



Dartford Warbler © Jon Hawkins BBOWT

## West Berkshire's attraction for the Dartford warbler

The Dartford warbler was first recorded as a breeding bird in 1773, near Dartford in Kent. The UK is the most northern limit of its population extent, being found in southern England, Wales, and as far east as Norfolk and Suffolk. Higher numbers are found in mainland Europe.

It is a bird that lives only on lowland heathland in the UK, and favours Mediterranean maquis in Europe. So, like its habitat it is relatively rare, and declining. It is listed as being of conservation concern in the UK and Europe (Amber listed) due to its historical population decline, as a result of habitat loss. Currently around 3000 pairs breed in the UK.

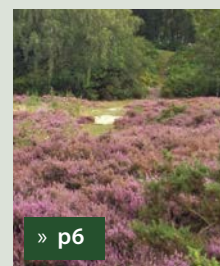
West Berkshire is lucky enough to contain a number of lowland heathland areas. Of which, only Greenham and Crookham – both sites looked after by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) on behalf of West Berkshire Council – are known to support Dartford warbler populations. Therefore, it is vitally important to maintain good, suitable habitat here and to increase this on the other sites.

Typically, this consists of gorse and heather in all growth stages, from young pioneer vegetation to abundant mature, dense gorse and heather. The Dartford warbler often nests in bushes low to the ground, and forages for its mainly insect diet amongst the heather, scrub and gorse. It is a small, dark, long-tailed warbler with a red eye ring, and is typically spotted perching on the

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very top of a gorse bush, singing out its rather scratchy warble. BBOWT, along with its many enthusiastic volunteers, work hard to ensure that the Commons provide sufficient appropriate habitat to support the potential population.

Along with other ground nesting birds, such as meadow and tree pipits, woodlark, skylark and stonechat, the Dartford warbler is vulnerable to disturbance, especially during the breeding season. There is a national Ground Nesting Bird Season (March 1st to July 31st) and on Greenham and Crookham, and Snelsmore Commons, BBOWT supports this by employing wardens to patrol the sites. A zoning system to protect areas where the birds are most susceptible (See Upstream Issue 89, Autumn 2019) is set up each year, to encourage people and dogs away from the most sensitive areas.

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# 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](mailto:enquiries@westberkscountryside.org.uk)

## Future Events

As a consequence of Covid 19 restrictions, this issue of Upstream does not include any diary dates for walks, talks or tasks. If some restrictions are lifted which then enable us to arrange such events before the next issue of Upstream is distributed in mid-September then the events will be publicised on the diary page of our web site. So please check the web site if there is some easing in the guidance.

## Conservation Volunteers Round Up

*Ride at Rushall Farm*

© John Lerpiniere

Lockdown may have halted our tasks in mid-March, but Nature continued to flourish. Indeed, many parts of the world have reported environmental benefits from the reduction of certain activities, not least travel.

Not that Nature doesn't need some human help of the sort that we provide, and as Spring arrived there were gratifying reports of flowers and plants flourishing on sites where

we have worked with the specific aim of encouraging their growth.

For example, at **Rushall Farm** in mid-April the woods looked spectacular, especially where rides had been widened over the last few years. They had become banks of wood spurge, primroses, wood anemones, celandine, foxgloves and grasses. Butterflies looked set for a good season. Leaf emergence and blossom from the trees and

hedgerows were rapid and beautiful, and the ash were looking very healthy.

