



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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Engaging with Nature

Since 2017, the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has been running its Engaging with Nature project to help people with mental health problems, working with mental health organisations in Berkshire, such as Eight Bells for Mental Health and Response. Project officer Carrie Starbuck runs a 10-week therapeutic programme that has a range of activities from wellbeing walks, gardening and eco-art to practical conservation. Activities run at local green spaces including BBOWT's Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham, where Carrie recently launched the Engaging with Nature Community Garden.

Here, Carrie gives six secrets to getting outside for the first time and to encourage more people to start

enjoying the benefits of time spent in the natural world.

Six Secrets for Engaging with Nature

1. It doesn't matter what you wear

Unless you are climbing a mountain, you don't need the latest or most expensive gear to enjoy the outdoors. What you do need is to feel comfortable in what you are wearing: a good pair of shoes, layers to keep you warm and, as we live in Britain, a waterproof jacket.

2. It's about moments, not minutes

It is tempting to think that you have to be outside for hours and do lots of activities to be an 'outdoors' person. Research shows that engaging with nature through simple activities, such as smelling flowers or listening to birdsong, has a greater impact on our wellbeing than simply the length of time spent

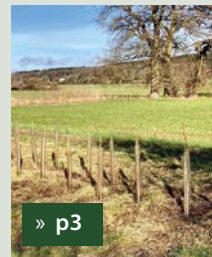
outdoors. If you are feeling nervous about visiting a new place, or too busy for a long, arduous walk, that's ok! What matters is developing your relationship with nature and engaging in a new way. One way to do this is to focus on one of your senses.

3. Nature reserves are special

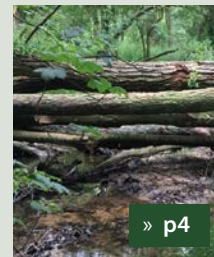
From mountains to meadows and woodlands to wetlands, Britain's nature reserves are some of the best places to connect with the natural world. Nature reserves invite us to slow down, be quiet, and look and listen. They allow us to disconnect so we can reconnect. That is very special in our busy, modern world. BBOWT sites often have hides for birdwatching, quiet zones, and plenty of benches to watch the world go by. Find a reserve near you at bbowt.org.uk/nature-reserves

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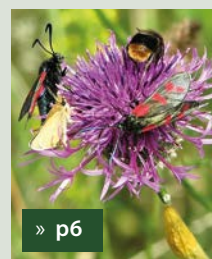
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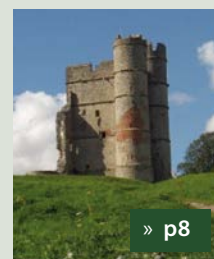
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4 Local Farmers Working Together

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Plus lots more...

West Berkshire Countryside Society

Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.

West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

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Initial contact for all above and for the Barn Owl Group, Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group and West Berks Conservation Volunteers should, unless otherwise stated, be made via enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk

Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task.

Date/Time	Venue	Details
April 2022		
Tue 5th Apr 10:00	Winterbourne Wood	Footpath clearance. Park in the entrance to the wood. SU447 717
Tue 12th Apr 10:00	Moor Copse Nature Reserve Tidmarsh	Footpath repairs for BBOWT. Park in the entrance to the Nature Reserve at SU633 738 .
Tue 19th Apr 10:00	Winterbourne Wood	Stool protection and woodland maintenance. Park in the entrance to the wood SU447 717 .
Tue 26th Apr 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking SU584 723 off road, park by the black barn.
May 2022		
Tue 3rd May 10:00	Hosehill Lake, Sheffield Bottom	Footpath construction around part of the lake, with BBOWT. Park in the car park of the Fox and Hounds pub at Sheffield Bottom. SU650 699
Tue 10th May 10:00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm. SU440 777 . Please leave your vehicles at the bottom of the track and walk up to the common. Vehicles carrying tools and refreshments please drive directly to the task site.
Tue 17th May 10:00	Redhill Wood Hampstead Marshall	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking SU419 642 off road, park on entrance to the main ride.
Tue 24th May 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Ample parking at new village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent. SU512 740
Tue 31st May 10:00	Redhill Wood Hampstead Marshall	Ride widening and brash clearance. Parking SU419 642 off road, park on entrance to the main ride.
June 2022		
Tue 7th Jun 10:00	Wokefield Common, Burghfield	Footpath clearing for BBOWT. Park in the car park for the Nature Reserve at SU653 662 .
Tue 14th Jun 10:00	Grimsbury Castle, Hermitage	Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board. SU511 723 . Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort.
Tue 21st Jun 10:00	Holt Lodge Farm, Kintbury	Clearing bracken. Meet at Holt Lodge Farmhouse near Kintbury. SU387 648
Tue 28th Jun 10:00	Grimsbury Castle, Hermitage	Parking near the Estate house at the castle – by the interpretation board. SU511 723 . Clearing invasive rhododendron from this ancient hill fort.

