

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

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.

### **The Year In Brief (Oct 2022 – Sept 2023)**

A much more settled year than recent with the disruptions of Covid finally behind us, a full staff compliment and no extreme weather we have been able to concentrate on the management of the 25 sites we are involved with.

Staff numbers have remained at eight although Matt, Stuart and Raf are all on four days a week for various reasons. Training has been priority this year following the hiatus during Covid years.

The one major disruption has been the ESSO pipeline installation that has continued all year affecting a number of the sites. As the year ends the pipe is in and restoration work is taking place.

Southwood Country Park has been a focus of our work. Rushmoor opened the café and field centre and asked us to look after the latter as well as the park itself. We are in discussion about a long-term agreement.

Wellesley Woodland once again received Green Flag accreditation in July.

Community involvement has returned to pre covid levels with increases on last year for both volunteer involvement and public events.

### **Improving Access**

#### **Blackwater Valley Path**

Use of the Valley's greenspaces has now settled down after the covid peaks. The people counters on the Blackwater Valley path have been replaced with a new system based on mobile phone data. This has had a few teething problems as we work with the providers (as we did at first with the counters) to develop the accuracy of the system. The figures returned are still being verified to ensure reliability. Counters are still in place on four sites, all sites show the pre covid trend of c. 3-5% increase p.a. is continuing despite more sites becoming available. It is assumed the BV path is similarly increasing in use. It is hoped the diverted section at North Camp will soon be reinstated as the planning application has been approved with the condition the riverside path is reopened prior to use of the site commencing. West of Swan Lake planning conditions require a riverside route but have not been enforced, although there is informal use. The current owner is still seeking BVCP Annual Report 2023 2 development on the site, and we remain in contact with him and monitoring planning applications.

#### **Developing The Green Network**

We have continued to help refine design details for Blandford Woods SANG. The associated house building was delayed but the SANG infrastructure is now almost ready with opening due early 2024. This will provide a 14ha extension to Wellesley Woodlands.

We advised on the design for Waters Edge SANG that was opened for public use last year. Funds to provide a link into the Blackwater Path have been received and we in contact with site owners to agree access and details.

The provision of public access paths and landscaping behind Tongham Services is finally in progress and this will link Tice's Meadow with Tongham Pool and Aldershot Park. Following their purchase of Tice's Meadow, Surrey CC are looking at how they can make the most of Tongham Pool and these potential links.

We sit on the restoration committee at Runfold Quarry helping to refine details on such aspects as planting, drainage and footpaths. Infilling the last remaining void has progressed well, with a target of completion for 2024. Quarrying and post quarry use here has taken a long time but the final landscape is in sight.

Meanwhile at the north end of the Valley infilling at Manor Farm Quarry Finchampstead is also nearing completion and it is hoped paths and planting will be laid out in 2024.

### **Maintaining The Valley's Green Spaces**

With Southwood Country Park returning we have been involved with 25 sites totalling 475ha. Southwood has been a focus of attention all year. We are currently in discussion with Rushmoor BC to provide more formal agreement for looking after the Park and running its field centre.

As well as the sites we are responsible for we also regularly help out when requested on sites owned by partners; this has included mowing grasslands and heathland fire breaks for Surrey Heath and woodland work for Hart.

Work varies from site to site but typically involves carrying out regular litter and fly tip clearance, vegetation clearance from footpaths, inspections and repairs of infrastructure such as fences and boardwalks, tree safety work, answering questions from the public and sorting access for utilities. Twelve of the sites are small, under ten hectares, and with their urban locations introduce many boundary issues to be tackled, with encroachment, and "over the garden fence fly-tipping" introducing invasive species being constant issues.

The ESSO pipeline has had a major impact on Southwood Country Park and Queen Elizabeth Park, felling many trees and putting footpaths out of action. Installation has almost finished with tree planting and grassland seeding now taking place. It will take many years for scars to heal. ESSO have provided Rushmoor BC with funds for extra improvement works which now need to be planned in.

On all sites we look to improve their long term wildlife value with annual tasks; in summer grazing at Moor Green, meadow mowing and seed introduction at other grassland sites. In Woodlands, removal of invasive species is an annual task. Most of the work is done ourselves, although for larger projects contractors need to be organised.

We rely heavily on volunteers to help us do this work. Eight sites have their own "friends" group who we support in various ways as required, from organising and leading all projects to the occasional loan of tools. For other sites our flying squad of Tuesday volunteers, students and corporate and community groups are used.

