

NEWPORT RIVER GROUP

PART OF THE CAM UPPER REACHES ACTION TEAM

This occasional newsletter provides an update on the group's activities, ongoing work and initiatives that are starting to pay massive dividends as we move forwards, as outlined by group members Adam, Bill, Dr Andy, Geraint, Glenys, Julie, Keith, Marion.



Stop Press

Wow, who'd have believed we'd see a Polecat in Newport?. One of our 'smart' mink traps guarding our river worked perfectly as the polecat was released safe and well within two hours of capture. This native species is a valuable part of the countryside ecology, helping to control populations of pests like rats and rabbits. It's a protected species, recently facing near extinction. Now with efforts underway nationwide to help its recovery, we are privileged to have this elusive and beautiful creature here in Newport'.

Image credit: BBC News - Conservationists: Polecats 'spreading across Britain'

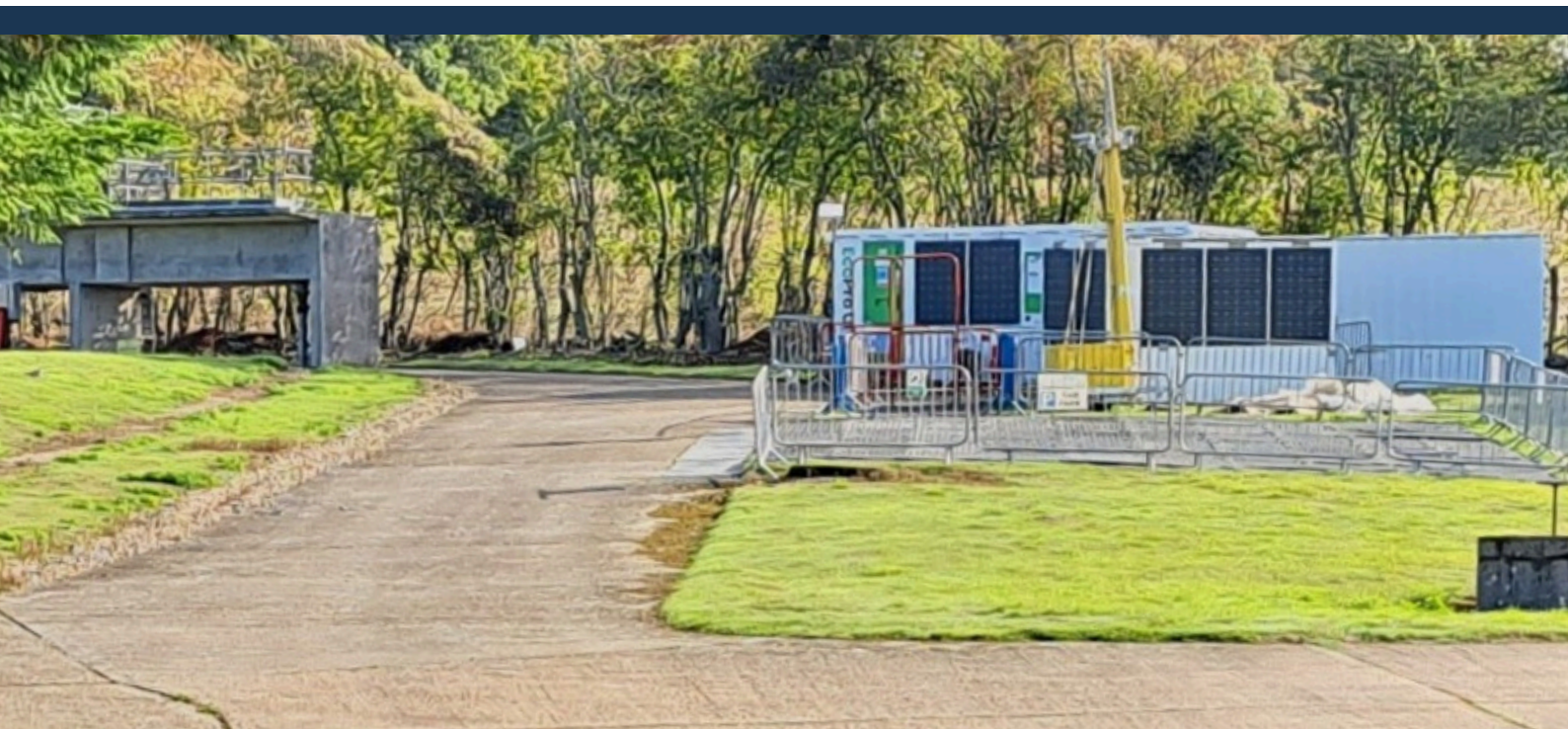
Newport Water Treatment (sewage) Works

Of huge importance to the river, to Newport River Group and to the village as a whole, on 27 August, Anglian Water commenced work on the much needed and delayed upgrade to the Water Treatment Works in Water Lane. New equipment is being installed to enhance wastewater treatment and improve water quality for wildlife, with completion expected by next February.

