

Bourn Free Newsletter

November 2014

Project update

Issue 1

The Bourn Free project is currently led by the Wildlife Trust and the Countryside Restoration Trust. It aims to control non-native species on the Bourn Brook, but also to improve habitat and water quality and to look at opportunities to accommodate flood flows. In 2011 we received funding for 3 years from Defra to control the invasive plants Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed. Although the funding has come to an end, the project aims to continue the work and we hope for the continued assistance of the Environment Agency.

Himalayan balsam control

The summer of 2014 saw the third year of Himalayan balsam control on the Bourn Brook. Volunteers put in a total of 187 hours of work, covering nearly 20km of brook, including several tributaries.

This plant is not native to the UK. It tends to form dense stands, which means there is no space for native plants to grow (and support native invertebrates). As it dies back in winter, it leaves banks vulnerable to erosion, and the resulting silt reduces water quality.

Several areas of the brook now have noticeably less Himalayan balsam than 3 years ago, but there is still lots to do.

The good growing season in 2014 meant the plants flowered throughout the summer, and control was perhaps less effective than in previous years as most stretches were visited only once.

Himalayan balsam pulling will take place again in summer 2015 and **more volunteers are needed!** Some of the work is on dry land, but much involves wading the brook itself (wadgers available to borrow). If you are interested in getting involved, please contact Ruth Hawksley at the Wildlife Trust (see overleaf).



Martin Yeadon pulling Himalayan balsam in Toft.

Water vole recovery!

This year has been a great one for water voles on the Bourn Brook. The brook from was surveyed in spring 2014 from Caxton Moats to Byron's Pool. The mild winter and lack of predation by mink meant that signs of water vole were found in greater numbers, and in more places, than during the previous survey of 2011.

The survey also spotted several kingfishers and showed that water birds such as moorhen are breeding more successfully along the brook.



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Cut&Chew

A free-to-use website which acts as a local match-making service between available land and live-stock; and hay for sale and animal owners in need of hay. It also provides information on grassland management and sources of funding and a contact directory.

The web address is

www.cutandchew.org.uk

Or contact Jess Hatchett for more details:

01954 713532

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Phosphates in water: tackling the problem — Elizabeth Ranelagh, FWAG East

The National Farmers Union, Environment Agency and Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) have been examining the levels of phosphate from agriculture in the Bourn Brook since 2012. The main source of phosphate in water is sewage treatment works; however, on average about a quarter of the phosphate burden comes from agriculture. When soil particles enter water they take with them phosphates which either occur naturally or have been applied to the land as fertiliser or muck. High levels of phosphate in water lead to increased growth of in-stream vegetation, lowering oxygen levels and leading to loss of fish and invertebrates; soil in water leads to siltation of gravels and even more vegetation growth.

The first phase of the project was to involve landowners in sampling water from their field drains and from the brook as it passes through their farm. Eight farmers with land between Bourn and Eltisley (i.e. not affected by the sewage works) took part. Conditions were not ideal, as it was a very dry spring and field drains were not running, but 45% of the samples showed higher phosphate levels than is desirable.

The second phase of the project in early 2013 was to walk this same length of the brook and look at the land use and the measures such as grass margins which have been put in place to avoid soil and muck entering water. This identified very few problems, with most farmers adhering to best practice. Following on from this, visits were made to 5 horse owners. Because they don't receive the same information as farmers do, they were generally less aware of the problems associated with phosphate loss and were happy to take measures to prevent it.

Finally, everyone farming alongside this stretch of the brook was invited to two discussion evenings at the beginning of this year, where specialists spoke about ways of managing soils and nutrients to avoid the problems caused by phosphates. It is hoped that the project will continue and we await news of the next phase.

MINK UPDATE 2014 — Vince Lea, Countryside Restoration Trust

Mink trapping started on part of the Bourn Brook at the Countryside Restoration Trust in Barton in autumn 2010. Mink are not native species, but they are highly efficient predators and have had a significant impact on our native water voles, moorhens, kingfishers, fish and amphibians.

The project uses floating rafts to monitor for footprints, with traps set where there is evidence of mink activity. Traps must be checked daily to deal humanely with any captured mink (or to release any other species accidentally caught). Trapping takes place outside the mink breeding season, so as not to risk catching female mink that may have dependent young in a den. For recording purposes, therefore, we count numbers over winter periods (August to May). Trapping on a small stretch merely opened up territories for new mink to invade from up- and down-stream. The localised scheme quickly expanded to cover the whole of the Bourn catchment, in collaboration with a gamekeeper on the lower reaches. This was the start of the Bourn Free Project.

Year	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
No. Bourn mink	41	44	16	7*

* A difficult year for trapping due to regular flooding; only 7 mink caught in entire area.

Control has expanded each year across the Cam catchment and now includes much of the Rhee, Mel, Shep, Guilden Brook, Cam and Granta. This current autumn there have been just 2 mink caught or killed on the Bourn Brook. As well as seeing a return of water vole to parts of the brook where they had disappeared, we have also noted increased breeding success by moorhens.

Mink are now few and far between on the Bourn Brook, and we now use automated sensors ("Mink Police Units") with just a few mink traps. Combining these automated traps with recycled plastic mink rafts made by local firm Filcris at Bourn, we have a low-maintenance system capable of detecting and trapping any incoming mink. **Volunteers to monitor mink are always needed.**



Bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire
Northamptonshire

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Bourn Flood Action Group

A group of local people with an interest in all aspects of the Bourn Brook. If you are interested, and especially if you are keen to make things happen, please contact them via the Bourn Parish Clerk (bournpc@lgs-services.co.uk)