Conservation Volunteers Round Up

Sites old and new featured in our Winter programme. We completed twenty years of visits to **Ashampstead Common**, cutting bramble and other vegetation from halos around fine veteran trees to encourage them to continue to survive. We also reduced bramble alongside a permissive path designed for wheelchair-users, stacking the arisings as a “dead hedge” to deter horse-riding. Then, on a new site, we assembled into log-piles timber scattered on the woodland floor so this could be mowed by the Yattendon Estate, thus encouraging bluebells to flourish.

The Tuesday volunteers and the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group made five visits to **Bucklebury Common** to continue the never-ending task of cutting down the regrowth of silver birch, Scots pine and gorse. Without these sustained efforts, the heather would quickly become overwhelmed, with a consequent impact on heathland wildlife.

One new site was at **Nunhide Farm** on Sulham Estate where we planted 200 whips in gaps in a 400-metre hawthorn hedge. We also removed numerous plastic protectors from established trees, detaching their wooden battens and stacking everything for reuse or disposal.

At **Sheepdrove Organic Farm** we continued laying an extremely long hedge, departing from the usual method and not using stakes or binders – there was sufficient material to make a robust, bulky barrier. Its main purpose is to stop crop-spray drifting from a neighbouring non-organic farm. It also provides a secure wildlife corridor.

An impressive eighteen volunteers turned out at **Boxford Water Meadows** as Storm Barra approached. We cut up

trees blown over in previous storms and removed damaged branches from standing trees. The brash was burnt and larger timber formed into habitat log-piles as the weather worsened – but being hardy souls, we continued until lunchtime.

Another wet day was at **Holt Lodge Farm**, where we cleared bramble, using hand-tools on small areas and on slopes, and brush-cutters on larger areas of level ground. We also maintained a public right-of-way that crosses the farm on a steep, muddy slope, cutting back overhanging branches, and cleared overhanging vegetation from two fence lines.

At **Malt House Farm** we planted saplings in the gaps of four hedgerows that we had previously cleared, and dealt with a huge amount of brash accumulated on two earlier visits.

We started laying a hawthorn hedge at **Rushall Manor Farm**. Apart from a little bramble, it was unusually free of other vegetation but still needed a good trim to remove unwanted growth so that stems of varying thickness could be laid. A very overgrown hedge was coppiced leaving standards along the fence line.

We continued maintaining woodland and footways at **Redhill Wood**, reducing scrub and removing trees leaning over one path, taking out a tree that had fallen across another, and using cut wood to edge the paths.

We tried out our new brush-cutter at **Grove Pit Common**, as we opened up a glade and haloed staked trees infested with bramble. We cleared around a bench and cut up fallen trees and branches.

At Upper Bucklebury's **Hockett Field**, we reduced 140 metres of hedge,



Rushall Manor Before
© Andy Hollox



Rushall Manor After
© Andy Hollox

comprising mixed whips planted ten years ago, to a manageable size to encourage new growth.

At **Furze Hill**, we used mattocks and forks to uproot bramble in the meadow, meaning less work for our brush-cutters in future rotational mowings, and coppiced trees in the fenced-off area, creating several substantial log-piles.



Grovepit Common
© David Hume

An extra task one Friday was clearing invasive foliage from just over half the length of the **Eling Way**, the new permissive path along a disused railway track linking Hermitage and Hampstead Norreys, which has become very popular with walkers and cyclists.

Terry Crawford

Local farmers are working together...

...making a real difference to the environment of the Upper Pang Valley.

There are currently huge changes underway in farming whereby farmers and land managers will only be rewarded for schemes which meet new environmental land management conditions, instead of the subsidies they used to be able to claim. In anticipation of these significant changes, there has been a real shift in thinking over recent years. Farmers and land managers are focussing efforts into working collectively to change countryside management and to have real impact over a larger area.

Over the last few years, Farmer Clusters have been popping up throughout the country - some government-funded, some independent - using the power of collective thought to help find alternative ways to replace vital lost payments and ensure a sustainable, economically viable future for both their businesses and the environment.

