

Discover **WILD SITES**

on your doorstep

A visitor's guide to wildlife sites in the Stour Valley



Discover **WILD SITES**

on your doorstep

About WILD SITES *on your doorstep*

This booklet is designed to help you explore and enjoy the fantastic landscapes and special wildlife of the Stour Valley.

To get the best out of your visit, go to our website: www.wildsites.org and click 'Explore Sites' for full details of the sites.

Much of the content in this guide book has been produced by participants in the Wild Sites on Your Doorstep project. Hundreds of people took part in activities focused on wildlife photography, drawing, painting, illustration and creative writing.



The booklet is divided into themes - the river, wild flowers, trees and woodlands, and so on - with helpful maps that pinpoint where to see the wildlife illustrated and information on the activities we ran.

Wild Sites on Your Doorstep has been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Kent County Council.

The Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership



The Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) organised the Wild Sites project.

The KSCP works to conserve, enhance and promote the countryside and urban green space of the Stour Valley. We work closely with landowners and communities to conserve and protect the landscapes, habitats and wildlife of our Partnership area. We conserve and enhance all sorts of habitats, including the River Stour and other watercourses, woodlands and wildlife rich grasslands; we also create habitats for wildlife in urban areas. Where we can, we develop opportunities for good access to the countryside and informal recreation.

During the Wild Sites project we have worked with art groups, camera clubs and other community groups, schools, and a range of partner organisations.

Contact KSCP:
www.kentishstour.org.uk
03000 410900



Get out there!

There are so many amazing places to enjoy nature and the outdoors in the Stour Valley! The Wild Sites are spread all over the KSCP Partnership area (see map). They are very varied, ranging in size from a few acres to hundreds of hectares, from local parks to internationally important nature reserves, owned and managed by a range of bodies (see back cover).

You can explore large, protected woodlands in the Blean, valuable coastal habitats at Sandwich and Pegwell Bay, precious chalk downland sites in the Kent Downs and extensive Forestry Commission woodlands like King's Wood. And don't forget urban green spaces like the Ashford Green Corridor and Hambrook Marshes.

There are great opportunities for riverside and coastal walking and cycling. Promoted cycle (and walking) routes include the Crab and Winkle Way, Great Stour Way, Oyster Bay Trail, and the Viking Trail. Walking routes include the Stour Valley Walk, Big Blean Walk and North Downs Way. For more on these trails and exploring the Kent countryside go to www.explorekent.gov.uk.

Explore the WILD SITES



Post codes may be approximate. Some sites have no parking. For full directions and maps, go to www.wildsites.org and click 'Explore Sites'.

A river at its heart

The River Great Stour and its tributaries lie at the heart of the Stour Valley. These rivers and their floodplains are important habitats for wildlife, and there are lots of places where you can enjoy riverside walks, some of them in urban areas.

The UK's first urban river Local Nature Reserve was declared in Ashford in 2002. The Ashford Green Corridor is made up of parks, recreation grounds and other green spaces alongside the rivers that flow through the town – the Great Stour, the East Stour and the Aylesford Stream. One of these sites, Buxford Meadow, is a small but wildlife-rich wetland haven in the suburb of Singleton. Here the river and nearby ponds are superb habitats for damselflies and dragonflies, amphibians and aquatic insects.

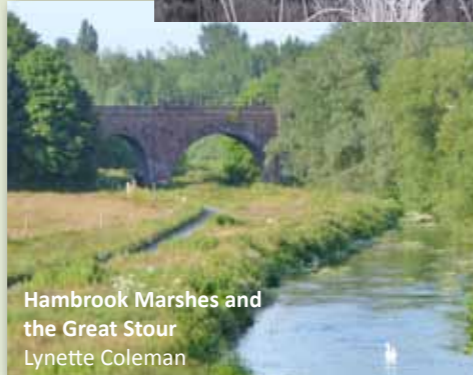
Canterbury also has urban river green spaces within easy reach of the city centre. Whitehall Meadow and Bingley Island Local Nature Reserve is made up of unspoilt grassland and other habitats, home to wetland plants lost from many other areas. Walk on out of the city and you will reach Hambrook Marshes; the wet pastures here flood in winter, attracting overwintering birds, and have been enhanced with other wetland features such as ponds, reedbeds and willow beds.

A great place to explore not just the River Great Stour but the extensive Lower Stour Marshes is Grove Ferry. The moored pleasure boats and riverside inn make

this a particularly picturesque spot, but if you can tear yourself away from it, it is also an ideal place to start a walk via some long distance trails. Head west on the Stour Valley Walk and you will find yourself in the internationally important reedbeds, wet pastures and lakes of Stodmarsh. You can also head east on the Saxon Shore Way into the Ash Levels, or north on the Wantsum Walk into Chislet Marshes.

The Great Stour meets the sea at Sandwich and Pegwell Bay, protected as one of Kent's largest and most important nature reserves (see page 17).

