

THE CHILTERN NEWSLETTER

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

Issue 113 Autumn/Winter 2026



Autumn path, College Lake

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 next edition, covering April to August 2027, please send your news, photos and features to juliebirch60@yahoo.com by 10 March 2027.

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 Autumn/Winter issue

This edition brings you updates on your favourite Chilterns reserves and additional reports on the wealth of invertebrates and wetland breeding birds at College Lake. Particularly notable is Mick Jones's piece tracing the development of the Extension of Dancersend starting with the purchase of three fields in 1999, then going through the various stages in reversion to chalk downland, plus the innovative cutting of the scrapes to favour chalk flora that was largely lost to ploughing during WWII, or lying dormant in the seed bank. Twenty-five years later, 'The Extension' is one of the most remarkable features of all the conservation work carried out in the Chilterns and one of the jewels in BBOWT's crown. This project has been led by Mick and Mark Vallance, backed up by the whole of the Trust's Bucks conservation team and supported, of course, by local volunteers. No wonder that wheatears are among the upland birds that have decided this is a choice place to rest and forage on their long migrations.

Getting into scrapes at Dancersend

In 1999 BBOWT had the chance to buy three fields adjacent to Dancersend Reserve that had been ploughed up during the Second World War to grow crops. The idea was this Extension to the reserve would be restored to the sort of flower and insect rich chalk grassland it had once been, and in the process would become an additional refuge for many of the vulnerable species hanging on in this part of the Chilterns.

We had a free hand to try whatever management approaches might deliver this vision. But was it really feasible and how long would it take? The main challenge would be the increased nutrients in the layer of topsoil after nearly 50 years of growing cereals and non-native grasses. These conditions would favour the more vigorous grasses, thistles and nettles and give little chance for the more delicate chalk grassland species to re-establish.

The first 10 years were spent refencing, establishing a grazing programme using cattle, monitoring the rather limited wildflowers, soil testing and carrying out re-seeding trials with expert input from researchers at Reading University. Eventually, in 2010 we were able to begin the restoration process as part of BBOWT's Chilterns Chalk Grassland Project funded by WREN Biodiversity Action and Natural England.

The middle and lower fields were re-seeded with a mix of wildflowers typical of this part of the Chilterns. But what about the high nutrient levels possibly inhibiting the establishment of the special, more exacting species of traditional chalk downland? This is where our secret weapon came in - the chalk scrape! Some areas were excavated to expose bare chalk with the richer topsoil shaped into surrounding banks and covered with chalky subsoil. These scrapes and banks were profiled to create a variety of micro-habitats in terms of slope and exposure to sun and shelter, hopefully providing a range of niches to suit all the different plants and insects we wanted to re-colonise. The chalk scrapes and banks were then sown with seed collected elsewhere on the reserve and from neighbouring ancient grassland that

had escaped the plough, with a particular emphasis on the larval food plants of butterflies and moths we hoped to attract.

Now, 25 years on, we can finally celebrate the initial success of this, literally ground-breaking, project. Rare and scarce chalk grassland plants are firmly established, including Chiltern gentian, slender bedstraw, meadow clary and basil thyme. More typical flowers like marjoram, wild basil, clustered bellflower, small scabious, yellow-wort, common centaury and both wild and large thyme are abundant. Common spotted, pyramidal and greater butterfly orchids have also appeared. Of particular interest given the original aims, the key butterfly foodplants bird's-foot trefoil, kidney vetch and horseshoe vetch are now present in sufficient quantities to support their respective blue butterflies - common blue, which colonised in the early days, small blue, which took around six years to turn up and start breeding, and finally chalkhill blue, which has made a triumphant appearance this year. Female chalkhill blues have recently been observed laying eggs in patches of horseshoe vetch, boding well for a new Chilterns colony.

I think "getting into scrapes" has turned out to be a very positive experience at Dancersend.



L: Volunteers working on scrapes, and R: male chalkhill blue at Dancersend Extension

Mick Jones, Volunteer Warden

Bacombe Hill Reserve

The early hot weather in May sadly held back the orchids on Bacombe Hill this year. The spotted orchids seemed particularly affected, being much smaller than normal, and finally flowering about 10 to 12 days later than usual. We did, however, have a good show of white helleborines with a grouping of more than a dozen appearing either side of a beech tree just above the hollow way, alongside the Ridgeway. These first appeared last year in an area that has benefited from the regular mows and hard work by the volunteers clearing the brambles and dogwood.



