



e-Newsletter

February 2025, Issue 15

Welcome

In this edition, we share the remarkable sighting by Simon Booker and Paul Rainsden of a local, record-breaking, flock of linnets. We delve into the pivotal role Oxfordshire is playing in the national Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), showcasing how our region is shaping the future of sustainable land management. In addition, we explore the concerning decline in insect numbers and explain why, last year, Dragonflies bucked this worrying trend. You'll also find an update on all that's being going on at White Hill Quarry, an informative article on the challenges posed by non-native plant species in the wild and a roundup of SSWCG's key achievements over the past three years.

Before you read on, a quick reminder that *Rhiannon Young*, a renowned ecologist and captivating speaker from Wild Oxfordshire, will give a talk on '*Gardening For Wildlife*' at the *Perch & Pike on Sunday 2nd March at 6.30pm*. No tickets required; please just turn up for what promises to be a fascinating and fun session.

A schedule of the rest of our events for the first six months of the year can be found on the website - sign up [here](#) to express interest and we'll keep you in the loop with final details.



Linnet flock over South Stoke

Simon Booker



Image courtesy of [Simon Booker](#)

SSWCG asked experienced local Birder Paul Rainsden to undertake a monthly bird species count around the parish. Paul invited me to accompany him on his first walk up Postman's Path to Cameron's Copse and back down past Chalkhouse Quarry to Little Stoke slipway, along the Thames path and back into South Stoke Village .

As we crossed Postman's Path, Paul spotted an enormous flock of linnets. While not a murmuration (those dramatic, shape-shifting flights seen in starlings), Paul - who has over 50 years of birding experience - was impressed by the sheer size of the flock. Naturally, I grabbed my camera and captured photos along the way, particularly near the Old Barn where a smaller flock landed on the brow of a field. You can view all the images online at [StokerPix](#).

After consulting with county recorders, Paul learned that the largest previously recorded linnet flock in Oxfordshire in 2024 was 300. We knew we'd seen far more...

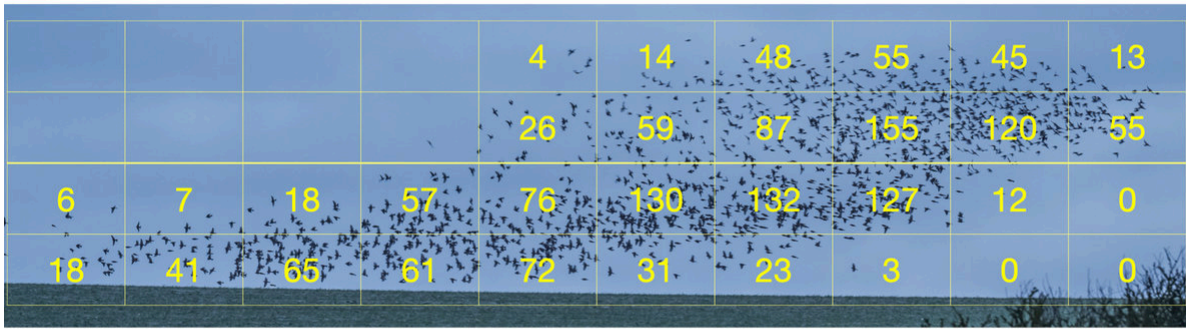
Counting this flock, however, proved a challenge. Using a photo grid and Google Sheets, we painstakingly tallied the numbers and were astonished to find the final total: 1,561 Linnets!

During our three-hour walk, we identified 46 bird species - a testament to Paul's encyclopedic knowledge of bird calls and flight patterns. Forty-six species may seem like a high number, but we were disappointed that several winter species we would normally expect to see were either recorded in small numbers or absent altogether. For example, there has been a notable decline in Mistle Thrush numbers in recent years, and none were recorded in this transect. Similarly, Meadow Pipits were observed only in small numbers. No House Sparrows, Lapwings, or Rooks were recorded; an unusual and perhaps concerning absence.

As someone who has spent six years photographing and observing wildlife, I still find birding alongside an expert humbling. However, my thermal camera—a recent tech purchase—helped spot a couple of species even Paul might have missed. There's hope for me yet!

Linnet Flock - South Stoke - 4th Jan 2025

Spot (Paul Rainsden), Photo (Simon Booker)



1,561 Birds !



Help shape Oxfordshire's nature recovery



Residents, landowners, businesses, farmers, and organisations across Oxfordshire are being called to action to help restore the county's natural environment.