**Winterbourne Wood** was also looking splendid. Primrose Ridge was awash with blooms and the bank down to the road that we had recently cleared was a fantastic slope of colour. The hazel coppice was looking good too, with excellent "greening up" and plenty of vigorous new growth behind the barriers we

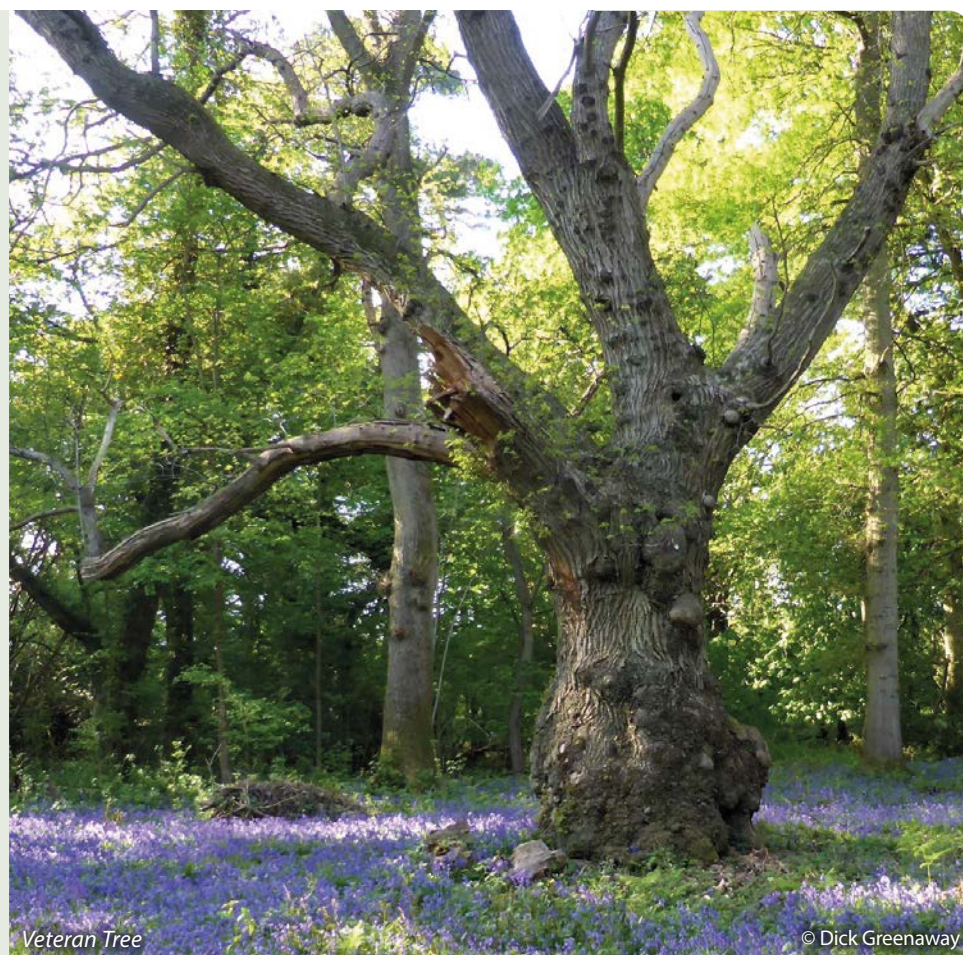
had constructed to prevent deer from nibbling at fresh shoots.

On **Ashampstead Common** the halo that we have maintained around the veteran sweet chestnut was particularly beautiful, and what was once a site of hammered mud from years of having been a collection point for logs is now a magnificent glade, due to volunteers' efforts over 20 years, with wild flowers spreading year by year.

At **Grimsbury Castle** near Hermitage the piles of rhododendrons we have cut down – and sometimes wrenched out of the ground – were rotting down well within the woodland. (We do not have bonfires on this Iron Age site because of its archaeological interest.) Only a low level of regrowth was apparent in the area where we have worked for some time, but there remain more plants to be cut on the opposite side of the road where we've been recently.

The year had started with bad news, when flooding close to **Hosehill Lake**, near Theale, destroyed a short stretch of the perimeter path which we and other groups have been laying over several years. Despite having been mechanically compacted, aggregate to the depth of nine inches was washed away, leaving hollows that presented a risk to the public. Saturday volunteers of the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group retrieved and reinstated much of the aggregate as a temporary measure.

