

# Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust

As Autumn set in, Colin Wilson and Mike Swaddling treated members to a lively and informative talk on the beautiful Blackwater Valley and the vital work carried out by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership and its charitable arm, the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust.

Mike began by quizzing the audience to find out what we knew already, which was surprisingly little considering how important the Blackwater Valley is locally. He went on to explain that the river system covered by the BVCT passes through Hampshire, Surrey and Berkshire. It includes the Blackwater, itself, which rises in Rowhill Nature Reserve, which after about 23 miles joins the Whitewater, becoming the Broadwater, then flowing into the Loddon at Swallowfield. Along its route, the valley contains two sites of special scientific interest, three nature reserves and 31 designated 'wildlife sites'.

In addition to the rivers and streams, there are several man-made lakes, the result of gravel extraction, which have been preserved and restored since the 1960s, and a network of paths covering most of the valley, many being suitable for wheelchairs, bicycles and horses as well as pedestrians, with links to country parks and other leisure activities.

Mike explained that the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership is a local government organisation, funded by all the local authorities along the valley, which employs the people who carry out the paid work. The Trust was formed in 2005 to access funding available only to registered charities. Its membership is around 250, plus corporate members and associate organisations, and it has raised in excess of £100,000. The Board of Trustees, which meets monthly, is comprised of a mixed group of volunteers, mainly retirees though anyone is welcome.

Some of the projects that Mike highlighted include: creating parks for children, as at Napier Gardens; creating a multi-use footpath in Heron Wood, to link the estate with Aldershot Park; building a network of footpaths to and around the Snaky Lane wildlife area; putting up nest and bat boxes; surveying ancient trees.

One important project is the restoration of the reed-beds at Frimley Hatches, created in the 1970s, when bitterns could be found there. Subsequently, they were sadly neglected for some 30 years. But the cooperation of the new owner, plus a grant of £5000 from TAG Farnborough Airport, have made restoration possible, so that a much wider range of insects, moths, butterflies and birds unique to reed-beds is now being recorded.

At Grant's Moor, a piece of land beside the railway line in Farnborough, a hedge has been planted to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, using 420 saplings supplied by the Woodland Trust. When established, the mix of native species will provide food and nest sites for a wide range of birds.

As well as these projects, Mike told us that the BVCT also has regular fungi forays, bird-watching outings (including ones for the dawn chorus), butterfly walks, nest box making sessions, bat box surveys and even worm charming.

The latest project is to collect stories and photographs of the valley, to build a historical record of its places and people throughout time. An introductory talk is scheduled for January.

Colin, a keen ornithologist, then gave a talk about the rich birdlife to be found in the many different habitats along the river. He explained that some birds are resident, some winter visitors and some summer visitors. Migratory movements depend to a great extent of the size of the ice cap at the North Pole.

The site is particularly attractive to wildfowl because there is both deep and shallow water, suitable for dabbling and diving birds, because the river flows even during freezing conditions, because there is plenty of aquatic vegetation both on the surface and below, because there are small fish and mammals, and because there is grazing, too.

Volunteers conduct observations and counts, and ring birds. They are also adopting new methods of tracking migration, such as using DNA data from feathers.

Colin told us that 22 species of ducks have been recorded at Moor Green Lakes, a key site in the valley, as well as herons, coots, grebes, geese and swans. He showed us photos of some of his favourite birds, along with details of their identifying features, feeding habits and migration patterns. We learned, for instance, that the goldeneye is a diving duck that feeds on insect larvae, small fish and plants, and, bizarrely, nests in tree holes.

Other birds include: lapwings, redwings, siskins, crossbills, bramblings, waxwings and a range of warblers, so that whatever the time of year there is always something of interest to discover.

Both Colin and Mike brought a wealth of knowledge and boundless enthusiasm to their presentation, which provided us with a thoroughly engaging evening and much food for thought.

Details of the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust can be found at: <http://bvct.org.uk>