Sandwich & Pegwell Bay
Joan Hobson



Hambrook Marshes and the Great Stour
Lynette Coleman



Grove Ferry
Colin McGinn



ACTIVITY FOCUS:
Skillnet Photography Workshop

July 2014
STODMARSH
The Skillnet Group supports people with learning difficulties to gain opportunities and become more independent in all areas of life. They enjoyed an afternoon's photography tuition in the wetlands of Stodmarsh.



Wetland at Buxford Meadow
Jill Batchelor

Punting on the Stour, Hambrook Marshes
Sony Kodakkallil John (aged 13)

Wild about flowers

The Stour Valley's diverse habitats all boast their own distinctive wild flower communities.

Arguably the most spectacular floral shows occur in ancient woodlands in April and May, when swathes of wood anemones, then bluebells carpet the ground. They emerge at this time to enjoy the spring light reaching the woodland floor before the trees come into leaf.



Bluebells, Denge Wood
Chris Rogers

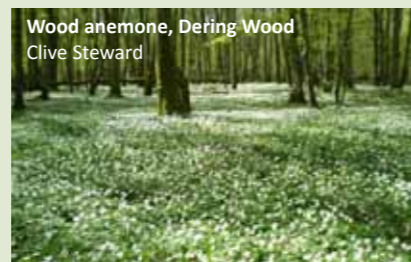
Later in the year, an equally stunning display gets under way in heathlands, and in glades in the Blean woodlands, with clouds of purple heather bringing a colourful conclusion to the summer.

While these natural spectacles are created by the proliferation of a single species, in meadows a whole range of wild flowers play a part. Management by

mowing and removal of cuttings helps to maintain this diversity, by keeping nutrient levels low so that no single species can take hold.

Even greater floral diversity can be found in chalk downlands in early summer. Here, the numbers of plants species found in a given area can rival tropical rainforests – up to 40 different plants in a square metre. They depend on grazing to keep a level playing field for competing species.

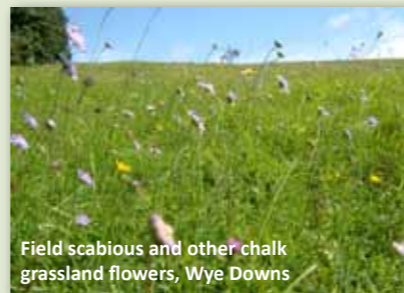
Some very specialised plants have adapted to live in wet conditions. Species such as ragged robin and yellow flag iris like to keep their feet damp and live at the edges of ponds and in wet meadows. The water crowfoot goes a step further – right into the water, growing with leaves fully submerged but flowering in beautiful patches of white at the surface in late spring and summer. At Hothfield Heathlands, in Kent's only remaining valley bog, grows a plant that has found a very unusual solution to the nutrient poor conditions: the round-leaved sundew is carnivorous and uses its sticky leaves to trap small insects, very much like a Venus fly-trap.



Wood anemone, Dering Wood
Clive Steward



Meadow, Hambrook Marshes
Alan Britton



Field scabious and other chalk grassland flowers, Wye Downs



Wetland wild flowers

Top: Water crowfoot, Chilton
Andrew Riddell

Lower left: Sundew, Hothfield,
Gabrielle Lindemann

Lower right: Ragged robin,
Hambrook Marshes
Mark Gaffney



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

A Blaze of Heather

August 2013
CLOWES WOOD

An outdoor painting workshop in the heathy glades of this lovely woodland.



Clowes Wood
Janice Keeler



Land of trees & woods

One thing we have no shortage of in the Stour Valley is trees! The extensive ancient woodlands here are some of the largest in south-east England. This is a well-wooded landscape, with the exception of the Lower Stour – the marshlands east of Canterbury.

Our most wooded area is the Blean – a unique and distinctive landscape. At eleven square miles in extent it is one of the largest areas of ancient woodland in England. It is also among the most valuable – a third of it is of international importance for wildlife. Oak abounds here, often in combination with silver birch, which thrives on the acid soils, or hornbeam coppice. Coppice is woodland where trees have been cut down to a stump and allowed to regrow as many thin stems; this traditional management technique is crucial for conserving wildlife value.

The Kent Downs is also a landscape with many woods, especially on the heavy clay and flint soils. The three largest blocks in the Stour Valley - King's Wood, Denge

Wood and Covert Wood - are all managed by the Forestry Commission and in places ancient woodland has been replanted with conifers. There are beautiful stands of beech in these woods, some natural, many planted. The tree you will see the most here (and in many other woods) is sweet chestnut – hundreds of acres were planted all over Kent during the 19th century to supply hop poles and fencing. Some of the oldest trees in these ancient woods are hornbeam 'stubs' that mark boundaries dating back to medieval times. There are also some lovely smaller woodlands in the downs, including Larkey Valley Wood, Earley Wood, Yockletts Bank, Park Wood and Perry Wood.

Another belt of woodland lies south and west of Ashford in the Low Weald. One of the best known woodlands here is Dering Wood, renowned for its butterflies and orchids and also for stories of haunting, which earned it the nickname 'screaming woods'!

