

Sussex Biodiversity Partnership

Winter 2008 Newsletter

The Sussex Pond Survey 2009-2010 *Bev Wadge, Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre*



Photo: Fran Southgate

The conservation value of ponds has been largely underestimated. Recent research shows that ponds support more invertebrates than rivers, including over two thirds of threatened species. All our native amphibians favour ponds as breeding habitat, and most British wetland plants, including half of the most endangered, can be found in ponds (Pond Conservation).

The importance of ponds has been recognised with the introduction of the UK Ponds Habitat Action Plan (HAP), which seeks to identify and protect the best pond habitats. Since little is known about the condition of most of Sussex's estimated 17,000 ponds, the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre (SxBRC) is planning the Sussex Pond Survey. The aim is to survey a representative sample of Sussex ponds, to obtain baseline

habitat information, leading to the identification of Priority Ponds according to criteria in the UK Ponds HAP.

Working closely with Pond Conservation, we are designing a 'baseline' survey aimed at enabling volunteers with little or no previous experience to assess the conservation value of a pond. This will involve assessing the surrounding area, identifying key plants and amphibians to species level, invertebrates to family level, and using simple water quality tests.

We will run training courses for our volunteers in spring 2009. The results will enable us to target the best ponds for expert ecological survey, whilst building up an overview of pond health in general. Best practice adopted by the Sussex Hedgerow Inventory of random sampling to produce countywide results will be replicated where possible.

In the longer term this project will lead to working with landowners, local communities, volunteers and conservation bodies, to help maintain Priority Ponds, improve others, and guide creation of new ponds under the Million Ponds Project.

In order to carry out this work SxBRC is looking for funding of £9150 and are grateful for the support of the Sussex Amphibian and Reptile Group who have kindly sponsored the project. If your organisation is able to offer support or would like to know more then please contact the project co-ordinator Bev Wadge on info@sxbrc.org.uk or 01273 497570 (Mondays only). Training events will be in the Wildlife Trusts courses leaflet in the new year and will be promoted on the ADASTRA egroup.

Water Voles in the Lower Arun Valley *Matt Smith, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust/University of Brighton*

The Water Vole is now widely considered to be Britain's rarest mammal. Populations have shown dramatic declines and national surveys suggest they have decreased by over 90% since the 1930's. Habitat loss and degradation, pollution, persecution, disease and predation by introduced American Mink have all contributed to their decline.



Photo: Dave Green

Surveys by the Vincent Wildlife Trust in the Southern Water Authority region showed sites previously occupied by water voles dropped from 74% presence in 1989/90 to 28% in 1996/98. It is feared this trend will continue unless action is taken and water vole conservation is now a top priority. In order to preserve the remaining populations, reintroduction schemes have been taking place across the country, aiming to connect fragmented populations and repopulate previous strongholds.

The Arun Valley Water Vole Project is one such scheme which aims to reintroduce water voles to the water meadows and ditches of West Sussex. One of the release sites was the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) reserve in Arundel, where 171 water voles of mixed bloodlines were released in 2005. I have been extremely interested in the reintroduction programme and the plight of UK water voles; this prompted me to conduct research into their distribution within the lower Arun valley as part of my final year project at university.

WWT exclude terrestrial predators from the reserve in order to maintain a relatively stable population within its confines. By the end of the breeding season, around the end of September, juveniles unable to establish territory within the reserve will migrate out into the valley.

Ditches on the water meadows of the Arun floodplain are being surveyed at 50 metre intervals. Presence and absence is determined by looking for signs of activity, such as latrines, feeding stations, burrows, lawns and footprints. This data will be plotted on a GIS map and the number of positive signs within a 100 metre radius from the release site will be used to determine how successfully water voles are migrating and whether relative abundance is lower or higher with distance from the reserve.

Vegetation, water current strength and bank gradient is also being recorded for each ditch. These habitat variables will be compared with presence or absence to see which conditions appear preferential. The hope is that water voles will spread throughout the valley, but this will only be possible if suitable corridors are available for them to move along. Some ditch banks have been trampled by cattle, making them unsuitable for water voles to burrow into, with others overgrown with Hawthorn, which shades out ground flora on which they rely for food and predator evasion. We hope this research will aid management of the area and ensure the water vole population in the Arun valley and surrounding areas will survive for generations to come.

Although the final report will not be finished until the spring initial signs look promising. Water voles are spreading well from the reserve and can be found in ditches that have substantial emergent vegetation (i.e. rushes, sedges and reeds), a stable bank for burrowing and water at least 0.5m deep.

You can play your part in assessing the status of Britain's water voles by contacting your local biodiversity record centre with any information regarding sightings of water voles in your area. For further information on this project you can contact Matt Smith maes14a@yahoo.com

News

GrantScape: Working with Nature Fund



GrantScape have launched their "Working with Nature" fund. With £1.3 million available, they will be looking to fund projects between £150 000 and £300 000. GrantScape funds projects aimed at creating, conserving or enhancing the biodiversity of England and

Wales, which can demonstrate they will support priority habitats and/or species listed on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, and are on sites within 10 miles of a licensed landfill site.

Applications can be submitted at any time up until the deadline of **Monday 6 April 2009**.

<http://www.grantscape.org.uk/grantshome/grants-available/workingwithnature1.htm>

Countryside Survey 2007

2007 saw the fifth Countryside Survey of Great Britain. The Countryside Survey is a detailed study of a sample of 1-km squares (591 during 2007, up from 256 in 1978) chosen to ensure all of Britain's major habitat types are represented. The Survey offers an opportunity to distinguish where changes have occurred over the past 30 years, which can be used to inform policy makers and countryside managers. The results from Countryside Survey 2007 were published on November 18. <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/reports2007.html>



Higher Level Stewardship Target Areas



Natural England have launched a new approach for delivering Higher Level Stewardship, which aims to target management in areas where environmental outcomes are likely to be greatest. These target areas have been identified through integration of information on biodiversity, landscape, natural resource protection, public access and historic interests. In Sussex two target areas have been identified (SE03 High Weald and Associated Valleys, and SE08 South Downs) and statements have been produced to identify priority land management activities within each area. Outside the target areas, Natural England has identified themes relating to regional features in particular need of management. Information on target areas and themes in the southeast can be found at <http://www.naturalengland.co.uk/planning/grants-funding/es/hls/targeting/default.aspx>

Planning Policy Statement: Eco-towns

A consultation on the Draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) on Eco-towns is now underway. The PPS defines the environmental, social and economic standards eco-towns would need to meet, including standards on climate change adaptation, green infrastructure, biodiversity and flood risk management. The consultation ends on **19 February 2009**.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/ppsecotowns>

Look out for

- **Securing Biodiversity** - Natural England has released a new framework for delivering action on priority habitats and species in England. The framework aims to ensure an integrated approach to biodiversity action, with a focus on ecosystems and landscape scale delivery. <http://naturalengland.communisis.com/naturalenglandshop/docs/NE127.pdf>
- The **Marine and Coastal Access Bill** in the Queen's Speech on Wednesday 3 December.

- **ConservationEvidence.com** - A website which aims to share knowledge and best practice in conservation management <http://www.conservationevidence.com/>
- The **UK BAP Group** have released the Priority Habitat Descriptions for the UK BAP, this includes new priority habitats resulting from the 2007 review, and changes to some existing habitats. <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/library/UKBAPPriorityHabitatDescriptionsfinalAllhabitats20081022.pdf>
- The **Environmental Audit Committee** have released their report on Halting Biodiversity Loss <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmenvaud/743/743.pdf>

Upcoming Events

December 2: The Landscape Character Network holds a conference *Landscape and Ecosystem Services* in Reading to provide an opportunity to learn about the concept of ecosystem services and its relationship with landscape character. <http://www.landscapecharacter.org.uk/ecosystem>

December 3: The Countryside Recreation Network holds a conference *Growing Up Outdoors* in London to explore the benefits and challenges in encouraging children and young people to be active in the outdoors. <http://www.countrysiderecreation.org.uk/events/Advert%20for%20Conference%20final.pdf>

December 7: The Herpetological Conservation Trust and the British Herpetological Society are holding a joint meeting in Bournemouth on Amphibian and Reptile Biology, Ecology and Conservation. http://www.herpconstrust.org.uk/downloads/HCT_%20BHS_meeting_2008_flyer.pdf

January 31: The English Moth Recorders' Conference will be held in Birmingham, providing an update on the National Moth Recording Scheme <http://www.mothscount.org/site/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=40>

February 13 - March 20: Birkbeck, University of London hold their latest series of free ecology and conservation studies lectures. The series will be all about freshwater. <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/ce/environment/ecssociety/index.shtml>

Is there something we should know about? Got an article you would like us to include?

Email Laurie with the details if you would like something included in a future newsletter
The deadline for submissions for the next edition is 20 February 2009.

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