By way of compensation for the poor show of spotted orchids, we had 3 bee orchids bloom this year, when normally we are lucky to get one. Sadly, one was nibbled by a rabbit or a deer, and one was picked by someone and discarded a few yards away on the very morning of the Bacombe Hill reserve visit. This particular bee orchid is always at risk as it blooms right by a junction of the Ridgeway and a main footpath on the reserve and so is extremely obvious to passers-by.

The reserve visit led by myself and my colleague Steve Thompson on 29 May was blessed with fine weather and 5 visitors enjoyed an amble around the hill. As well as being told the history/geography and archaeology of the site, we enjoyed the fairy flax, squinancywort, twayblades, rock rose and various other chalkland flowers in bloom. The absolute highlight of the walk came whilst showing the visitors the junipers; in front of us, on a sun-drenched branch were at least a dozen of the rare juniper shield bugs, obviously mating. And while we watched, more were flying in over our shoulders to join the party! These endangered shield bugs are one of the reasons Bacombe has its SSSI status, and in 9 years of volunteering up there I have only ever seen 2 of them, so to see so many at one time like this was a really positive reward for all the hard work the volunteers put in, taking care of the junipers.

I have heard it reported that this year is a very good year for butterflies. The evidence I see on Bacombe certainly seems to back that theory up. Common blue, holly blue, small heath, painted lady, speckled wood, small skippers, large skippers, brimstones, commas, painted ladies and marbled whites all showing in good numbers so far. As I write this (22 July) I'm waiting to see exactly what fritillaries are on the wing on the top ridge - the little so-and-so's won't settle for me to get a good look at them.

There has been a profusion of wildflowers this year; the regular mow is starting to get on top of the dogwood and brambles, and areas that were once covered in shrub are now starting to stay shrub-free. The contractor with the robo mower has been up on the hill in the past few days cutting 'mosaics' to knock the dogwood back and the cows have been grazing away since late May. Although the poor things are retreating to the woods during the heat of the day and coming out to graze very early or late, so I only really see them as I'm walking my dog up there when there are few people around.

Sadly, we have had a number of fires and BBQs on top of the burial mound which are burning a deep scar into the mound and require the regular removal of discarded bottles, cans and disposable tin foil BBQ trays. With the ground being so dry there is a constant worry that a wildfire might break out. But I am enjoying the weather too much to pray for rain! This spring and summer it's been an absolute joy to be up there on the Hill.

Paul Niddler, Reserve Warden

Finemere Wood

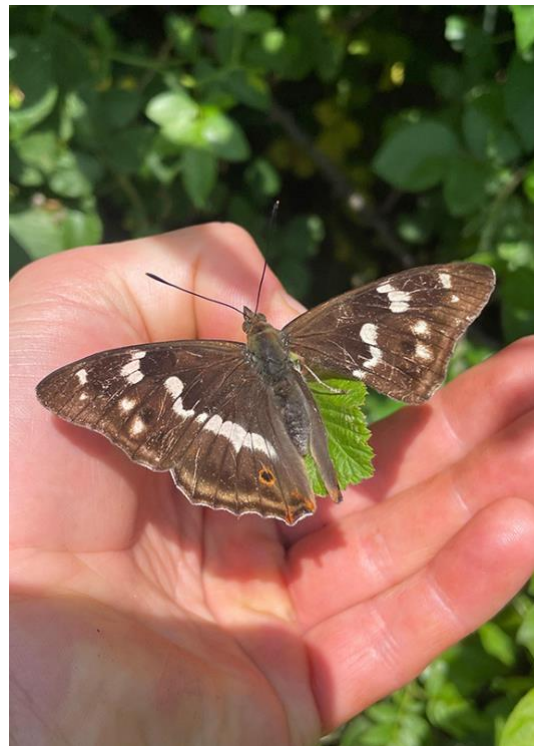
Finemere Wood is crisp and dry, the grass brittle and brown. Crevasses open in the rock-hard ground. Extreme heat and a dearth of rain are taking their toll: flowers wither and struggle to produce nectar. A carpet of Devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) lies parched, its leaves limp and blooms scarce. A late-flowering species on which many invertebrates depend, it has really taken a blasting this year.