Outside of woodlands, parklands are often the best places to see the very oldest, gnarliest 'veteran' trees. While large trees in woodlands will eventually be harvested for timber, in parks they are part of ornamental landscapes, so they are left to grow, sometimes for many centuries. Hatch Park near Mersham and Chilston Pines and Ponds both have some spectacular specimens.

Wellingtonia,
Chilston Pines
George Byles
(aged 11)



Silver birches in the Blean
Yvonne Gambrill



King's Wood
John Miller



Dering Wood
P. Bennet

ACTIVITY FOCUS:

ARTROOTS

June 2013, August 2014

POULTON WOOD & PERRY WOOD

A series of workshops that used experimental art techniques to explore the woodland environment. Participants included the Poulton Wood Rangers, a group of adults with learning disabilities who manage this ancient woodland nature reserve.



Hornbeam boundary
markers, Denge Wood
Chris Rogers

Orchid central

It may surprise you to know that the Stour Valley is one of the best places to see orchids in the whole of the UK! It's protected sites contain internationally important populations of these beautiful, unusual plants. But what makes it such a hot spot?

The first thing is its habitats. On the chalk geology of the Kent Downs, there are precious remnants of special grassland known as chalk downland, where orchids thrive on dry slopes with thin soils. Orchids also grow in our numerous ancient woodlands and on the sand dunes of Sandwich and Pegwell Bay.

The second factor is that the Stour Valley is close to the continent. Orchid species can be found here that are common in Europe but rare in the rest of the UK. Finally, the relatively warm, sunny climate also suits many species.

The Wild Sites where orchids grow need to be managed carefully. Some orchids depend on the presence of particular fungi to get nutrients from the soil, and disturbance of soils can upset this delicate balance. Those on chalk downlands rely on grazing to keep the habitat open and prevent scrub from invading.

At Wye Downs National Nature Reserve, large, internationally important tracts of chalk downland are being managed in just this way. Smaller areas can be visited at Jumping Downs and Broadham Down.



Lady orchid, Denge Wood
Ruth King

A TRULY KENTISH LADY: If any wild plant can be said to be characteristic of Kent, it's the lady orchid, which occurs almost nowhere else in the country. The Stour Valley boasts some of the best places to see this stunning species, including Denge and Eggringe Woods and Yockletts Bank.



Greater butterfly orchid
Katie Zurakovsky



Early purple orchid
Ivonna Karlikova



Fly orchid, Denge Wood
Peter Bott



For full details of these sites, go to www.wildsites.org and click 'Explore Sites'

ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Orchids in a Downland Wood

May 2013

DENGE AND EGGRINGE WOODS

Participants enjoyed a truly stunning display of orchids and other wild flowers, in one of Kent's largest and remotest woodlands.



Terry Whittaker

Common spotted orchids
Chloe Mckenzie (aged 10)

Watery wildlife havens

Ponds enhance the countryside in all parts of the Stour Valley. These watery little jewels in the landscape offer homes to a whole host of wildlife – from aquatic plants and insects to newts and grass snakes. Unlike many habitats, ponds can be of great wildlife value when just a few years old, because flora and fauna move in quickly.

Just such a pond can be found at the Cherry Orchard, Littlebourne. This former orchard is now a community wildlife garden in which local volunteers have created an impressive array of habitats. The pond is quite new but is already buzzing with wildlife. A new pond at the Singleton Environment Centre has been enhanced with aquatic planting and a new species-rich hedge.

At Hambrook Marshes, a new pond was created in one of the large riverside pastures. It holds water at those times of year when the marshes are not waterlogged, so acting as a refuge for wildlife that depends on open water. The pond at Bull Heath, a disused sand quarry now managed for wildlife, was dug to bring water to a site where otherwise there would be no standing water at all.

At the other end of the age scale is the ice pond at Chilston. It dates from the 18th century, when it was part of the Chilston estate and used to supply ice for the big house (now a hotel). The remains of an ice house where ice was stored can be seen nearby.

At Buxford Meadow, the pond is one of many habitat features that together bring an impressive list of wild species right into suburban Ashford, while the pond at Ashford Warren is full of the scarce water violet in May and June.



Pond ripples, Bull Heath
Suzanna Byles (aged 13)



Pond at Hambrook Marshes
Charlotte Newnham



Water Violet in the pond at Ashford Warren
Conrad Skillen



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Littlebourne Art Group photo' workshop

July 2014

CHERRY ORCHARD NATURE RESERVE

This community art group enjoyed tuition from two very talented photographers at a local green space.



Female emperor dragonfly
Mike Norris



The Ice Pond, Chilston Ponds
Brian Fuller

Kingdom of the weird

Welcome to the third kingdom. A kingdom not of plants or animals, where death and decay are the driving forces for life, and terrible poisons and outlandish colours and shapes abound. Welcome to the kingdom of the fungi.

Nothing is predictable here and what's going on at the surface is only half the story. A fungus exists mainly as a hidden network of filaments called a mycelium - the mushrooms, brackets, toadstools and other strange growths you see are just its fruits.