In 2023, Oxfordshire County Council was named by the government as the authority responsible for leading nature recovery in our area. As part of this vital mission, the council is working with local communities and organisations to deliver the **Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)** – a roadmap for tackling biodiversity loss and revitalising our natural spaces. SSWCG has participated in the consultation process and contributed to the LNRS map.

Why Nature Recovery matters

In the words of Councillor Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of Oxfordshire County Council: *“Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and biodiversity is under constant pressure from habitat loss, climate change, pollution, invasive species, and overuse of natural resources. A healthy natural environment isn't just good for wildlife – it's essential for human wellbeing...Here in Oxfordshire, we are lucky to have ancient woodlands, chalk grasslands, rivers, and wetlands. These ecosystems support a diverse range of species and play a vital role in our lives, from providing clean water and improving air quality to protecting our homes from floods. But without positive action, we risk losing them forever.”*

How the LNRS will help

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy is a plan to reverse the decline of biodiversity in Oxfordshire. It will identify key priorities and actions to improve and connect habitats across the county, helping wildlife flourish while delivering benefits for people and communities.

This strategy will also highlight areas where targeted efforts can make the greatest impact, creating a network of thriving habitats. By improving our natural spaces, Oxfordshire can look forward to cleaner air and water, greater carbon storage, reduced flood risks, and a healthier environment for future generations.

Partnerships driving positive change

The LNRS is being developed and implemented by Oxfordshire County Council in collaboration with local organisations, including the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, Natural England, the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, Wild Oxfordshire, and many more.

Local groups are already making a difference. Katherine Chesson, Director of Community Action Groups Oxfordshire, highlights the inspiring work happening on the ground: *“Community groups across Oxfordshire are creating habitats for wildlife by planting hedgerows and orchards, making wildflower areas, and even digging new ponds. These efforts are transforming urban and rural spaces, connecting people with nature and supporting biodiversity.”*

Estelle Bailey, Chief Executive of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, has said: *“Protecting and restoring wildlife habitats is essential for nature recovery. By working beyond the boundaries of our reserves and linking habitats together, we can create a truly connected landscape where nature thrives.”*

A future rich in nature

Improving Oxfordshire's natural habitats isn't just about wildlife – it's about building a sustainable, healthier future for us all. Cleaner rivers, thriving woodlands, and connected

sustainable, healthier future for us all. Cleaner rivers, thriving woodlands, and connected wetlands offer benefits that go far beyond biodiversity, underpinning the health and wellbeing of every community in the county.

How you can get involved

There's still so much work to do, and every small action counts. Whether it's planting wildflowers in your garden, supporting local conservation projects, or simply learning more about the amazing biodiversity in Oxfordshire, you can be part of this vital effort.

Together, we can ensure a future where nature and people thrive hand in hand.

More information about the LNRS and ongoing projects can be found [here](#).

Curious about the process? Watch this [video](#) to learn more and discover how Oxfordshire is leading the way in nature recovery.



Insects decline but Dragonflies thrive

John Lindley



Image courtesy of John Lindley - with thanks

Many of us will have noticed that Insect numbers in the Summer of 2024 were well down compared to previous years. Butterfly Conservation reported that numbers of Butterflies recorded in their 2024 survey were the lowest since the survey began, and other surveys of wild Bees, Moths and other insects have also shown sharp declines. One notable exception to this alarming trend was Dragonflies and Damselflies - so why did they do well in a year that saw dramatic declines in so many other types of insects?

Long term decline in insect numbers has been linked to three factors:

The most important is **habitat loss** - the UK has lost over 97% of its wildflower meadows since 1945, coppicing in woodland is generally not managed in the way it used to be (resulting in a lack of open "glades") and large areas of wetland have been drained for development. Many farmers are now replanting hedgerows, but we are still a long way from replacing all those that were lost.

Secondly, **climate change** is having a significant impact. Many of our native species of insect need a "cold shock" - a period of consistent cold weather - over the winter months, and recent winters have not provided this. We have also seen in recent years the arrival in the UK of many species from further south in Europe.

And thirdly, there is no doubt that the **ongoing use of insecticides and the pollution of our waterways** with untreated sewage has an ongoing impact.

Many scientists believe that the answer lies in the weather during Winter and Spring. Winter was overall very mild and wet, and Spring was also extremely wet, and was the warmest recorded in over 350 years in Central England. These weather patterns also occurred across most of Western and Central Europe, and similar sharp declines were recorded in countries including France, Croatia, and Poland.

The one area of Europe to receive more "normal" amounts of rainfall in this period was Spain and Portugal, and in these countries the reduction in numbers was noticeable, but not dramatic.

