

What's Beane Happening?

The newsletter of The River Beane Restoration Association
Issue No 37 Winter 2023



Welcome

The last issue of WBH was dedicated to our reintroduction of water voles back to the River Beane after many years of absence. Volunteers gathered towards the end of October to survey the two areas where the release took place to look for signs of water vole activity. The first area was a stretch of 'new river' where it passes through the Woodhall Park Estate bypassing the Broadwater. Sadly no signs were detected of our little friends leaving the surveyors somewhat depressed. However, deep joy, in the second location there were signs that they were thriving. As water voles are basically vegetarian prey animals and breed in large numbers we are very optimistic for the next survey which will take place in April.

We were all frustrated that the river ran dry again last summer between Aston and Whitehall. But then 2022 was an exceptionally dry year with 10 months of well below average rainfall (one month was completely dry). If we don't have a very wet winter then the aquifer is unlikely to recover. So far it's not too bad

and November was very wet. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, although as a dog walker, wading through the mud, I confess to having some mixed feelings!

The River Beane Catchment Partnership (RBCP) from Sarah Perry

The River Beane Catchment Partnership, hosted by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust, gathered before the Christmas break to summarize progress of the previous year and new activities for 2023 towards improving the River Beane and its valley. The meeting was well attended with over 45 representatives covering parish and local councils, residents, volunteers (many of whom are RBRA members), water companies, Environment Agency, Riverfly partnership etc. More info about the meeting can be found in the minutes. (CTRL click on the following link)

<https://www.riverleacatchment.org.uk/index.php/river-beane-news-and-events/river-beane-news/1237-river-beane-catchment-partnership-meeting-minutes-01-dec-2022>

The Living Rivers of Hertfordshire

An online talk by Sarah Perry which will take place on the 7th February from 7.30 to 8.30pm. To register for the talk CTRL click on the following link.

Living Rivers of Hertfordshire (Online Talk) | Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust



This picture of a water vole was wrongly attributed in the last issue and was in fact taken by Anthea Thornton. My apologies, it's a great picture and well worth a second viewing!



A water vole surveyor on the new stretch of river not having much luck!

The new stretch of river passing through the Woodhall Park Estate taken in October during the water vole survey.

Out with the INNS crowd! from Peter White's presentation at the RBCP

We've touched on the problem of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) in previous issues of What's Beane Happening, but this is now an area of greater focus for the RBRA, and Affinity Water too.

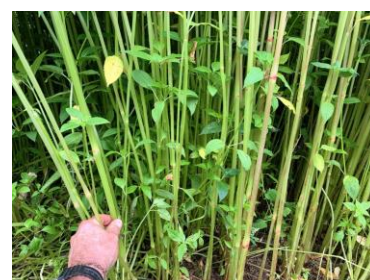
The presence of non-native invasive species in a river system is one of the 'reasons for not achieving good' (often shortened to RNAG) in the assessment of ecological status under the Water Framework Directive and so efforts are being ramped up to stamp them out.

Our main target is invasive Himalayan Balsam. Although this is a pretty, pink-flowered plant much loved by bees, it's also the fastest-growing annual plant in Britain which rapidly shades out and smothers native species at the water's edge. Come autumn, it dies back completely, leaving exposed soil and mud that's no longer stabilised by native plant roots. This washes away in winter floods causing siltation of the riverbed (affecting invertebrate and fish life) and leaving the banks unstable (threatening Water Vole burrows). Each Balsam plant produces hundreds of seeds which drop into a five metre radius around it leading to a bigger 'stand' the following year. The seeds also float, so the plant rapidly spreads downstream and can eventually affect the entire river corridor.

Affinity Water has been supporting river groups like the RBRA with funding and volunteer time from their staff as part of their INNS Out campaign since 2021. We applied for further support in 2022 and as well as funding were awarded 100 hours of time from Affinity. On a warm day back in July last year ten staff from Affinity Water and four new RBRA volunteers (alongside me, Bob Thornton and Sarah Perry from HMWT) headed to The Rookery in Frogmore Park (near Watton) and cleared Balsam from a good few hundred metres of the river banks. This site is one of the two upstream-most Balsam 'seed banks' on the Beane and where we're focusing our efforts to remove it. This simply involves pulling the plants up from the soil – they are shallow rooted and come away with very little effort – and leaving them on dry ground where they rot down to nothing in just a couple of days.

We also ran two similar sessions (but this time only an RBRA team) at the Wychdell Flood Meadow on the southern edge of Stevenage. The Stevenage Brook – a key tributary of the Beane – flows through this large site where the amount of Himalayan Balsam has reached quite epic proportions. Along with The Rookery, Wychdell will be our other focus this coming year. We also are tackling some Balsam further downstream, but it's best to concentrate on the upstream end and work down to be really effective. Each site will need a concentrated effort for three or four years to bring the infestations down to manageable levels, as any seed that doesn't grow in the first year remains viable on the ground for two or three more. Total elimination is possible, but if just one plant gets missed, it can drop enough seed to allow several dozen to grow back the following year.

Our application is in for the third year of the INNS Out scheme and we hope to receive further support in 2023. We are also keen to grow our volunteer 'task force' to help with future Balsam Bashes. All you need is a pair of gloves and wellies – we can even lend waders – for a couple of sessions in late spring and more in the summer. Do get in touch if you'd like to join in.



The above photos from Peter White show:

how tall Himalayan Balsam can grow in just one year

Balsam growing along Stevenage Brook

And dense monoculture starting to develop.



The photo to the left, from Bob Thornton, shows the team from Affinity Water + RBRA volunteers and HMWT's Sarah Perry on a Balsam bash last summer.

RBRA Activities 2022 from Dave Standing's presentation at the RBCP

We have continued our monthly borehole dipping and riverfly monitoring along with the publication of this newsletter. We also had a stall at Watton fete and had a display in the Methodist Church in the summer which proved popular. We gave several presentations about the RBRA to Hertford u3a, Stevenage Library and Watton Primary School. There were three very successful 'Balsam bashing' sessions during the summer, two at the Wychdell flood management reservoir in Stevenage and one at the rookery in Frogmore Park at Hooks Cross.

Nitrate and phosphate monitoring at several sites along the river is new for 2022 and the highlight of the year was in July when we re-introduced over 120 water voles to the river. This was a collaborative venture with HMWT and the Woodhall Estate. Several RBRA members subsequently attended a water vole survey course and will carry out regular checks on the voles going forward.

Our website is being revamped to be more social media friendly and we are reorganising the RBRA committee which will hopefully give better support to the conservation work along the Beane valley.

Finally, a new initiative is being rolled out by Affinity Water, HMWT, RBRA and The Environment Agency that we hope will involve a large amount of physical work on the river to try and restore it as close as possible to its original state.

Waterford Marsh from Marcella Randall

Work has started along the Beane

Major works have commenced early in the New Year at Waterford Marsh to improve the habitat along the Beane. The scheme is a combined project between Hertfordshire County Council and the Environment Agency.

Initially some additional strengthening materials were installed at the breach site by the Horseshoe Weir to protect the adjacent footpath. A team from the EA installed a number of sandbags on 3rd January. Further measures to mitigate the impact of flows around the breach will take place over the coming months.

The main task this winter has been dealing with extensive sections of concrete walls along the Marsh which were collapsing. The walls have been broken up and removed by contractors. Then more natural, sloping banks have replaced the walls and areas with 'brash berms' gradually installed to increase habitat diversity. These are made from woody debris secured within the channel with the use of stakes, some acting as 'deflectors' to help vary flows along the river.

Further plans include removing a small weir upstream and creating further wetland scrapes on the Marsh to hold more water.



The photos on this page are from Marcella Randall and Peter White. They show a welcome sign at the entrance to the marsh, sand bags stabilizing the bank near the breach, an area between stakes being filled with woody debris to improve bank side habitat, concrete walls broken up and waiting for removal, and finally grading the bank to a more natural angle.

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