There are thousands of species in Britain, and fungi new to these shores are still being found on a regular basis. Most species have only Latin names, and those English names that exist are often just as outlandish and mysterious as the fungi themselves – Amethyst Deceiver, Dryad's Saddle, Fly Agaric, Fairy Club.

Despite the baffling variety of fungi, there are recognisable and commonly found species to look out for - some are pictured here. Autumn is the best time to go in search of fungi, although some species appear in spring and summer.

Woodlands and old, undisturbed grasslands are often the best places to go, but fungi can crop up anywhere, including gardens, parks and waste ground.

CAUTION: Please don't eat any fungi found in the wild without expert guidance.



Fly agaric, Ashford Warren
Alan Britton



'Jew's Ear' fungus
Rob Stevens



Sulphur tuft, Ashford Warren
Alan Britton



Japanese umbrella,
King's Wood
John Miller



Shaggy inkcap,
King's Wood
John Miller

STRAIGHT OUT OF A FAIRY TALE: It would be hard to find a species - fungus, plant or animal - with more associated folklore than the fly agaric. From its use by witches for its hallucinogenic properties, to connections with Siberian shamans and even Santa's flying reindeer, this poisonous fungus is imbued with ancient meaning.



ACTIVITY FOCUS: Wildlife of the King's Wood

September 2013
KING'S WOOD
This autumnal workshop gave participants the chance to photograph fungi at this woodland site.



Brick caps,
King's Wood
Julie Barry

Woodland fungi, West Blean
Adrian Bennet

Predatory beauty

Some of the most efficient predators the world has ever seen are flying over a pond or river near you. Dragonflies and damselflies are beautifully adapted hunters with incredible eyesight, stunning aerial manoeuvrability and clever survival strategies.

These qualities mean they've been around for a while - 325 million years in fact! Some of the earliest dragonflies, hunting in prehistoric forests so ancient they formed the coal measures we now mine, had a two and a half foot (75 cm) wingspan! The species you will see today in the Stour Valley are not quite on that scale but are beautiful and impressive nonetheless.

The largest you will see, with a wingspan of just over 4 inches (106mm), is the emperor dragonfly. Males of this well-named species can be seen lording it over most ponds and lakes, patrolling and showing off their bright green and blue colouration from June to August.

Another, less widespread, species of ponds is the four-spotted chaser, so named because it has four dark spots on its front wings and four on its hind wings; it flies from late May to August.

From mid-May to September, on fast flowing rivers including the Great Stour itself, watch out for the eye-catching fluttering of the male banded demoiselle, with its large, dark wing patches and iridescent blue body.

There are two key differences between adult dragonflies and damselflies. The first is size: damselflies are smaller and more delicate than their dragonfly cousins. The second is the position of the wings when at rest – dragonflies hold their wings flat, damselflies generally hold them together above the body (see photos).

Of course the winged adults we love to see in summer are just part of the life-story of these insects. This swooping, shimmering summer glory is just a passing phase, lasting as little as two months. The majority of a dragonfly or damselfly's life is spent in a very different state, as a dull brown nymph that lives in a dark, murky underwater world. They are no less fierce than the adult form; dragonfly larvae catch prey in jaws that shoot forwards from the head (and in part inspired the design of the creature in the Alien films).

Some species spend four or five years in this state before crawling out of the water to begin a brief summer fling of mating and hunting. The transformation from the nymph into a winged adult on a reed stem is a sight in nature once seen never forgotten.



Blue-tailed damselfly feeding
Jo Taylor



Four-spotted chaser,
West Blean
Jo Taylor



Banded demoiselle,
Buxford Meadow
Alan Britton



Keeled skimmer dragonfly,
Hothfield Heathlands
Gabrielle Lindemann



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Dragons in the Meadow

July 2013

BUXFORD MEADOW

This urban site has an impressive array of dragonfly and damselfly species. The picture shows a participant focused on an azure damselfly.



Female emperor dragonfly
Jo Taylor

At the land's edge

The area that the Wild Sites project covered includes two stretches of very special, protected coastline: the first between Deal and Ramsgate, the second between Whitstable and Birchington.

Sandwich and Pegwell Bay is the place where the River Stour reaches the sea. The river estuary is a superb habitat for so much wildlife – in particular large numbers of waders and wildfowl (visit in winter to see the biggest flocks), and a small colony of seals (see page 30). The estuary is just one of a grouping of habitats here that is unique in the south-east, including mudflats, saltmarsh, shingle beach, sand dunes, ancient dune pastures, chalk cliffs, coastal scrubland and grazing marsh. No wonder it's protected by international law!

Part of the same 'Special Protection Area', Reculver is a lovely coastal site with sandstone cliffs and a beach that is a great place to see shore life of all sorts. Like Sandwich and Pegwell Bay it has an impressive bird fauna, including passing rarities like snow buntings.

