

THE CHILTERN NEWSLETTER

From BBOWT Chilterns Group - supporting and promoting our local Wildlife Trust

Issue 112 Spring/Summer 2026



Orchids at Aston Clinton Ragpits by Kate Tifford

Wildlife Trust news, views and event information from the Chilterns Group, College Lake and around Bucks.

We are very grateful to all who take the trouble to send in material. If you would like to contribute to the autumn issue, please send your news, photos and features to juliebirch60@yahoo.com by 24 July 2026.

The newsletter goes out twice a year to over 600 people. To be put on the mailing list, please email membership@bbowt.org.uk.

Welcome to our Spring/Summer issue

In view of the amount of information the Trust already shares through *Wild*, its Facebook page, blogs and the volunteers' *Grapevine*, we are continuing to focus our newsletter on key updates about Chilterns Group and College Lake activities, to avoid duplication. In future, we will look for additional material from nearby Aylesbury Vale to add to Charlotte's welcome updates from Finemere. We aim to encourage you to explore some of our under-visited reserves - full of summer excitement for flower enthusiasts and rich with birdlife in winter. It's a vast area with many square miles of green space.

It goes without saying that volunteers are always welcome at reserve work parties, but please apply via volunteering@bbowt.org.uk. If you would like to help at events such as the Plant Market, just email richardbirch60@yahoo.com. The Chilterns Group would also like to recruit a new member to our Planning Team to help with organising and delivering events in our area.

Enjoy this issue and the wonderful abundance of wildlife in the Chilterns. There is a huge variety of opportunities to get active for nature, both out on the reserves and raising funds for the Trust in line with our slogan:

More nature everywhere, for everyone

Julie Birch, Editor

College Lake - Winter habitat update

Winter has felt never-ending this year, and while working outdoors certainly has its rewards, they're usually most appreciated when the summer sun is shining and the birds are in full song. In conservation, though, winter is our key season for habitat management - so we pull on our waterproofs, summon some determination, and get stuck in, whatever the weather throws at us.

Our volunteers continue to amaze me with their dedication. While I'm paid to be out in the cold and rain, they turn up time after time, wrapped in Gore-Tex and ready to tackle whichever spiky thicket of scrub I've marked out for the day. Thanks to their hard work this season, we have:

- Cleared over 300m of scrubbed-over fence line
- Tree-popped an area over 0.8ha of scattered hawthorn and dog rose across our chalk grassland
- Coppiced more than 100 willow stools along the lake edge, ditches, and wooded areas
- Cut, raked, and cleared vegetation on the three islands to ensure they are nest-site ready for spring wading birds.

It's relentless work, but always carried out with good spirits - even on the wettest days. A huge thank you to all our College Lake volunteers!

Site improvements

The reserve has also benefited from some exciting upgrades. With support from the Chilterns Conservation Board, we've extended the surfaced path on the eastern side of the site. This has greatly improved access, bringing visitors closer to the chalk grassland's unique flora and fauna.

Our wildlife garden and activities area have also received a much-needed refresh. A new information centre, potting shed, and entrance arbour - along with new features designed for younger visitors - will allow us to expand our engagement activities and make even better use of these spaces.

These improvements will help us welcome a wider range of visitors and inspire even more people to take action for nature.

Emma Routledge, College Lake Warden

Behind the scenes at Dancersend

Hopefully you'll be planning a visit to Dancersend - BBOWT's oldest and largest Buckinghamshire reserve - sometime this spring or summer. The mix of habitats means there will be plenty of wildlife to be found and we've had a busy winter work programme preparing the reserve for you.



Dancersend volunteer work party, December 2025

If you don't happen to visit when a volunteer work party is out, you might not realise just how much work takes place, especially during the autumn and winter months.

Our volunteers have been mowing, raking, and collecting across all the open chalk grassland areas to keep nutrient levels low and reduce competition for the specialist wildflowers and creatures that depend on them. They have also cleared invading scrub from woodland glades and re-coppiced trees to allow more sunlight to reach the ground flora. Fallen trees have been removed from paths, and fencing, steps, and gates have been repaired.

Judi Fisher and I were proud to look back at our work party activity in 2025 and find that a total of **2,260 person/hours** were completed across **39 work sessions**, both the monthly Sunday sessions and the fortnightly Wednesday morning sessions. **Seventy-seven volunteers** took part at some point during the year, and several additional sessions were carried out by the roving Mid-week Volunteers from College Lake. Thanks to all this effort, the reserve is looking splendid for your visits.



Dancersend apple harvest, September 2025

It's not just habitat management that we get up to as a volunteer group. One of our September work parties each year is devoted to harvesting apples and pears from the restored orchard at the Waterworks. Last autumn this produced a stupendous harvest, and we turned this into **340 bottles of Dancersend Special Reserve Apple Juice**. This has been steadily selling at Chilterns Group events through the winter, raising funds for BBOWT and especially the Chilterns reserves. It was widely welcomed as a superb vintage. Don't worry, I have kept back some supplies for sale at the Plant & Produce Market in May!

