



Newsletter No. 19 Winter 2009

The Wessex Chalk Streams Project focuses on river enhancement and management of the River Avon system in Wiltshire, which includes its tributaries the Wylde, Nadder, Bourne, Till and Ebble.

It promotes wildlife-friendly river management by working with landowners and river managers.

They are encouraged to enhance the habitat, fishery and wider biodiversity in their respective parts of the river. The project officer can assist with the development of schemes, sources of funding and liaison with statutory bodies.

For more information about the project or the River Avon and its tributaries, contact:

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River Wylde (Cain Bio-Engineering Ltd).

The Wessex Chalk Streams Project Partnership



ENVIRONMENT
AGENCY



Wessex Chalk Streams Project update

By Ruth Clarricoates

As 2009 draws to a close and the winter sets in, I have finally been able to take a moment to reflect on my first year as the Wessex Chalk Streams Project Officer. And what a busy year it has been!

It began with a very enjoyable tour of the Avon and its tributaries and the opportunity to meet and get to know the people who love the river and whose knowledge I now regularly call upon.

The first challenge was to help Wiltshire Fisheries Association with its reply to the Water Framework Directive draft plan proposals - a beast of a document! With the dedicated work of Richard Archer and Tom Davies, however, I think we submitted one of the most comprehensive reports in the South West (see page 5).

As the spring arrived, reports of aliens on the river began flooding in and before we knew it the invasive plant growing season was upon us.

As part of the Living River Project, the WCSP continued to work at keeping the problem in the public eye. I have been working alongside the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's Wiltshire Invasive Plants Project, which has deployed armies of volunteers to eliminate the intruders up and down the river.

WCSP celebrated International Biological Diversity Day with two events; a public 'Aliens on your River' awareness day at Harnham Water Meadows, which had guest speakers on signal crayfish, American mink and invasive plants. And the first meeting of the Avon Invasive Plant Forum in Salisbury where together we began to define a strategic plan (see page 8).

The highlight of my year has been managing

a restoration project on the Upper Avon at East Chisenbury on behalf of the Environment Agency.

Throughout October the team from Cain Bio-Engineering Ltd worked their magic and together I hope that we will have improved the biodiversity of the 600m stretch, re-energised the river and improved the gravels for spawning.

The winter flows are already testing the work and I will be writing a full report on the scheme in the spring newsletter when hopefully things will have

had a chance to settle down and even begin to grow. So watch this space!

Photo competition

As you may have noticed, this edition of the newsletter is the first to be printed in colour to allow you, the reader, to better enjoy the photos within the articles. To celebrate this we are holding a photography competition.

Many of you email me photos of the river and its inhabitants and so naturally the theme will be 'On The River'. So please send in your photos, amateur or otherwise. (Ideally they need to be high quality, at a minimum resolution of 300 dpi).

The winning shot will be featured on the front page of the next newsletter. Please state if you are willing to have your photo used by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust for other publicity uses.

You can either email them to me at ruth.clarricoates@naturalengland.org.uk or post them to me at: Natural England, Prince Maurice Court, Hambleton Avenue, Devizes, SN10 2RT.

The deadline is 1st April 2010.

Happy Snapping!



The Avon flows past Salisbury (Ruth Clarricoates).

Wiltshire Fishery Association report

By Richard Archer

In the last newsletter, which celebrated the Wessex Chalk Streams Project's first 10 years, Tony Wells wrote a comprehensive review of its achievements. It has had only four project officers since its inception and they have faced a challenging whirl of issues and changing priorities. My aim is to update the WFA's view on events since then.

A list of the main concerns facing members of Wiltshire Fishery Association continues to be headed by

- Water - its quantity and quality, the pressures of abstraction and the effects of pollution.
- The life forms in that water, from unwelcome algae to healthy and essential populations of the ranunculus family and associated species
- Invasive plants and exotic species.
- Swans, and the plan to limit the ecological impact of their increasing numbers.
- Access - the challenge of trying to gain widespread support for activities that will bring rivers up to the best possible condition to meet European legal requirements, when those rivers are largely in the hands of private owners, and the designations of which exclude certain forms of access.

Water

The Association remains closely in touch with Wessex Water, whose Resources Plan and Business Plan are due to be 'determined' by Ofwat towards the end of November.

These plans include the creation of an integrated grid to facilitate the wider distribution of water from a variety of their sources around their area of supply. This is with a corresponding reduction of demand from any one source which, in summer and autumn, and in low flow conditions generally, could make a significant difference to those rivers most at risk from low flow conditions. The Association sees this as a desirable development.

Work has continued to reach a better understanding of the complex hydrogeology underlying the southern flank of Salisbury Plain, affecting in particular the Chitterne Brook, the Till,

and to a significant extent, the Wylve below the Till confluence.

Some progress is clearly being made, and new data points to the effect of the adjacent abstraction points being of direct significance, not only on the drying of the winterbourne reaches, but also below the permanent springheads. Once again member fisheries, aided by Wessex Water, have had to rescue stranded trout from isolated pools in both the Chitterne Brook and the Till.

Water quality, even in rivers as carefully managed as these, can never be taken for granted. Members continue to report events requiring investigation as and when they become aware of them, but the speed with which damage can be done militates against effective action after the event, and effective prevention and regular monitoring are the keys to maintaining clean water.

One of the most effective indicators of healthy water is the abundance and diversity of the invertebrate population, with species such as fresh water 'shrimp' (*Gammarus pulex*) and certain of the trichoptera and plecoptera, being particularly sensitive to pollution and acting as indicator species.

I am pleased to report that regular sampling is taking place more and more widely by trained volunteers, and the Wessex Chalk Streams Project is already making a significant contribution to this effort (see page 7).

I would like to thank the Environment Agency for the gift of six sets of the necessary equipment, already in use by Association members. The more widely and frequently we can take regular samples and keep careful records, the better the picture we can build up of the ecology of our rivers, and from time to time we shall undoubtedly find water quality under threat early enough to enable timely action to be taken.

Life forms in the water

This links directly into other life forms in the water, where the plant life forms the basis for the food chain and also acts as a water quality indicator in its own right. Familiar plants like water crowfoot (*Ranunculus sp*), starwort (*Callitriche sp*) and others, provide a food store,

shelter, shade (and temperature control), oxygen exchange and filtration system on which all other forms of life depend.

Managing the sometimes rampant growth of this group enables us also to manage water levels, flow rates and siltation. The weed cutting regime now well into its sixth decade of partnership with successive statutory authorities continues to be an important management tool.

We are in continuing discussions with the Environment Agency and Natural England on how this can be rendered even more effective, not least by reducing the distance that cut weed has to travel before removal. This will be done by introducing on the Avon and, if this is successful, subsequently on the Wylde, intermediate points where the weed can be removed and disposed of locally.

We learned a few weeks ago that all mechanical weed cutting on the lower Avon by the Environment Agency is to cease, and it and Natural England are conducting a review of the process and comparing practices with those carried out above Salisbury.

All of us are involved in the quest to ensure that rivers achieve favourable conditions as defined by European law, against very tight timescales. The Association is among the many consultants that have contributed views to the South West River Basin Development Plan (SWRBDP), a comprehensive but time-consuming Environment Agency document; and then to a draft plan for the Strategic Restoration of the River Avon (and its tributaries) in preparation for the actions phase of the SWRBDP. This document is still in course of completion as I write.

Swan action management plan

This project, being run by Wiltshire Fishery Association in conjunction with Natural England and with help from the Game Conservancy Trust, is part of the much wider Wiltshire Biodiversity Action Plan and is designed to develop benign means of reducing or stabilising the mute swan population on the chalk streams of Wiltshire.

Due to the excellent habitat that these chalk streams provide we have an excess of swans, which is damaging the whole ecosystem by the hard grazing of ranunculus in the streams. Currently the main activity is egg oiling, a technique which has been used widely on such

species as Canada geese and various gulls, and is well proven.

The logic behind this is based on a study carried out in the '90s by the Central Science Laboratory. This indicated that egg oiling down to two eggs per nest would reduce the population by between 20 and 50 % in 10 years.

A license to oil swan eggs was granted in 2009, 47 nests were located, 44 had eggs, 299 eggs were laid and 200 were oiled. It is hoped that a further license will be issued in 2010.

The intention is to develop the management plan, which is seen as being ongoing, into more than just an egg oiling exercise and it is intended to carry out work, which will provide a better understanding of the ecology and needs of the mute swan. This in turn will make possible a management plan which will enhance the chalk stream habitat to the benefit of the whole ecosystem.

Access

The Association's attention is being more and more insistently drawn to this question, as reports of boating and rafting incursions continue into these protected waters.

The belief expressed by, for example, the British Canoe Union, that all waters ought to be theirs to explore by right and without contributing to their upkeep, let alone to their ecological improvement, is not one that the Association shares.

It may be that on larger, undesignated, less intensively managed waterways, scope does exist for the Voluntary Agreements - the direction in which the Government would prefer the debate to move.

On rivers designated SSSI and/or SAC any consent for access would lie with Natural England, whose view is that any such consent is unlikely to be granted, and Voluntary Agreements are therefore not going to be the way forward.

Dealing with un-consented access presents very real problems. These range from a studied indifference on the part of the offenders, to varying degrees of abuse, occasionally coupled with actual vandalism affecting river structures. Members and their keepers have been advised to exercise courtesy and caution in any encounter; to avoid personal risk, but to make careful records,

Water Framework Directive

By Ruth Clarricoates

including photographs whenever possible, so that if necessary evidence can be produced at a later date.

The situation remains unclear in law and unsatisfactory in practice. Also present is an upsurge in poaching, and an increasing demand for the right to walk across, and gain additional 'rights' over, private land.

Strangely, the responsibilities inherent in property ownership are seldom seen to be part of any such arrangement. Riparian owners are thereby increasingly discouraged to grant access, or to simply allow it unchecked for fear this may lead to their losing control over their own property.

The 2006 Common Lands Act seems to encourage the public to claim the creation of new village greens for recreation where property owners have exercised a light touch in their attitude to access to land. An application in the Ebble valley is attracting attention at the time of writing.

Water in rivers, estuaries, coasts and aquifers will improve under measures set out in River Basin Management Plans, drawn up for river basin districts across England and Wales under the Water Framework Directive.

River Basin Management Plans are the plans for protecting and improving the water environment and have been developed in consultation with organisations and individuals.

Earlier this year Wiltshire Fisheries and the Wessex Chalk Streams Project spent time collating a response to the draft plans for the Avon.

The final plans were completed by the Environment Agency in September and are being approved by ministers in December. These are to be published on 22nd December 2009 and will be available at www.environment-agency.gov.uk/wfd

STREAM and Living River projects update

By Eva Stuetzenberger



STREAM has ended

The EC LIFE-Nature-funded STREAM Project ended in September 2009 and the team would like to thank everyone who has been involved, in particular the project partners, landowners, fishery managers and local people who have all helped to make the project a success.

Information on all aspects, including guidance notes on river restoration techniques, permissions, linking river and floodplain, and community engagement are available on www.streamlife.org.uk

STREAM has not solved all the problems affecting the River Avon system, but importantly it has built strong partnerships to carry on the work. A restoration plan covering the whole river system is already underway, and the STREAM project

partners are considering what further action may be required to improve the River Avon system.

Awards

The Living River Project, together with its sister project STREAM, has recently been nominated for the final of the International Thies Riverprize.

The prestigious prize recognizes and showcases excellence in river management with nominees all demonstrating leadership, innovation and commitment to sustainability.