One such group is the Upper Pang Valley Farmer Cluster (UPVFC) which is comprised of 4 local estates and their tenant farmers. There are other local groups nearby including the Lower Pang Valley and Ridgeway Clusters. As the co-ordinator for UPVFC, it is a pleasure to be involved with such a positive group of businesses and individuals who have a shared belief that current farming and land management practices need to change to reflect the very real threats posed by the new regulations, climate change and biodiversity decline. What strikes me most about this group is the array of environmental improvements that have been carried out over the years,

and the positivity and enthusiasm to engage in yet more.

The UPVFC covers a vast 7,700ha of Berkshire countryside consisting of arable fields, and grassland habitats where livestock form part of the businesses. The area has a huge amount of ancient woodland, miles and miles of hedges, beautiful expanses of wildflower and insect habitats and forms a large part of the contributing catchment for the Upper Pang chalk stream.

Walking around the local countryside you may notice bat, barn owl and kestrel boxes creating breeding places for these wonderful creatures. There are leaky dams hidden in the valleys of small streams which flow into the Pang, put there to slow the flow of water and protect areas further downstream from the impacts of flooding. We have one of the best local examples of arable reversion, where previously cultivated land has been allowed to return to natural habitat. There are acres of land turned into wildflower meadows to provide for insects.

Since this cluster was formalised, we have been able to start making more joined-up plans. We recently received news that one of our members was successful in a bid to secure funding to plant more than 2.5km of hedges. This will provide new wildlife corridors within the estate, but importantly will link to areas of hedge and woodland on neighbouring farms. It also contributes to our climate change objectives by capturing carbon.

Associated with this, UPVFC hosted a very successful hedge management training day for its members and the Ridgeway Cluster, also welcoming representatives of the West Berkshire Countryside Society Volunteers. The aim of this training was to help those who have responsibility for managing our hedges to allow wildlife to thrive in a way that fits in with their business requirements.



Hedge Management Training

© Torz Brown



Flower-rich seed mix for insects

© Torz Brown

We have recently begun a carbon footprint assessment for all the farms and forestry operations within the Cluster area. This will give us a very good idea of where the biggest sources of emissions are, but also quantify carbon sequestration in hedges, woodland and green cover. We will take the results of this project as a baseline, develop strategies for what could be improved and measure the impacts of any changes.

We are also very excited to have been invited to get involved in a Thames Water flagship Chalk Streams project. This project is in the very early stages of development and aims to work as a true partnership between water companies, land managers, and other organisations. The process will identify priorities and opportunities where land managers can help deliver water quality, quantity and flood risk management measures.

The current pressures on farmers and land managers are huge. But we believe we've taken a step in the right direction by working together to deliver the best possible outcomes for the environment in combination with sustainable farming businesses.

Torz Brown (Co-ordinator for the Upper Pang Valley Farmer Cluster)



Leaky Dam

© Torz Brown

Continued from page 1.

4. Be wild all year

Some say winter is lifeless – it's anything but! Starlings fill the skies with the incredible patterns of their murmurations; barn owls extend their hunting hours into daylight; and in February queen bumblebees begin to look for new nests sites. As the world awakens in spring we can enjoy carpets of bluebells, and cuckoos and nightingales sing night and day. Come summer the world is alive: butterflies flit between flowers, reptiles bask in the sun, and

dragonflies hunt waterside. Then autumn invites us to slow down again as lush greens become browns and oranges, punctuated with pops of red and purple berries.

5. Visiting a nature reserve is climate action

Nature reserves safeguard the most rich and diverse habitats for the future, yet they only make up approximately 0.7% of the country's land surface. By supporting your local reserve you are taking action for nature. While visiting you



The Pleasure of Gardening
© Carrie Starbuck/BBOWT

can help protect these places by following the principles of 'leave no trace': plan ahead, stay on footpaths, dispose of waste properly, leave what you find, respect wildlife and be considerate of other visitors.

6. You belong here

BBOWT's aim is to create a safe place for nature, and that includes you: we want people to visit our reserves and help nature in their neighbourhood. To get involved, go to bbowt.org.uk/team-wilder

Peter Hughes and Carrie Starbuck

The Engaging with Nature project is currently looking for volunteers to help at its new community garden at the Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham. To find out more, email carrie.starbuck@bbowt.org.uk

The Annual General Meeting of the West Berkshire Countryside Society

will take place in the Oak Room, Upper Bucklebury Memorial Hall RG7 6QH
Thursday 19th May 2022 7:00pm for a 7:30pm start

The official business of the meeting will be followed by a talk
'Harvesting the Hedgerows: a conservationist's perspective' by Charles Gilchrist

Items of Any Other Business – Please notify the Secretary at least one week before the meeting at wbcshonsec@btinternet.com



Don't forget our website!
www.westberkscountryside.org.uk



A History of the Holies

The Holies forms part of a complex of chalk grassland sites on the East Berkshire Downs above Streatley. Part of the Holies, The Holies Down, is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), despite its recent varied history, and is known for its chalk grassland flora and associated insects, including the rare Chalk-hill and Adonis Blue butterflies.

The Holies, with Lardon Chase (also a SSSI) and Lough Down, are three National Trust countryside areas within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These adjacent properties incorporate areas of unimproved chalk grassland, a habitat now becoming increasingly rare in Berkshire. Today, there are only 440 acres of chalk grassland left in Berkshire.

The Holies comprises one of the finest dry valleys cut in chalk by running water. Millions of years ago, the area was covered by the sea resulting in deposits of chalk. Clay and sand were deposited on top of the chalk, and geological uplift eventually exposed a flat plain with a large river (the Ancient Thames) meandering through it. Erosion by the Ancient Thames led to the chalk being exposed and eventually to the creation of the Goring Gap; a

smaller river running into the Thames created the Holies. Over millennia the level of the Thames gradually fell to the current level and the rivers running through the Holies dried up. Today, there are remnants of clay and sand at the very top of the site.

The first physical evidence of settlement on the Holies is of field boundaries and banks defining small, irregular, arable fields which were ploughed by Iron Age or Roman farmers. The remains of this field system can be seen on aerial photographs. The farmers lived in small farmsteads in the valley and grazed sheep and cattle on the steeper slopes. As well as evidence of worked flint, 49 Roman coins have been found in the Holies, including one silver coin that dates from AD circa 220. The other 48 coins are copper alloy and date from the late 3rd and early 4th centuries.

More recently, in the 1970s, the Holies was privately owned with the only access being via a public footpath. However, the West Berkshire planning records show that there were several proposed developments before the community managed to secure ownership and protection of the land.

The first of these proposals was for a farmhouse to be built. A local farmer suggested he would use the land for sheep and, eventually, for a herd of Charolais cattle. However, the plan was denied permission as the 60 acres, being partly covered by woodland, was considered an unviable unit.

In 1985, it was proposed to establish a shooting school within Checkenden Wood in the Holies, which is known locally today as the bluebell woods. The shooting school planned to instruct clients in the use of shotguns, using clays as targets. The school would have been spread out in the woodland, so the traps and shooting butts would have been invisible from the surrounding areas.



A Busy Food Source
© Evelyn-Simak Creative Commons Licence



Chalk-hill Blue
© Andy Potter Creative Commons Licence

However, this proposal received hundreds of objections from residents. Complainants were concerned about spent shot falling on nearby footpaths and the noise resulting from the discharge of guns. In October 1985, Newbury District Council recommended that the introduction of a shooting school would not be appropriate, and the planning consent was not granted.

It might now be supposed that peace and tranquility were assured for The Holies, but for the fact that in the 1980s the Holies was being used for motorbike scrambling and turf stripping, resulting in considerable damage to the precious habitat of unimproved grassland. The motocross track was known as Streatley Hills, the home of the Mortimer Motorcycle Club, who were at the time a big name in the sport. In March 1985 the club hosted the British 250cc Motocross



Adonis Blue © Stefan Czapski Creative Commons

Championship, followed in May, by the British Sidecar & 125cc Solo Moto-Cross Championships. August 1985 saw the club's first promotion of an international sidecar event, when the club hosted the International Sidecar Cross at Streatley Hills. In March 1987 the British 500cc Motocross Championships were held there, followed by the Sidecar Cross Grand Prix on the 25th and 26th of April 1987. You can watch the British Sidecar Cross Grand Prix at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOIxJ0ZWisk>.

However, despite its popularity with motocross fans, the damage to the grassland was causing great concern amongst the local community. With the support of the Goring and Streatley Amenity Association, Streatley Parish Council, and Newbury District Council, a campaign was started to bring an end to motocross racing on the site. After much local effort the campaign was successful. The original grassed state of the Holies had to be reinstated by the end of April 1988.

Fortunately, in 1989, the National Trust was persuaded to buy the 109 acres on behalf of Streatley. They did so only on the basis that the cost would be repaid by the local community. The necessary hundreds of thousands of pounds were

Dates for Your Diary

Sun 24th April 2022 10:30am

The Woods of Hampstead Norreys

A walk with Charles Gilchrist to look at the woodland spring flowers as well as some historic features of land use. Meet at the Hampstead Norreys Village Hall car park **SU527 762**.