Winter rain also created several large quagmires at **Furze Hill**, on the path from Pinewood Crescent into the woodland. We removed mud and then dug channels, which had the immediate effect of taking away



*Veteran Tree*

© Dick Greenaway

surface water. We also laid large rubber mats obtained by Hermitage Parish Council at the gateways into the recreation field. Some heavy logs were rolled into place to delineate a path and our brush-cutters cut scallops into the brambles bordering the wild-flower meadow.

Sometimes it takes a while for our efforts to show results. But within two months a hedge that we'd set out close to **Sulham** was flourishing. In February we planted 240 whips, mostly hawthorn but with some field maple, in two rows as a continuation of an existing hedge and with the aim of providing food and shelter for wildlife. We also removed one tree that was blocking a public path close to where we were working, and a second one that was threatening to do so. By early April, the whips were beginning to bud.

We continued laying a hedge of considerable length at **Sheepdrove Organic Farm** with the aim of providing a barrier to prevent non-organic sprays being blown on to the farm's land – in contrast to the

usual objective of creating a barrier to roaming stock. Before the actual laying, we removed surplus growth from the hedge, building habitat piles with the logs and burning the excess brash.

At **Malt House Farm** we started laying hedges on either side of a quiet rural road. One hedge, alongside a cropped field, was tall and overgrown. On the other side were the remains of an old hedge in a very poor condition between woodland and a field. After lunch it rained heavily so, with more visits obviously needed, we finished early.

**Leckhampstead Parish Council** asked us to make a one-off visit to Hill Green to clear brash from an area bordering a public footpath. Two volunteers used brush-cutters to clear and burn a substantial amount of encroaching bramble and our chainsaw team made safe a tree, left dangerous after extremely windy weather, and cut it into logs – with the remainder of us providing manual labour to gather up the results.

**Terry Crawford**



*Small Copper Butterfly at Elm Farm*  
© Anne Sayer

Continued from page 1.

The population of Dartford warblers, and other key birds on Greenham and Crookham Common, has been monitored using territory mapping surveys (a modified Breeding Bird Survey methodology) since 2009. This has shown a steady increase from single figures for the first few years to 13 or 14 territories in 2015-17. However, in 2018 only 3 territories were identified, most likely due to the previous harsh winter, through which many individuals will not have survived. The species is very susceptible to prolonged cold weather, as their food source reduces significantly. In 1960/61 when there was an even harder winter the national population is thought to have crashed to only a few pairs. After a milder winter, early indications are hopeful that numbers are up this spring 2020.

On Greenham and Crookham there is a good amount of gorse, which obviously favours the species. It is important to maintain this for the benefit of the Dartford warbler and the many other

ground nesting birds found on the Common. So, large areas are cut on rotation each year, by machinery, in order to ensure that there is a variety of all stages of growth. In addition, lowland heathland is prone to natural succession, so to preserve an open habitat, encroaching birch and pine scrub is cut and burnt every winter on all the heathland sites. Most of this work is carried out by volunteers including WBCS, CROW and Green Gym alongside BBOWT's own volunteer groups.

All the Commons are great places to visit all year round, being especially fragrant in Spring and Summer when the coconut scented gorse is in flower. It isn't always easy to see the Dartford warbler but with patience it can be spotted. It is important when visiting to keep to the main paths on the sites to avoid disturbance.

During the current Coronavirus Regulations please DO NOT DRIVE to visit our nature reserves.



Dartford Warbler  
©Chris Gommershall BBOWT

We have closed the car parks at our reserves and are asking people not to park in the ones we can't close. Please do not park on the verges instead – this is dangerous for you and other road users.

Finally, thank you to those who support BBOWT through membership and volunteering in keeping this important habitat in the best condition to help the vulnerable Dartford warbler to survive.

