

# Reconnecting Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray: A call to action

## Summary



**Berkshire  
Buckinghamshire  
& Oxfordshire  
Wildlife Trust**

### The landscape

The Bernwood, Otmoor and Ray region is one of the best remaining ecologically important but fragmented landscapes in southern England. Sitting across the border of Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, this 300km<sup>2</sup> area is critical for biodiversity, with a strong farming heritage.

It is nationally important for rare habitats and species, such as wildflower and floodplain meadows, wading birds, hairstreak butterflies, bats and ancient woodland. Yet the landscape - stretching between Buckingham, Bicester, Aylesbury and Oxford - is under huge threat from major development, historic agricultural intensification and pollution.

### Feasibility study

The Reconnecting the Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray (RBOR) initiative aims to ensure that vitally important sites in the region are protected, restored, extended and connected up on a landscape scale. It is being led by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, with initial funding from Buckinghamshire Council.

As part of the initiative, an extensive feasibility study of the area has been completed, which involved consulting with a wide range of people including 28 landowners and farmers, 60 people from community groups and 132 stakeholders from 44 organisations.

### The vision

A long-term vision and six key priority projects have been identified for the region to benefit people and nature:

Land in BOR is well managed for nature, yet remains productive and local agricultural businesses are thriving. This iconic landscape, its key habitats and species are being protected, restored, and enhanced as a result of harnessing a range of new innovative funding mechanisms and sustainable income streams based upon the ecosystem services that this region can provide for people, communities and the environment.

### Project concepts

#### 1 Farmer cluster

Farmer-led initiative to drive environmental improvements and maximise innovative finance opportunities for farm businesses.



#### 2 River restoration

Floodplain and meadow restoration project to secure the River Ray valley as a nationally important wetland complex.



#### 3 Bernwood Forest

Enhancing and expanding ancient woodland, developing new habitat mosaics and increasing habitat connectivity.



#### 4 Access to nature

Creating and improving a mosaic of connected wildlife habitats, with emphasis on access to nature for people in Oxford.



#### 5 Hedges and edges

Expand and improve linear ecosystem, such as hedgerows and verges, enabling wildlife to move across the landscape.



#### 6 Health and wellbeing

A nature connection and access project to create and enhance high-quality natural greenspace for people living in and near the BOR landscape.



### What next?

BBOWT is offering to lead a new landscape-scale partnership and programme of projects, built around a long-term and co-created vision with communities, businesses and partners. This will bring together the collective expertise of a diverse range of people, to help raise the profile of the region with planners, funders, investors and decision-makers.

The BOR landscape is worthy of multi-million pound, multi-year investment and BBOWT will be exploring funding options to help build on and deliver the vision in the future.



## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PRESENT BOR LANDSCAPE



### Farmland

A strong farming heritage defines much of the present landscape character.



### The River Ray

An ecological corridor throughout the landscape.



### Floodplain meadows

Flower-rich and important for nationally-scarce wading birds.



### Bernwood Forest

Once a medieval royal hunting forest. Includes ancient woodland and supports vulnerable species such as Bechstein's bats.



### Curlews

Charismatic, ground-nesting birds. Ray Valley and Otmoor Basin are important for inland curlew conservation.



### Ancient bushy hedgerows

Criss-crossing the landscape, they are a stronghold for rare black and brown hairstreak butterflies.



### Otmoor

Lowland wet grassland, reedbed, blackthorn hedges and species-rich hay meadows. Wading birds and wildfowl thrive here.



### Culture

Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* is said to have been inspired by 'chessboard-like' field patterns of Otmoor.



### Heritage

People's memories of the landscape describe loss but also provide hope for what could be returned in future years.



### Placenames

Providing clues to a rich natural and social heritage that is waiting to be unlocked – e.g. Blackthorn, Kingswood, and Marsh Gibbon.



### Community action

Local community groups are active in volunteering, surveying wildlife, campaigning and looking after their greenspaces.



## THREATS

- 
**Development**  
 Allocations exceed 550ha with potential for habitat loss, fragmentation and loss of connectivity.
- 
**High Speed Two (HS2)**  
 Fragmenting woodland and other fragile habitats.
- 
**Inappropriate land management**  
 Damaging and fragmenting habitat for threatened species such as curlew.
- 
**Deer**  
 Over-population is preventing natural regeneration of woodland areas.
- 
**Poor water quality in the Ray**  
 Diffuse pollution threatens key habitats such as floodplain meadows.
- 
**Modifications to the River Ray**  
 Major implications for riparian habitats, river ecology and farmland birds.
- 
**Human impact**  
 Lack of accessible greenspace is driving recreation pressure and impacts on wildlife.
- 
**Limited access**  
 Exploration limited by public transport, parking facilities, busy roads and narrow lanes.
- 
**Climate change**  
 Vulnerability to extreme weather events, pests and diseases, and pressure on key water resources.

## OPPORTUNITIES

- 
**Biodiversity Net Gain**  
 Could unlock up to £30m to compensate for development and support nature recovery.
- 
**Nature-friendly farming**  
 A new farmer cluster is driving nature recovery in the wider landscape.
- 
**Hay meadows**  
 Restoration possible using seed harvested from local nature reserves.
- 
**Venison market**  
 Specific deer management around a local venison market to reduce browsing pressure.
- 
**Greenspaces**  
 A network of accessible greenspaces would support wellbeing of diverse communities.
- 
**Local Nature Recovery Strategies**  
 Coordinating action for nature at scale.
- 
**Catchment partnership**  
 Investing in river and floodplain restoration throughout the Ray catchment.
- 
**Freshwater habitat creation**  
 Supporting curlew and other wading birds with new ponds and reedbeds.
- 
**Floodplain restoration**  
 To benefit wildlife, reduce flooding and attract investment.

**BBOWT would like to thank heartily all those who contributed energy, ideas and time to develop and shape the vision and project concepts.**

We would like to hear from organisations, businesses and individuals keen to do more for nature in BOR. If you are interested in getting involved, please contact: [RBOR@bbowt.org.uk](mailto:RBOR@bbowt.org.uk)



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