddler, volunteer warden of Bacombe Hill onto the committee, now rebranded as the Planning Team, because that is what we do, and we would welcome a couple more volunteers to help create and carry out our programme of walks, talks and fundraising events. We only meet for a sociable couple of hours four or five times a year so it's a fun way of assisting the trust in achieving its objectives in our area, supported by about 40 volunteer helpers.

Contact richardbirch60@yahoo.com please if you would like to get involved.

#teamWilder

Community Matters

Kate Sheard, Wildlife Community Manager, and our management report says that her #teamWilder set-up continues to expand its grass-roots role of getting people active for nature. Lily O'Neil is the network coordinator and Veritie Taylor has recently joined in the community role for Bicester area. To see the latest newsletter from Lily please use this link [Community Network news](#)

At a recent networking session in Wendover, we were very happy to meet members of #team Wilder working locally on projects, like Kirsten de la Haye in Aylesbury whose interest is in mammals.

Come and Enjoy a New Season of Great Missenden Talks – Dates for your Diary



We start the new season on Tues **17 September** with **'A Year in Reserve.'** which promises to be a great talk by **Jon Mason, aka 'theearlybirder.'**

N.B. This season we shall open the doors ready for refreshments to be served at 7.00pm as before, but we'll start the talk at 7.30pm, allow for a ten minute break, then aim to finish about 9.30pm. The admission cost will still be £5, including refreshments.

'A year in Reserve 'is the story of one member's adventure of wildlife discovery across the three counties. In 2023 Jon Mason undertook the challenge of visiting all of BBOWT's reserves in a year. Jon is an experienced speaker, writer and photographer who has been teaching geography for over thirty five years in Harrow. He is a birder and naturalist and can be found on Instagram and Facebook as 'theearlybirder' or via his website - theearlybirder.co.uk. Living on the edge of the Chilterns, he also leads walks, specialising in bird song identification for beginners.



Tuesday 15 October sees the return of popular, regular speaker **Nick Marriner** of The Chilterns Conservation Board, covering **'Conservation and Farming in the Chilterns'**. Nick's team of volunteer surveyors are giving him an exact picture of how birds like skylarks, corn buntings and yellowhammers are growing in numbers thanks to the work of farmers in providing winter food and preventing loss of habitat.

The **26 November** session (postponed from 12 November) will headline **Chloe Bradford**, the Upper Ray Reserves Officer, who some of you will have met at Gallows Bridge Farm, where she cares for the curlew, redshank and other birdlife of this increasingly successful wetland reserve.

In **'The Upper Ray - Wildflowers, Waders and Water'**, Chloe will take us on a tour of BBOWT's sites near Bicester and the many species they support, focusing on wildflowers and wading birds.

The Ray catchment meadows are a stronghold for scarce floodplain wildflower communities, and she will describe some of the projects, past and present, which have helped to create and maintain an environment where they can survive and thrive.

17 December Mick Jones – Dancersend: A hundred Years of Conservation.

In the post-Christmas period we shall have the pleasure of hearing from **Veritie Turner** on **Bees** on 21 January and on 18 February BORG will be with us to update the group on owls in Bucks, The season will close on **18 March** with a **Social Evening** featuring a light supper, some amusements and a short talk on rhinos by a member who is a South African National Parks Ranger.

We are very grateful to the hard working volunteer organiser of our talks programme, Jenny Shaw, who also introduces our speakers at the Memorial Centre, Gt Missenden HP16 9AE. Please contact Jenny on jshawam@gmail.com. with any comments or suggestions for new speakers.