Liz Fricker, BBOWT's Land Management Officer

## Painting Tree Stumps



Stumps on Bucklebury Common

Tony McDonald

In the article 'Slash, Burn or Nurture' in the Winter issue of Upstream, the authors explained the need for 'scrub bashing' and how it is undertaken. It also mentioned the need to prevent scrub growing back by the application of herbicide.

Herbicides are an effective, simple and low-cost method of controlling weed growth. However, herbicides can kill plants that are wanted, as well as weeds. They are also potentially dangerous to people and wildlife if not correctly used. Hence great care must be taken when applied. To ensure they are used safely only users that have been properly trained should handle and apply herbicides.

The sale, supply, storage and use of herbicides is governed by the Control of Pesticide Regulations 1986. The regulations classify herbicides in to two types 'professional' for use in horticulture, forestry and agriculture and 'amateur' for use in the garden. Both types contain the same chemicals but 'amateur use' is lower strength. Whichever category is used the instructions on the label must be read and followed. Professional herbicides should only be sold to and used by holders of the National Proficiency Training Council (NPTC)

A NPTC training course includes understanding the product information label, the risks to people, personal protective equipment (PPE), how to deal with personal contamination, safe storage, safe transport and disposal, record keeping, risks to the environment and emergency procedures. WBCS has two volunteers who are trained and hold a NTPC certificate gained through their work with conservation agencies other than WBCS.

WBCS only applies diluted 'professional' herbicide to tree stumps, usually small birch saplings, to prevent regrowth. The herbicide of the correct strength is applied by means of a clean dedicated paint brush to the freshly cut stumps. This is referred to as 'painting' the stump. The two WBCS volunteers will only carry this out on WBCS tasks when the herbicide is mixed, provided by and transported to site by the landowner or their agent. The herbicide has a dye added so that treated stumps can be easily identified. This method ensures only the stump is painted and minimises the risk of herbicide coming into contact with other people, plants, soil or water. WBCS does not use a sprayer.

A user can be exposed to an herbicide by the skin, mouth, eyes and breathing it in. The risk is very low when painting compared to spraying, but impermeable gloves and eye protection is worn to ensure safety. The users avoid application close to other volunteers on site and the herbicide dries quickly so other people are not put at risk.

Bob Sarney

# Bringing Back the Elm

Since 2015 Butterfly Conservation's Upper Thames Branch have been busy planting elm trees, mostly using varieties that are resistant to Dutch Elm disease. So why is a charity dedicated to the conservation of butterflies and moths planting trees? The project aims to protect the White-letter Hairstreak butterfly. This species has declined in population by an estimated 87% since the 1970's due to the loss of elm from Dutch Elm disease and it is now a UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. There are also about thirty moth species that rely on elm, including the very rare White-spotted Pinion.

The once stately English Elm now only ever survives as small suckering trees that become re-infected with the disease long before they can mature. Wych Elm can escape the disease much longer and it is still possible to find occasional mature trees, but it certainly isn't immune. In part it is the preference of the Elm Bark Beetle (which is the vector for the fungus) for English Elm over Wych Elm that has helped the latter.

Part of the problem for the White-letter Hairstreak is its requirement for mature elm. This is because the caterpillars feed firstly on the flowers of the elm. The caterpillars overwinter as an egg before hatching out in March, in time with the opening flower buds into which it



White Letter Hairstreak

© Peter Cuss

burrows. As the seeds develop in April the larvae start to feed on these before finally moving on to leaves in May. After pupation the adult butterflies emerge in late June. If you look up into the canopy of an elm that has a colony of White-letter Hairstreak (in late June or early July) you will see the males clashing with each other in furious dogfights as they wait for the females to emerge.