The volunteers are battling the elements too, working through all but the most extreme temperatures. They repair fences, replace waymarkers, scythe and brush-cut rides and paths, and rake up the debris left by the tractor.

At the heart of the wood, Long Close Meadow, an ancient pasture has been grazed for centuries. But for several years there have been no animals to help maintain this precious habitat. Its sprawling boundary fence had fallen into disrepair, with rotten posts and fallen trees dragging down the wire. The volunteers have now restored it, its line once again weaving through trees and scrub. The cows can return to do their magic.

Then there is the purple emperor, elusive and ethereal - it spends much of July high in the woodland canopy, feeding on tree sap and aphid honeydew. But a taste for salts draws it down occasionally, to dung or even human sweat.

One worker, apparently carrying just the right aroma, found himself with three-quarters of a purple emperor in his hand. Remarkably, the butterfly was spotted again a couple of weeks later, seemingly managing well with its handicap. Unless, of course, such afflictions are commonplace in Finemere Wood.



L: Volunteers repairing fencing, and R: Purple emperor butterfly

HS2 works continue, but access to Finemere Wood remains open. There are numerous road closures in the area, however, so check your route before visiting.

Charlotte Karmali, Reserve Warden

College Lake Reserve - Summer Update

The past few months have been as busy as ever at College Lake. Throughout spring and early summer, the islands on the marsh were alive with nesting black-headed gulls, lapwings and geese, greeting visitors with a chorus of squawks, whistles and honks. Before the drought took hold, the meadows were awash with colour, and it has felt like a particularly good year for butterflies, with marbled whites and ringlets taking to the wing in impressive numbers.

As I write this in August, the sights and sounds of the reserve have changed dramatically. With very little rainfall, much of the colour has drained from the meadows, leaving a sea of yellow and brown stretching across the landscape. The chalk grassland crunches underfoot, and many plants look as though they have been scorched by the relentless heat. We desperately need rain!

It is not all doom and gloom, however. Our nature reserves remain vital sanctuaries for wildlife during these challenging conditions. Well-managed habitats support healthier soils, greater plant diversity and increased resilience to drought, ensuring there are still valuable sources of nectar available. The deep root systems of many wildflowers help them continue flowering through dry periods, while also providing shade and shelter for small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

The hot weather has also affected visitor numbers, with attendance lower than during the same period last year. To help people continue enjoying the reserve, we ran several successful events during the cooler hours of the day. Following their popularity last year, our Dawn Chorus and Glow-worm Walks returned, with extra sessions added to give more people the opportunity to experience the reserve at these magical times.

We also hosted a number of externally facilitated events, including a Queer Ecology guided walk and a British Naturism evening, which raised funds for the British Heart Foundation.

If you would like to find out more about our upcoming events, visit [BBOWT Events](#).

Emma Routledge

Upcoming Events at College Lake

In terms of upcoming events, this [Eventbrite page](#) is the best place to look. Here are some of our highlights...

New Term, New Wildlife Clubs!

Join us from first steps to teenagers to discover College Lake's wildlife, learn new skills and make new friends. Our wildlife clubs are:

Nature Tots – for pre-schoolers

On the following Tuesdays and Thursdays:

15 & 17 September

6 & 8 October

3 & 5 November

8 & 10 December

Nature Explorers – for 4-8 year olds

On the following Saturdays:

19 September

10 October

7 November

12 December

Young Rangers – for 8-11 year olds

On the following Saturdays:

26 September

17 October

14 November

5 December

Teen Rangers – for 11-17 year olds

On the following Saturdays:

26 September

17 October

14 November

5 December

If you're looking for an activity for the whole family, why not join us for a [stargazing evening on Saturday 19 December](#) with UK Astronomy? We'll be learning about what we can see in the skies above and having a go at stargazing with the naked eye, as well as using a range of telescopes.

College Lake will also have plenty going on over half-term, with some autumnal activities for children, including the **'When Things Go Bump in the Night'** trail, available to purchase at the visitor centre.

For adults, we'll have a range of guided walks and talks throughout the winter months, including relaxation in nature walks, beginner fungi walks, and local geology walks and talks.

Please note that all events, except trails, require booking in advance at www.bbowt.org.uk/events.