The sandy cliffs erode quickly, and this has shaped the fascinating history of this place. The coastal landscape here is dominated by Reculver Towers. They are all that remains of the 12th century church - the rest was demolished in the 19th century due to the threat of coastal erosion, the towers left as a 'seamark' for ships. There are also the walls and other remains of a Roman fort here.



Reculver
Colin McGinn



Saltmarsh, Sandwich Bay
Jo Taylor



Snow bunting, Reculver
Margaret Smith



Sandwich Bay
Jo Taylor



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Wild Places, Wild Words

October 2013 & April 2014
SANDWICH BAY

These are some of the writings produced by participants on these two creative writing workshops.

SANDWICH BAY HAIKU

Pebble with a hole through,
pulverised, pummelled long times,
A Brunel tunnel.

Val Sitton

NO LIZARDS FOR THE LIZARD ORCHID (EXCERPT)

We talk talk as the crow crows pass.
A wind rush pushes us
forward, Clang rattle chatter through the
kiss-me-quick gate.
Bizarrely there is a chair on a hill. I
pass a galaxy of yellow stars,
rusty flowers, then ragwort to a white
ball. The chair is now dead
upturned. I see no lizards for the lizard
orchid.

Steve Walker

Background photo:
Stour estuary
Jo Taylor

FROM THE TOP OF THE STEEP SIDED PEBBLE SLOPE TO THE SEA (EXCERPT)

Soft slap, slap of sea against shore. The sound of my childhood, the empty horizon, something 'other' over there, out of sight - different lives, strange different words in their mouths, land stretching far beyond far, days and days, weeks and weeks to cross to another shore

Angie Murray

VISIT TO THE ELMS, RESTHARROW RESERVE, (EXCERPT)

He sees me. A flash of soft grey, and then gone. I sit down on a wooden seat, immersed in the dappled greenness of this lovely place. The squirrel has vanished, but here I remain more than content merely to listen: the red-hearted, clear song of autumn robin; wren, tiny troglodyte, with thrilling voice rather larger than his body.

Vanessa Dent

SHORE BONE

Upon the beach, some creature's bone,
last remnant of a life unknown,
lies almost unnoticed on the shingle.
The bone has taken on the hues,
the rusty browns, not-blacks-not-blues
of the shifting stone wherein it mingles.
It seeks to hide itself within the beach,
Its link to life and movement now long gone.
With land behind, with water out of reach,
Content to blend amongst the lifeless stone.
To lie together cold,
And wait to turn to sand.

Rob Stevens

SANDWICH BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY (EXCERPT)

Sitting on the shingle beach after crossing the famous old golf course I was struck by a sense of peace and openness and reminded of why I moved down to Kent in the first place. The flat but slightly rolling landscape and hazy mist stood in stark contrast to the tall concrete and man-made smog of my childhood. One thing that remained from those days is the spark of excitement that seeing the sea always ignites in someone who grew up inland.

Malcolm Richmond

The sweet rotten smell of alexanders
crowd my nose, and I curse
the motorists whose choice spoils mine.
Then it's onto the bridlepath where
I'm hemmed in by mud and water
left over from a wet season,
and even my quick puddle dashes
leave me feet damp, an all-day reminder.
Finally on the seawall, legs can stretch,
water pewter flat on my right.

Tricia Peak

"Be aware of golfers approaching from the right" the sign tells me.
Are those coming from the left somehow safer?
Are they less prone to playfully ambushing unsuspecting wildlife writers?
Are they less likely to connect their club with an object of solid, white matter, designed to hurtle through the air at astonishing speed, hopefully to a destination somewhere beyond us?
Perhaps their balls are softer and less likely to hurt?
I conclude it is better to be aware of golfers coming from any direction and proceed to the beach...with caution.

Rachel Staples

Beauty on the wing

There is no more cheering sight of approaching summer than a butterfly spotted on a warm spring day. Common and familiar species abound in the countryside of the Stour Valley, and are joined by some rarities in the specialised habitats of its nature reserves.

It may come as a surprise, since we associate butterflies with sunlight and open spaces, that many species make their home in woodlands. However, in order to survive, they need breaks in the tree cover. The speckled wood butterfly can be seen flying in most woodlands, enjoying patches of sunshine and dappled shade from April to October. The peacock likes sheltered clearings and rides but is also a familiar species in gardens.

The Duke of Burgundy requires larger clearings, such as Bonsai Bank (so-called because of its stunted, planted conifers) in the middle of Denge Wood, one of the few sites in Kent where it can be found, flying from late April to early June. In all cases, management of woodlands through coppicing, and keeping open clearings and wide tracks (known as rides) is vital.

Some species found in woodlands are just as happy in other habitats. The ringlet is often seen in woods but also inhabits lush, tall grasslands. The green hairstreak can be found in a range of habitats, included the landscaped coal spoil heap that forms Fowlmead Country Park. The small skipper, large skipper and meadow

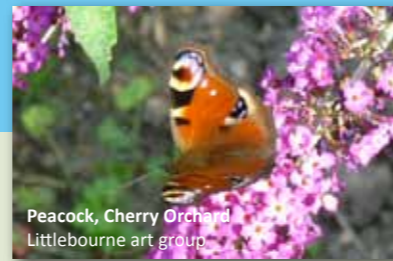
brown are mainly grassland species but can be found in grassy woodland glades. The brown argus is much more of a chalk downland specialist but can be seen elsewhere. Grazing is as vital to the conservation of butterflies on grassland as coppicing is in woodland – the species we love to see depend on good management of the Wild Sites.



Duke of Burgundy, Denge Wood
Mike Aubry



Green hairstreak, Fowlmead
Margaret Smith



Peacock, Cherry Orchard
Littlebourne art group



Ringlet, West Blean
Sue Clinker



Speckled Wood, East Blean Wood
Sue Smith



Brown Argus, Fowlmead
Margaret Smith



Meadow Brown, Buxford Meadow
Alan Britton

ACTIVITY FOCUS:

The Blean and its Butterflies

June 2013

EAST BLEAN WOOD

This workshop was timed for the flight season of the rare heath fritillary (see right) but participants also photographed a range of other butterflies.



Josie Briggs

THE WOODSMAN'S FOLLOWER: This nickname for the heath fritillary, one of Britain's rarest butterflies, tells us a lot about its ecology. The woodsmen that it followed were coppicing – cutting trees and opening patches of warm, sunny, sheltered habitat in the middle of woodlands. Once those trees started to grow back and the habitat became more closed, the butterflies moved on, following the woodsmen to the next patch they were cutting.

The Blean Woods around Canterbury are one of the few places in Britain where this species can be seen. In the open glades here, the butterfly's food plant, common cow-wheat, grows in abundance.



Heath fritillary, East Blean Wood
Marcia Tillman

Snapshots of hidden worlds

We have focused so far on some of the insect world's most beautiful representatives – butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. But in an area as large and diverse as the Stour Valley, a baffling number and variety of other insects also live: beetles, flies, moths, bees and wasps, ants, grasshoppers...And not forgetting spiders, which of course are not insects but arachnids.

In all these groups taken together, there are thousands of different British species, and a even the smallest nature reserve will be home to a long list of creatures.

There's no way that a page in a booklet can begin to describe all this diversity, but the images captured by people who took part in Wild Sites activities give an interesting snapshot of the insect world of the Stour Valley, and in some cases flag up species you are more likely to see.



Bush cricket, East Blean Wood
Stephen Brown (aged 8)



Southern wood ants, East Blean Wood
Kieran McGettrick

LESS ANTS AT YOUR PICNIC?: When an insect seems as plentiful and widespread as the ant, it may come as a surprise to you that some species are in decline. The southern wood ant, whose massive nests you have probably seen in woodlands, is one of them. This is thought to be mainly due to changes in woodland management.



Bumble bee on marjoram, Cherry Orchard
Mike Norris



Wolf spider with egg case, East Blean Wood
Stephen Brown (aged 8)



Lesser stag beetle, Cherry Orchard
Mike Norris



Poplar beetles, Hothfield Heathlands
Gabrielle Lindemann

ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Volunteer-led guided walk

July 2013

HOTHFIELD HEATHLANDS

Volunteers trained in leading guided walks as part of the project went on to lead walks in our activities programme. This walk at Hothfield Heathlands gave participants the opportunity to learn about and photograph the rich insect fauna of this reserve.



Six-spot burnet moth
Gabrielle Lindemann

Cold blooded wonders

While the Stour Valley can boast plant species in their hundreds, and thousands of different insects, reptile and amphibian species inhabiting the area both number in just single figures.

One of the more widespread reptiles, the viviparous lizard, can be found in rough grassland and open areas in woodlands throughout the area. The best time to see them is early on a sunny morning from spring to early autumn, when, being cold-blooded, they bask in sunlight, often on logs, stumps or patches of bare earth.

The slow-worm (actually not a worm, nor a snake, but a legless lizard), likes similar habitat. It is seldom seen basking, but lift up logs or flat pieces of debris and there is a good chance you will see them sheltering underneath. Do so with caution however, because there is a possibility that, in the right area, an adder could also be lurking under there. The adder, Britain's only venomous snake, is classed as 'vulnerable' in Kent, and in the Stour Valley is restricted mainly to sunny slopes on the Downs - chalk grassland sites, such as Wye Downs, or woodlands with lots of open habitat like King's Wood (see map).

Much more at home in wetland areas is the grass snake. This is a species with a strong association with water, and can often be seen swimming across rivers and ponds. The main reason for this is its preference for feeding on amphibians.

One of the grass snake's favoured prey items is the common frog. This familiar amphibian, often seen in gardens, spawns in small ponds. Sometimes confused with the common frog, the common toad tends to breed in larger bodies of water – traditional breeding sites to which the toads return year after year in large numbers. One key difference between frogs and toads is in their movement – frogs hop and toads crawl. Grass snakes are quite happy to eat either!

Three newt species can be found in the Stour Valley – the smooth newt, the palmate and great crested. The latter is a high priority species for conservation, having declined across Europe, but in the Stour Valley the population is healthy.

If you are walking at a wetland site in late spring or summer and you hear a loud croaking, you are probably hearing a marsh frog. This is a non-native species, first introduced to Britain at Walland Marsh in Kent, in 1935. It is unclear whether they are having any detrimental effect on native wildlife.



Common frog
Gary Johnston



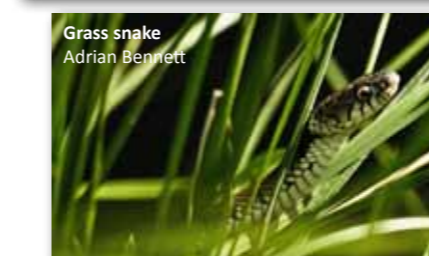
Common toad
Jason Steel



Marsh frog
Sheena Moss



Slow-worm
Jason Steel



Grass snake
Adrian Bennett



Great crested newt
Jason Steel



ACTIVITY FOCUS: Reptiles in the Orchard

September 2013

NO MAN'S ORCHARD

A volunteer from Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group, who monitor the reptiles here, took a group of participants around this orchard site.



Viviparous lizard
Alan Britton



Adder
Adrian Bennett

Wild on the wing

Because the Stour Valley contains so many habitats, its bird life is very varied, and describing it all in one short page is very difficult! So we have focused on just a few important and distinctive species that can be found in the area's woodlands and wetlands.

Surely one of the most evocative and iconic of woodland birds is one that is rarely seen – the nightingale. This dowdy, brown bird is of course famed for its spectacularly varied song, which it pours forth, usually unseen, from dense undergrowth and scrub. It can be heard in April and May in a number of woodlands in the Stour Valley, including Dering Wood and Blean Woods.

Much more brightly coloured and more easily seen are the green and great spotted woodpeckers; the scarcer lesser spotted is usually restricted to the best ancient woodland sites.

Another well-known woodland bird is the tawny owl, which is also at home in parks and residential areas where there are large numbers of trees.

The barn owl prefers much more open habitat and is the owl most often seen over marshes, reedbeds and other wetlands. Two rare wetland birds - the bittern and the bearded tit - specialise in the extensive reedbeds at Stodmarsh; they are part of the reason this site is protected by international law.

The Great Stour and its tributaries are the place to see herons, kingfishers and grey wagtails, but perhaps the bird you are most likely to see in wetland areas is the mute swan. They are joined in winter by migrant Bewick's and whooper swans.

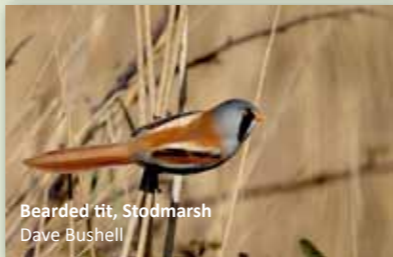
Winter is also the time when large numbers of migrant waders and wildfowl arrive at wetland and coastal sites. On flooded gravel pits throughout the Stour Valley, wildfowl like tufted duck can be seen on the water. At Sandwich and Pegwell Bay, large flocks of lapwing, sanderling, golden plover, oystercatcher and other waders come to feed on the mudflats.



Great spotted woodpecker
Jo Taylor



Nightingale



Bearded tit, Stodmarsh
Dave Bushell



Oystercatcher
Roger Ford



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

British Wildlife Illustration Workshop

June 2013

WILDWOOD BRITISH WILDLIFE CENTRE

At this all-day workshop, participants enjoyed outdoor sketching around the park followed by an indoor session with a tawny owl as model.



Barn Owls
Kate Emans (top right) & Annabelle Edginton (aged 13)



Mute Swans
Chris Sime



Tufted duck
Jason Steel



Kingfisher
Roland Wells-Colyer

Four-legged conservationists

Some of the hardest working conservationists in the Stour Valley have four legs. And hooves. They are the cattle, sheep, goats and horses without which some of our most precious habitats - flower-rich grasslands and heathlands - would disappear.

What happens to any grassland with no animals to graze it? First it grows longer and the smallest plants get shaded out. Then the balance of plants starts to change more radically – a few vigorous species take over and many others start to disappear. Next, the windblown seeds of trees arrive, germinate and grow and, with no livestock to nip off the seedlings, they take hold. The grassland turns to scrub. Eventually the scrub turns to woodland. The valuable grassland has been lost.

Ecologists call this process ‘succession’. It’s perfectly natural and it’s fine in some situations, but in a flower-rich grassland or heathland it needs to be managed. That’s where livestock come in. They stop vigorous plants taking over, prevent tree seedlings taking hold and keep grasslands...grassy!

The organisations managing the Wild Sites use livestock as a vital tool in conserving the Stour Valley’s special habitats. By adjusting the number of animals they use, the time of year they graze and even the type of livestock, they create conditions for target species such as orchids or butterflies to thrive.

POLISH PONIES: *The Konik horse has been called the closest living relative of the Tarpan, the extinct European wild horse. Although this is now disputed, there is no doubt that these hardy, semi-feral ponies are very useful grazing animals in nature reserves across Europe, including our very own Hothfield Heathlands.*



Konik horses, Hothfield Heathlands
Kate Emans



Sheep, Chilston Pines
George Byles



Exmoor pony, Sandwich & Pegwell Bay
Jo Taylor



ACTIVITY FOCUS:

The Stour at Canterbury

June 2013

HAMBROOK MARSHES

The highland cattle grazing this riverside wetland were certainly a star attraction on this workshop in partnership with Friends of Hambrook Marshes.



Terry Whittaker

Highland cow, Hambrook Marshes
Alan Britton

Creatures small & great

The phrase 'All Creatures Great and Small' certainly describes the mammal fauna of the Stour Valley. Its landscapes provide habitats for everything from the tiny pygmy shrew to wild boar and deer.

At the smaller end of the scale, the Stour Valley is a stronghold for two of Britain's most threatened rodents. The hazel dormouse is doing well in our local woodlands, while in the marshlands of the Lower Stour, including Stodmarsh, is a population of water voles thought to be one of the largest in Britain.

Another, much larger rodent has been reintroduced to a nature reserve in the Stour Valley. Beavers, extinct in Britain for over 400 years, have been brought back to help manage Ham Fen near Sandwich. Their natural activities – tree felling, dam building, canal digging – are playing an important role in conserving one of Kent's last remaining ancient fens.

The Mustelid family of mammals includes stoats, weasels and badgers. A much rarer relative is the otter, which is thought to be present in very small numbers on the Great Stour. The American mink is a problematic mustelid, a non-native species released from fur farms in the past. This voracious hunter is a significant factor in the decline of water voles.

The wild mammal you are perhaps most likely to see is the fox. It is well known for thriving in urban areas, and the towns in the Stour Valley are no exception

to this. Rabbits and squirrels are also a common site in many areas. The rabbit's near relative, the brown hare, is a little harder to see but if you go walking on the marshes, or any area with large arable fields, in early spring you stand a good chance of spotting one.

Wild boar have made the news in recent years, having re-appeared in British woodlands after being extinct for centuries. These new wild populations are the descendants of animals that escaped from farms. There have been sightings at a number of sites in the Stour Valley, including the woods near Aldington, but numbers are thought to be very low. The large hoofed mammal you are much more likely to see in the woods is the fallow deer. King's Wood has a large free-roaming population while at Hatch Park a herd of about 100 animals are enclosed in an ancient deer park.

Mammals are not just restricted to the land. Coastal waters are home to small colonies of harbour and grey seals. The Stonelees area of Sandwich and Pegwell Bay National Nature Reserve is a good place to see them – just look out to the Stour estuary using binoculars. And of course we mustn't forget mammals that take to the air – the Stour Valley supports a number of bat species, that make their homes in mature trees, old buildings and underground sites.



Water vole



Hazel dormouse
Debbie Reynolds



Otter (captive animal)



Drawing wild boar at the British Wildlife Illustration workshop, Wildwood



Beaver, Ham Fen
Roland Wells-Colyer



Badgers
Kristiina Sandoe



Harbour seals
Jo Taylor

ACTIVITY FOCUS:

Fallow Deer in Focus

September 2014
HATCH PARK

Participants got some great shots of the deer in the semi-wild herd, including fawns and bucks.



Fallow Deer, Hatch Park
Susan Sanger

The next step

...looking after the Wild Sites

Organisations

who own and manage the Wild Sites

If you love the Stour Valley's wild places, why not take the next step and get involved in caring for them? The Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership run regular volunteer days where you can take part in hands-on conservation and make a real difference.

You can contact us on:
03000 410 900
www.kentishstour.org.uk

Some of the organisations listed opposite, such as Kent Wildlife Trust, also offer volunteering opportunities. You could get involved in livestock checking or wildlife monitoring. The Conservation Volunteers (www.tcv.org.uk) are also active in this area.

Why not join one of the many local community groups who look after sites?

Here are just a few:

Ashford Community Woodland Group
ashfordcommunitywoodland@hotmail.com

Friends of King's Wood
www.friendsofkingswood.org

Heaths Countryside Corridor
www.heathsc.co.uk

Ashford Borough Council
www.ashford.gov.uk

Canterbury City Council
www.canterbury.gov.uk

Forestry Commission
www.forestry.gov.uk

Kent County Council
www.kent.gov.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust
www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk

Natural England
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england

RSPB
www.rspb.org.uk

Swale Borough Council
www.swale.gov.uk

Woodland Trust
www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

We would like to thank all the organisations and private land-owners who gave us permission to include their sites in the project.

*Written and designed by Clarity Interpretation
www.clarityinterpretation.com*



Front cover photos: Greg Mackenzie, Louise McGettrick, Maiuko, Michelle Moxley, Ruth King
Back cover: Alan Britton