We do plant some Wych Elm, as it is an important tree in the wider countryside, but mostly we have planted Dutch Elm disease resistant types. These are usually hybrids of different elm species. Research and development of these

trees has been done almost entirely on the continent and it is hasn't always been easy to source them in the UK, but they are gradually becoming more widely available. We also plant the European White Elm (*Ulmus laevis*). This tree isn't resistant in the true sense but is virtually never infected with DED as the beetle dislikes the taste of the bark (due to a naturally occurring triterpene in the bark). White Elm is easy to grow from seed and the tree does well in damp soils, riversides and flood plains.

To date we have planted two hundred trees in the Upper Thames, from North Bucks through Oxfordshire to as far down as Kintbury in West Berks. A number of other Butterfly Conservation branches are running similar projects, and the Hampshire branch are fortunate to have one of the leading elm experts, Andrew Brookes, who has been running their elm project for nearly twenty years now – as well as looking after Butterfly Conservation's showcase elm plantation at Great Fontley in Hampshire.

As well as helping those species that require elm (and of course sequestering carbon) it is also just wonderful to bring back a tree that was a much loved and integral part of the English countryside.

Peter Cuss  
Butterfly Conservation,  
Upper Thames



White Letter Hairstreak Caterpillar

© Peter Cuss

# West Berkshire Countryside

## Chairman's Report

Dear Members

This year we have taken the unprecedented step of cancelling the Annual General Meeting because of Covid-19. I am sure that all of you would have expected this, but we have brought forward the publishing date of this Upstream to advise you of the decision. In this edition we have included shortened versions of the reports which would have been given at the AGM by the three Group leaders plus our Treasurer and myself. I can report that every member of the Committee is happy to stay in post for the next year and I should like to thank them all for their support and for agreeing to continue.

The year has been a very positive one for the Society marred, at the last month in March by the advent of Covid-19 which

has caused us to cancel all field related tasks and our quarterly walks, actions which we all regret.

During the year we reached agreement with the John Simonds Trust to support those free school visits which they provide. These visits are funded by generous benefactors and we have agreed to make an annual donation to the Trust to pay for items of kit, or similar, related to these 'free visits' in response to a request from the Trust for a donation from us for this specific purpose. The amount of this payment may vary each year depending on the level of our funds at that time.

The Group Leaders' and Treasurer's reports will provide more detail of the activities of all of our volunteers, meanwhile I thank you for your



Tony McDonald

© Kate McDonald

continued support for the Society, I hope that you stay safe and well during this virus attack and look forward to seeing you at next year's AGM.

Tony McDonald

## Treasurer's Report

The financial health of the Society is good with funds at the end of the year amounting to £18,505 compared to £16,152 last year. The coming year will be more difficult due to Covid-19 meaning that working parties have stopped. How long this will be is the great unknown but it will have an effect on donations.

Barn Owl income is up due to larger sales of boxes and donations. The

grant of £1,000 was made to The John Simmons Trust.

This year we have spent £357 on a reprint of the Owl booklet and next year we are committed to £500 on a reprint of the "Yattendon for Visitors" book with a contribution of £300 having been received from Yattendon Parish Council and further contributions having been promised.

So far as expenditure is concerned

the reason administration is down is because last year we reprinted membership forms and there was a bulk buying of stationery. A summary page of the 2019/20 accounts is included, for members.

Should any member have anything they would like clarification on they can contact me on: [jantipoff@aol.com](mailto:jantipoff@aol.com).

Robert Antipoff

## Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group



Bucklebury Common

© Tony McDonald

The Heathland part of Bucklebury Common looks well, in part because of all the hard work put in by the Group at weekends, the WBCS Volunteers on Tuesdays and the Green Gym on Mondays. It was a very wet winter, followed by a warm and dry spring, the silver birch is growing like mad, but is of a manageable size, and the heather is starting to grow away well. I have had favourable comments from two acquaintances who know about conservation on the condition of the

Common, well done everybody.

Last year we had at least one calling Night Jar on the Upper Common, and I think five on the Lower Common, and they should be back soon. A new arrival is a pair of Stone Chat's on the Lower Common and two Wood Larks were heard there. But we are not sure if they are still around.

