

Editorial

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The Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire continues to expand and bring up to date its activities. We are delighted to announce that *Fritillary* has gone on-line and Volume 4 can be found on www.fritillary.org.uk. In future, those who, like me, prefer a paper copy can obtain one, bound and in A4 format from orders@fritillary.org.uk or by ringing 07702 948660. Publication on the web allows us to bring articles to public notice as they are completed. At the end of the year or thereabouts these will be collated and bound into the next volume of the paper version.

We are pleased that Volume 4 is again a joint venture between the Society (ANHSO) and the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and forms part of the educational work of both organisations. The content is varied. First of all we are sad to recall the death, in April 2004, of Stan Woodell, whose brainchild this Journal was. Recognition of his life-long commitment to nature conservation can be found in his obituary at the beginning of this volume. The importance of the management of plant communities for insects is recognised together with that of long-term botanical studies in both lower and higher plants. Rebecca Jeffree investigates ride management in Whitecross Green Wood, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and BBOWT Reserve and recommends habitat management for the conservation of the wood white butterfly and of its food plant. Jacqueline and Ivan Wright discuss the bryophyte flora of Chawley Brick Pit, Oxford. This site is part of the Hurst Hill SSSI designated for its geology. Natural succession from the time brick making was abandoned in 1940 up to 2003 is discussed and found to be closely related to the industrial history of the site. Finally, Geoffrey Davy looks at the changing flora of a Berkshire farm over some 24 years. It is not surprising that he finds that modern agricultural methods have reduced the number of arable species but gains are made through sowing a wildflower seed mix and through natural regeneration, and losses have also occurred due to road maintenance and modernisation.

We already have two papers in the pipeline for Volume 5 and these will be published on-line as soon as they are ready. We invite further papers and systematic lists to be submitted.

Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire activities

The Society now has three sub-groups; the Verge Survey Group has been doing its work for nearly 30 years. The Rare Plants Group celebrated its 10th birthday in 2004 and the Education Group is now in its fourth year.

The Rare Plants Group is now monitoring *Apium graveolens*, *A. repens*, *Aristolochia clematitis*, *Carex vulpina*, *Cynoglossum germanicum*, *Filago pyramidata*, *Gentianella anglica*, *Lythrum hyssopifolia*, *Pulsatilla vulgaris*, *Salvia pratensis*, *Sium latifolium*, *Thlaspi perfoliatum*, *Viola persicifolia*, *Veronica praecox*, Frilford Heath Common and Frilford Heath Golf Course practice ground, and arable flowers at Wytham. The

Group's latest challenge is to set up an Oxfordshire Rare Plants Register with the County Recorder and the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre.

The Education Group's plant identification courses begun in 2002 continue to go from strength to strength. The basic course has been fully subscribed each year with a waiting list. More advanced specialist courses have also been very successful. In 2005 a new short course on aquatics has been successful and the grasses course ran successfully for a second time.

The Verge Group expects to re-visit in 2005 some roadside verges which were designated as nature reserves some ten years ago in order to see how they have fared. The valuable data collected by the verge group is passed on to the local Records Centre, now the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, which will monitor change in species abundance over the years.

The Society is involved in a large variety of work and much of this is done in collaboration with or with help from other organisations. Without their help some of our activities would not be possible:

- Plantlife International, English Nature and the Environment Agency assist the Rare Plants Group financially and scientifically.
- We work closely with the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre in various ways and we are very grateful to them for their financial support of the Education Group.
- The Awards for All Scheme (Lottery funding) have helped the Education Group in the past and we have recently received finance from the Tanner Trust to help with the 2005 courses and Oxera for the 2006 courses.
- We work closely with BBOWT, the local wildlife trust, on this journal and also on our annual Warburg memorial lecture as well as in other ways.

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust Activities

BBOWT continues to support a wide variety of projects, which promote wildlife conservation across the three counties. These include: introducing and inspiring the younger generation about wildlife, at our environmental education centre at Sutton Courtenay and through the 'Wildlife Watch' program; working with community groups to improve their wild spaces, such as churchyards; and commenting on and feeding into the planning process, to maximise wildlife gains through policy.

The Trust also hosts several 'wider countryside projects' which seek to increase biodiversity on privately owned land, by encouraging farmers to sign up to government agri-environment grant schemes and by giving management advice. The Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites project has been running since the late 1990s. The project carries out regular surveys and suggests management strategies to ensure the continued importance of the site for local wildlife. These sites are then eligible to apply for further government funding.

BBOWT works directly for BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) species. This includes the water vole recovery project, which continues to survey for water voles across the three counties. It also gives advice to landowners and has recently developed, with

landowners, a strategic predator control program to help prevent water vole population decline. Along the river Chess on the Bucks/Herts boarder there is some sign that this may be working, with water vole populations increasing in density and range. The population is, however, still much below its 2001 levels, so there is clearly much work yet to do.

Grant money from English Nature enabled an extensive search of the River Ray area for the rare and elusive *Carex vulpina*. The results were extremely promising with 4 new sites being found in 2004 and 7 in 2005. The Rare Plants Group attended a field trip to see the true fox-sedge.

While the Trust recognises the importance of biodiversity benefits within the wider countryside, our reserves still play a very important role in preserving and enhancing biodiversity. Over the past few years the importance of monitoring the effects our management is having on biodiversity has become ever more clear. A large team of volunteers carry out survey work on reserves to help collect data to show whether site management is achieving the desired impacts. Some of these surveys are broad-brush and help to inspire the next generation of natural historians, while others are much more in-depth.

At Chimney Meadows in Oxfordshire the Trust is converting arable fields to a wild-flower flood-plain community (MG4). Here the plants, invertebrates and birds are being studied in detail to monitor the changes in community type and biodiversity. Help in doing this from members of the Rare Plants Group and other specialists was much appreciated. A visit from Richard Pywell (of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology) indicated that many of the fields are already borderline MG4, so results in future years should be very interesting. Anyone who is interested in surveying at Chimney or other sites in the future would be most welcome.

Finally, BBOWT understands only too well the need for skilled natural historians. We are attempting to overcome the potentially looming skills gap, by running a series of training courses each year, aimed at introducing the general public to basic species identification.

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