



River Ock Catchment Partnership

Newsletter – Winter 2019

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the first River Ock Catchment Partnership newsletter, which is designed to update you on some of the latest watery news from around the Ock catchment.

The River Ock catchment includes part of the Oxford Important Freshwater Area, one of England's 20 best freshwater biodiversity hotspots, hosting rare and protected species such as Creeping Marshwort, Water Vole and Pondweed Leafhopper. However, freshwater wildlife in the catchment is under severe pressure from threats such as pollution, drainage and climate change.

The Ock Catchment Partnership is led by the Freshwater Habitats Trust, and brings together organisations and communities from across the area - including those concerned with farming, flooding, wildlife forestry and fishing - to help protect and restore freshwater and wetland habitats, to manage the catchment to reduce flooding and diffuse pollution and to share expertise. The work is part of the Defra-supported Catchment-based Approach and has been funded to date mainly by the Environment Agency, which the project works closely with.

If you'd like to contribute to a future newsletter, please get in touch (details on page 9). Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Ellie Mayhew, Regional Project Officer

IN THIS ISSUE

Introduction	1
Update from Freshwater Habitats Trust	2-3
The Freshwater Network	4-5
Update from the Letcombe Brook Project	6
NFM Update	6
Update from Thames Water	7
Update from Oxford Flood Alliance	8
Notices from Environment Agency	9
Further Information	9

Update from Freshwater Habitats Trust

Ock Hosting and Ock Arable Project

Freshwater Habitats Trust has been continuing to host both quarterly Ock Catchment Partnership meetings and Ock Catchment farmers' meetings.

A total of 18 farms within the catchment have now been visited jointly by Freshwater Habitats Trust and the Environment Agency, to provide tailored advice on the adoption of measures to ameliorate diffuse pollution, and to assess the land for suitable areas for installation of Natural Flood Management (NFM) measures and freshwater habitat creation and/or improvement. Water quality surveys were undertaken during these visits to assess the nitrate and phosphate levels of different waterbodies on the farms. Farmers were provided with a report following each visit, which summarised the findings and listed recommended actions for addressing diffuse water pollution.

Freshwater Habitats Trust has applied for another round of funding from the Environment Agency's Water Environment Improvement Fund, which, if granted, will be used to make further visits to farms within the Ock catchment, to engage with new farmers and to develop detailed plans for practical projects with farmers we have previously engaged with. These visits would take place between January and March 2020. So far through this project, we have successfully engaged with farmers managing about 30% of the Ock catchment.

Additional Projects within the Ock Catchment

Freshwater Habitats Trust has been undertaking additional work within the Ock Catchment; brief updates on these are provided next.

Saving Oxford's Wetland Wildlife (supported by Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and Thames Water)

Saving Oxford's Wetland Wildlife is involving people and communities in conserving the rare and varied freshwater wildlife found in and around Oxford's wetlands. 2019 has been a busy year, with highlights including: practical management work at Chilswell Valley (below right) and Cutteslowe Meadow to improve the freshwater habitats on site; a dedicated team of volunteers undertaking eDNA surveys at 28 sites around Oxford to record freshwater vertebrates, the results of which will be shared soon (below left); distributing water quality test kits to engage schools, community groups and individuals with their local freshwaters; expanding the ex-situ conservation work of rare Oxford wetland plant species with Oxford Botanic Garden and local expert Judy Webb, and running free public walks and talks around Oxford.



Volunteers surveying eDNA



Chilswell Valley fen, on the edge of Oxford

Update from Freshwater Habitats Trust (continued)



Top: The construction of one of the new Great Crested Newt breeding ponds at Hinksey Heights. **Bottom:** Members of the Oxfordshire Fens Project committee visiting one of the SSSI fen sites – an old artesian well can be seen in the foreground.

Newt Conservation Partnership

(previously South Midlands Newt Conservation Partnership)



The Newt Conservation Partnership is the delivery body of the NatureSpace Great Crested Newt District Licensing scheme.

Freshwater Habitats Trust is part of a consortium of organisations trialling the scheme, which now operates across 16 district councils from Bedfordshire to the Forest of Dean. The Newt Conservation Partnership has been constructing new breeding ponds for Great Crested Newt within the Ock catchment, including two new ponds at Hinksey Heights, which will provide compensation habitat within South Oxfordshire District Council. You can find out more about the scheme [here](#).

Oxfordshire Fens Project (supported by Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment)

The Oxfordshire Fens Project is working to restore areas of internationally important alkaline fen habitat within the county. These sites have become degraded, primarily due to drying-out, lack of management and loss of grazing. Volunteers have been working hard at Hinksey Heights to help keep rank vegetation under control, which has been outcompeting and shading the smaller fen plant species. This has included clearing trees and scrub, undertaking regular reed-cutting and raking, and spreading seed of Marsh Lousewort, a hemiparasite that stunts the growth of grasses, rushes and sedges.