I hope we will all be "released" soon to enjoy walking over the Commons.

Tim Culley

# Society 2020 AGM Reports

## Conservation Volunteers Report

As in previous years we have had good turnouts to our sites. Tasks include hedge laying, coppicing, the creation of butterfly habitats, scrub clearance, path maintenance and fencing. Much of this work is on sites that we have had long term relationships with. The Malt House at West Woodhay is an example where we can track the results of our efforts over many years. We also receive requests for help from new sites. Examples of these are the SSSI Redhill Wood at Hampstead Marshall and the Leckhampstead Parish Council site at Hill Green.

Each year, there is a standout task that demonstrates 'dedication and commitment to the task'. This year the accolade is shared between two tasks. They were Elm Farm in September and Winterbourne Wood in October. In both cases the volunteers worked on and completed the tasks despite the most dreadful weather conditions.

We had a quiet year for training. Three members attended first aid courses whilst two more were delayed until the COVID-19 crisis is over. It was time



Volunteers

© Tony McDonald

for one of our three chainsaw users to undertake the required refresher course which he did, successfully.

Thanks go once again to all who those who assisted in the functioning of the

group. For providing tea and coffee, acting as first aider, organising tools and equipment, leading tasks and putting together our contribution to Upstream.

Chris Genge

## Barn Owl Group Report

The Covid-19 is wreaking havoc with everybody's lives and this includes wildlife activities. National organisations such as RSPB and British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) have stopped all field activities. Closer to home, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and our own West Berkshire Countryside Society have done the same. This means that surveys are not being carried out and many projects will lose continuity with their monitoring programmes. It also means that important work on habitat improvement is not being done. For many species this will be a temporary setback from which they will recover, but for species that are already on the edge this could be seriously bad news.

Barn owls typically select a nesting site in April and will lay their eggs in mid-May.

Incubation takes about 33 days so that the chicks hatch in mid-June. They are fed in the nest for about 9 weeks before taking their first flight in August.

The Barn Owl Group currently have about 185 nest boxes installed in West Berkshire and work to install additional boxes has come to a halt. Monitoring of breeding is usually carried out in July and August and it looks unlikely that this will be possible. Fortunately, the actual breeding should proceed unaffected, it is the monitoring that won't happen.

The coronavirus will cause a temporary hiccup in installing new boxes and maintaining existing ones but we hope to catch up with these tasks later in the year. It will be disappointing not to have our monitoring statistics as they give us useful pointers of where to site new boxes. In conclusion, the Barn Owl

Group will miss doing the field work later in the summer, but the team are ready to make up for lost time as soon as restrictions are lifted.

John Dellow



Balsdon Farm

© John Dellow

# Spring Railway Track Walk April 2020

The new track surface between Hermitage & Hampstead Norreys is now finished and proving very popular for walkers and cyclists taking their daily exercise during the lockdown period. Far busier in fact than the B4009. My walk was on a very pleasant, calm, bright, cloudless day, coming at the end of a cold period known as the 'Blackthorn Winter' (11-14th April) which generally ties-in with the flowering time of the blackthorn. Blackthorn were still in flower along the track and in the playing field at Hampstead Norrey's.

Starting at the Hermitage end, what struck me was the amount of birdsong that had been missing on my winter walk signalling that spring had really started. It is true that for every bird you see there must be a hundred nearby that you don't and so I have learnt to recognise some distinguishable calls of a number of birds. Blackcaps were abundant but they are difficult to spot even nearby in the thickest of hawthorn bushes so to hear the 'stone-clicking' of their contact call followed by their powerful warble is a beautiful sound.