Katharine Walley, Visitor Engagement Manager

College Lake breeding and visiting birds on the Lake and Marsh (April to June)

The black-headed gull colony has been the most obvious evidence of breeding, with 230 young raised, an important contribution to their numbers as this is an amber-listed species. The common terns may have felt a bit pushed out but had nine or more chicks all the same, and once more the oystercatchers did well. Unusually, little grebes nested this year, raising three young. Lapwing nests counted in mid-April included 12 adults and three chicks, being predated by the gulls. Probably two redshank nests, one of the adults being a bird that was nesting here for the seventh consecutive year. The most chicks counted was four.

Other interesting visitors have included lesser scaup, hanging around with a female tufted duck, pochard, whimbrel, Mediterranean gull, common sandpiper, cattle egret and Egyptian goose.

Richard Birch, with thanks to the Bucks Bird Club reporting system with observations mainly by Terry and Adrian

Helping communities away from reserves / Amersham Heritage Day

The nearest Trust reserves to where I live in Amersham, are College Lake and Dancersend, a good half hour's drive away. However, BBOWT also contributes to the maintenance and health of Amersham's natural landscape with its expertise and practical help.

A good example is its contribution to restoring the Misbourne. For many years, parts of the river had become overgrown, heavily silted and unnaturally straightened, reducing the variety of habitats available for wildlife. Working in partnership with Affinity Water, the Environment Agency, the Wild Trout Trust and local volunteers, BBOWT has helped restore the river to a healthier, more natural condition.

At Barn Meadow and nearby Pondwicks Meadow in Old Amersham, restoration work included opening up heavily shaded sections of the river by carefully managing trees, creating gravel riffles to improve water flow, constructing earth berms to encourage the river to meander naturally, and creating backwaters that provide valuable habitats for fish, amphibians and aquatic insects. These changes have increased the diversity of the river and improved conditions for species such as brown trout, mayflies and water voles.

BBOWT has also led efforts to control invasive American mink, one of the principal predators of the endangered water vole. Volunteers regularly monitor the river using specially designed mink rafts, helping to protect one of Buckinghamshire's few remaining water vole populations.

Sunday 6 September is Amersham Heritage Day and the Chilterns Group will be there again, raising awareness of the work BBOWT does both on its reserves and in the community - you'd be surprised just how many people do not know of BBOWT's existence. We will have wildlife displays and quizzes which, looking back over past years, interest adults as much as they excite their children! It's a huge event which takes over the whole of the High Street in the Old Town and, the Council tells me, attracts some 8,000 people. We will be there all day, talking to people about nature on our doorstep while a Wildlife Trust recruiter enrolls new members at the stand next door.

The event runs from 11:30am to 5:30pm - please come and say hello.



L: Wild Trout Trust volunteers in the Misbourne, and R: John by the BBOWT stand in Amersham

John Catton, Chilterns Group Community Events

Dancersend Guided Walks 2026

Sunday 26 April, 10:00-12:30 Dancersend: It's wildlife and history

There were 10 attendees, meeting at the Waterworks. We investigated the origins and development of the Rothschild-inspired pumping station (1886) and the previous chalk quarrying and lime production activities on the site, traced some of the associated industrial archaeology and explored the rich wildlife habitats that have been left. Primroses and bluebells were putting on a stunning display, and a range of typical spring flowers were pointed out, including a very early fly orchid. Orange-tips, a green hairstreak and holly blues were amongst the butterflies seen.

Sunday 24 May, 14:00-16:30. Dancersend: wildlife specialities and secrets

We explored the variety of habitats and their special plants and invertebrates. There were 19 attendees on the day with at least four bookings made late on the previous day. Two people had dropped out earlier. This turned out to be too large a group given the sensitivity of gathering around some scarce and delicate plant species. It was also a very hot day and progress was slow given the presence of at least two participants with mobility issues. I will limit these types of events in future to a maximum of 14 people and strengthen the messages about the terrain and mobility levels expected.

We tracked down five species of orchids in flower, including a group of spectacularly large white helleborines in deep shade, and other Dancersend specialities like wood vetch, meadow clary and the lady's-mantle *Alchemilla xanthochlora*. Mining bees were investigated and the remarkable bee *Osmia bicolor* was observed gathering long pieces of dry grass to build a 'compost heap' over the empty snail shell in which she had laid eggs.