## **Nature Recovery**

Improvements to the biodiversity of the Valley has always been one of our aims. Surveys and monitoring enable us to find what we have, to allow sympathetic management and target improvement projects.

This year's work included:

- Green hay was used to seed prepared ground at Runfold Ridge. 10 plots of Kidney Vetch seed was also introduced as part of Butterfly Conservation's Small Blue Project and has established well.
- Removal of invasive woodland species, Variegated Yellow Archangel from Rowhill and Southwood Woodland, Rhododendron from Queen Elizabeth Park and Rowhill.
- Maintenance and monitoring of 170 bat boxes including a spring check showing unexpected high usage. Natterer's bats were found for the first time. Monitoring of four known large tree roosts continued through the year.
- All known stands of Japanese Knotweed were checked and treated at Wellesley Woods and Rowhill.
- Barn Owl boxes in Wokingham were surveyed and maintained after a 2-year covid break.
- Rapid Grassland surveys were carried out at Tice's Meadow and Runfold Ridge with a detailed survey commissioned for Hawley Meadows.
- Five Beetle "stumperies" constructed at Wellesley Woods.

## **Community Engagement**

### Volunteer Activity

Looking after the public green spaces in the Valley relies heavily on the many volunteers who give up their time. We are pleased to support the 10 site-based groups however we can, depending on their needs from occasional tool loan, leading occasional or regular tasks, or carrying out heavier work with our equipment.

The groups are:

- Rowhill Nature Reserve Society
- Friends of Brickfields
- Tice's Meadow Bird Group
- Tongham Wood Improvement Group
- Cove Brook Greenaway Group
- Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park
- Southwood Improvement Group
- Surrey Heath Tree Wardens
  - Friends of Frimley Allotments
- Moor Green Lakes Group

The impact of Covid is still apparent with a number of groups still working with reduced numbers and wanting to recruit new blood.

As well as the site group we run a regular volunteer group who work throughout the Valley on Tuesdays and on Wednesdays with students.

BVCP staff have organised and helped on 197 volunteer projects, involving 1,402 days work valued at £200,000. But much volunteer effort is undertaken without our presence, not just practical work but group administration, organising projects and open days, or individuals doing litter picks. As an example, Tice's Meadow Bird Group are particularly active and self-reliant organising work parties, ecological monitoring fundraising. None of the figures for any group when we were not directly involved are included above.

The figures above underestimate the true value of volunteers in the Valley. We are particularly grateful for those volunteers who take on responsibilities such as group administration, task leadership or first aider.

### Public Contacts

We were able to put on 21 public site events this year, attended by 500. This included a series of weekly children's events at Naishes Lane SANG during the school summer holidays, two children bug hunts and three bat walks, the latter assisted by BVCT. We support events organised by partners, this year we attended ones at Lakeside Park and two at Southwood Country Park. Work parties were arranged for four corporate groups attend by 50 people.

We greatly value the help of Surrey Choices who made five visits to Weyburn Meadows. The organisation provides opportunities to those who need extra support to volunteer or gain employment skills.

The role at Southwood Field Centre gave a focal point for community contacts, and will provide a venue to promote our work and Valley facilities.

The BVCP Facebook page was kept up to date with regular postings to keep followers up to date with our activities.

### The Wider Partnership

As well as our local authority core funding partners, we have close links with many other bodies, not least the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust and the ten sitebased volunteer groups.

Land Trust provide the funding for five SANGs we manage on their behalf, whilst we also received smaller amounts from Cemex to help us support work at Moor Green Lakes. Surrey CC contribute funds to us to help at Tice's Meadow.

We are members of the Loddon Catchment Partnership and the Loddon Fisheries and Conservation Consultative; both maintain links with the Environment Agency, angling clubs, and wildlife trusts coordinating work towards river improvement projects.

Links with Natural England are maintained by membership of their Access Management and Monitoring Partnership that deals with SPA and SANG issues.

### **The Value Of Partnership**

The total value of work undertaken in the Valley this year due to the activities of the Partnership was £580k. This is slightly more than last year, Income partner fee earning work was down but non partner fee earning and value of volunteer activity was increased. The core contribution from partners made up just 16% of income. Other raised income totalled £18k – 10k of which was due to a licence to ESSO and £4k was contributed by the BVC Trust towards the last year of the woodland flora project.