e-Newsletter

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Welcome

In this edition, we're delighted to headline with the mystery of the drying out of Woodcote's Lower Greenmore Pond and the truly inspirational remedial project to restore it (with thanks to Rachel Sanderson, Vice Chair Woodcote Conservation Group). It's an absolutely fascinating and evolving story and no doubt we'll be revisiting and celebrating it in the future! We also cover off our own celebrations; a decade of revitalisation of White Hill Quarry, the successful spotting of our target butterfly species - the Adonis Blue - on Lardon Chase, and the end of our 2025 nature activities programme. We may not be running any more events this year, but we won't be any the less busy; watch this space for requests for hedge planting and general project volunteers. Please email us to let us know if there are any particular walks/talks/events/places of interest, you'd like us to include next year.

Restoring Woodcote's Lower Greenmore Pond;

A Triumph for Wildlife and Community

After more than 1,000 years as a vital water source and wildlife haven, Woodcote's Lower Greenmoor Pond faced a crisis; within six weeks in 2023, it lost all its water. But thanks to local determination, expert guidance, and generous supporters, the pond is on the brink of a remarkable restoration.

SSWCG have been following the project closely and were delighted to accept a very kind invitation from Rachel Sanderson, Vice Chair of the Woodcote Conservation Group, to visit the site and get an update on progress.

The History

The two Greenmoor Ponds at Woodcote (SU646812) span 1.635 acres of registered common land, perched near the second highest point of the South Oxfordshire Chilterns. Their contrasting features - the shallow, plant-rich Upper Pond and the deeper, tree-shaded Lower Pond - make them both a visual delight and an ecological haven.

The name Greenmoor (also spelled Greenmore) is derived from Greenmere, meaning "green pond" or "green pool," and was first recorded in 1109 when Henry I confirmed Eynsham Abbey's possessions, including this very site (source: South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group, Greenmoor Project). By 1818, the ponds were clearly marked on maps and designated as public watering places in the Enclosure Award of 1853. Earlier, undated maps refer to them as the "Sheep Wash Ponds," reflecting their long use by farmers watering livestock before turning them out onto Woodcote Common.

This long-standing role as a water source may stretch back even further. Less than a kilometre away, in Friarhampstead Wood, a nearby earthwork enclosure has been inspected by English Heritage, who suggest it may date to the Romano-British period. Given the absence of other natural water sources in the area, it's entirely possible the Greenmoor Ponds served as a vital supply even then.

The Lower Pond continued to serve the local community into the 20th century, providing drinking water until the 1920s. The old well head, still visible at the pond's north-western edge, stands as a quiet reminder of its more utilitarian past (and also happens to be where we sat to chat with Rachel!). Recognising the site's enduring historical significance, English Heritage has expressed an intention to consider the Greenmoor Ponds for designation as a Scheduled Monument (source: Karen Woolley, Woodcote: The Greenmore Ponds).

A Wildlife Treasure

Beyond their history, the Greenmoor Ponds are ecological gems. Perched atop the dry Chilterns, they depend entirely on rainfall and groundwater. They rank among the top 15% of ponds in the UK for species richness. Surveys by Pond Conservation (now Freshwater Habitats Trust) in 1990 and 2000 found both ponds have “very high conservation value,” supporting rare water beetles, frogs, toads, and both smooth and palmate newts making them one of the richest pond habitats in the country (source: SOAG Bulletin No. 60, 2005). It’s a haven for many other wildlife species as well; there are 17 species of bat in England and nine were identified at the site in 2024 including the rare nathusius pipistrelle (source: WCG: Restoring the Lower Greenmore Pond).

Each year, the Woodcote Conservation Group (WCG) runs an annual ‘toad patrol’ to help the amphibians cross the road safely when they migrate to breed in February/March - new volunteers are always welcome!

Crisis Strikes

In May 2023, the Lower Pond’s water level began to drop dramatically; falling around two metres below normal, and by June, the pond had dried out completely. Although some water returned over winter, it quickly vanished again by summer 2024. The same happened last winter and, by the end of May this year, the pond was once again dry.

Dry pond before work started (image courtesy of Rachel Sanderson)

The site is owned by the Parish Council and is a much valued community asset. In response to feedback from the local community keen to see the pond restored, Woodcote Conservation Group have been supporting the PC on the restoration project. Initial investigations by hydrologists pointed to a potential breach in the clay lining - perhaps from tree roots or subtle ground movements - that could have drained water into the chalk below. However, subsequent constructions work analysis showed this might not be the full story, and the exact cause remains unresolved.

A Triumph Against the Odds

Determined not to let a centuries-old wildlife haven disappear, the team asked local expert companies to tender for the contract and their quotes established an ambitious £45,000 fundraising target in February 2025 - and smashed it by June 2025! Donations poured in alongside a very successful crowdfunder campaign, a generous grant from the BA Climate Fund, and a £25,000 contribution from TOE, funded by Grundon Waste Management Ltd through the Landfill Communities Fund.