Sunday 28 June, 10:00-12:30 Dancersend Extension: a refuge for rare chalk species

This was a very pleasant and successful event with eight very receptive attendees, despite a sudden unexpected rain shower halfway through and our grazier having failed to remove the rather excitable herd of cows (as promised!). Most of the group were reasonably well informed and interested in chalk grassland plants and butterflies and we were able to tick off rare species like slender bedstraw, basil thyme and meadow clary as well as a range of species benefiting from the low nutrient conditions of the excavated 'scrapes' such as squinancywort, field madder, viper's-bugloss and the first leaves of Chiltern gentians that will be blooming from late August.



Chiltern gentians at Dancersend Extension

The group very much enjoyed a surprise extra section of the walk when I explained the different geological formations exposed by the chalk scrapes and showed a selection of fossils associated with these including a form of sponge which currently remains a mystery. Walking through the scrub plantation, we spotted a whitethroat collecting food. Visiting the pond, three species of dragon/damselflies having dog-fights over the water added interest. I had very positive feedback including one person wanting to join our Dancersend work party volunteers list.

Mick Jones, Reserve Warden

Invertebrates at College Lake

A daytime survey and a moth event were held on 4-5 July by the [Buckinghamshire Invertebrate Group](#) (BIG). Here are Neil Fletcher's notes:

Daytime meeting: we recorded 122 species comprising 65 butterflies and moths, 16 true flies, 10 bees and wasps, 8 spiders and gall mites, 8 dragon and damselflies, 6 beetles, 3 bugs, 3 grasshoppers & crickets, and 3 other orders.

- The dance fly *Tachydromia smithi* is a nationally rare species (RDBK) found at very few UK sites.
- The Basil Blotch-miner *Stephensia brunnichella* is a Nationally Scarce (Nb) species with less than 20 Bucks records, this may be the first record of the leafmine.
- Two leafmines on Dogwood were seen, caused by Dogwood Cutter *Antispila petryi* and Shining Dogwood Cutter *Antispila metallella*, there are not many Bucks records for either.
- Three clearwing moths were attracted to pheromone lures, all of which are associated with willows. Sallow Clearwing *Synanthedon flaviventris*, Red-tipped Clearwing *Synanthedon formicaeformis* and Lunar Hornet Moth *Sesia bembeciformis*.

Moth event: This was very well attended, helped significantly by volunteer Stephen directing/encouraging people to come and have a look. We recorded 115 species comprising 104 moths, 3 beetles, 1 true fly, 1 bug, 1 Darwin wasp and one dragonfly! There were a few things of interest:

- The Nationally Scarce (Na) moth Bartsia Straw *Gynnidomorpha luridana* appears to be only the second Bucks record.
- There was a large number of the Nationally Scarce (Nb) Rosy Knot-horn *Oncocera semirubella* (aka Rhubarb & Custard).
- At least two of the migrant Small Mottled Willow *Spodoptera exigua* were recorded.
- There were thousands of the small caddis fly *Leptocerus tineiformis*. I've never seen so many caddisflies!

Neil Fletcher



Oncocera semirubella (aka Rhubarb & Custard)

Editor: A truly astonishing variety of ‘bugs’ meticulously recorded by the members of BIG. In addition, Katharine Walley wrote that sightings by visitors in early August included clouded yellow butterflies, Jersey tiger moths and lesser emperor dragonflies. These three are signs of climate change, as the warmer weather brings more of these European migrants to our shores.

Enjoy our new season of talks at Great Missenden

We start our programme on:

Tues 15 September with popular local volunteer reserve warden Phil Townsend, who has cared for Aston Clinton Ragpits for many years. He will be showcasing the superb flora of the reserve, which of course holds an exceptional variety of orchids.

Tues 20 October Nick Marriner of the Chilterns National Landscape will be our second speaker. He will explain how ‘Farming Clusters’ help nature recovery in the Chilterns as farmers and volunteers collaborate to preserve habitats and species. Nick is a lifelong birder so has a special interest in how we can assist the recovery of scarce farmland birds, like yellowhammer, corn bunting and skylark, all of which were once common.

Tues 17 November We are happy to celebrate the return of John Morris, closely involved with The Royal Forestry Society and The Chilterns Society, to talk about the ancient Hockeridge and Bottom Woods in particular.

Tues 15 December. Our final meeting of the year will be another opportunity to see and hear John Tyler, on one of his favourite subjects ‘The World of Fungi’ so we can be sure of some superlative photography.

All our talks are open to everyone and are held in the excellent facilities at Great Missenden Memorial Centre (HP16 9AE). There is free parking in the adjoining Borough Fields car park, off Link Road. Admission is £6 and includes refreshments and a free raffle ticket.

Welcoming three new volunteers to the Group - Phoebe, Saffa and Sandra



Phoebe Alder answered our call for help with our advertising by designing a striking flyer for the May Plant Market, and so helped the Chilterns Team achieve a fantastic profit of £1,150. Though she lives in West Berkshire and studies in Manchester, she is happy to go on giving us the benefit of her creative input from time to time while navigating the second year of her biology degree course.



Saffa Rais of High Wycombe says: 'I'm Saf, I'm a master's student starting my MSc Global Sustainability in London in September. I have a background in research and politics, but I am now shifting towards the energy and environmental sustainability sector. Aside from this, I am also into hiking with my next goal being to complete the Yorkshire Three Peaks in 2027. I've spent a lot of time hiking around local nature reserves and now I'm excited to be joining the BBOWT Chilterns Group, with the aim of contributing to the great work they have been doing.'



I'm **Sandra Rooney**, a resident of Rickmansworth and a regular Dancersend Reserve volunteer. I'm now turning my hand to helping Chilterns Group at events like the evening talks, the Plant Market and the September Amersham publicity stand so I look forward to meeting a lot of Chilterns supporters and other members of the community.

Richard Birch, BBOWT Chilterns Group Publicity

Orchid count for Aston Clinton Ragpits

The great British weather was not kind to us for the annual orchid count. However, in spite of the incessant drizzle we had a good turn-out of intrepid volunteers.

The season had been slightly late so we were able to enjoy seeing the usually early flowering species in good numbers. In fact this year was to see the best ever numbers of white helleborine and greater butterfly-orchid and both species look to be spreading into other parts of the reserve.



Greater butterfly-orchid

The drizzle did not let up but we valiantly continued and managed to take a census of most of the reserve. The numbers were not as high as last year but still an impressive tally overall. We also noticed that the yellow hay-rattle is spreading and cropping up in new areas, a good sign as its growth slightly suppresses some of the more aggressive grass species from getting the upper hand. One bonus of the damp weather was that there were plenty of Roman snails to be seen. They love to roam all over the reserve and have no problems in scaling the steepest of slopes to reach new pastures!

Over the winter the main hedge that traverses the reserve was laid by a team of volunteers and now looks impressive as it has filled out with this year's spring shoots. That should now be a more attractive habitat in itself for nesting birds, mammals and invertebrates.

In the recently coppiced area we have seen some interesting plants colonising; wild strawberry, ground ivy, wood sanicle and sweet woodruff. More exciting than that is the emergence of some broad-leaved helleborine spikes which will hopefully flower later in the year. This part of the reserve has also produced some nice sightings of green hairstreak and holly blue in April/May, not to mention some nice long horned moths.

Also in the spring we had the first sighting of a grass snake for some time so it is good to know these beautiful reptiles are still inhabiting the scrub edges.

Anyway, the final figures from the count were as follows - a big thank you to all those volunteers who not only braved the wet weather but also worked so hard during the work parties to help conserve this beautiful reserve.

fragrant - 11613
twayblade - 7497
common spotted - 4138
greater butterfly - 297
pyramidal - 410
white helleborine - 130
bee - 4
grand total - 24089

Let's hope the weather improves so we can enjoy those later summer flowers and that the butterflies can be tempted out!

Phil Townsend, Reserve Warden

An autumn walk at Aston Clinton Ragpits, Sunday 27 September

Please join the warden at 10am for a 2-hour guided visit looking for fungi in particular.

Book at www.bbowt.org.uk/events

That Eclipse. Phoebe Alder was busy at Thatcham Reserve and got an excellent photo thanks to the loan of free glasses from Newbury Astronomical Society. I tried the colander method in my back garden but my results were useless so I'll have to wait till the next one!

Richard Birch, BBOWT Chilterns Group



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 next issue, please submit them by 10 March 2027 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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