*Viburnum Lantana*

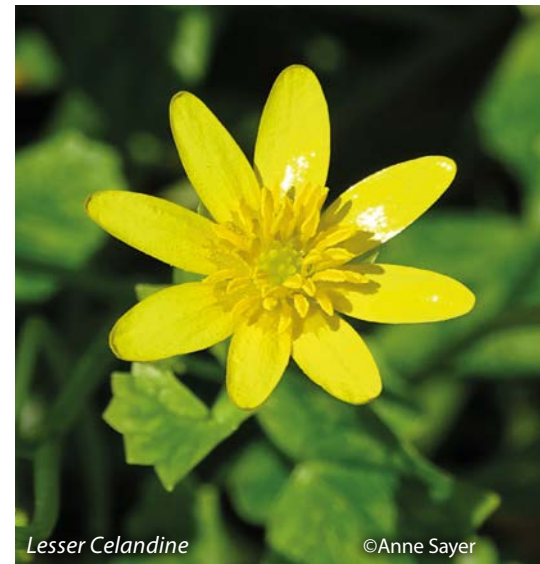
©Anne Sayer

Above the noise of the motorway can also be heard the great tit's 'squeaky pump' song; it does indeed remind you of a pump. At the same time can be heard the call of the summer migrant chiff-chaff which is very similar to the call of the great tit but more monotone in delivery. Other abundant birds included robins, blackbirds, wood pigeons, chaffinches, wren and the occasional song thrush. Overhead was heard the whistling of kites and the long drill of skylarks above the open fields on each side of the track.

Ground flora included herb robert (just starting), stitchwort, which was emerging in January along with arum maculatum (lords and Ladies) – now showing their flower spathes of 'jack-in-the-pulpit', ground ivy growing with lesser celandine (the bluey purple and bright yellow together being a delightful combination), dog violets and barren strawberry under the hawthorn and plenty of dandelions, white dead-nettle, garlic mustard and cow parsley each side of the track.

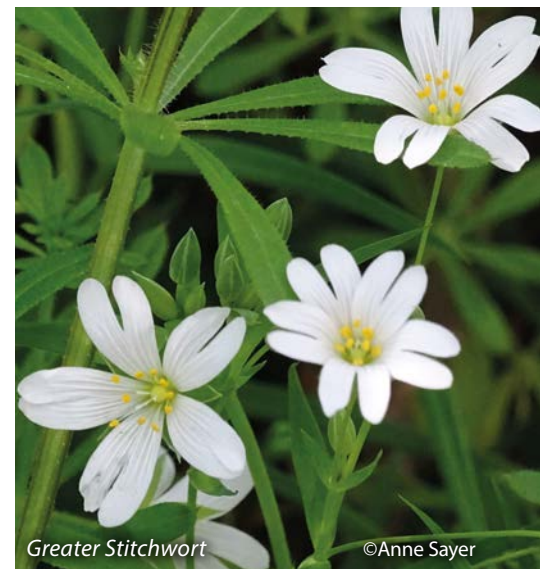
Where the track meets the woodland at Hampstead Norrey's, the ground flora changes to plants indicative of ancient woodland such as bluebells, dog's mercury, wood anemones, wood spurge and town hall clocks. These are mostly plants that are slow to spread and cover large areas of the forest underfloor which they could only colonise as widely given hundreds of years. The wood spurge is the food plant of the drab looper moth known to exist in the Hermitage area and written about in the Spring 2020 edition of Upstream.

I took a slight detour to see the wildflower meadow at Furze Hill and, whilst there were not many wildflowers



*Lesser Celandine*

©Anne Sayer



*Greater Stitchwort*

©Anne Sayer

in the sward other than ground ivy to give nectar, there were many early butterflies such as brimstone, orange tip and small white. Insects also had gorse (furze) and bird cherry trees in full blossom; bumble bees, and many other invertebrates, were about but are too difficult to identify when 'on the hoof'.

It was gratifying to think that what has emerged from the surfacing work is a popular and useable track that respects and supports many ecosystems.

Charles Gilchrist



Don't forget our website!  
[www.westberkscountryside.org.uk](http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk)