



Benson Nature Group

Caring for Benson's green spaces

Year of Green Action – Exciting Programme for 2019 – Get Involved!

The Government has designated 2019 as the “Year of Green Action”, in support of which it plans to publish an Environment Bill early in the year. Although policies on plastics have grabbed the headlines, other aspects of the government’s 25-year plan for the environment will be covered, including the establishment of a nature recovery network to reverse the declines in wildlife. You can read about their plans at:

<http://www.natureconnected.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/YoGA-Partner-Pack-Oct2018.pdf>

In line with its Strategy for People and Nature, Benson Nature Group will continue to involve members of the community in its work to improve Benson’s ecological network and to get involved with the natural world at a local level. We will have an exciting programme of talks and activities throughout the year, with more emphasis on interactive events for all ages than in the past. We will also continue our long-term projects to ensure the village is permeable to wildlife and allow people to experience nature every day.

This year, we have big plans for making Warwick Spinney better for wildlife. The BNG projects team has been hard at work applying for money from the Trust for Oxfordshire’s Environment for the first stage of our plans to restore the meadow, making it much richer in wildflowers and the species that rely on them. It will be a while before we hear if we've been successful but watch this space for more news on how everyone can get involved. We have loads of activities planned that all the family can help with. Keep all your fingers crossed! Regular updates on the projects will be published via Social Media along with local sightings and other relevant news. (Twitter - @BensonNature. Facebook - <https://t2m.io/OXj6Tk>)

Our first talk of the year will be by **Dr Angela Julian of Amphibian and Reptile Group UK** entitled **“A Frog’s Eye View of Benson - mapping and conserving our local amphibians and reptiles”**. Building on survey work done a few years ago by BNG and as part of the NatureSpace Project this is an excellent opportunity to develop our understanding of the relevant habitats in the village. It will be interesting to see how things have changed over recent years and to discuss ways to make improvements for wildlife. You can find the previous study on the BNG Website <https://www.bensonnaturegroup.com/publications> and can learn more about ARGUK at: <https://www.arguk.org/>

The talk will take place on Tuesday 12th February at 7.30 pm in the Canon’s Room, St Helen’s church.

Non-members are very welcome at our activities. You can pay on the door as a guest (£2 per event) or join the group for £10 a year. In addition, if you are interested in helping with any of the project work, please let us know.

Val Siddiqui



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A Frog's Eye View of Benson and Other News

It wasn't compulsory to come dressed as a frog to enjoy Benson Nature Group's fascinating first talk of the year "A Frog's Eye View of Benson"! Given by Dr Angela Julian of Amphibian and Reptile Group UK, it revealed a host of interesting facts:

- Toads get killed in large numbers on roads at night when travelling up to 1.6km back to their ancestral ponds
- Newts can live up to 13 years and lay around 200 eggs every year which they wrap individually in leaves in ponds
- Oxfordshire has a good population of Great Crested Newts, with Wittenham Clumps being a hot spot
- Adders were of "least conservation concern" 10 years ago in Oxfordshire but are now extinct in the county
- Long vegetation alongside walls, for example in churchyards, is great habitat for slow worms - legless lizards that can also live underground

Aided by an entertaining demo of the props used in surveying for amphibians and reptiles we were led through a "speed dating" session covering the characteristics, habitat preferences and conservation status of the UK's 7 amphibian and 6 reptile species.

We heard how habitat loss and fragmentation, persecution, disease and climate change are all contributing to population declines, but that, in Benson, allotments, churchyards, gardens and Warwick Spinney all have the potential to provide excellent habitat for these creatures. Indeed, we learned that a survey in 2007 showed that of the 46 Benson garden ponds for which we have data, 87% contained frogs and spawn whilst 26% also had newts, (evidence that frogs and newts do co-exist). We can all help amphibians and reptiles locally by wildlife friendly gardening, assisting with toad patrols, and allowing nature to move at its own pace into new (ideally fish-free) ponds as introducing spawn or animals artificially is not regarded as good practice.

You can find the previous study on the BNG Website (see below) and tips on wildlife friendly gardening are coming soon. You can learn more about ARGUK at: <https://www.arguk.org/>

In other news, BNG has redesigned its website (www.bensonnaturegroup.com) with a new logo and updated the content/layout to make it more user friendly and easier to navigate. The site contains details of our 2019 Programme as well as links to our Twitter, Facebook and Instagram sites. Please take a look. We're happy to receive feedback and suggestions for further improvements via the Contact Webmaster under the Links menu item.

On 5th February BNG organised a morning working party with Wallingford Green Gym to tidy up the willow spiling (growing willow bank protection) at Rivermead and to clear a small area at the entrance to St Helen's allotments where 50 wildlife friendly native mixed hedging plants were planted. Only one person took an accidental dip in the river! Our grateful thanks to Benson Parish Council for the funding and, of course, to the Green Gym, both for their labour and the coffee and cake!

Our next meeting will be held in the Canons' Room of St Helen's church at 7.30pm on 12th March. At the time of going to press our speaker has not been confirmed, but we will make details available via social media soon.

Val Siddiqui

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Seabird Protection, Chalk Streams and Outdoor Events

Mosquito nets at night are essential equipment for protection against giant coconut crabs and ticks while surveying bird colonies in the large Marine Protected Area surrounding the tropical Chagos Islands. This we learnt during BNG's fascinating March talk on Seabird Protection in this British Overseas Territory in the Indian Ocean given by Dr Malcolm Nicoll, Senior Research Fellow at the Zoological Society of London.

The Chagos Islands are home to one of the world's oldest and largest "no-take" MPA's (640,000 km² and including >58 uninhabited islands). The presence of c19m seabirds in the Indian Ocean has been shown to positively impact the health of coral reefs as well as the size and quantity of fish. 19 species of seabird breed on the islands, yet our knowledge of their ecology and status is limited.

Seabirds are the most threatened group of birds globally but, unlike in the UK, in the tropics they have no fixed breeding place or season, so it is necessary to study them at different locations, at different times of year and over a number of years.

Focussing initially on the Red-footed Booby and the Brown Booby, Dr Nicoll and his team used GPS technology and ring mounted geo-locators to study where these birds forage and which areas are most important to them. It was very interesting to learn that in the four locations studied, the Boobies had different foraging strategies according to their location and species, with Red-footed Boobies foraging further afield (up to 800km) and Brown Boobies staying closer to the coast. The foraging areas of the four different colonies were found not to overlap. The study which began in 2016 is planned to continue till at least 2020. See blog@zsl for updates.

Our April talk will return to our local patch with a talk on Chalk Streams by Allen Beechy and Ceri Groves of the Chilterns Conservation Board. There are only 210 chalk streams in the world, of which 160 are in England. Although, at around 2.5 miles, Ewelme Brook is the shortest chalk stream in the Chilterns we are privileged to have one of these globally endangered important wildlife habitats flowing through Benson. Find out more at: <https://www.bensonnaturegroup.com/copy-of-millbrook-mead>. The talk will be held at **7.30pm on 9th April in the Canons' Room of St Helen's church.**

Feedback from members suggested they wanted more interactive activities. April also sees the start of our outdoor programme with an evening amphibian night safari on 16th April from 19.00 to 20.30 at the Watercress Beds, Ewelme. We will be assisted by Dr Angie Julian from our local Amphibian & Reptile Group who gave such an interesting talk in February. This will be a family event in the Easter school holidays, using torches and trapping to seek out what secrets our ponds hold. There will be a follow-up visit next morning (8.30am) to see what we have found.

BNG are also working with the PCC to incorporate some outdoor family nature activities as part of the church festival at St Helen's Church on 8th June. More details will be forthcoming nearer the time.

You can find out more about our future events by viewing our programme on our website (www.bensonnaturegroup.com) or our Events on Facebook (<https://t2m.io/OXj6Tk>).

We would welcome any help you might be able to give on all the forthcoming activities and work on existing and new wildlife areas. You don't have to be a wildlife expert, but simply enjoy nature and the outdoors - research shows activities in nature support both physical and mental well-being. Please contact Tom on thomas.stevenson@ntlworld.com or 07773 251 301.



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Chalk Streams, Dawn Chorus and Churchyard Festival

Has anyone seen the Brook steaming during cold weather? At our April meeting, Allen Beechy of the Chilterns Conservation Board explained the reason for this phenomenon - the water in chalk streams sits at a remarkably stable temperature of 11 degrees C, so on very cold mornings, it may well appear to steam! Allen's talk probably takes the record for our longest in recent times, but it certainly didn't feel like it. We were treated to a fascinating tour of the chalk streams right across the Chilterns, how they work, what makes each of them special, stories of decline and now of restoration. There were also some pretty sobering messages - chalk streams are fragile and rare, and the threats of pollution, over-abstraction and now climate change are ever present. We're very privileged in Benson to have a chalk stream flowing right through our village - it's one of only 225 globally - and we can all play a part of looking after it. We can make sure we leave a plant called water crowfoot in place (check the internet for pictures) - it's the classic chalk stream plant and it provides really valuable habitat and for trout and a host of invertebrates. Also, looking after the water quality is vital, so be really careful not to dispose of detergents, chemicals or rinsings from paint cans etc down street drains which often discharge directly into the stream. As individuals, we are limited in what we can do about the chronic problem of low flows at the moment, but avoiding wastage of water will help reduce the pressure.

Next month's talk will be another opportunity to look further afield with a talk on "Africa's Elephant Crisis on your Doorstep - Closing the UK's Domestic Ivory Market". The talk will be given by Dr Roselle Chapman from Wild Oxfordshire who captivated us with a talk on bees not long ago. It will be held at **7.30pm on 14th May**, and don't forget, we move to our summer quarters of the **Cressbeds Visitor Centre in Ewelme** for this one.

On 18th May we will return to our outdoor programme in our local patch to experience the sounds of the Dawn Chorus with a walk led by Martin Latham of the RSPB. The Dawn Chorus starts early at this time of year, so we will meet at 05.30 by the entrance to the allotments on St Helens Avenue. We will then walk through various habitats (shrub, woodland, and river bank) identifying the different bird song. At the end we will have breakfast together (not full English, I'm afraid but probably a bacon butty or sausage sarny) at Millbrook Mead. This is all subject to the weather but hopefully we will have a beautiful May morning. Please let Tom (thomas.stevenson@ntlworld.com or 07773 251 301) know if you will be attending (with number in party) so that we can cater for food.

And finally, a word about plans for the St Helen's Churchyard Festival on Saturday 8th June. We're working with the Parochial Church Council and others around the village to celebrate the many facets of our churchyard. Bring the family along to find out what the churchyard has to offer by way of local nature and heritage. BNG will be running an array of activities - moth trapping, wildflower walks, bee and hoverfly catching, and a bug safari for children. And we're planning to create opportunities for children around the village to contribute to a bug hotel being created by the church youth group. Put the date in your diary. The fun kicks off at 8.30am with opening the moth trap. Watch out for the full programme next month.

See our website (www.bensonnaturegroup.com) or our Facebook page (<https://t2m.io/OXj6Tk>)

Val Siddiqui/Edel McGurk



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The UK Ivory Market, Dusk Chorus, Warwick Spinney Grant

A century ago there were 100 million elephants in Africa. Despite 84% of today's population being in legally protected areas, their numbers are dwindling fast, with 352,000 recorded in a 2016 census – down 30% in seven years. The causes of their decline – habitat destruction and poaching for the Asian ivory market – are well known. But the role of the UK in providing cover for the laundering of illegal ivory via London's antique trade is less widely appreciated; 36,000 ivory carvings being exported mostly to China and Hong Kong between 2010 and 2015. In another fascinating talk, Dr Roselle Chapman explained the difficulty of differentiating between old (legal) and new (illegal) ivory and the research undertaken by IUCN to convince CITES member states to close their domestic ivory markets. In the UK, this has resulted in the 2018 Ivory Act to be enacted soon. This will close the UK's domestic ivory market and the three small exceptions will require licences. More information can be found at the Great Elephant Census website <http://www.greatelephantcensus.com/>. (Sadly, since the talk, the government of Botswana has decided to legalise elephant hunting. So, the fight to save the elephant continues.)

On a lovely evening on 18th May, 12 participants joined BNG's Dusk Chorus Walk led by the RSPB's Martin Latham. Following a kestrel sighting at the allotments in St Helen's Avenue we made our way along Ewelme Brook to Millbrook Mead, then on to Riverside, with a wonderful sighting of a cygnet nestling under its parent's wings, and from there along the Thames Path. Although less impressive than the dawn chorus we were treated to various interesting calls including song thrush, robin, blackbird, wren, blackcap, reed warbler, reed bunting and sedge warbler. And, as darkness fell there was the occasional sound of moorhen, mallard and Canada geese, with the bat detector picking up the sounds of pipistrelle and Daubenton's bats. A great way to end the day. Our thanks to Martin for revealing the secrets of the birdsong.

Finally, we are thrilled to report that Benson Nature Group has won a grant of over £3000 for work at Warwick Spinney to provide better habitats for wildlife, particularly wild pollinators. The grant is provided by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, with funding from Grundon Waste Management from their own funds and through the Landfill Communities Fund. Warwick Spinney, which is held in trust of behalf of us all by Benson Community Association, is a lovely place, but could be so much better for wildlife. The money will pay for a specialist contractor to mow the meadow at the end of the summer to make it better for wildflowers; it will provide 500 trees and shrubs, together with seeds and plug plants to provide food for bees, moths and butterflies; and finally it will provide us with a valuable set of tools that will enable our band of volunteers to undertake work across all of Benson's green spaces. We have plans to involve the community in lots of events at the site - more news soon!!

If you missed the moth trapping at the church festival (and even if you didn't!) there will be a second opportunity to marvel at these under-rated creatures when we hold another **Moth Breakfast at Millbrook Mead starting at 8.30am on 13th July**, facilitated by moth expert Dr Marc Botham from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. We hope you will join us there.

Val Siddiqui and Edel McGurk
12th June 2019



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Benson Nature Group

Caring for Benson's green spaces

Catching up on our Summer Activities

It's been a busy summer with a lot of outdoor activities by popular request. Here is a brief round-up of what has happened since our last update.

Hot on the heels of the successful Churchyard Festival in early June, we held a Bug Hunt and Kick Sampling event at Millbrook Mead aimed at families. The sun shone on us, and we dispatched the children with butterfly nets to sweep through the meadow for bugs, transferring the catch into jars for a spell so they could be identified. We eventually beat a retreat to the chalk stream to cool off, whilst having a go at catching invertebrates from the stream bed using a net and a tray. We even caught a fish - a tiny bullhead!

On a bright morning on 13 July around 40 people, including 15 children turned out at Millbrook Mead Nature Reserve for the now annual moth breakfast hosted by expert Marc Botham from the Centre for Hyrdology and Ecology. The trap had been set up the previous evening with the lamp attracting moths which then spent the rest of the evening in the egg boxes inside it. 51 species, many of them different from previous years, were identified. The large Poplar and green and pink Elephant Hawkmoths obliged by allowing participants to hold and examine them. The Buff Tip which mimics a twig and the Chinese Character moths which imitates bird droppings also sparked a lot of interest. The beautiful pale yellow Swallowtail, the delicate White Plume and White Ermine amongst others demonstrated the amazing variety of shapes, size, colours and names of the moths in this small site.

Interesting discussions were also had on the merits of ragwort for pollinators and privet for moths; the food plants of various moth caterpillars and the cutting regimes for meadows and hedges to benefit moths. If you want to encourage the beautiful Elephant Hawkmoth into your garden, then don't pull up any Rose Bay Willow Herb (their caterpillar food plant along with Fuschias).

The sausage sandwiches and cream scones were also a great hit. Our thanks to Marc for finding the time in his busy schedule for this popular activity. Records of the sightings will be sent to the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre to help build their database and our understanding of the species found in our locality. The full listing can also be found under the surveys tab of the Benson Nature Group Website (<https://www.bensonnaturegroup.com/>).

Unfortunately, we decided to cancel our summer Picnic and Pond Dipping (planned for 13th August) due to lack of availability of our team for various reasons. As we have already run a few similar activities this summer we hope people do not feel too disappointed.

September sees the start of our indoor programme, with a talk on "The Degradation of our Precious Freshwater Habitats" given by Dr. Izzy Bishop of the Earthwatch Institute. The talk will be at **19.30 in the Canons' Room of St. Helen's Church.**

Val Siddiqui and Edel McGurk
12th July 2019



Benson Nature Group

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Big Benson Tree Plant at Warwick Spinney

Although the talk scheduled for November had to be postponed till some time next year, there was no rest for Benson Nature Group. Plans were well advanced for the Big Benson Tree Plant at Warwick Spinney on Sunday 10th November. The BNG publicity machine had gone into full swing with posters in strategic locations throughout the village, postings on social media and informal communications via the village grapevine. Trees and mulch were ordered and the planting area marked out. Arrangements were made for first aid and a risk assessment was carried out. And, most importantly, tea and cakes were organised for participants.

Despite a miserable lead-up in the preceding days, the weather turned up trumps – soaking wet on the previous day to soften the ground and a glorious, sunny and mild winter day for the planting.

Improvements to Warwick Spinney, a community green space owned by Benson Community Association and managed by BNG, are being funded by a grant from a local charity, The Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE). The Woodland Trust also provided some trees as part of their national Big Climate Fight Back Campaign where one million people have pledged to plant a tree.

The activity started with a briefing from Edel McGurk on the background to the project, its context within the parish nature strategy, and the health and safety “dos” and “don'ts”. This was followed by a demonstration by Tom Stevenson on how to plant a sapling – use a spade to slice a hole in the ground; place the tree in it; heel it in; put a supporting cane next to it; wrap a plastic sleeve around sapling and cane to prevent rabbit damage and finally spread some of mulch around it. In all, 300 trees of 10 different native varieties (eg Rowan, Oak, Maple, Buckthorn, Malus) together with 500 English bluebells were planted in double quick time due to the excellent turnout.

In total, around 80 volunteers, including 20 children, took part in what was universally acclaimed to be a very enjoyable and successful community event. And the tea and delicious home-made cakes went down a treat at the end of the hard work.

Our special thanks to two new members of the BNG Project Team, Chris Hartshorne for his creative posters advertising the event and to Fiona Brown for organising the catering. Also, to Imogen Parker for the risk assessment, Helen Stevenson for acting as first aider and Jon Fowler for the signage and photos. And as ever, a big thank you to Tom for all the practical work in getting the site ready as well as ensuring the trees arrived on time and to Edel for her tireless planning to make sure it all went right on the night.

With BNG increasing its commitments to manage our green spaces, more volunteers are needed, particularly to help with the practical work. If you enjoyed the Big Benson Tree Plant, whether you have lots or only a little spare time, please let Tom (Thomas.stevenson@ntlworld.com) know if you would like to volunteer for similar future activities. We'd love to see you, and it will help us to plan resource for our future commitments.

Val Siddiqui
11th November 2019



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