Earlier this year, the project expanded to work on a further four sites – all SSSIs – following the award of a Water Environment Grant from Natural England. Work has already begun to restore these fens, with tree and scrub removal and re-wetting well underway at two of the sites at the time of writing. You can find out more about the Oxfordshire Fens Project [here](#).

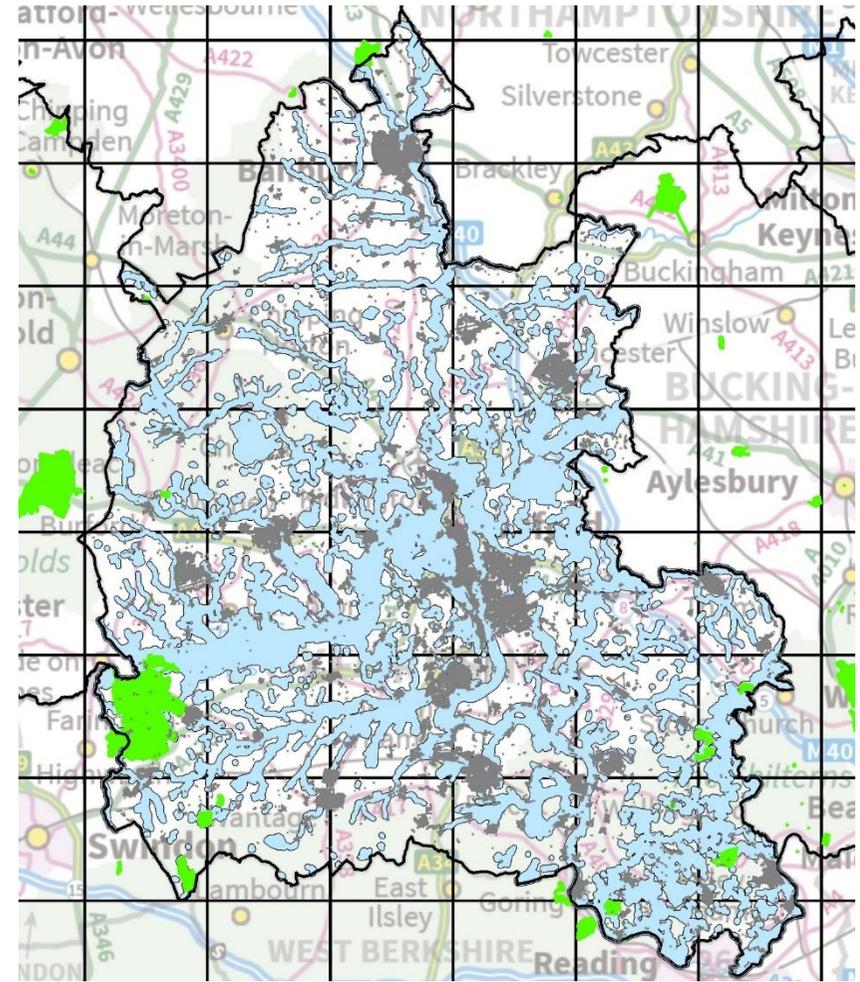
The Freshwater Network – Freshwater Habitats Trust

In May this year, Freshwater Habitats Trust proposed that the Oxfordshire 2050 County Plan should include a network to protect and restore floodplains and other wetland habitats. This “Freshwater Network” would be designed to restore freshwater wildlife, to help people and to deliver ecosystem services, including flood protection, across the county. The network would cover all the main river valleys and reach up into the landscape, linking together existing areas that are still good for freshwater wildlife with opportunity areas where new clean water habitats can be created or restored – like woodlands, floodplains and unfertilised grasslands. We’ll be talking more about the Freshwater Network to partners in the Ock catchment over the next few months.

Oxfordshire still has a nationally outstanding and unique freshwater environment. Like all of lowland England, the county’s freshwater habitats have been severely degraded by pollution, habitat loss, isolation and water stress, and are further threatened by regional economic growth and the climate crisis.

A new integrated network, based on sympathetically managed floodplain and wetland corridors, has the potential to reduce and reverse these threats by restoring a more natural water and wetland environment. It provides an opportunity to: reverse the decline of freshwater biodiversity; create new green infrastructure to support recreation, health and wellbeing; provide green transport links, e.g. between-town cycle routes, and provide space for nature-based measures that will hold back water on floodplains to reduce flood risk, replenish aquifers and store carbon in new wetlands.