We also raise funds by selling second-hand books on wildlife, conservation, and the countryside. I will have a stall at the Plant & Produce Market and would be very grateful for any additional book donations beforehand. If you have books to offer, please contact me at jonesmick365@gmail.com or 07818 624092.

To discover more about Dancersend Reserve, why not join one of my guided walks?

Sunday 26 April, 10.00-12.30

Dancersend Reserve: its wildlife and history

Sunday 24 May, 14.00-16.30

Dancersend Reserve: wildlife specialities and secrets

Sunday 28 June, 10.00-12.30

Dancersend Extension: creating a refuge for rare chalk species

Booking details for all events can be found on our website: www.bbowt.org.uk/events

Mick Jones, Volunteer Warden

College Lake birds and events

Although snipe numbers were low again this winter, there were plenty of wintering ducks to enjoy. The highlight was the goldeneye, with up to five birds regularly seen between December and February - the drakes looking stunning in their black-and-white plumage.



Goldeneye by Adrian Bayliss and Slavonian grebe by Dave Hutchinson

The star of the winter birding, however, was a Slavonian grebe first sighted on 4 February. It stayed for eight days and was enjoyed by a steady stream of birders and visitors. This was a first for College Lake, and a species not recorded in Bucks since 2021. It is one of the rarer of the six grebe species that can be seen in the UK. The black-necked grebe is a regular, if scarce, winter visitor to the south of the UK (including College Lake and Calvert Jubilee), while the little grebe is a well-distributed but unobtrusive bird, frequenting any patch of water with good cover (such as the Wendover Canal). The great crested grebe is the best known and is often seen on Weston Turville Reservoir and the Tring Reservoirs. This was the species that prompted a group of ladies to advocate the founding of the RSPB. Its striking dark brown and chestnut head plumes were much in demand for adorning hats around 1890, and the birds were in danger of becoming extinct in England. Then there is the red-necked grebe, mostly seen on our coastal waters in winter

(take your scope to RSPB Titchwell in Norfolk), and very occasionally you might see a pied-billed grebe, a vagrant from North America.

As spring hurries in, redshank and oystercatchers have arrived. Lapwing are starting to create scrapes on the islands, and black-headed gulls are already jostling for territory.

A great deal of work goes into providing the right conditions for waders to feed and nest, so do come and try your luck at any time in spring or summer. We have a good list of occasional visitors that could return at any moment.

Birders and others will enjoy the events being organised by Katharine - along with many others - via the link below:

[College Lake Nature Reserve Events | Eventbrite](#)

Adrian Bayliss with Richard Birch

Amersham Environmental Day – Saturday 25 April 2026

The Chilterns Volunteer Group will be taking the BBOWT gazebo to the third Environmental Day run by Amersham Town Council on Saturday 25 April, from 10:00am to 1:30pm. We will be joining nine other stalls highlighting the fragility of our planet and demonstrating what practical steps we can take to mitigate, in some way, the damage which is being wrought on it by ourselves.

BBOWT and Wild Amersham will show what there is to lose - the wonder of nature all around us - through exhibits and interaction, especially with children, the next generation who will have to care for our planet.

There will be stalls helping with practical day-to-day issues such as recycling, repairing rather than replacing “broken” items, composting food waste, and not being a slave to “fast fashion”.

The cost of energy has been brought into sharp focus by the current Middle East war, and climate change has alerted us to how precious water is. Advice will be available on home insulation and water-saving measures.

During the event, there will also be a series of talks on how you can help save the environment, improve biodiversity, and make more sustainable fashion choices.

John Catton

Aston Clinton Ragpits - Guided Reserve Visits

Sunday 17 May (10am-noon)

Spring guided walk - late spring/early summer flowers and butterflies

Sunday 7 June (10am-noon)

Summer guided walk - orchids and butterflies

Saturday 13 June (10am-2pm)

Annual orchid count

Help count the orchids at this jewel of a nature reserve nestled high on the Chiltern escarpment. Every year we count the number of flowering orchids on this chalk grassland reserve, in order to help understand the longer-term trends in numbers and population size. You can enjoy the colourful spectacle of all the flowers and butterflies at the same time! No previous experience needed - all training and tools provided. Booking essential.

Saturday 18 July (10am-noon)

Late summer guided walk

Sunday 27 September (10am-noon)

Autumn guided walk - fungi and late summer flowers

All events, except the orchid count, are short, leisurely walks with the warden discovering the best of the reserve in each season. Be aware that the Ragpits is a small reserve but it has a lot of fairly abrupt slopes.

Please book online at www.bbowt.org.uk/events

Phil Townsend, Volunteer Warden

Finemere Wood

Finally, there is a hint of spring in the air. It is such a relief for everyone to hear the birdsong growing louder, to see the warm yellow of primroses appearing, and the first shoots of other spring flowers beginning to emerge. A mass of bluebell leaves is already evident throughout Finemere Wood, promising once again a spectacular display of this iconic flower.

The volunteers have worked hard throughout the winter months, coppicing and clearing sections of the wood to allow sunlight to reach the ground once again and encourage new growth to begin. These areas will be fascinating to watch over the coming months and years - what plants will emerge in these newly created habitats?



Finemere volunteers

Along the ancient drovers' track, brave souls have taken on the blackthorn hedge that runs along its edge, continuing to lay the thorny trees and completing a long stretch this year. The result looks stunning, opening the track to more light and encouraging the growth of wildflowers whose seeds have long lain dormant in the soil.

Now is a wonderful time to visit Finemere Wood, although the many HS2 road closures in the area can make getting there a little more challenging. The Shipton Lee road that runs past the wood is currently closed while a new bridge is being built, but there is still access to the wood from the eastern side for those determined to make the journey.

Charlotte Kamali, Volunteer Warden

Winter talks at Great Missenden (A surprise finale for the season!)

It has become a tradition to end the season in a light-hearted way. So, after an excellent programme of serious talks by experts in Wildlife Gardening, Biodiversity Net Gain, Woodland Wildlife, Protecting our Chalk Streams, and Forestry, we turned to Nigel Hopper for a stimulating recap of the Trust's major projects across the three counties. This was followed by a quiz embedded in a precis of fantasy stories from the Ancient Greeks to J.K.Rowling (Wildlife in Magic & Myth) created to test the audience's attentiveness and sense of humour. By some quirk of fate, a team including Wayne Brown of Volunteering and Judi Fisher from Dancersend walked off with the first prize. What shall we do for an encore next year? Come to our next Chilterns Group Winter Talks Season to find out. They will restart on Tuesday 22

September and with Jenny Shaw in charge of the programme again you are sure to have a good time in good company!

We would like to extend our thanks to everyone who has supported this season of talks. This would not be possible without the efforts of volunteers from the Chilterns Group and we would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed.

Richard Birch and Jenny Shaw

YOUR PLANT & PRODUCE MARKET NEEDS YOU!

Sunday 17 May (11am-1pm)
Great Missenden Memorial Centre



On Sunday 17 May we are holding our main fundraising event of the year, and we look forward to the participation of all our supporters.

We have decided to come back to Great Missenden, as the car parking situation at College Lake was becoming very difficult due to the ever-increasing popularity of the reserve and visitor centre on summer weekends.

The hall and display area at Gt Missenden also give us more options for staging additional sales activities using the large indoor space, while we use the small hall car park for plant display and sales. The large public car park is available free on Sundays for all comers.

The main requirements are, first, a large number of **donated plants to sell**, as these are always at the heart of the event; second, a good supply of **home produce** - cakes, jams, pickles and biscuits - which brings in a good stream of income and looks very attractive; and third, an **enthusiastic team of helpers** to engage the public and move the stock.



Many of our regulars have already told us they are ready to support the Trust again in May, and **we appeal to new people to join the team and enjoy the fun of the occasion**. We have a few key volunteers to handle the reception and pricing of plants, but they need support from extra hands to help customers make their choices and, in some cases, carry purchases to their cars.

We are also looking for help with the coffee bar we will set up in the hall, and some of the stalls we wish to have inside to widen customer choice - such as a table for small bric-a-brac, a variety of craft offerings (we have two so far), and stalls selling second-hand books and raffle tickets.

Fortunately, our friends Judi and Bryan Fisher, will be coming with the Work Aid van selling refurbished tools, and they are always happy to recycle old garden and other tools that are cluttering up your shed or garage.

There are jobs for everyone - all of us can make a contribution to the work of BBOWT raising money through the market. In the past, we have had up to 200 people coming to buy, so there should be plenty going on!

Julie and I are managing the event this year so please just email or phone us with how you would like to help - from early on putting up the gazebos and marshalling the cars, to supplying plants or produce and perhaps running a stall inside.

Incidentally, any unsold plants and books will go to College Lake or Lindengate at the end of the day so nothing will be wasted.

Finally, please do all you can to promote the event - through your local community media, gardening clubs, and by sharing our flyer (below) with friends on social media.

For any queries, contact richardbirch60@yahoo.com, or phone me or Julie on 01296 624511.

Richard and Julie Birch



COME AND JOIN US...

In ten years at Gr Missenden, we have raised £22,000 and had a lot of fun!

[Click here to download and share the flyer](#)

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

We are covering topics from around the county to encourage members to spread their wings. The Trust's reserves north of Aylesbury have year-round interest but are less visited, so please explore them and support the hard work of local staff and volunteers.

We are grateful for everyone's contributions to the newsletter.

If you have ideas for the autumn issue, please submit them by 24 July 2026 to:
juliebirch60@yahoo.com

To be put on the mailing list for this newsletter please email:
membership@bbowt.org.uk

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Views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust.

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Events

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Volunteering

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