In a remarkable feat, the restoration project was launched on June 23rd 2025 with a tight 3–4 week window. Thanks to unseasonably warm and dry weather (which made it possible to dredge silt and deliver the clay without turning the site into a mud bath), the team has kept work firmly on schedule. Had heavy rain arrived, the entire plan could have ground to a halt. White Horse Contractors have dredged decades of silt and are busy, at the time of writing, laying 400 tonnes of Lias clay from West Oxfordshire. A 300mm clay layer is being compacted across the pond base and up its sides, forming a watertight pond base sealed to hold water once more. Clever cooperation with Thames Water, which agreed to accept silt on their adjoining land, saved the project huge disposal costs.

Machinery delivered to site *Excavator in action*
(images courtesy of Rachel Sanderson)

The restoration isn't just about fixing leaks. WCG and contractors plan to replant aquatic vegetation to transform the pond back into a thriving wildlife oasis rather than leaving it a barren "muddy hole" (source: Henley Standard, Feb 2025). A wildlife-friendly bund will reinforce a weak point left by past excavation, and the clay's compaction - done with a specialist 'sheep's foot roller' - evokes the old tradition of treading down clay with sheep! This intense, fast-moving project shows what an expert led community project can achieve when it comes together. Thanks to WCG, contractors, and the support of local people and funders, Lower Greenmoor Pond is on course not just to survive, but to flourish. As James Godfrey, a hydrogeological engineer, and WCG member put it: "We're hopeful this project will future-proof the pond, maintain the ecosystem, and safeguard this important village asset for years to come".

View of pond after work completed (image courtesy of Rachel Sanderson)

For more information visit: https://woodcotecg.org.uk/home/greenmoor-pond-restoration-fund-woodcote/

Sources:

- Karen Woolley: The Greenmore Ponds
- WCG: Restoring the Lower Greenmoor Pond
- SOAG Greenmoor Project Background
- SOAG Bulletin No. 60 (2005), “Greenmoor Ponds Historical and Ecological Background”
- Henley Standard, February 2025, “Conservation group to restore Greenmoor Pond after dramatic water loss”
- SOAG Post-Medieval Archaeology at Wyfold Grange
- With thanks to Rachel Sanderson, Vice Chair WCG

White Hill Quarry Nature Site - A Celebration

Ian Haslam

On Sunday 8th June, South Stoke Wildlife and Conservation Group hosted a special celebration to mark the remarkable progress made at White Hill Quarry over the last decade. Thanks to years of dedication, the site is thriving.

Among the many achievements; new/rejuvenated hedges expertly laid by Wallingford Green Gym, a fresh new information board and a second bench installed to take in the sweeping views. Excitingly, orchids first spotted three years ago, continue to flourish alongside other wildflowers including bird's foot trefoil and wild marjoram (related to oregano), together with sightings of peacock butterflies, corn buntings, skylarks, brown hares and even a hedgehog.

Laid hedge - hours of hard work, with thanks to Wallingford Green Gym

White Hill Quarry was given to the Parish in 1853 after the land surrounding South Stoke was enclosed. It served as a source of gravel and chalk for over a century. Later used as a dumping site for many years during building work in South Stoke, it was eventually covered over to become part of the larger field system. In 2010 it was reclaimed by villagers and planted up as a green area to improve biodiversity and encourage wildlife.

Since then, SSWCG has been looking after the site on an informal basis, together with volunteers from the village, until last year when an arrangement was reached with the Parish Council for a renewable stewardship of the land to be given to the Group which included creating and enacting a maintenance plan.

On a bright and breezy Sunday the get-together was attended by members of Wallingford Green Gym, Rachel Sanderson from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (who generously provided funds for some of the tools used on the site), our District Councillor (and now County Councillor) Maggie Filipova-Rivers (who has also awarded grants from SODC for the work), our Parish Council Chair Victor Meyer, local land-owners, the Trustees of SSWCG and volunteers from the village who have had a hand in establishing the site and maintaining it since.

Ian Haslam, Chair of SSWCG, welcomed everyone and thanked all those who had contributed to the success of the project. He handed over to Paul Jenkins, who was instrumental in recovering the site in 2010. Councillor Maggie Filipova-Rivers followed, and spoke about the impact made by community groups on District plans to conserve and enhance the area for the environment. Her daughter, Indi, added a few words reminding the assembled crowd how vitally important nature and the natural world is to the younger generations.

Councillor Maggie Filipova-Rivers addresses the gathering

We celebrated with a few bubbles and were treated to a delicious array of cakes, coffee and tea provide by Naomi Hallam – a trustee of SSWCG and co-owner of Boki Coffee (which has 9 sites spread across London).

All in all, it was a wonderful chance to celebrate the hard work and dedication of everyone who has contributed to the huge effort involved over the years; appreciate the extraordinary progress made and enjoy the beautiful surroundings together. White Hill Quarry has become a haven for wildlife and a wonderful space for all to enjoy for years to come.

Butterflies on Lardon Chase

John Lindley

A group of fifteen gathered at Lardon Chase on May 18th for the SSWCG Butterfly walk. The weather was warm and sunny, leading us to be optimistic that we'd find our target species, the Adonis Blue, a species that is restricted to chalk grassland in Southern England. Within a few minutes we saw our first butterflies - several Common Blue and Small Heath, plus singles of Red Admiral and Small Copper.

As we approached the area that has, in the past, been a good spot for Adonis Blue, we saw our first glimpse of electric blue, and confirmed our first sighting of Adonis. Over the next half hour we saw several more male Adonis, often perching close to Common Blue, enabling us to clearly see the differences between the two species. We also encountered several female Adonis, plus a handful of Dingy Skippers.

We then explored an area where scrub has been allowed to flourish, and where a colony of Small Blue had been found in previous years. It was great to see large numbers of Small Blue; more than John, who led the walk, has ever seen at this site before.

With the weather becoming very warm, we decided to call it a day and head back to the car park. As we walked back we saw a single Grizzled Skipper, plus several day flying moths, notably including Mother Shipton and Burnet Companion, two species particularly associated with this site.

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Postscript - unusually, we saw no "Whites" - normally we'd expect to see Large, Small and Green-veined Whites - however, within a couple of weeks huge numbers of Large and Small Whites arrived as part of a mass migration from mainland Europe.

All images taken at Lardon Chase and courtesy of John Lindley, with thanks


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Male Adonis Blue

Mother Shipton moth

Grizzled Skipper

Male Small Blue

What a Year! Highlights from Our 2025 Programme

As we wrap up our 2025 programme, we're thrilled to reflect on what's been a truly rewarding and action packed year. From planting hedgerows and disease resistant elms (with thanks to Guy Hildred), to memorable outings like our trip to RSPB Otmoor, a very popular '*Gardening For Wildlife talk*' in the Perch & Pike and repeats of our always popular pond dipping, butterflies at Lardon Chase, dragonfly, dawn chorus and glow worm walk/surveys, it's been a season full of learning, fun and inspiration!

This summer, we introduced a new moth recording event and hosted a highly entertaining *Strictly Nature* evening with our celebrated local wildlife photographer, Simon Booker. Simon shared insights into his photographic techniques and the wisdom he's gathered over the years, all vividly illustrated with his stunning photos and videos. Alongside these special events, we've been running bi-weekly wildflower surveys, while Paul Rainsden and Simon Booker have continued their monthly bird transects.

Our events have drawn nature lovers from far and wide, including Wallingford, Woodcote, Goring, Streatley, Didcot, Reading, Oxford and even Princes Risborough! We've had a raft of great people and experts inputting to our events and special thanks go to Rhiannon Young, Nature Recovery Engagement Officer, Wild Oxfordshire (*Wildlife Gardening Talk*), Paul Rainsden (birder) and the wonderful Wallingford Green Gym team for their amazing work hedge laying at White Hill Quarry. In addition, a big shout out to our own John Lindley for being such a brilliant and knowledgeable leader of all our invertebrate sessions.

We're very proud of all the swift boxes that have been installed around the village and in St Andrews church. Huge thanks to Paul Jenkins and Harwell Swifts for their dedication, craftmanship and expertise in designing, locating, building and siting the boxes.

So, it's been fun and educational. But also so much more; all of the data we collect at our events is entered onto the iRecord national database, thus providing scientists with important new biodiversity information that contributes to nature conservation, planning, research and education.

Thanks, as always, to Simon Booker for allowing us to use his incredible wildlife images on our website.

We'll soon be turning our attention to planning the 2026 events programme, and we'd love to hear your ideas! If there's an activity, walk, or talk you'd like to be included, please drop us an email; we'd be delighted to hear from you.

Here's to another inspiring year ahead and, in the meantime, onward with hedge planting!

And a couple of recommendations to finish:

Seek by iNaturalist

Take your nature knowledge up a notch with *Seek*. Use the power of image recognition technology to identify the plants and animals all around you. Earn badges for seeing different types of birds, amphibians, plants, and fungi and participate in monthly observation challenges.

- Get outside and point the Seek Camera at living things.
- Identify wildlife, plants, and fungi and learn about the organisms all around you
- Earn badges for observing different types of species and participating in challenges

Night Sky 'This planetarium in your pocket makes it easy to discover the wonders of space wherever you go. Day or night, just aim your device skyward to see a live 3D map of the heavens, complete with beautifully illustrated constellations, stars, planets, and satellites. A special night mode helps you read the map in the dark, while integrated weather reports show the best times for stargazing. You can even have notifications alert you to future astronomical events'.

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