

Water for Wildlife Annual Report

March 2014 to February 2015

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough



Restored section of the Hoffer Brook

Ruth Hawksley

This is a summary of Water for Wildlife work in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough between March 2014 and February 2015.

Bourn Brook

The Bourn Free project continues on the brook, although Defra's Local Action Groups funding has now come to an end. Project partners are committed to continuing, in some form, and it is essential that more local people get involved. Mink control is still in place and keeps the brook almost mink-free.

Survey

The brook was re-surveyed in spring 2014 from Caxton to Byron's Pool, as a repeat of the 2011 survey. A separate survey report is available. The survey found an increase in water vole signs and distribution. While it seems that 2014 was a good year for water vole, we believe that at least some of this increase was aided by the Bourn Free project.

Future surveys will use more detailed recording, to get a better idea of changes in density of Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed over time. We are able to deduce reductions in numbers of plants by the reduced time it takes to pull / spray a given section.

Himalayan balsam



Balsam pulling in Toft 2014

2014 was a good growing year for many plants including Himalayan balsam, and coincided with difficulty in finding volunteers to pull it. We held 17 work parties, comprising 177 volunteer hours and 26 hours of staff time. Next year it will be important to recruit volunteers sooner and perhaps hold more weekend work parties.

Giant hogweed:

Giant hogweed was treated by the Environment Agency in spring, with a second treatment in September. Locations of plants were mapped and this information provided to the EA to help them locate some of the less obvious plants.

Two plants were seen flowering – one had the seed head removed and burnt, the other was cut as part of regular golf course maintenance.

Funding for control in 2015 is still uncertain and various options are being explored. It is essential to continue the control once started.

Habitat work:

Coppicing was carried out in March on a short stretch near Caldecote, with more planned for 2015.

The Countryside Restoration Trust has reinstated an old meander on the brook, adding about 100m to its length. Work was carried out at the beginning of February and required some tree clearance by hand followed by damming the straightened course. The downstream end of the straight course will probably be left as a backwater.



The Bourn Brook back in its original channel

Landowner meeting:

A meeting was held in February 2015 for landowners along the Bourn Brook and was attended by 10 of them, some of whom had not had contact with the project before. Forming a “cluster” of farmers was suggested for the purposes of the new Countryside Stewardship, and the farmers present will write to the other Bourn Brook

landowners about this. Opportunities and pitfalls of a volunteer warden scheme were also discussed and Andrew Down gave a talk about Catchment Sensitive Farming.

Publicity:

A first Bourn Free newsletter was sent out in November 2014, with another planned for spring 2015. This went to all contacts related to the Bourn Brook, including parish councils, and all or sections of it went into parish newsletters and websites. There is also a page on the Wildlife Trust's website for the Bourn Brook, and more content will be added to it soon.

Future plans:

Farm cluster – the cluster of farmers will be encouraged to apply for the new stewardship with the assistance of CFE/FWAGEast. First steps will be to collect names and map their joint land holding.

Volunteers – the aim is to recruit more volunteers with a greater number of options for what they can do, including surveys, invasive species control and “adopting” a stretch. It may be possible to emulate Essex WT's Riversearch programme on a small scale.

Invasive species – mink monitoring and control will continue, as will volunteer pulling of Himalayan balsam, although greater ingenuity may be required to find enough volunteers. Plans are not confirmed for giant hogweed control yet, although at least some may need to be carried out by the Wildlife Trust / Water for Wildlife.

River Rhee

This was the final year of survey for the Rhee (again with Local Action Group funding), and concentrated on three tributaries. These were the Orwell stream, the Whaddon Brook and North Ditch. The survey was not very extensive as no invasive plants were found, although water voles were present on both the Orwell stream and the North Ditch. Both have the potential to be improved as habitat for water vole. The survey results have been written up as a separate report.

Three landowner visits were carried out on the Rhee. One landowner is interested in various river options and these ideas are being discussed with the Environment Agency. We plan to add some woody debris to the river in March, with possibly a further visit in September. Ideally an arable field would be reverted to grassland and allowed to flood more often, but there is currently no funding for this.

Surveying the Orwell stream highlighted the presence of crayfish, which were later verified as native. Trapping on the Rhee by a resident in her garden has found signal crayfish upstream of the mill and weir at Barrington nearby. This suggests that improving fish passage into the Orwell stream could be detrimental to the native crayfish, while proposed work to remove the weir at Barrington would be less of a problem in this respect.

Future plans:

Work along the Rhee will be more opportunistic in future, although much of the Bourn and Rhee project area is now part of the Wildlife Trust's West Cambridgeshire

Hundreds living landscape scheme. A meeting for landowners in this area is planned for late February.

There are also plans for a landowner family workshop looking at the invertebrates in the river, probably on the Rhee somewhere, in spring. This would be arranged jointly with CSF and the Rivers Trusts.

Hoffer Brook

Enhancement work is now complete on the Hoffer Brook. Following placement of mesh in winter, 280 tonnes of gravel have been placed, three cattle drinks created, the severely poached area re-modelled and the grazing land fenced. The mesh appears to be supporting the gravel successfully over the area of deep silt, though it will be interesting to see what happens in future years. A separate project report has been prepared and will be circulated to anyone who is interested.

River Granta

The Abington Parish Council worked with Cambridge Water, South Cambs DC and Water for Wildlife to install a new gravel shoal for access and river enhancement. 20T of gravel were placed by a machine provided by Cambridge Water.



New shoal creation in progress

Cambridge City survey

Watercourses in Cambridge city were surveyed for water vole and invasive plants. Other features were also noted. Water voles were found in relatively large numbers, and using sub-optimal habitat.

Cherry Hinton Brook

Work has started placing flow deflectors into the Cherry Hinton Brook by Cambridge City Council, Natural England and the Friends of Cherry Hinton Brook. The Water for Wildlife project has also provided help and advice.



Reinforcing wood deflectors with gravel

Nene Park Trust

One site adjacent to the River Nene was surveyed and mapped this summer. A training course was held in September to train volunteer surveyors. These will then help the NPT carry out a water vole survey, by monitoring floating boards. A data study is underway looking at existing records from Nene Park Trust and identifying gaps and survey priorities.

Cam Catchment Partnership

The Cam Corridor Strategy is now known as the Cam Catchment Partnership. Links are maintained with this group as well as with other catchment partnerships. Closer links are sought with CamEO, as we work outside the Cam catchment as well.

Cambridgeshire ACRE are looking to put together a HLF Landscape Partnership bid covering part of the Cam catchment, and the Wildlife Trust / Water for Wildlife will be involved with the development and delivery of this.

Local Action Groups / Biosecurity

Ruth Hawksley and Penelope Chaney attended the Local Action Groups workshop, which was an opportunity to find out about projects in other parts of the country. There was also information on new and potential invasive species and ideas for improving biosecurity.

County Wildlife Sites

Several wetland sites were surveyed this year, including Buckden Gravel Pits, Eyebury Road Pits, and Manor Farm Meadows. Potential sites along the Hoffer Brook were also surveyed and advice given regarding Manea Pit.

Other activities

- Trumpington Meadows – a survey for floating pennywort and Himalayan balsam was carried out and invertebrate monitoring continues.
- Talks for Friends of Cherry Hinton Hall AGM and the Swavesey and Over Conservation Society.
- Chair of MLC Drainage Board Conservation Committee meeting.
- River Restoration Centre training event attended, Hemel Hempstead.
- Liaison with the Environment Agency about river restoration on the Cam at Hinxton.
- Attendance at Wildlife Trusts national seminar on freshwater issues.
- Attendance at first meeting of Friends of Bin Brook.
- Discussion with PTES about use of their new water vole recording system.
- Involved with workshop planned by Cam Valley Forum / catchment partnership for local people on river restoration, May 2015.