Richard Birch, deputy chair Chilterns Group

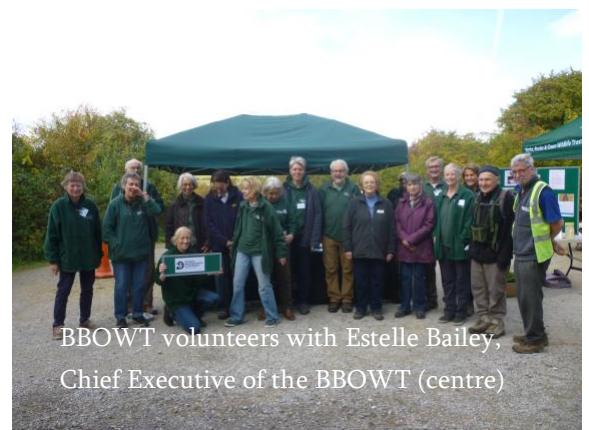
Chilterns Group outdoor events this autumn

We are all now only too aware of the fragility of our environment, so when local events are being planned organisers are becoming keener to involve us. For instance the Chilterns Group is having a stall at a Climate Action Day in **Amersham** on Saturday 14 September and an Eco-fun day in **Weston Turville** on 12 October. For us the Amersham Heritage Day is primarily an awareness raising day – you'd be surprised just how many people do not know of BBOWT's existence – we will be sited next to a BBOWT recruiter, meaning no membership 'hard sell' is involved for us! As it's a family day we'll have a couple of quizzes for both parents and children. The event runs from 11:30am to 5:30pm so we'll be looking for up to 6 volunteers to spend about an hour each with us.

Before this, on **Sunday 8 September**, we'll be taking one of our gazebos to the **Amersham Heritage Day**. It's a hugely popular all-day event held in Old Amersham High Street that we've attended for many years.

Then there's the second of this year's fundraising **Plant and Produce Markets** which is being held at **College Lake** on **Saturday 12 October**...and we'd love new volunteers for both of these events.

The Plant and Produce Market is an established biannual event that takes place in the heart of the Chilterns area at College Lake reserve. It's open for two hours from 11:00am to 1:00pm. We get a huge amount of support from the team of volunteers based at College Lake but more are needed to run the stalls: **Plants**, donated by enthusiastic local gardeners, **Produce**, selling locally grown, made and cooked food items, plus some Dancersend reserve apple juice, from its heritage orchard, along with two



BBOWT volunteers with Estelle Bailey,
Chief Executive of the BBOWT (centre)

complementary stalls, **Environmental and Wildlife Books** and the charity '**Workaid**' selling recycled tools.

The success of these events depends very much on the support of volunteers. It's good fun and I'm pretty confident you'll know people attending both events.

If you would like to help at either, or have any queries, please contact **John Catton** on 01494 726616 or richard.catton1@ntlworld.com

PLEASE SUPPORT THE BBOWT PLANT AND
PRODUCE MARKET

COLLEGE LAKE RESERVE
Bulbourne
Tring HP23 5QG

Saturday 12 October, 11am - 1pm

Excellent value plants
Tasty homemade produce
Workaid recycled tools
Badger Café open
Free entry, free parking

For contributions and queries please contact
John Catton on 01494 726616 or
richard.catton1@ntlworld.com

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BBOWT Chilterns Group – Financial Report at 29 July 2024

Total Group funds at 29 July 2024 are **£2096.47**

At the time of our last meeting on 11 February 2024, we held £1777.84
Since then our major items of income and expenditure have been:

Income :

£268 from February Talk
£307 for ticket sales for March entertainment evening
£30 from Apple Juice sales
£947 income from Plant Sale 18 May

£1552 Total Income

Expenditure:

£200 for speakers and musicians -

£90 for Gt Missenden Hall, Feb and March.

£500.00 – Contribution to College Lake signage.

£407.00 - Other

£1197 Total Expenditure

NOTES:

1. The figures above record the money going in and out of our Group Account (and exclude minor items such as bank charges)
2. Sumup charge 1.69%, deducted from card transactions.
3. Eventbrite charge 19% on takings for Events booked on the BBOWT site. All income via Eventbrite goes directly to HO, and not through our Group account
4. We sometimes raise additional income for the Trust, paid directly to HO from walks / talks / events booked via Eventbrite. Also, sales of left-over plants via College Lake.
5. Most of the profit from the March Entertainment Evening went directly into BBOWT accounts other than ours (mainly via Eventbrite). The total profit for BBOWT from that event was £293.
6. The overall profit from the May Plant Sale was £751 to our account,

David Atkinson, Group Treasurer

More Freebies for Volunteers. From Ro Turan, Volunteering Development Manager

The series of **free online talks and guided walks** arranged by Ro Turan for BBOWT volunteers continues with

- Tuesday 24 September: 'Dragonflies and Damselflies 'online talk with Peter Philp
- Saturday 28 September: 'Birds of Moor Copse 'guided walk with Ailsa Claybourn
- Thursday 10 October: 'Adder Tunnels 'online talk with Roger Stace
- Saturday 12 October: Ardley Wood Quarry guided walk with Reg Tipping

[Register for a walk or talk](#)

[Watch recordings of past talks](#)

And here's an update from **Laura Rushby** on the new Volunteer database.

