

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre

Summer 2006

Special Interest Articles:

- UK Biodiversity Action Plan Habitat maps in Oxfordshire
- The Berkshire Biodiversity Partnership
- Oxfordshire Bird Surveys
- Environmental Stewardship and Wildlife Records
- Local Plant Recording
- Stag beetles
- Mammal recording

And much, much more.

About this edition of the Newsletter

Phew, what a scorcher! Welcome to the summer edition of the TVERC newsletter. Once again, we've bundled together some of the exciting things we've been up to in Berkshire and Oxfordshire in recent months. In addition, we've tried to provide an update on some of the initiatives being undertaken by others from the recording and conservation community in our two counties. I hope you will find something of interest amongst the updates, overviews and downright tall stories (see p. 10) we've compiled.

Don't forget that we are always delighted to receive news updates from you. Do let us know what's happening in your part of the recording world in time for our Winter edition of the newsletter.

From the director's seat

How much time do I spend at work sitting at my computer? Back when I started work at the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre in 1981 I was 'face-to-screen' probably 10% of the week - we had one Amstrad word processor for a team of five and the phone rang constantly (no e-mail!). Now I think about 70% of my work time is spent welded to the PC and the only time at work I get to see real wildlife is when someone brings in a specimen for identification.

This year, for various reasons, I get to break free from the desk and meeting room and spend work time in the field - Hurrah! I am busy surveying a handful of Wildlife Heritage Sites in Berkshire and looking for crayfish in the streams and rivers of West Oxfordshire.

It's good to get out there in the green and even to be reminded how much I have forgotten since the last time I did any serious survey work. It is also very good for me to remember how much effort goes in to collecting the pieces of data that I stare at on my computer screen every day at work. When I multiply my small records output this year by the effort it took to collect that data and apply the same sum to the 1.25 millions species records held by TVERC I am struck anew by the enormous value of the data that is collected every year by local naturalists.

After three years of operation, TVERC is really starting to make the most out of all that effort in the field - with not a little assistance from the computers that we seem so wedded to. We have been able to bring together a whole range of environmental data to create new and useful 'pictures' of the wildlife around us. One example that we are particularly proud of is the new computerised map of wildlife habitats and landuse across Oxfordshire and Berkshire that we are working on. Which is why, despite the attractions of field work, I will still be spending 70% of my time staring at a screen this year!

Philippa Burrell

Habitat mapping in Oxfordshire

Gavin Bird, TVERC

As most will be aware, we have been digitally mapping the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitats within the designated sites – Sites of Special Scientific Interest and County Wildlife Sites – in the county over the last year or more, using our Geographic Information System. Mapping within these sites is now complete and the results analysed.

UK BAP priority habitats within designated sites (CWS and SSSI) in Oxfordshire

| Broad Habitat | Specific BAP Priority Habitat | Area in Oxon (hectares) |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Woodland | Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland | 2527.6 |
| | Lowland Beech and Yew Woodland | 566.9 |
| | Wet Woodland | 106.7 |
| | Lowland Wood Pasture and Parkland | 163.7 |
| Grassland | Lowland Calcareous Grassland | 679.9 |
| | Lowland Meadow | 997.3 |
| | Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh | 356.8 |
| | Lowland Dry Acid Grassland | 41.9 |
| | Lowland Heathland | 3.0 |
| | Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture | 7.0 |
| Water | Fens | 131.8 |
| | Reedbeds | 25.8 |
| | Eutrophic Standing Water | 358.7 |
| Total | | 5967.1 |

Note

The figures for fen include those of reedbed – reedbed is identified as a sub-set of fen. Some BAP priority habitats, e.g. ancient and/or species rich hedgerow, and cereal field margins, have yet to be mapped owing to a lack of available information.

Work has started on mapping beyond the designated sites. Country estates, such as Ditchley Park or Shotover House, are known to have lowland wood pasture and parkland, for instance, and ancient woodland sites are likely to contain yet more lowland mixed deciduous woodland. Further mapping will reinforce the point that mixed deciduous woodland is the most widespread BAP priority habitat within the county, followed by neutral and calcareous grasslands.

The results have already started to be used by local planning authorities as part of their constraints checking processes on planning applications; BAP priority habitats are referred to under section 74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 as “habitats of principal importance for the conservation of biological diversity in England”. In addition, local authorities are using the results as part of the wildlife indicators associated with their new strategic planning documents, known as Local Development Frameworks. The mapped material has also helped us draw up the conservation action target areas within the county (see p. 12-14 for more).

No doubt there will be many more uses for the data, especially when comprehensive county mapping of UK priority BAP habitats is completed within the next year.

Berkshire Biodiversity Partnership

Adrian Hutchings, TVERC

Biodiversity action in Berkshire has just been re-invigorated with the creation of a new post of Biodiversity Co-ordinator. Joint funded by the Unitary Authorities of Berkshire, as well as English Nature, the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Thames Water Utilities Ltd., the post aims to co-ordinate biodiversity action within the county, update the Biodiversity Action Plans and work with the partner organisations to ensure Berkshire makes headway in achieving benefits for wildlife, habitats and people.

Melanie Hardie, based at Reading Borough Council, has taken on this role and one of her first tasks is launch the new Urban Habitat Action Plan for Berkshire, a key aspect of this is to engage the local authorities and the public to create and protect wildlife areas and corridors through the county's urban open spaces, as well as realise the potential of brown field sites for biodiversity.

Much of the biodiversity action in Berkshire will rely on the vital role of TVERC and its valued recorders to provide information on where the protected and priority species and habitats are found in order to focus regional and local action. The Berkshire TVERC habitat mapping project is the first phase of this work that we, as a Partnership, can develop to identify areas for habitat regeneration and creation.

So if you are looking to get involved in or are currently running an urban scheme to enhance wildlife and want to promote it more widely get in touch with Melanie.Hardie@reading.gov.uk.

Plant Invaders

Plantlife International is a charity dedicated to conserving all forms of plant life in their natural habitats, in the UK, Europe and across the world. This year they have teamed up with the Environment Agency to try and tackle the problem of invasive alien plants in the UK.

As part of their campaign, they are asking all of us to report sightings of Japanese knotweed, Indian balsam or New Zealand Pigmyweed. Responses can be made online at the Plantlife International web site or using one of their reply postcards. I have a stack of these cards at the TVERC office in Woodstock and if you would like some just give me a call. I apologise in advance for the truly hideous picture on the card!



All the records will come to TVERC eventually for validation and local use.
Philippa Burrell, 01993 814147, philippa.burrell@oxfordshire.gov.uk

More about the survey and about Plantlife at www.plantlife.org.uk

Wildlife Records, Conservation and Environmental Stewardship

A key motivation for many of us wildlife recorders is to be able to contribute to the conservation of the habitats and species that we enjoy finding, studying, watching etc. When we send data in to a records centre such as TVERC it is often in the hope that they may be useful to help with practical conservation action. The new environmental stewardship scheme, run by Rural Development Service, aims to make use of wildlife records to the benefit of the countryside.

The Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) is the most important route to managing the land for biodiversity. With a limited amount of funding available it is important that HLS is targeted at the most important environmental features. To achieve its biodiversity objectives the scheme is mainly targeted at

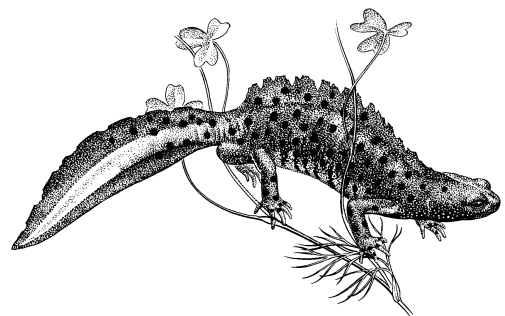
- UKBAP priority habitats (including SSSIs)
- UKBAP priority species
- Key Farmland birds
- Rare Arable Plants

The Environmental Stewardship scheme, currently managed by the Rural Development Service (RDS)*, has objectives to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of much of the countryside through setting up land management agreements with farmers and other landowners. Use the web link (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/es/default.html>) for more information.

Applicants to the scheme need to demonstrate how they are going to conserve the important habitats or species present, or restore degraded areas, or even try to create new habitats. And this is where the work of wildlife recorders comes in. If we have 'current' species information from existing databases or from new surveys we are able to make more informed decisions about how to spend the budgets, and how to get good value for money from the Stewardship agreements set up.

Some examples of how the HLS has already made use of wildlife records in Berkshire include:-

- **Great Crested Newts** in ponds next to arable fields. The creation of rough grass and light scrub is proposed to buffer the areas around the ponds. Some new ponds will also be created in the vicinity.
- **Bats** – Insect-rich feeding areas are vital to all of our bats. Some agreement holders have agreed to change grassland management to help increase insect populations, and by allowing hedges to grow taller and be trimmed less frequently they should provide increased sheltered foraging habitat.
- **Rare Arable Plants** – This is a difficult group, probably under-recorded due to the lack of suitable access to the arable field edges where they might occur. Some farms on lighter soils have agreed to put in cultivated strips along arable fields to encourage these plants. The strips will not be sown with crops or have any fertiliser or sprays applied.
- **Key farm birds** – We have set up HLS agreements at farms to encourage species such as lapwing, corn bunting and grey partridge. Arable farms use a range of options such as winter stubbles, conservation headlands, fallow plots to provide breeding habitat, spring food (invertebrates) for rearing chicks and winter food (seed) for improved over-winter survival.
- **Brown Hare** – This is a fairly widespread UK BAP priority species. Hares will benefit from many of the arable options used for farm birds, but they also need a diverse countryside



containing arable crop types mixed with grasslands and hedges or copses. Restoration of this sort of mixed farmed landscape will also have benefits for a wide range of 'non-target' species.

By working with landowners and our various conservation partners such as TVERC and members of the Berkshire Nature Conservation Forum we hope to be able to use the Environmental Stewardship scheme to enhance the countryside of Berkshire to the benefit of wildlife and recorders alike.

Des Sussex
Ecologist, Rural Development Service
01189 39217

*From October 2006 RDS is merging with English Nature and the Countryside Agency (Landscape, Access and Recreation) to form the new agency '**Natural England**'.

Berkshire RIGS*



The geological history of Berkshire covers the time period from the Cretaceous to the present day, over 100 million years. It includes beautiful chalk downlands in the north and west, geologically recent Thames gravels and geomorphological features, particularly associated with the last ice age. The Berkshire RIGS Group are working to document these sites, produce a plan for their conservation and to designate the best of their type as sites of importance (RIGS).

One RIGS locality exists at present, Rushall Farm, and it is hoped to add several more over the coming months. The RIGS Group are just about to embark on a project designed to involve people in the preservation and recording of sites within the North Wessex Downs AONB. There will be plenty of opportunities for volunteers and interested parties to become involved in preserving Berkshire's unique geological heritage. If you are interested in geology, are involved with teaching earth science or just interested in the natural environment then contact us and we can keep you informed of what will be happening. Similarly if you have any geological records that you think would be good to add to our database then we would be very pleased to receive them. Records can be sent to Lesley Dunlop at TVERC.

*RIGS – Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites
 Secretary – Heather Whetter, English Nature, Foxcombe House, Thornham Road, Crookham Common, Thatcham, Berks RG19 8EL
heather.whetter@english-nature.org.uk

Oxfordshire Bird Atlas Project – 2005 survey

Gavin Bird, TVERC

Back in 2003, a meeting of the Oxfordshire Bird Club Co-ordinating group agreed to tackle a new avifauna atlas over the coming years. There was a recognition that much had changed in the county since the last complete atlas was generated in the 1980s, and the speed and nature of change meant that a new atlas would help us understand these changes. In 2004, Oxfordshire's birding groups - Oxford Ornithological Society, Banbury Ornithological Society, RSPB and British Trust for Ornithology - and TVERC met to co-ordinate a survey of breeding birds in the county. We began by organising a trial breeding bird survey in 2005.

150 random tetrads (2km x 2km squares) were identified for survey effort during the April – July breeding season. Volunteers were then asked to look for evidence of breeding (as well as indicative figures of the numbers of breeding pairs) using criteria which had been established by the project working group. Surveyors were also asked to make a note of the location of certain amber- and red-listed Birds of Conservation Concern, the species currently experiencing the greatest decline in population numbers.

In all, 110 tetrads were surveyed, 86 of which were from the targeted list, and an additional 24 from outside the survey area. The results were then processed by TVERC staff and volunteers and a comparison made between those birds identified in 2005 and those found in the same tetrads from the original 1980s surveys. The analysis was an attempt to determine the changes in incidence of breeding birds in Oxfordshire over the 20 year period.

Overall, 21 species showed an increase in their distribution (i.e. were found in more tetrads) over the last 20 years, 4 species showed no net change, and an alarming 97 species showed a decline. Common buzzard and red kite are clear successes; the great gains achieved by the red kite introduction project (which began in 1989) is supported by the results, though it is unlikely that breeding occurred in anything like the number of recorded tetrads. Elsewhere, more modest increases are apparent in species associated with the county's largely man-made waterbodies.

Losses were seen primarily amongst farmland or woodland species. The reasons for this are likely to be varied, but land management and/or habitat loss would appear to be crucial factors which have impacted on these species.

It is worth mentioning that the 1980s results were the product of four seasons worth of intensive survey effort, whilst 2005 data were gathered in just one breeding season. 1980s data, therefore, are likely to be more comprehensive than recent survey results; the apparent declines in some species distribution will be more marked than the apparent increases. Nonetheless, the results should help in our understanding of the dynamics of bird population changes over the last 20 years.

The 2005 survey was an effort to galvanise volunteer surveyors, to develop a partnership of organisations willing to co-ordinate county bird surveys, and a chance to obtain a snapshot of the health of the county's breeding birds. The full county survey will commence in 2008, when a more informed view of the current state of our breeding birds

will be taken. A more detailed analysis and report on the 2005 survey will be released by the project group later in the year.

Changes in incidence of bird species in our surveyed tetrads

| Top Winners | | Worst Losers | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Species | 2005 v 1980s - change | Species | 2005 v 1980s - change |
| Buzzard | 66 | Cuckoo | -59 |
| Red Kite | 29 | Turtle Dove | -59 |
| Greylag Goose | 8 | Spotted Flycatcher | -54 |
| Barn Owl | 8 | Willow Warbler | -54 |
| Grey heron | 8 | Corn Bunting | -51 |
| Grey Wagtail | 8 | Lapwing | -50 |
| Green Woodpecker | 6 | Mistle Thrush | -45 |
| Common Tern | 6 | House Sparrow | -42 |
| Cormorant | 5 | Grey Partridge | -41 |
| Black-headed Gull | 4 | Lesser Whitethroat | -41 |
| Gadwall | 4 | Stock Dove | -41 |

Earley Environmental Group

The Group was formed eighteen months ago, and is run by its members, who are residents of the Civil Parish of Earley, near Reading. The group is supported by the Earley Town Council. At present we have about 225 members, but are gradually recruiting more. Our chairman is Stuart Hine, an expert in insect identification at the London Natural History Museum. The main focus of the group is to produce a Town Wildlife Survey (the first phase of which is complete), to develop people's skills and knowledge and to carry out practical tasks.

We are now in the process of pinpointing on the initial surveys where we can concentrate our energies in future projects. Projects in the pipeline are to record Earley's veteran and near-veteran trees, and map the few remaining hedgerows. To keep our members informed there is a quarterly newsletter, which covers not only local news but also wider global environmental issues, and which can be found on our recently created website at www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk.

Earley is now highly urbanised and there is little of its natural environment left, but EEG hopes that we can support and perhaps improve on what remains.



New
Oxfordshire
Bird Atlas

Oxfordshire Bird Atlas 2006 Spotted Flycatcher survey

The Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) is an unobtrusive small brown bird about the size of a sparrow, which breeds in Britain and Europe and migrates to equatorial Africa for the winter. Traditionally its main habitat is woodland of broad-leaved trees such as oak, but it has long been associated with mature gardens and churchyards. Globally, the species is not considered to be at risk, but in the UK its numbers have declined dramatically, indeed by about 60% in woodland and 70% on farmland, in the last 25 years. The reasons for this decline are not yet clear, nor whether the main problems lie within the breeding grounds, wintering grounds, or on migration. However, a recent survey conducted by a single member of the Oxford Ornithological Society visiting churches, suggested that churchyards might represent a significant stronghold for this species in Oxfordshire. **Although the breeding season is coming to an end, we would like to hear about your spotted flycatcher sightings, particularly in our churchyards.**



© John Robinson

As its name implies, the spotted flycatcher lives on small flying insects, which it catches on the wing by flying out from a perch and back; behaviour known as sallying. The localised decline of this species may well be related to the general decline in flying insects, in which case churchyard management practices that favour the species would be of interest. Finding out about how churchyards are looked after will form part of this survey.

Spotted flycatchers are amongst the later migrants to arrive back in the UK, typically arriving in Oxfordshire in mid to late May. Being rather inconspicuous, they are most likely to be detected first by their high-pitched rather squeaky calls. The nest is typically constructed on a ledge, for example in a dry-stone wall or in creeping foliage such as ivy, and the birds may be seen perched on gravestones from which they sally, or where they can sit while feeding their young. Although the squeaky call, upright perching posture and sallying behaviour of the spotted flycatcher make it unmistakable to the birdwatcher, to the inexperienced observer there may be other species with which it might be mistaken, such as the dunnock, female house sparrow and even juvenile robins. Be aware of these possibilities when looking out for it.

We would very much welcome records of spotted flycatchers from anywhere in the county, but especially from your churchyard. Using the survey form (below), send in your records – either electronically or by post – to Gavin Bird at our Woodstock Office (address details given below), or e-mailed to him at gavin.bird@oxfordshire.gov.uk. The survey guidance and record card are also accessible through the Oxford Ornithological Society web site: <http://www.oos.org.uk/>.

OXFORDSHIRE SPOTTED FLYCATCHER
¹CHURCHYARD SURVEY 2006 – RECORD CARD



Please read notes before surveying and completing this record card

²Survey dates: / / 2006 / / 2006 / / 2006

Estimated no. of pairs:

Total no. of hours spent surveying this site:

³Location: (e.g. name of church and village)

Grid reference: To 6 figs please, e.g. 'SP351576'

Habitat type: Churchyard Cemetery Other (garden, woodland, park etc. Please specify)

Habitat quality: Estimated area of site (specify m², hectares (100x100m) or acres)

Estimated % area of site left uncut/long grass (30cm or 1ft high)

Estimated % area of site with scrub/tree cover

Tick if following present: Pond/stream Open-front nestbox Mature broadleaf trees

⁴Breeding: (tick) Possible Probable Confirmed

Observer: Tel. No:

Other obs: (e.g. other birds noted)

Notes:

1. Please cover local churchyards as a priority. Complete 1 card per site. Negative returns are important too – please return all cards
2. Allow up to 3 visits per site. First visit between 13th-31st May. Second visit (if required) in June. Third visit (if required) in July.
3. Please specify location by name and grid reference if possible.
4. Breeding status defined as follows: Possible (bird present in suitable habitat); Probable (bird apparently holding territory, display or agitated behaviour, visiting probable nest site, nest building); Confirmed (any of the following – used nest, occupied nest, recently fledged young, adult with food for young or incubating bird, adult carrying faecal sac).

Please return all cards (including negative records) to TVERC by 31 August 2006.

LOCAL PLANT RECORDING IN THE NATIONAL SCENE

Camilla Lambrick, TVERC

Much of the current botanical recording in Oxfordshire is stimulated by country-wide initiatives. This has the great advantage that local records add significantly to understanding the flora at a national level. Two such initiatives have been particularly important recently - the Local Change study has been centrally organized by the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) with help from Plantlife, whilst the County Rare Plant Register work has been locally organized by the Rare Plants Group of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire with TVERC following BSBI national guidelines.



During the summers of 2003 and 2004 volunteers were out doing "their tetrads", revisiting the 811 tetrads studied by the Monitoring Scheme of 1987-88. This work has now been published as "Change in the British flora 1987-2004" (Braithewaite, Ellis and Preston 2006)

and it shows a number of significant trends. One of the most interesting is the loss of species in infertile habitats, including both calcareous grassland and acidic heaths. This may have been triggered by habitat fragmentation, which increases the likelihood of species loss by eutrophication, or either excessive or too little grazing. The most worrying trend is the increase in wetland species tolerant of eutrophication. Increases have also been recorded in nitrogen-requiring species such as cleavers and stinging nettle. This suggests that diffuse pollution has become pervasive and is altering our vegetation. There have been huge changes in the distribution of ruderal species. While annual weeds of arable fields mostly declined sharply during the 20th century, this has now been halted and even partly reversed by the introduction of "set-aside". There has been an increase in the diversity of ruderal species in waste and urban situations. Climate change appears already discernable in the increase of southerly species in, for instance, neutral and calcareous grassland

The second major project is the preparation of an Oxfordshire Rare Plants Register. This will be a listing of sites for all the nationally listed, rare and scarce species and those which are locally rare and scarce. The abundance of the plant at each site and the status of the site will be noted. The register will also describe habitat preferences and apparent threats for each species in the county. Several counties have already published a Rare Plants Register which helps conservation efforts to be focused on species which are particularly in danger. We are using the new national Red List which categorizes species according to their recent decline as well as absolute rarity.

What is 'rare' and 'scarce'?

Local frequency has been defined nationally: Locally Rare = present at three or fewer localities in the vice-county, while Locally Scarce = present at more than 3 but fewer than ten localities.

Fortunately with the computing expertise at TVERC we shall be able to calculate which species should be included both for a definition using Watsonian vice counties and using the current administrative counties. The aim is for volunteers to spend two to three summers searching former localities to see how the plants are faring. Some 380 species have been identified as being possibly sufficiently uncommon to be included. A trawl through the Recorder database has produced some 11,000 records to be followed up - this remarkable number is thanks to John Campbell's formidable energy at entering data.

The Pirate's Tale.

(or How useful is your grid reference?)

More tales from the world of data management (based so loosely on the works of Robert Louis Stevenson that know one will notice) - Graham Hawker, TVERC

In a lonely tavern, in a lonely town on the south coast sat a lonely figure. He was on his third shot of rum so the first two would feel less lonely. They called him Short Pete Gold, for reasons he still didn't understand. He was quite tall and his real name was Jonathan Silver. He stared at the map on the table. It was much easier in the old days, he thought. Then you just got maps of undiscovered islands with crosses on them. Sure, it was tricky finding the island, but once you had, you just went to the cross and dug up the treasure.

These days you knew where the island was but crosses had been replaced by grid references. Well, that was all fine and dandy, but they came in various flavours depending on who he talked to. The problem was they were all right. For a while he thought it was best to seek out someone who could give him an eight figure grid reference. After all, that should locate the treasure to within 10 metres. Any pirate, or, as he liked to think of himself, any treasure seeker, worth his shot of rum could dig that up in a few hours. If they couldn't, they'd be fit for nothing better than walking the plank.

But eight figure references were hard to estimate unless you had a really expensive map and a good ruler and knew exactly where you were. Some old salts had invested in something called a GPS but Short Pete Gold still yearned for the days when maps said that the treasure was buried ten steps west of the palm tree next to the rock that looked uncannily like Tom the cabin boy's old mum. It was often just as good to have a six figure grid reference, though you had to make it clear that this was just the bottom left hand corner of a 100 metre square. And just because this corner was a bit offshore didn't mean that the treasure was actually buried at the bottom of the sea. At least these six figure references were easier to estimate and sometimes people were kind enough to add that the treasure was indeed near that interesting looking rock.

Then this bloke called Pratchett invented treasure chests with legs. They hadn't caught on but had been snapped up in the clearance sale at Chests R US by just about every skinflint pirate around (and frankly that was most of them) looking for something to stash their pieces-of-eight in. So these eight figure references were often just sightings of treasure chests out for a stroll – there one minute, gone the next. You could have just as easily used a four figure reference. And indeed that's what many people did. Considering how these chests wandered, knowing it was somewhere in a one kilometre square was still very useful.

Mind you, when they take a rest they re-bury themselves. So knowing where they are on the island is very handy because you don't want to disturb sleeping chests. As everyone knows, you have to catch them with nets when they're out and about. Just ask most one-legged pirates.

For the static chests, though, four figure grid references weren't the best. It just meant a lot of digging. Short Pete Gold knew that sometimes using four-figure grid references was done to discourage a spot of treasure seeking, especially if it was someone's retirement stash. Even today, some pirates just can't be trusted. And you certainly can't rely on state pensions anymore. Sometimes, though, Short Pete Gold found four figure references confusing. They cover such a wider area - a two kilometre square tetrad. Sometimes he wasn't even sure if the four figure grid reference was just for a tetrad. The Pirate Council were always keen to keep an eye on treasure chest distribution, because a big decline would be trouble all round. "Plenty of treasure, plenty for all" as they said. One thing he was sure about was that no one but old Joe Blogger would go digging up such a big area to find a chest. Mind you, Blogger was last seen buying ten spades and that was five years ago. So four figure references had their uses, but for good honest day-to-day practical pirating, they didn't really help.

He looked at his treasure map once again. In small writing on the bottom it said "Been and checked – definitely at this grid reference". Now that cheered him up. He wouldn't be lonely much longer. Tomorrow would be crew-raising time, before setting sail for the Spanish Main. "Drinks are on me" he called out to the tavern. Luckily he was the only one in.



Shotover Wildlife **mossES Course**

A 3-day Mosses & Liverworts identification course with field visits

Dates:

| | | |
|--------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sunday | 12 th Nov 2006 | Indoor Sessions |
| Sunday | 19 th Nov | Field & Indoor Sessions |
| Sunday | 26 th Nov | Field Session |

Fee: £35

Venue:

Indoor sessions: Hill End Field Study Centre, Farmoor, Oxford

Tutor:

Jacqueline Wright, County Recorder of Bryophytes for Oxfordshire (VC 23)

The aim of the course is to develop both the skills and knowledge required to identify mosses and liverworts (bryophytes). No previous experience of bryology will be assumed but a basic knowledge of botany is expected.

Content

- Structure of bryophytes, terminology, relevant taxonomy, life cycle
- Identification using microscopes and keys.
- Field identification, recording for the region, field craft.
- Bryological microscope techniques, basic microscopy.
- Sessions in the field will help participants to 'read' a habitat and gain an appreciation of where to expect different species.

Follow -up after the course

The Oxford Mossing Group provides on-going field and microscope sessions to assist with bryophyte identification. Microscopes can be loaned for further study after the course.

Places are strictly limited to allow for a high level of guidance from tutors.

For further details and/or an application form, please contact:

Jacqueline Wright Tel: 01865 874423
 Shotover Wildlife Email: ivan@shotover-wildlife.fsnet.co.uk,
 or contact www.shotover-wildlife.org.uk

Shotover Wildlife is grateful for the support of the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

Oxfordshire's Conservation Action Target Areas

Graham Hawker, TVERC

In autumn 2005, the Oxfordshire County Ecologist, Craig Blackwell, commissioned us to define key target areas for conservation action within the county. The aim was to identify and map our most important areas for biodiversity, where targeted conservation action would have the greatest benefit. By promoting these target areas amongst wildlife and conservation partners in the county, targeting conservation work could lead to the

restoration of landscapes through the restoration and management of the habitats that define them.

As a starting point, the project used the biodiversity information and mapped landscapes developed by Craig Blackwell through the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS), complemented by Joint Character Area information for the county. Our approach also followed elements of the North Wessex Downs AONB Chalk Grassland Strategy (conducted by Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre in May 2005). This defined key areas within the AONB using a scoring system, and defined core areas within those key areas, based on certain biodiversity, archaeological and access criteria.

The Oxfordshire target area project looked widely at the county's biodiversity resource to ensure that a comprehensive assessment was made. The key factors taken into account during the mapping process were:

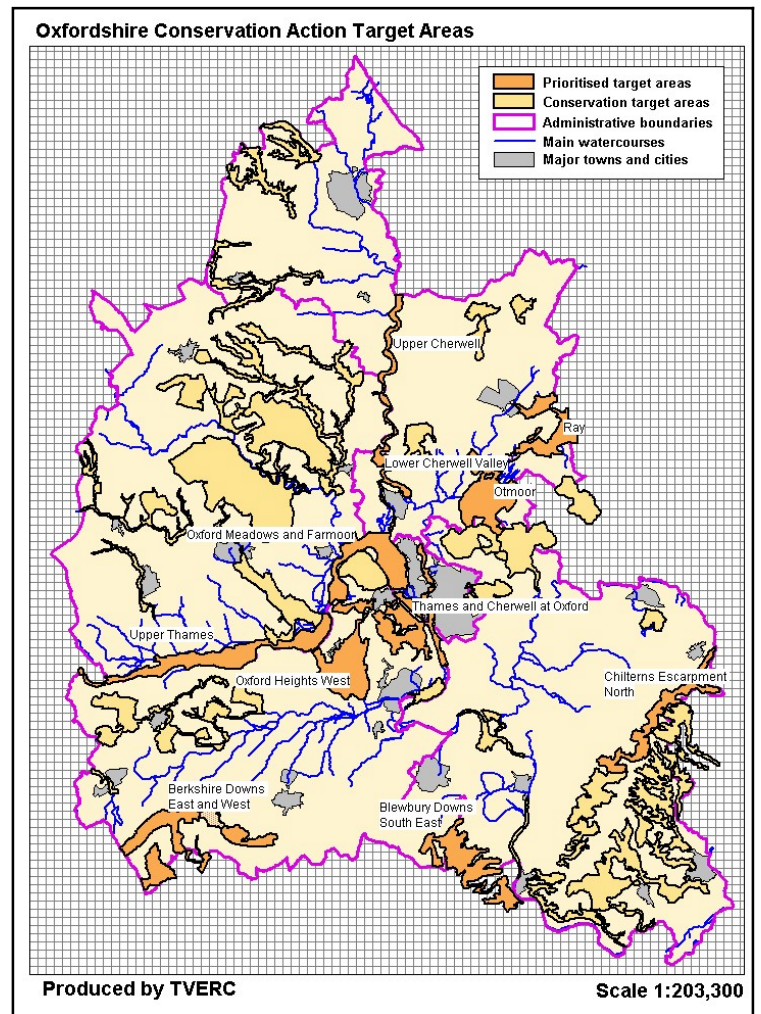
- Concentrations of UK BAP habitat
- Important areas for UK BAP and rare species
- Archaeological features
- Areas with public access, such as national and local trails
- Land with good potential to restore the main target habitats
- Areas linking existing habitat
- Habitat restoration schemes e.g. those linked to agri-environment schemes
- Geology
- Topography, especially steep slopes (where certain habitat potential is greater)
- Information Zones, containing areas important for parkland, arable wildflowers, ridge and furrow, etc.
- Some areas within Countryside Stewardship.

Once draft target areas had been produced, events were held to consult with organisations, groups and individuals active in biodiversity or conservation work in the county. The comments made through this consultation process were used to edit the boundaries of the target areas.

36 target areas (with associated target area descriptions) were drawn up and incorporated into a county map (see next page). The majority of target areas are well-known within the county and their inclusion provides no surprises. A meeting of wildlife and conservation organisations and local authorities then took place in May to choose the target areas where work should be targeted first .

| Oxfordshire districts | Target Areas |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Cherwell | Cherwell Valley (Upper and Lower) |
| | Otmoor |
| | Ray |
| Oxford City | Oxford Meadows and Farmoor |
| | Thames and Cherwell at Oxford |
| South Oxfordshire | Chilterns Escarpment North |
| | Blewbury Downs (South East) |
| Vale of the White Horse | Oxford Heights West |
| | Berkshire Downs East and West |
| West Oxfordshire | Upper Thames |
| | Upper Windrush |

TVERC are now producing detailed maps for each of the short-listed target areas. These will allow organisations, such as BBOWT, RSPB, the local authorities, ONCF and the AONBs, who are leading the conservation action in the target areas, to better understand the areas and to draw together those groups or individuals most likely to be able to help with progressing conservation ambitions



National Stag Beetle Survey 2006

The People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) is calling for gardeners, wildlife enthusiasts and eagle-eyed children to take part in the Great Stag Hunt in a nationwide effort to gather data over the summer to understand the status of Britain's biggest beetle. The greater stag beetle, *Lucanus cervus*, has declined throughout mainland Europe and, it is feared, parts of the UK.



This is the third of the Great Stag Hunt surveys - carried out every four years - and PTES is appealing to the general public to report any stag beetles they spot over the summer months. The survey information can be compared with the previous surveys of 2002 and 1998, giving entomologists a vital insight into how this iconic species is faring across the county. Any sightings of stag beetles can be recorded online at www.greatstaghunt.org. Paper recording forms are also available from PTES.

Deborah Harvey is part of the team researching the stag beetle at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London. She said: "There are two halves to the battle to ensure a future for this magnificent but much maligned beetle: We need to get people

taking part in the survey and, at the same time, to reassure people that these beetles are harmless. The more sightings we receive, the bigger the picture we can build up of their numbers nationally. And while the male beetles might look intimidating, they are not dangerous and will not attack you or your property."

"I'm very concerned that the species' status may have changed in the past four years. A number of factors, including changes in gardening practices, with people leaving less dead wood around and having tidier gardens, may have affected numbers. Climate change may also have caused a decline in stag beetle populations, both at a local and national level." Whilst stag beetles are relatively widespread in southern England (in the Thames Valley, north Essex, south Hampshire and West Sussex) and are found in the Severn Valley and coastal areas of the southwest, elsewhere they are extremely rare or not present at all. PTES is particularly keen for people to hunt for stag beetles in the counties on the border of their known range: Cambridgeshire, Devon, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Yorkshire.

Mammal records

Philippa Burrell, TVERC

I have recently been 'appointed' County Mammal Recorder for Berkshire and Oxfordshire and I'm looking forward to getting to grips with the task.

I've started by looking at what we already know about the status and distribution of mammals in the two Counties and have produced a (very) provisional atlas of mammals in Berkshire. The atlas clearly shows the paucity of mammal records for the County and has already inspired people to go forth and record! Thank you to everyone who has already sent in their records. I hope to produce provisional 'state of the records' atlases each year.

I've been talking with Martin Harvey in Buckinghamshire about working towards a Three County (Berks, Bucks, Oxon – and Milton Keynes) Atlas publication in 2010 and we are hopeful of funding to do this. In addition I have also taken over the otter survey project from BBOWT (the Local Wildlife Trust) and if you would like to take part in the survey let me know – we will run some training days this Autumn.

Over the next eighteen months I would like to run some mammal workshops – focussing on field skills but also covering the biology, ecology and behaviour of mammals. I will put the details in the next TVERC newsletter (and elsewhere).

Do contact me if you are interested in setting up a County Mammal Group and I will organise some kind of get together. It would be great to have a group of us with a diversity of ideas about what we can do – I'm very records focussed and could do with being pulled in other directions!

Philippa Burrell, 01993 814147

philippa.burrell@oxfordshire.gov.uk



THE PARISH POND SURVEY

Ponds are a much loved feature of our landscape. Historically, they have been a neglected habitat whose value was underestimated, partly because they are so abundant and mostly small. Many ponds have been lost or destroyed through land drainage, in-filling and neglect. Even in the field of nature conservation they have often been under-appreciated and misunderstood. However, recent research has shown ponds to be the most important freshwater habitat – across a region supporting more species (including rare species) than other freshwater habitats.

Pond Conservation is a national conservation charity, which focuses on ponds and works to reverse the historic treatment of ponds as unimportant habitats. We are trying to find out more about how many ponds there are, where they are, what they are like and what lives in them. We need this information in order to be able to conserve ponds and the life that depends on them.

We are interested in finding out the locations of as many ponds as possible, what they are like and what lives in them. To gauge past and future changes in pond numbers we are also interested in historic records as well as any new ponds being created now, or in the future. We want to know about all types of ponds regardless of their size, shape, location or origin. Ponds can be man-made (e.g. millponds, moats, monastic fishponds) or natural; located in the countryside as well as urban areas; in gardens, schools, woods, fields etc. They can be formal water features or wild and unmanaged. Whatever they are like, we are interested in recording them.

The Parish Pond Survey aims to do just this. The information collected in this county-based survey will be fed into a national database – created and maintained as part of the National Pond Monitoring Network (NPMN) run by Pond Conservation. This dataset will be made publicly available through the NPMN website and will be shared with other organisations unless the person supplying the data asks us not to do this. You can access the NPMN Database at <http://www.pondnetwork.org.uk/>. We have named it the Parish Pond Survey because the parish is a useful small, distinct and usually familiar area of land to most people. However, a survey can be carried out for any target area (small or large) and include any number of ponds (from one to many).

We have compiled a comprehensive recorders pack that contains

- Information about Pond Conservation
- Guidelines for Filling in the Survey Form
- Parish Pond Survey Form
- Example Completed Form
- Ordnance Survey Guide to Creating Grid References
- Amphibian and Reptile Recording Form
- Amphibian Identification Sheet

The pack is available electronically from www.pondconservation.org.uk via the "Help us with the Parish Ponds Survey" link. For hard copies (or if you have any questions) please contact:

Rod d'Ayala – Email: rod.dayala@brookes.ac.uk

Tel: 01865 483608, or

Anita Weatherby – Email: ajweatherby@brookes.ac.uk

Tel: 01865 483189.

An invitation to join the Records Centre team by taking up one of the TVERC volunteer opportunities or student placements.

I am very happy to announce that we now have dedicated space and opportunities in the Woodstock and Newbury offices of TVERC – so we can welcome people who would like to work with us as a volunteer or on a student placement. There is a wide range of opportunities and we will try and match the task to the person as far as possible. You don't need to have any experience of Records Centre work – we can offer training and support throughout your task.

We are particularly looking for people who would like to make a regular commitment to helping with computer data entry – not as dull as it sounds, honestly! Any contribution from half a day a month to one day a week could be useful. Regular contributions over a limited time are fine for us (the winter months perhaps?). Or perhaps you would prefer one whole week of data saturation?

The work can be very rewarding and the team is welcoming and most grateful for any help – and you can learn new skills and find out about wildlife and geology.

If you think you would like to join us, contact Lesley Dunlop on 01993 814147 or Lesley.dunlop@oxfordshire.gov.uk or at the Woodstock office address (see back page).

Philippa Burrell, TVERC.

And whilst we're talking about volunteers . . .

We'd like to offer our sincere thanks to the volunteers who have helped us in a variety of ways at our Berkshire and Oxfordshire offices and in the field during the last few months.

- Jenny Sneddon – wildlife site surveyor
- Chris Atkinson – digital habitat mapper
- Rachel Sanderson – plant data analysis
- Darren Ivey - plant data analysis
- Sarah Priest – wildlife site surveyor
- Brian Walker - wildlife site surveyor
- Susan Erskine – wildlife site surveyor
- Una Fenton – wildlife site surveyor
- Mike Rogers – wildlife site surveyor
- Sue Helm - wildlife site surveyor
- Steve Alley - wildlife site surveyor
- Gillian Oldfield - wildlife site surveyor
- Robert Barber - wildlife site surveyor
- Sandra Conn - wildlife site surveyor
- Michele Leveque – wildlife records analysis

And finally . . .*The bit about us...*

The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TV ERC) is one of a national network of Local Records Centres. It aims to:

- *collect, collate and make available information to help people make sound decisions about our natural environment*
- *hold all available information about the plants, animals, wildlife habitats and important wildlife and geological sites in Berkshire and Oxfordshire*

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre is a 'not for profit' operation run by a partnership of the following organisations:

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, Cherwell District Council, English Nature, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Reading Borough Council, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Borough Council, Slough Borough Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of the White Horse District Council, West Berkshire District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, Wokingham District Council.

Contact us**TVERC Hub Office and Oxfordshire**

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