We didn't win first prize, but came back with a big trophy and great recognition for the achievements of the STREAM and Living River projects and their river management practices.

We are also pleased to announce that the Living River Project has been awarded first prize in the South West regional Green Hero Awards, by its partner



International Thies River Prize.



Volunteers help to create natural river banks (Living River).

the environmental volunteering charity BTCV.

The award recognises the enormous achievements of the partnership in restoring and improving the banks of the River Avon in Salisbury City centre.

The Living River Project, together with BTCV, helped to create natural river banks that provide new habitat for a wide variety of species in an urban river environment.

River restoration work

The Living River Project has now successfully completed all its restoration work in Salisbury and Amesbury. Within our remit of engaging local communities and raising awareness and appreciation of the River Avon System, we have engaged nearly 1,000 volunteers in our work since the Project started in 2006.

The backgrounds of volunteers that have helped are as diverse as the tasks carried out under the Project. Executives from HSBC and Friends Provident mixed with pupils from local schools and colleges, international environmental groups, young people excluded from education and enthusiastic individuals.

As well as carrying out river restoration work, the volunteers helped with improving paths, building benches and dipping decks, getting involved in the development of interpretation boards, and the running of river-related events.

They get wet, dirty and tired - but at the end of the day they all have one thing in common - a big sense of achievement and a smile of satisfaction.

Invasive Plant Stakeholder Forum

Armed with injection guns and a long-term vision, the Living River Project launched an Invasive Plant Stakeholder Forum earlier this year. The forum moved a big step forward in October by developing and adopting a 20-year strategic plan for managing invasive plants in the River Avon catchment (see page 8).

Interpretation work

For those people who don't want to put on their Wellies or walking boots to explore the river there is now also another way to get a glimpse of what is going on above and below its surface.

We have installed a webcam outside Salisbury Library which continuously streams live pictures from the river onto a screen in the children's section. Which means the fictional characters of Jemima Puddle Duck, Ratty the Water Vole and Trudi Trout are all giving live performances at the library.



A webcam streams live river pictures into the children's library in Salisbury (Living River).

The Living River Project continues its work until summer 2010. Having completed its main restoration work it is now focussing on engaging more than 30 communities within the Avon catchment with their local river. Many more interpretation facilities and boards, benches and artwork will spring up along the river over the next few months.

For more information about STREAM or Living River visit www.streamlife.org.uk or www.livingriver.org.uk or contact: Eva Stuetzenberger, Tel. (01722) 334856 or eva.stuetzenberger@naturalengland.org.uk.

Publication of the Strategic Framework for the Restoration of the River Avon System SSSI/SAC

By SFfRRA project steering group

The Strategic Framework for the Restoration of the River Avon System ('strategy') has been completed and is published on

www.wiltshirewildlife.org/Standing Up/WessexChalkStream/EmailForm.aspx

In developing this strategy, the WSCP and Hampshire Wildlife Trust partnership has:

- Surveyed all of the SSSI river channel above Salisbury and reviewed the lower Avon from aerial data.
- Developed a Geographical Information database which can be used for water restoration planning, water level management or other ecological studies.
- Drawn up a 'Strategy' to restore the river to a naturally functioning system.
- Drawn up initial reach-based restoration options which will be further developed in planning the future planning of restoration.

The study showed that the river is extensively modified and rarely naturally functioning. This means that a lot of maintenance is required and the river is in 'unfavourable' condition as an SSSI.

Although the strategy aspires for it to be a naturally functioning river, many of these modifications are now of historic and landscape interest and the protection of these features will constrain how far the river can be restored.

Following a consultation workshop in June, the consultation period was extended and a series of drop-in sessions were held, with a total of more than 80 attendees. Their comments, plus those of organisations who wrote in, were considered in finalising this strategy. Many of the comments were more specific to the reach level planning and have been recorded for use in the next stage of implementing the strategy.

Early costs to implement the strategy have been estimated. A significant part of the restoration work is most likely to be delivered by the Environment Agency's water level management plan team's 'favourable condition' programme.

It will be achieved through working in partnership with others over the next five years and is subject to funding being made available. Consultation will start in 2010 for this programme which will help restore the health of the River Avon.

River Monitoring Project

By Susan Allan - RMP Administrator

The River Monitoring Project is an invaluable scheme run by volunteers and the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. Our monitors conduct monthly surveys of rivers in Wiltshire, typically recording data from April to September at a site they have chosen near their homes.

By performing kick samples and identifying the invertebrates found, the health of a river can be determined - generally, the more species of invertebrates found the better.

Volunteers also record biodiversity along the river bank at their site, recording important information ranging from plant species and animals seen, to litter and the state of the river. The information that monitors collect has in the past unearthed

pollution events and invasive non-native species, which helps to improve rivers and shows just how important river monitoring can be.

We have made 1,399 records, beating last year's 1,281 records, with a rise in invertebrate and plant records. We've also boosted the number of volunteers to 38, and increased the number of sites monitored. It has been a good year!

Next year we are looking forward to the AGM on Saturday 30th January at Langford Lakes. We are also hoping to hold a training day for any new, committed volunteers who would like to become river monitors.

We need people who will be willing to monitor once a month for a six-month period, so if you think that could be you, please contact us on: monitoringprojects@wiltshirewildlife.org or look at our website www.wsbrc.org.uk and follow the links to the River Monitoring page.

Volunteers help stem spread of invasives



Left: a volunteer helps to remove Himalayan balsam from the Wylde (WWT). Right: Balsam is a pink peril on our rivers (Simon Taber).



The Salisbury Avon and its tributaries, the River Ray in Swindon, and the By Brook in west Wiltshire are now in a far healthier state thanks to the enthusiasm of volunteers who have been hard at work over the summer surveying for outbreaks of the invasive non-native plant Himalayan balsam, and then helping to remove it from the river banks.

From May to September a volunteer team under the guidance of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's Wiltshire Invasive Plant Project (WIPP) were out and about finding exactly where the balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) was growing.

Based on these findings WIPP staff then took volunteers out on more than 45 tasks to pull the plant up. "Our survey volunteers gave nearly 100 hours of their spare time to survey the water courses and the practical task volunteers gave almost 500 hours to help pull up the balsam. We owe them a huge 'Thank You'," says Project Officer Sarah Stebbing.

Balsam's pink flowers may look pretty along the rivers in the summer but it quickly forms two-metre high thickets that out-compete native plants. When native plants disappear, so too do important food sources for invertebrates so that the whole food chain of the river system can break down.

As it is an annual plant the stalks die back in winter, leaving bare river banks that are vulnerable to soil erosion. The key to its control is to pull the plants up while it is flowering and before it releases its seeds, because if these get into a water system they very quickly spread and can colonise areas downstream.

WIPP is a three-year project funded by SITA Trust and the Environment Agency. Over the summer WIPP has also advised more than 60 agricultural and domestic landowners on how to control the three species.

Sarah says that now the project wants to encourage river users such as anglers to get involved. "If you see even one balsam plant as you go out to fish, please pull it up, because by next year it could cover a big area. And if you see any clusters please let us know."

Contact: Sarah Stebbing (01380) 725670 ext 227, mobile 07775 815957, email sarahs@wiltshirewildlife.org

While the WIPP project helped pull balsam on the ground, the WCSP got organisations to begin to work together to reduce invasive plants on the Salisbury Avon. The first Avon Invasive Plant Forum was launched in May and included Natural England, the Environment Agency, Wiltshire Fisheries, Wiltshire Council and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust among a number of representatives.

The forum hopes to join up work that has happened across the valley and will strive to help landowners in removing these problem plants. It has already produced an Invasive Plant Strategy, which will be available from Ruth Clarricoates in the New Year.