Assemble (volunteer management system)

Assemble will be bringing all our volunteer teams together under one roof, which will improve our communications to you, make it easier for you to access and book events, save everyone time, make volunteer opportunities accessible and easy to apply for and give you the opportunity to share ideas with other volunteers, if you wish to. We are busy unpicking how each volunteer team works, who needs to be able to communicate with whom, what training does each role require, does, for example, a Trailside Ambassador have the same role at Warburg as it does at College Lake? These are the kind of questions that we are working through to help us build Assemble and to 'get our house in order 'to gain consistency within volunteering across the organisation. There are ongoing meetings and conversations with colleagues to try to ensure we get it right for everyone. We are

now at the stage of creating a system map - our volunteer ecosystem, which looks like a huge spider's web. We will then be able to test and tweak it before creating it in the new system.

Finemere Wood update

After months of sloshing through mud and rain, traversing fast-flowing rivers as they tumbled along paths, and sinking knee-deep into unexpected swamps, the rain eventually ceased and the Finemere Wood volunteers began to dry out. It has been a wet year. But despite this the bluebells were magnificent, the early purple orchids increased in number, and spring and summer flowers were as stunning as ever. Devil's bit scabious and betony, in particular, are thriving, extensive clumps found in meadows and along sunny rides.

During May, fences, no longer required, were demolished. Posts and rails were attacked with hammers, as volunteers walloped and whacked to loosen nails. Bulging muscles were on show, as wood was wrenched from wood. And in the background, the cuckoo called, not heard in the woods for a couple of years.

Dragonflies and damselflies are the stars of the show right now and many species are to be found in Finemere Wood. I recently joined a guided walk around the reserve with Peter Philp from the Upper Thames Branch of Butterfly Conservation who spotted creatures previously unknown to me:

- A White legged damselfly, with its pale broad legs-widespread in the South of England, but not common.
- A Western willow spread wing/ Willow emerald damselfly - a species first spotted in the UK in 2007 that has spread rapidly across southeast England.



The scything season is coming to an end. Those sharp sickle-shaped blades have been shimmering under the summer sun for many weeks as grass is mown to keep pathways accessible. Woodland rides and meadows will now be cut as flowers have bloomed and seeds have been produced.

HS2's presence continues to be felt, but finally, the plea for them to resurface the track into Finemere Wood has been answered. There is no longer the fear of disappearing into a bottomless pothole as you navigate your way into the reserve!

Charlotte Kamali , Volunteer Warden

Chalk Hill butterfly



The chalk hill blue *Polyommatus coridon* is a butterfly with caterpillars that feed on a plant with a restricted distribution: horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*. horseshoe vetch is restricted to alkaline soils with low fertility. All acid soils and all 'improved '(i.e. ruined by the application of fertilisers) soils are unable to support it. The Chilterns are one region where the chalky soil of steeper slopes still hold some relic ancient downland and unimproved grasslands. Wherever we (humans) could use machinery to grow crops the soils

were altered and the plant was removed. As a result, horseshoe vetch has a scattered and localised distribution across the Chilterns and the fact that not all the UK's horseshoe vetch grows in conditions that suit the butterfly (it needs a relatively sparse turf on warmer hillsides that get long hours of sunlight), the butterfly is only found on a relatively few patches of land; with perhaps 25 Chiltern colonies.

Until recently the chalk hill blue was showing some tentative signs of spreading. It started to breed on BBOWT influenced land near Dancersend, at Homefield Wood and at College Lake. However, like so many insects, 2024 has been a near disastrous year for this beautiful butterfly. Many long-standing colonies seem to have vanished. Others, normally bustling with the pastel blue of this butterfly in August are mere shadows of their normal glory. Yoesden is just one site with about 5% of the normal numbers reported.

During repeated visits in early August, I (and others) failed to find it at Aston Clinton Ragpits, Bacombe Hill, Dancersend, or at College Lake. Happily the butterfly was finally spotted at College Lake with a female egg laying on August 16th, so it seems to have persisted there in tiny numbers.

The situation at many others is far less rosy. If the sites that appear to have lost colonies are close enough to a persisting colony, they can be recolonised, but with unimproved grasslands being so patchy and isolated it may take many years. Happily, many landowners and tenant farmers are making efforts to see horseshoe vetch return to field margins and areas of limited agricultural use, with deliberate seeding or plug planting. Their efforts mean that, given conditions that suit it, the butterfly could recover more quickly than it might have done twenty years ago. Sadly the converse is also true. It is essential for this and for so many other insects we all do everything we can to create spaces where insects can breed and give up the outdated notion that everywhere should look tidy and be weed free.

Nick Bowles, Butterfly Conservation

Make hay whilst the sun shines.

July is a busy period for many farmers, and we aren't any different with traditional management such as hay making taking place on many of our meadow sites at this time of year.

Fortunately, the wet and cold spring and early summer of 2024 made way for a period of more settled and sunny weather as we came out of June and into July. This gave us the perfect opportunity to get on with this essential job.

One part of our annual management of many of our meadow sites, such as the Upper Ray meadows or Bernwood meadows in north Bucks.



The process of hay making (the cutting and removal of the standing grassland crop to provide winter fodder for livestock), can at first sight be seen as an incredibly destructive process as much of the flower rich habitat is removed in one major operation.

Hay making is however critical in creating and supporting the floristic diversity found within these species 'rich meadows. This is because the process removes a large amount of biomass from the grassland and prevents the

accumulation of nutrients that would otherwise occur. Reducing nutrient levels is good for wildflowers because most species prefer nutrient poor environments, as they are easily outcompeted by coarse grasses which thrive and dominate in nutrient rich conditions.

The hay is normally cut just as the grass begins to set seed as this is the point at which the bulk of the nutrients are held within the grass leaves and thus the hay has the highest nutritional value for livestock to eat. After this point the nutrients begin to return to the grass roots. Cutting at this time also means that the maximum volume of nutrients is taken out of the system thus providing the best conditions for wildflowers to flourish.

The word meadow actually comes from the Old English *mædwe*, which derives from *mæþ* meaning 'mown' and refers to a field where the grass is cut in summer. Most of our meadow sites will have been managed in this way for hundreds of years, making them incredibly rich botanically.

To ensure there is some continuity of nectar resource for insects following the hay cut, where possible wide margins are left uncut around the edges of the hay meadow. On some meadows birds such as curlew may have nested on the ground early in the spring. On these sites, to ensure that any chicks are out of danger from hay making machinery, hay making will not place until we are sure that the chicks have fledged. The hay cut is also always taken in strips up and down the field, rather than round and round working inwards, as this prevents small mammals from becoming trapped.

Following the hay cut, meadows are also used to graze livestock, in what is known as an 'aftermath graze'. Grazing animals help improve the diversity and abundance of wildflower species by further removing nutrients from the system, as they eat the grass regrowth after the hay cut. Both sheep and cattle are used to help manage the wildflower meadows found on our nature reserves.

Our meadows are incredibly important. Traditional hay meadows contain a huge diversity of specialist plant species, such as great burnet, green-winged orchid and meadow thistle, with the most diverse meadows supporting over 40 different species in each square metre,

Meadows also support an array of bird, mammal and invertebrate species. These species are often associated with the meadow flora, such as orange-tip butterfly, the caterpillars of which feed on lady's smock.

For centuries traditional hay meadows were a common sight across Britain but since the advent of agricultural intensification they have dramatically declined. By the mid-1980s the English and Welsh lowlands had lost 97% of the semi-natural grassland they had possessed in the 1930s.

Mark Vallance, Bucks Conservation Manager

Aston Clinton Ragpits,



This Spring saw very good numbers of Green Hairstreak butterflies which are always a treat to see. The very pugnacious males vigorously defend their territories and have regular aerial battles with one another. There were also several sightings of Holly Blues and Dingy Skippers to add to the butterfly list.

The wet spring appeared to produce some supersize plants with very robust specimens of Greater Butterfly Orchids and Adderstongue ferns (the latter almost twice their usual height) As we approached the end of May it was clear that White

Helleborines were much lower in number than in previous years but there were plenty of other orchids to keep us busy during the annual orchid count in early June.

In early August I took a photo of a bee with what looked like pink trousers! I noticed that it was actually pink pollen baskets on its legs and an expert then told me that it was a Large Scabious Mining Bee (*Andrena hattorfiana*). This is a first ever record for the reserve and a rare species nationally. It nests in bare ground and collects the characteristic pink pollen from both Field Scabious and Small Scabious - both of which occur on the reserve



Here are the numbers from the annual Ragpits orchid count

Large Scabious Mining Bee (*Andrena hattorfiana*)

There was a good turnout of volunteers so the both the main areas (quarry and north compartment) were covered

Common Twayblade - 6749
Chalk Fragrant Orchids- 6656
Common Spotted Orchid - 4753
Greater Butterfly Orchid - 124
Pyramidal Orchid - 799 (counted 13th July)
Bee Orchid - 4
Common Spotted x Chalk Fragrant Orchid hybrid - 4
White Helleborine 21 (counted on 19th May)
Broad leaved Helleborine 33 (counted on 20th July)

Total - 19143 (including White Helleborine)

The count was a week earlier than normal but the flowering season was slightly earlier anyway. A nice surprise was a small group of flowering plants kidney vetch, which I haven't seen before - although I notice there was a record from 2014 and prior to that from the 1960s

Phil Townsend, Volunteer Warden

Hands-on Conservation Opportunities

We welcome volunteers to help with the practical management of our reserves. Work parties are sociable and satisfying events with opportunities to get exercise in the open air, learn new skills and discover more about our reserves. You will join a group led by one of the BBOWT reserves staff members or a volunteer reserve warden.

Some reserve groups currently have enough volunteers, but others are welcoming new volunteers, including complete beginners. You can often elect to work for a half-day or a full day. Tools and instruction are provided.

All potential new volunteers must register with the BBOWT Volunteering Team (email volunteering@bbowt.org.uk) who will provide information about opportunities at different reserves and a briefing to get you started.

Where contact details are given below they are for queries to the work party leaders.

Regular work parties

Bacombe Hill, near Wendover. Work parties held on the second Thursday of each month. Leader: Paul Niddler 07756 775153 or p.niddler@gmail.com. **New** volunteers very welcome.

College Lake, near Tring. Several different work parties held plus a roving mid-week team covering other reserves.

Dancersend, near Tring. Main work parties held on the second Sunday of every month throughout the year. Occasional half-day sessions are held on Wednesday mornings. Leaders: Mick Jones 07818 624092 or jonesmick365@gmail.com, Judi Fisher 01494 722073 or judiandbryan@yahoo.co.uk.

Finemere Wood, near Quainton. Work parties on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month. Leader: Charlotte Karmali charlottekarmali@outlook.com.

Grangelands, near Princes Risborough. Work parties held in conjunction with the Chiltern Society.
Pitstone Fen, adjacent to College Lake, near Tring.

Sporadic work parties

Aston Clinton Ragpits, near Aston Clinton and Wendover. Leader: Phill Townsend 01923 353410 or philtownsend@yahoo.co.uk. For your diary, Phil hopes to hold work parties this year on **Sunday 6 October** and **Sunday 20 October**, both 10am-4pm.

Weston Turville Reservoir, near Wendover - no information
Yoesden, near Bledlow Ridge and Radnage.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

We try to cover topics from around the county to encourage members to spread their wings. The Trust's reserves north of Aylesbury have year round interest but are less visited, so please explore them and support the hard work local staff and volunteers.

We are grateful for everyone's contributions to the newsletter.

If you have ideas for the next issue, please submit them to:

juliebirch60@yahoo.com **Copy to me by Friday 21 March 2025**

To be put on the mailing list for this newsletter, please email:

membership@bbowt.org.uk

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