Wood Anemone
© Philip Halling Creative Commons Licence

Wed 15th June 2022 9:00pm

Join Tim Culley on a short walk looking for Night Jars on Bucklebury Common.

Meet at the Crossroads on the Common **SU556 961**.



Bucklebury Common
© Edmund Shaw/Creative Commons Licence

raised from donations and grants as well as through fundraising events.

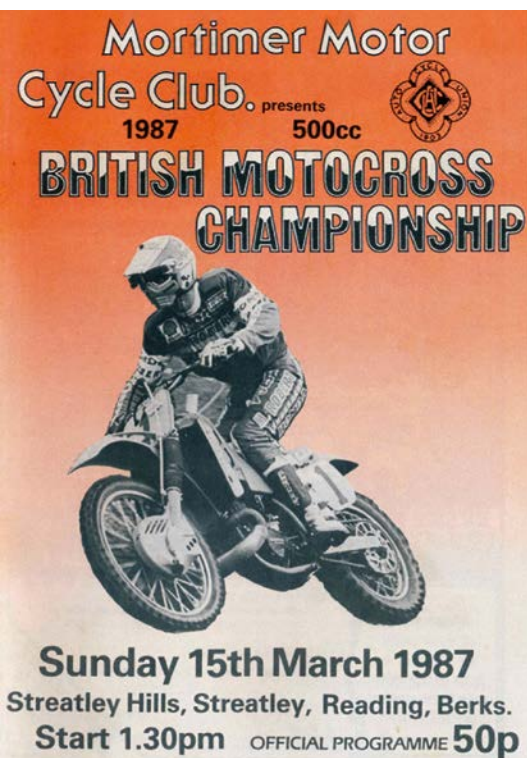
Today, the National Trust manage the landscape by a mixture of scrub clearance and cattle grazing which aims to encourage the growth of a wide range of flowers. The area is used by residents and visitors, who are lucky enough to enjoy a leisurely walk overlooking the Goring Gap among the abundance of local wildlife.

Amelie Cox

(With thanks to Goring Gap News for permission to publish)



Common Milkwort
© Keith Edkins Creative Commons Licence



© Dave Rily/Weebly



The Holies in Spring

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Castle, Heath and River

About 3¼ miles or 5¼ km

Exploring Donnington Castle, Snelsmore and the River Lambourn. Starting and finishing at Donnington Castle car park. There is a short steep hill from the car park to the castle and a long moderate hill from Bagnor back to the castle. There are pubs in both Bagnor and Donnington.



Donnington Castle from the car park

1. **Donnington Castle** occupies both a strong tactical position on its steep sided ridge and an important strategic position at the junction of the east-west route from London to Bristol and the south-north route from Southampton to the midlands. There has probably been some sort of castle here since at least 1086. It was a key site during the Civil War (1642-46) and was besieged by the Parliamentary forces for twenty months. The earthworks around the castle were constructed by the Royalists

at the beginning of the siege. The castle was not important during the first Battle of Newbury on 20th September 1643 but played a key role during the second Battle on 26th and 27th of October 1644.



The Civil War fortifications



Ancient Pollard

2. This **Ancient Pollard** has a girth of 6.5m and is about 500 years old. It would have been here during the siege.

3. **Snelsmore Common Country Park** is a lowland heath and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a rarity not only in West Berkshire but nationally. The acid gravelly soils lying over clay have ensured that the Common was never cultivated but it has been important to the local communities as a source of fuel and grazing for thousands of years. The grazing prevented the regrowth of trees. During World War 2 the Common was used to store ammunition and equipment – hence the concrete roads. Gravel was quarried to make the concrete and 'Spooky Hollow' was a result! The Common is rich in wildlife.

The flora has several heathers and some unusual flowers. There are nightjars, roe deer and adders and in the wet mires there are newts and sundews.



Spooky Hollow

4. **Spooky Hollow** is a sheltered spot for a coffee break. Sadly, the benches are gone.

5. The **sunken track** past Ashridge Copse is the ancient link for Bagnor people using the Common for grazing and other resources. Note the large oak, ash and hazel coppice stools growing on the bank. Some of these are hundreds of years old.

6. **Bagnor** existed in 1086 and had one watermill. The Watermill Theatre was opened in an abandoned mill in 1969.

7. The **River Lambourn** is a chalk stream. There are only 200 chalk streams in the whole world and they have very special communities of plants, fish, insects and other wildlife. We shamefully neglect and abuse our chalk streams. The Winterbourne joins the Lambourn here.



The River Lambourn

Dick Greenaway, Terry Crawford

Many more interesting local walks are available on our website: www.westberkscountryside.org.uk