Whilst this is part of Anglian Water's wider strategy to invest in water management systems across the region, Newport River Group have contributed significantly to this decision, by providing them with chemical and wildlife-related test data over the past three years. Using Anglian Water equipment supplied to us as part of the Get River Positive citizen science project, we've collected water samples on a regular basis from key locations both upstream and downstream of the works. This data has shown high levels of phosphates in the outflow from the treatment process and which causes harm to the river, affecting wildlife such as invertebrates which we have also been monitoring as part of the national Environment Agency supported Riverfly scheme.

You can find out more about the upgrade by visiting anglianwater.co.uk/check and provide your postcode. The below photo shows additional equipment at the site, which is needed for the upgrade. We will continue to monitor the chalk stream after the work has been completed.

Adam





Balsam Bashing

Imagine standing in a river (with waders on), in the middle of the glorious countryside that is NW Essex, pulling out huge swathes of 6-8ft stalks of Himalayan Balsam. This is green bathing in the true sense of the word! But not only is it uplifting to be outside - you would be doing something vital for the health of our rivers... that is pulling out this incredibly invasive plant, beloved of the Victorians (and imported by them).

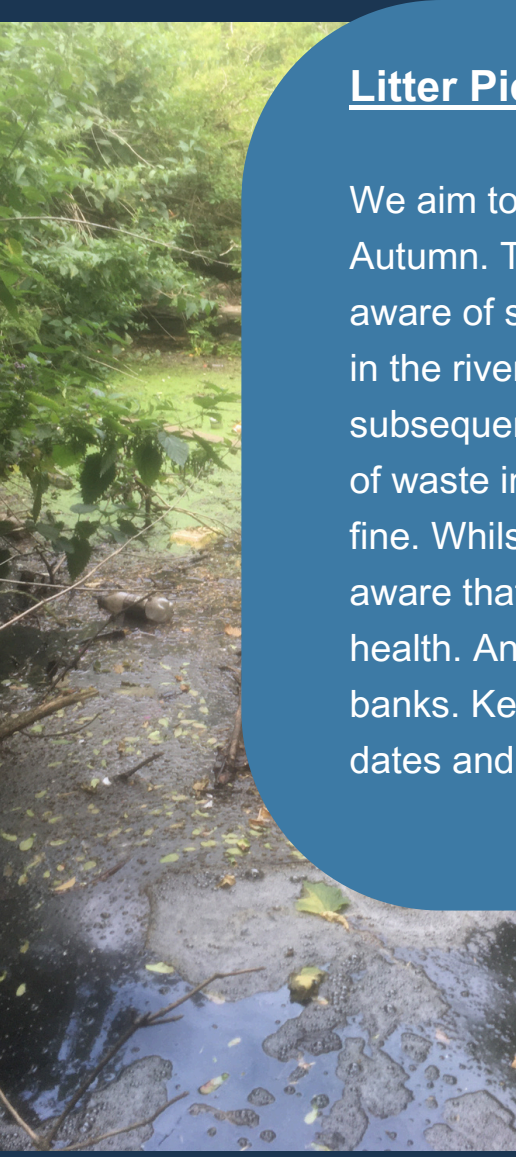
It is everywhere and grows at an alarming rate along our river banks blocking out the light for native species that would otherwise be there and meaning that silt is a constant problem as it slides into the river and covers up the chalk.

There's been a huge effort by about 25 volunteers from Newport and surrounding villages working tirelessly over several weekends this summer to pull this stuff out and stop it spreading, with at least 250 volunteer hours of hard work. But however hard it is, it is such a satisfying activity, because of the pace and difference just a few hours each day makes ... and the very delicious sound of the sucker like roots being dragged out of the bank. Believe me it is addictive.

Marion

“RIVERS ARE DYNAMIC AND EVER-CHANGING. TO RESTORE THEM RELIES ON LOCAL PEOPLE WHO SEE, ASSESS AND WORK ON THEM REGULARLY, WHICH IS WHAT NEWPORT RIVER GROUP DO SO BRILLIANTLY.”

Ruth Hawksley, Water for Wildlife Officer, The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire



Litter Picking

We aim to organise a number of litter-picking sessions throughout the Autumn. This has recently become something of an issue as we are aware of someone/people dumping amounts of fairly large tree cuttings in the river, impeding its flow and potentially causing blockages and subsequent flooding if continued and left to gather. Dumping any kind of waste in the river is considered fly-tipping with a potential £5,000 fine. Whilst group members have dealt with this we all need to be aware that not everyone realises the impact of their actions on river health. And there is always litter to be removed from the river and its banks. Keep an eye open for the forthcoming email about litter-picking dates and join us if you can – waders provided!

Glenys

Communication and Engagement



We set up an Education and Engagement Group last January with 5 of our River Group members, following the sewage spill we'd reported to Anglian Water, to look at how we could:

- inform our community through better engagement about the river and how our own actions can negatively impact on it;
- look at ways we could educate others about the river.

Our activities to date have included:

1. providing a report on the sewage leak to the local press;
2. producing a leaflet about the river and had it distributed to all households in the Walden Local distribution area. A copy is attached with this newsletter and if you would like your own leaflet, please let us know and we can get one to you;
3. giving talks to the local History Group, and staff and sixth formers at JFAN about the river and our work;
4. running a stall at the Village Fete in August.

Geraint

Education

In July, we hosted another school visit for Newport Primary School Year 4 pupils, who joined us on the banks of Wicken Water in JFAN school grounds. With help from the children, we tested the water quality, checking for phosphates and nitrates and took water samples for the children to identify different river fly (invertebrates) and discuss their diversity. Whilst the children were amazed to see the American Signal Crayfish we showed them, we explained that this invasive species decimates our own native crayfish and significantly harms the river bank by its burrowing activities. The children learned about the water cycle in Newport and what not to put down the toilet such as wet wipes, nappies and other harmful pollutants because of the damage they cause by blocking the sewage system, along with household cleaning products and their environmental impact on river health. It was both a fun and educational day for all!

We have been delighted to welcome students from both our local secondary schools, JFAN and SWCHS, who have become involved with water quality, river fly testing and balsam bashing, some of which has contributed to their work experience evidence.

Adam and Julie

**“THE LONG-TERM
SURVIVAL OF WATER VOLES AND A
THRIVING RIVER ECOSYSTEM WILL BE
MUCH MORE LIKELY IF WE CAN
ACHIEVE OUR GOAL OF ERADICATING
THE ECOLOGICALLY DESTRUCTIVE,
NON-NATIVE AMERICAN MINK FROM
THE WHOLE OF GREAT BRITAIN:
CURAT IS PLAYING A VALUABLE PART
IN THIS MASSIVE UNDERTAKING!”**

**Vince Lea
The Countryside Regeneration
Trust**



Water Quality and Riverfly Testing

Our happy(and growing) band of volunteers continue monthly chemical and riverfly testing at 4 sites around Newport. We have doubled the number of qualified riverfly testers in the team since last year, which has enabled us to keep testing in all weathers this year.

Our regular testing has enabled us to spot pollution events round Newport, including two occasions where a sewage pipe blocked by wet wipes and other unmentionables blew the manhole cover. Rapid action by our volunteers and a speedy response by Anglian Water prevented the sewage reaching the river in one case. Sadly, the sewage reached the river in the other incident. This illustrates how important it is that we only put toilet paper and human waste down our toilets and drains. This was one of the reasons that prompted the development of 'Our Beautiful River Cam' leaflet, attached to this newsletter and see Geraint's 'Education and Engagement' section.

Chemical testing has revealed much higher rates of phosphate pollution 100 metres downstream of the Water Treatment Works with the highest level being 10mg/l (milligrammes per litre), contrasting with less than one mg/l only 100 metres upstream of the plant. The Environment Agency recommended level is 0.1 mg/l in a chalk stream such as ours! Likewise, results of riverfly testing at the same locations confirmed the damage being caused by various outflows into the river, with significantly higher and more diverse riverfly populations upstream of the plant than downstream, where often only negligible populations of gammarus (freshwater shrimp) were found.

All testing results have been shared with Anglian Water and the Riverfly Partnership and, as a direct consequence, as Adam has reported above, the former have announced a £3.3 million upgrade of the Newport sewage plant, including phosphate stripping, to be completed early next year (2026) We hope this will lead to significant improvement in our lovely chalk stream.

Bill

"THE DILIGENT WORK OF THE CITIZEN SCIENCE TEAM AT CURAT IS PROVIDING THE ONLY RELIABLE INDEPENDENT MONITORING OF OUR CHALK STREAMS IN ESSEX. IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE HOW WE COULD PROTECT THESE HABITATS WITHOUT THAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMITMENT TO THE ENVIRONMENT."

Darren Tansley

Wilder Rivers and Protected Species Manager, Essex Wildlife Trust

Trail Cameras

I took over managing the trail cameras for the Newport River Group in May 2024 with an initial remit to learn what species, in particular if otters were using the River Cam in Newport. The trail camera I use has a rechargeable battery and a solar panel, which can run for long periods of time before recharging.

Most trail cameras are now quite sophisticated in what will activate them. The first level of detection is a passive infrared scan to see if there is a moving heat source. The interval between checking can be varied but I typically set this to every 15 seconds, which is good for most terrestrial mammals but can mean that faster moving animals, such as kingfishers, rarely get detected. Decreasing this interval allows me to capture faster moving animals but also drains the battery quicker. Next the camera uses a visible light motion detector to determine if something is moving, and only then does it complete the designated number of photos and videos it has been set to record. I am currently recording two 60 Mpixel pictures and 10 seconds of 1080P video footage. The main reason for recording two photos is to get a scene comparison to spot a moving animal, with the video footage then useful if the target is difficult to determine, as a moving target can provide a lot more information.

An issue we face from April to Sept is increased undergrowth and the trees coming into leaf. Undergrowth provides good cover for all animals, which makes it difficult to see what's moving. Many of the smaller species, such as brown rats and rabbits, don't even trigger the camera. Also, despite being quite sunny and daylight hours longer, the leaf coverage keeps the camera shaded reducing the effectiveness of the solar panel. Where sunlight does get through leaf coverage it can create warm patches on the ground, potentially confusing the camera with a moving warm-blooded animal: along with a little breezy weather and hey presto the camera thinks that nettle is very interesting as it waves back and forth near a warm spot. Warm windy weather can create a series of activations each just a few minutes apart, all of which need to be checked in case there is something other than nettles moving. This can generally add from 50 to 300 additional activations, taking hours to sift through.



Monitoring our first wetland restoration project site provided more than a year's worth of data (see below chart), with good evidence of animal activity in the area from our trail cameras before the work started. To make the data quantitative I record every animal present in the footage whenever the camera activates, which creates a daily tally of the species visiting one specific spot on the site. The plan is to keep all camera parameters constant, including field of view to keep the study valid, which will mean any significant changes in wildlife activity could be linked to our work.

Common name	Jul-24	Aug-24	Sep-24	Oct-24	Nov-24	Dec-24	Jan-25	Feb-25	Mar-25	Apr-25	May-25	Jun-25	Jul-25
Badger	8	29	28	6	20	22	12	28	32	20	20	34	12
Blackbird	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	13	7
Brown Rat	18	3	4	2	4	12	5	6	8	2	0	8	1
Buzzard	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Carriion Crow	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Chinese Muntjac	9	20	29	34	40	21	22	31	50	58	92	20	14
Eastern Grey Squirrel	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Eurasian Otter	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
European Rabbit	0	4	1	1	1	0	1	1	6	1	0	0	0
Fallow Deer	28	54	11 3	10 7	88	43	24	16	39	36	73	28	13 5
Green Woodpecker	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grey Heron	1	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Grey Wagtail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
Jay	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Kingfisher	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Little Egret	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0
Magpie	8	5	9	3	3	0	1	0	2	4	2	1	5
Mallard	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	5	14	4	71
Moorhen	20	13	7	0	1	2	0	0	5	8	18	38	66
Pheasant	6	14	6	8	12	5	1	1	6	10	1	9	12
Red Fox	0	1	1	3	9	9	8	6	9	2	4	8	26
Song Thrush	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	1
Sparrowhawk	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stoat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Wood Pigeon	13 1	10 1	59	24	14	0	0	0	19	64	27	71	81

Deer

With the exception of wood pigeons our most common visitors to the wood are the many fallow deer, with calving does over the last few months, with what appears to be two colour variations - the usual reddish brown and white spotted pattern and the darker brown melanistic variant which has no white markings at all. Quite interestingly we have mums of each colour variant with fawns of the other colour variant.

The does start to calf from late June and through July, leaving their little ones in safe locations, with a trail camera position I chose coinciding with one of these regularly used fallow deer nurseries. We need to keep this area of the woods wild and generally inaccessible to allow the deer to raise the young undisturbed. Many dog walkers I talked to are unaware that fallow deer calve at this time and even small dogs off a lead will chase the fawns, leading to them becoming separated from their mums and potentially killed. At the very least it causes distress to both mum and fawn.

We have sightings of at least 2 maybe even three handicapped does with fawns. These mums somehow lost the lower part of a back leg, which I sincerely hope is not the action of poachers using snares. I cannot see this kind of clean joint-positioned dismemberments occurring in any other way and they don't seem to be natural.

Badgers

We have a badger sett somewhere in or close by, as the badgers regularly use the deer trails to forage, with regular sightings this year of two cubs as well as several adults. Unfortunately one of the adults seems to have an injury and moves with a limp on its right foreleg, despite which it seems to be doing fine.

Foxes

With only brief visits to the wood by adult foxes last year we have now had sightings of two juvenile siblings and likely cubs of the foxes we have been more used to seeing. We have good footage of them honing their hunting and scavenging skills in broad daylight apparently searching for morsels in amongst the stones of the river. I can only conclude they are eating invertebrates.

PROJECTS UPDATE



The restoration of the wetlands continues to be a highly complex process, particularly from a regulatory standpoint. Navigating the requirements of statutory bodies has been slow—at times glacial—even though the goal is simply to return the land to its natural state. It is a frustrating process, but we remain hopeful that the project will be completed in time to capture at least part of this winter's rainfall.

We are also collaborating on a scheme to collect and analyse silt samples from multiple sites. The aim is to measure concentrations of so-called “forever chemicals” and, importantly, trace their sources. Having robust laboratory evidence will strengthen our ability to hold polluters accountable.

One persistent challenge has been Giant Hogweed, a highly invasive and dangerous plant that has spread widely along the river. To address this, we plan to use new mapping technology and secure funding for both training and specialist equipment. With stem injection techniques (requiring a long lance and full PPE), we aim to begin tackling the problem effectively next spring.

Behind the scenes, we are developing three potential wetland restoration projects to help move the river system closer to a healthy ecological balance.

Our chalk streams extend beyond Sparrows End, so we have been working with CURAT to establish River Groups in villages along the Cam, including Littlebury, the Chesterfords, and Duxford—leaving only Ickleton and Hinxton to complete the chain. Perhaps most exciting has been the emergence of an energetic volunteer group in Saffron Walden. Even though the town is not directly on the Cam, their involvement is expected to have a significant long-term impact on river health.

Looking ahead, perhaps the most important initiative of all is the development of an Upper Cam Catchment Recovery Strategy. This collaborative effort—bringing together water companies, farmers, and landowners—will not deliver quick wins, but it is the only realistic pathway to restoring a fully functioning chalk stream network in the years to come.

Farm Cluster

Farmers and landowners across the Cam catchment have recently come together to explore the creation of a Farm Cluster, with coordination provided by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG). This collaboration among some of the area's largest landholders represents an exciting opportunity—not only for the wider environment but also for our own focus on river health and wetland restoration.

Farm clusters are already well established in many parts of the country, including several within our region, and they have consistently delivered impressive environmental results. With the strong commitment of our local farming community to sustainability and conservation, we are optimistic that this initiative will lead to meaningful, long-lasting improvements for both the landscape and the river system.

Marion



In Summary

As you can see the range of activities the Group as a whole is involved in, and the excellent and important result we have collaboratively achieved with the Anglian Water upgrade to the village Water Treatment Works, benefitting us all in the long run. We are also grateful to Newport Parish Council for their excellent support and involvement. If you want to get involved, please email info@curat.org.uk giving your name and your town/village, so that we can direct you to the most appropriate group and contact.

MANY THANKS FOR ALL YOUR SUPPORT!