The Freshwater Network capitalises on the opportunities provided by new funding models (e.g. compensation/offsetting funds, flood risk management funds) which, if used in an integrated and strategic manner, could achieve major societal gains,



The Freshwater Network in Oxfordshire. Areas in grey are the city of Oxford, towns and villages. Areas in green are National Trust properties. The large National Trust site in the west of the county, the Coleshill and Buscot Estate, is the site of one of Britain’s first, and largest, river restoration demonstration projects. The Freshwater Network continues into all adjacent counties.

The Freshwater Network (continued)

rather than being dispersed in piecemeal disconnected projects. Oxfordshire has led the development of these models with the introduction of the first offsetting schemes for habitats and protected species, the development of Conservation Target Areas, and effective floodplain and wetland restoration projects (e.g. Otmoor, River of Life, Heyford Meadow, Pinkhill Meadows complex, Chimney Meadows, Lower Windrush Valley).

In practice, the network will build on the opportunity provided by land which regularly floods, an area covering about 10% of the county. This naturally provides a network of green corridors throughout the county. It will unify existing statutory and planning designations of land and water including:

1. Land inside the 100 year flood envelope as defined by the Environment Agency which is, effectively, protected from development and therefore constitutes a long-term and strategic green space, as well as being the major part of the river environment.
2. The Important Freshwater Areas concept, which is being piloted nationally as part of the Catchment-based Approach and identifies the most important spots for freshwater wildlife to ensure they remain in important areas.
3. Opportunity areas, particularly those belonging to major landowners such as the National Trust and Forestry Commission, those that generate clean, unpolluted, water (e.g. ancient woodland, non-intensive species-rich grassland), and others providing locations where high quality freshwaters, wetlands and floodplain grasslands may be restored or created (e.g. lower grade farmland).
4. The Oxfordshire Conservation Target Areas (CTAs): the Freshwater Network is being built into the revised CTA plan.
5. The recently defined Great Crested Newt Conservation Areas, which are implementing the first large scale practical application of strategic habitat creation and management for a protected species.

The Freshwater Network is underpinned by the Oxfordshire Environment Board's proposals that Oxfordshire 2050 Plan should be structured around: a Green Infrastructure Strategy and Action Plan, to include measures to ensure Oxfordshire meets the Government agreed Accessible Natural Green Space Standards; a refresh of Oxfordshire's Conservation Target Areas, to include the Freshwater Network and to align with Nature Recovery Networks, and a spatial plan, policies and standards to ensure delivery of Net Environmental Gain.

Update from the Letcombe Brook Project

LBP became a charity in 2017, and was set up to protect and enhance the Letcombe Brook and to help people to understand, appreciate and care for the brook and the precious wildlife it supports. The brook was in decline, being greatly over-shaded and heavily silt-laden in places, with many low weirs, obstructions to fish passage and much litter.

The Project Officer has been working hard with a team of volunteers and local flood groups to let more light into the brook by coppicing and pollarding bankside trees and reducing bankside bramble and scrub. In areas where this has been accomplished, such as the BBOWT Community Nature Reserve at Letcombe and Willow Walk Nature Reserve in Wantage, it has been rewarding to see how quickly both in-stream and marginal vegetation has recovered.

Ongoing projects include invasive species control, with many hours spent removing Himalayan balsam to encourage native plants and reduce bankside erosion, and also mink control, so that water vole populations and other wildlife can recover.

LBP recently launched a website with lots of information about the brook, its wildlife and the projects we hope to be able to deliver over the coming years. It also contains lots of useful advice for riparian owners on subjects such as land management, saving water and natural flood management. You can take a look at the website [here](#).

We are very keen to work with landowners that border the brook, whether they be private residents, farmers, businesses or local authorities. The Project Officer is able to come out and give free advice on management of the brook and surrounding land, reducing soil erosion, water pollution and flood risk, plus survey for wildlife.

Mark Bradfield, Project Officer

NFM in the Ock: Update

The feasibility of Natural Flood Management (NFM) as a method to ameliorate flooding in Abingdon is currently being explored for the Ock catchment. The Environment Agency has commissioned JBA Consulting to undertake modelling of different NFM approaches in the catchment to forecast their effectiveness and viability. Once the results have been obtained next year, they will be made available.



A stretch of the Letcombe Brook in Wantage that has benefitted due to bankside vegetation clearance.

Update from Thames Water

We are committed to engaging positively with the communities we serve, and to minimise the impacts of our activities. In 2014 we launched our community investment programme to invest £6.5m in community projects between 2014 and 2019. The community investment strategy was developed in response to a wide range of feedback including customer research and stakeholder comments and aims to improve customer awareness of the service we provide.

In the last couple of years we have supported two community investment projects in the Ock catchment:

In 2018 we invested £48,630 in a project to restore Rivermead Nature Park a 1.8 hectare urban nature reserve situated in Oxford. The park's condition had deteriorated so much that people had stopped using it, but recent work undertaken between BBOWT and Oxford City Council has begun to reverse this situation. The Thames Water community investment project was in partnership with BBOWT and aimed to further the project through tree work as well as installing and restoring ponds. Overall making the park a more inviting space for nature and people.

More recently we committed to an investment of £75,000 between 2018 and 2020 to support the Freshwater Habitats Trust project: Saving Oxford's Wetland Wildlife. This project is maximising the role of the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme to protect the rare and varied freshwater wildlife found in and around Oxford whilst providing engagement opportunities for people from a diverse range of age-groups and backgrounds.

Read about the [discovery of Iron Age skeletons in Wantage](#), along with evidence of settlements, animal remains and household items including pottery, cutting implements and a decorative comb.



Saving Oxford's Wetland Wildlife is engaging the local community. **Top:** A Scout observes a hawk dragonfly larvae during a pond dipping activity. **Bottom:** Project Officer Francesca Dunn runs a stall for Saving Oxford's Wetland Wildlife at FloFest Community Festival.

Update from Oxford Flood Alliance

The primary focus of the Oxford Flood Alliance currently is the proposed Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme (OFAS). OFA is a member of the Sponsorship Group for the scheme, and works with the Environment Agency and other partners to try to secure the support of the general public for the project. We also try to ensure the concerns of local residents affected by the scheme are being heard and addressed.

The scheme is currently facing delays. Over the summer of 2019, County Council engineers raised concerns about the southern bypass (A423) bridge over the railway. They concluded that, while the structure is safe for current traffic, the work required by OFAS to create two large culverts under the road on either side of the track presents a problem.

The County plans to rebuild the bridge, but the additional complexities and timescales involved have delayed the flood scheme further. Because of these delays the anticipated public inquiry into the scheme has not yet taken place, and consideration of the planning application has also had to be delayed. This is frustrating, but the Environment Agency's project team is working on resolving these additional challenges.

River levels in Oxford during November 2019 were high, with parks, fields and allotments flooded. Though levels were well below those seen in January 2014, they were a reminder of why we need the OFAS scheme. The delay to that project means that for the next few years many Oxford households will continue to live with the risk of flooding. Maintaining current flood control assets is crucial.

Several members of OFA recently walked the local network of streams to check for any fallen trees or other obstructions. We found a few issues needing attention, but thankfully nothing major. The Environment Agency has maintenance work on these streams scheduled for January 2020 and we're sharing our survey findings with them. Keeping these channels clear prevents flood water building up in the city.

We have also been monitoring the construction site for Seacourt P&R extension, a development we opposed. The site was underwater for more than four weeks in November and December, with all work suspended. Had the car park been constructed it too would have been under water, and hence out of action. OFA believes the car park will flood more frequently and for longer than claimed in the planning documents, and that a flooded car park is a public hazard which it will be difficult for the City Council to manage. We argued that the planning decision sets an undesirable precedent in its interpretation of planning guidelines to allow the extension to be built in the floodplain.

Notices from Environment Agency

Priority Invasive Non-native Species and Biosecurity Workshop by Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape Partnership c/o Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

The workshop will consist of a morning and an afternoon session, and will focus on raising awareness on up and coming invasive species across the Midlands region. Aspects covered will include identification, recording and reporting of these species, and on a variety of biosecurity measures, and constructing a biosecurity plan. Workshop participants will be provided with materials on Invasive Non-Native Species of concern, including I.D sheets and biosecurity posters.

The workshop will be held on 4th February 2020 at Wild Oxfordshire (Little Wittenham, Abingdon OX14 4RA) from 9am - 4:30pm and will be run by Rebecca Corrie-Close from the South Cumbria Rivers Trust. Tea/coffee and a light lunch (sandwich and snack) will be provided.

Please email Tarik.Bodasing@wkwat.org.uk or book a ticket via Eventbrite [here](#).

Challenges and Choices Consultation

We are seeking your views on the challenges our waters face and the choices and changes we all need to make to help tackle those challenges.

By responding to this consultation you will be helping to shape the management of the water environment. The information gathered through this consultation will help us update the current river basin management plans, starting with the publication of draft plans in 2020.

We will also use your responses to help us consider how some of the current approaches to the management of water in England will need to change in response to a changing climate and a growing population. We are calling this work the Water Story.

Find out more and take part [here](#).

Further Information

You can read more about the River Ock Catchment Project on our website [here](#), and find out more about the Catchment Based Approach [here](#).

If you'd like to contribute to future newsletters, please get in touch by emailing Ellie Mayhew (emayhew@freshwaterhabitats.org.uk) - the deadline for submitting content for the next River Ock Catchment Partnership Newsletter is Friday 1st May 2020.

Keep up to date by following Freshwater Habitats Trust on social media:

