

## **BLACKWATER VALLEY COUNTRYSIDE PARTNERSHIP (BVCP)**

**MARCH 2020**

The aim of the Partnership is to provide a continuous green space alongside the Blackwater River as an attractive, safe, sustainable and wildlife rich environment for informal countryside recreation.

During 2019/20 BVCP continued its extensive activities throughout the Blackwater Valley area with its workload only being made possible with the support of many individuals and site groups. The Partnership operates with a small but dedicated staff complement. Those in post at the year-end were:

Manager:	Steve Bailey B.Sc., M.Phil., MIEEM.
Senior Ranger:	Stuart Croft B.Sc., M.Sc.
Senior Community Engagement Officer (Wellesley):	Nicola Shepherd B.A.
Countryside Ranger (Wellesley):	Laura Keighley B.Sc.
Countryside Ranger:	Stuart Barilli
Countryside Ranger:	Jenny Sibley B.Sc.
Assistant Ranger:	Bobbie Withers B.Sc.
Assistant Ranger:	Matt Bennett B.Sc.
Senior Administrative Assistant:	Emily Moore

The following report is just a snapshot of the work undertaken during 2019/20

### **ACCESS**

#### **Blackwater Valley Path**

Some sections of the Blackwater Valley Path fall within sites managed by BVCP but some sections don't and work on these is reliant on core funding to keep them open and safe to use. The whole path requires an annual litter pick in Spring and regular vegetation cutbacks and safety inspections during year.

Repairing footbridges remains an annual task. Hollybush Bridge was repaired and is awaiting a replacement deck, whilst warped boards at Lakeside Park were replaced. The bridge at the

south end of Frimley Hatches has been closed pending a decision on repairs or removal. Twenty-six instances of fly-tipping were cleared from the path and sites during the year.

## **CONSERVATION**

### **Habitat & River Improvement**

The BVCP is working with the Environment Agency and angling clubs to tackle Floating Pennywort in the Yateley area. Physical removal of two patches in the river over the last two years is working, with only a few fragments found and removed last autumn. Surveys and removal from four ponds in the Yateley area will continue until it is eradicated.

During the Blackwater Rivers Festival in September tasks to improve the aquatic biodiversity in Tice's Meadow and Wellesley Woodlands were carried out.

To improve meadow flora and manage grasslands, there is an annual programme of hay cutting and mowing across most of BVCP with specialist equipment hired to enable removal of cut material from meadows, tackle scrub and bramble patches, and work safely on steep banks.

The bat house inherited at Wellesley Woods was refurbished and a bat box scheme at Frimley Fuel allotments started with boxes supplied by the BVC Trust, whilst many boxes were added to the long running project at Lakeside Park with boxes paid for by Guildford Borough Council.

### **Biodiversity monitoring**

BVCP use 'Living Record' - a web based open access method for recording wildlife observations with a training course organised to encourage local groups and volunteers to submit records by this means.

Appropriate BVCP staff carried out inspections of bat boxes at five sites as part of long-term monitoring projects, proving the success of these schemes. The three bat hibernation sites created in the valley were checked – all are proving successful. In partnership with Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group, a new survey was set up Ash Green Meadows. At the existing surveys at Grants Moor and Tice's Meadow, Slowworms, Grass Snakes, Common Lizards and Adders were regularly recorded.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### **Volunteer groups**

The rangers led a Blackwater Valley Conservation Volunteers task every Tuesday and Thursday with student work parties on Fridays.

Staff supported site groups at Snaky Lane, Moor Green Lakes, Southwood Woodland, and Tongham Wood, by supplying tools, advising on work, with staff leading most tasks and attending group meetings. Other groups were very active but did not rely on BVCP as much. The Partnership supported these groups with provision of advice and equipment, and organising projects and joint tasks when requested.

Practical tasks were also organised on request for other community and corporate groups, including SC Johnson, 10th Farnborough Cubs, The Environment Agency, Rushmoor Blooming Marvellous.

### **Volunteer value**

The value to the Partnership of community involvement is much more than a monetary issue, however putting a value on their time does illustrate how dependent BVCP is on their input.

Based on Heritage Lottery Fund figures introduced in 1999 of £50 per day per volunteer, £150 per day for skilled volunteer, the total of 11,399 hours (equivalent to 2,280 days) gives a value of £182,730. However, if these figures were to be updated using Bank of England inflation rates, a total value of £311,075 would be more appropriate.

### **WORK IN GUILDFORD** (Including Ash Parish area)

The Snaky Lane Community Wildlife Group held monthly work parties. BVCP supplied all tools and equipment. Staff attended when larger equipment was required on seven occasions which included installing a culvert, renewing fencing and hay cutting the meadow.

At Lakeside Park work included removing invasive scrub from the reedbed, cutting paths and meadow management. The annual checks of bat boxes and meadow orchids were completed, with 11 new bat boxes installed.

Shawfield Meadow was hay cut with paths cut back there and at Hollybush Park.

### **BLACKWATER VALLEY ROUTE Landscaping, North** (Surrey Heath, Rushmoor)

Land either side of the A331 is managed by the BVCP to ensure commitments to environmental mitigation for road construction are met. The linear green corridor contains long sections of the Blackwater Valley path, screening tree belts and wildlife rich habitats. Annual management included clearing encroaching vegetation from paths and cycle ways, clearing roadside sight lines, thinning plantations, coppicing hazel, cutting grass on wildflower areas, litter and fly-tip removal.

Grassland and heathland at Grants Moor and Frimley Hatches were cut to maintain habitat for reptiles as it supports a population of Lizards, Adders and Grass Snakes.

The meadows, south facing banks and logs piles, provide niches for basking reptiles and insects.

### **BLACKWATER VALLEY ROUTE Landscaping Central and South** (Guildford, Rushmoor, Farnham)

The Surrey section of the Blackwater Valley Route landscaping required its annual clearance of overgrown path vegetation and work on hazard trees was done to maintain safe public access. Also, management work was required. This included fixing furniture, hay-cutting, and removing fly-tipping

At Tongham Wood orchard trees were planted to complete the restoration following the replacement of a main water pipe. Three pedestrian bridges over the River Blackwater are showing signs of old age and were monitored and repaired where necessary

### **LAND TRUST**

#### **Ash Green Meadows (Guildford)**

In September 2018 BVCP took over management of this 24ha site located between Ash Vale and Tongham. Unfortunately like some other sites where set up has been done by contractors, the first 6 months were spent sorting issues. This included replacing unsafe gates, securing access, removing historic fly tipping, tree safety work and cutting overgrown paths.

After the initial safety works, the site was improved through installation of interpretation signs and bins. Once wider vehicle gates were installed and drainage dug for the adjacent access track, the meadows were cut. To develop the wildlife interest tins were set up for reptile surveys. A new 70m section of path was laid to complete a circular surfaced route.

The pond on site is still to be handed over by the developer as the liner continues to fail, due in part to vandalism. It is hoped that BVCP will be able to secure a long-term agreement with the Land Trust to look after the site.

### **PLANNING**

BVCP is involved in 2 principal areas of planning - the development of new public greenspace facilities in the Valley mainly via restoration and future use of aggregate sites in the Valley and SANGs, and consultation on planning applications and strategic documents such as policies and local plans.

SANG development dominated in 2019/20 with involvement on potential and approved sites in Waverley, Hart, Surrey Heath, Rushmoor and Guildford. BVCP involvement was both as advisory on the design and as potential future managers. This could bring a further 200ha of open space into public access.

## **THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP**

The total value of work undertaken in the Valley in the year due to the activities of the Partnership was £768,000, a significant increase over the previous year. The core contribution from partners dropped slightly to £91,300 making up just 12% of income.

It is worth noting that £236,000 was due to management of SANGs with Land Trust contributing £186,300 of this for Wellesley Woods. Even so the greatest single element remains the value of volunteers.

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR**

- Taking on management of Ash Green Meadows
- Start of community engagement programme at Wellesley Woods
- Over 11,000 hours of volunteer practical support
- Engaging over 7,500 visitors through a wider programme of events.

Information about BVCP's activities can be found on:

Blog: [www.blackwatervalleycountryside.wordpress.com](http://www.blackwatervalleycountryside.wordpress.com)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/blackwater.valley](http://www.facebook.com/blackwater.valley)

Councillor Jo Randall  
Ash Parish Council