But why were Dragonfly numbers not impacted? The answer lies in their life cycle. Dragonfly larvae are aquatic - they live in ponds, ditches and rivers - and it doesn't matter how wet or dry the weather is if you live underwater!

With the winter of 2024/25 being another unusually wet season, there is concern that insect numbers in 2025 will again be badly impacted.



White Hill Quarry

SSWCG manages this nature site for the Parish Council. Our aim is to develop the site to improve biodiversity, whilst creating a pleasant place for people to enjoy.

Since late summer, we have been cutting and clearing away grass and debris from the grassland areas. We've also removed some scrub. This helps create conditions that support the increasing number of orchids.

We decided to lay some more hedges to thicken the base of the rather thin hedgeline. This is to encourage thicker growth lower down, which provides better cover for wildlife, especially birds and mammals. We have used the cuttings to create a substantial "dead hedge" which provides habitat for a further range of species.

A wonderful team from the Wallingford Green Gym has been engaged in all of this. They have used willow binders from the Ewelme Watercress beds, and Hazel stakes from White Hill Quarry and from a coppice at Stoke Row. The enthusiasm and skill of the Wallingford team has been very impressive! They seem to enjoy working there and we love having them!



We have also planted a few more trees, including a few apple trees, to provide a food source for the many insects, birds, and possibly people enjoying the site.

When the Amenities Charity decided that the wooden sign at the entrance to the Rec became a bit rotten, we helped remove it and it was taken up to White Hill Quarry to be re-purposed into a new bench. Darren from Goring Logs donated some logs for supports and now we have a splendid second bench up there.

We would like to thank South Oxfordshire District Council, and Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers in particular, for generous Grant support for our work at White Hill Quarry and elsewhere.

White Hill Quarry is a small, peaceful wildlife site at the top of the first hill out of the village on the Woodcote Road, opposite the Postman's Path - a short walk from the village. It's right next to the road, go and have a look! And if you'd like to join our team of volunteers, please email: contact@southstokewildlife.org



Invasive plants: what you need to know

Some plants brought to the UK for gardens have turned into serious pests. Without natural predators, these invasive species spread fast, crowding out native plants by hogging sunlight, water, and nutrients. They may look pretty or attract bees, but they can wreak havoc on ecosystems, alter soil chemistry, and even damage property.

A recent study found 1,402 non-native plants growing wild in Great Britain, with 108 causing significant harm. Here are three to watch out for:

1. Japanese Knotweed

One of the worst offenders, Japanese Knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*), is also known as Billy Weed or Donkey Rhubarb. Brought from East Asia, it grows rapidly, spreads aggressively, and causes severe damage to buildings and infrastructure.

What it looks like:

- Bamboo-like stems up to 3.5m tall
- Large green leaves and white flowers in summer

Why it's a problem:

It's nearly impossible to kill without professional help and can even lower property values.

Japanese knotweed is of such a great concern, there is a national register of sightings within the UK. There have been a total number of 42,788 sightings within the UK and 27 identified within an RG8 postcode. Further information can be found at

<https://japaneseknotweedagency.co.uk>



2. Giant Hogweed

Giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*), nicknamed "The Hog," can reach 5m tall and has umbrella-shaped white flowers. Native to South Russia and Georgia, it escaped gardens and now thrives in the wild and has been sighted in [Oxfordshire](#)

Be Warned:

Its sap reacts with sunlight to cause severe burns, blisters, and scarring. It's toxic to dogs and can cause serious injuries. Found along riverbanks (like the Thames in South Stoke), it's a danger during spring and summer.

Tip:

Always wear protective clothing when handling this toxic giant!



3. Himalayan Balsam

Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*), also known as Jumping Jack or Policeman's Helmet, spreads explosively. Its pink flowers and seed pods shoot seeds up to 7m away, especially near rivers.

Fast facts:

- Grows up to 3m tall
- Produces 800 seeds per plant, flowering from June to October
- Smothers native plants, dominating habitats

How to manage:

Remove plants before they flower or set seeds—it's illegal to grow or spread this plant under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.



Let's work together to protect our wildlife and keep invasive plants in check. Have you spotted any in your area?



Celebrating three years!

SSWCG have been working hard to make a difference for local wildlife. Here's what we've accomplished so far:

Enhanced habitats:

- Planted nearly 1,000 metres of new conservation hedges to support local wildlife
- Continued to maintain and enhance the White Hill Quarry nature site working alongside the wonderful Wallingford Green Gym. Go and have a look - we're very proud of the laid hedges!
- Planted twenty disease-resistant elm trees around the Parish

Contributed to science:

- Identified nearly 1,500 species around South Stoke
- Submitted 5,400 biodiversity records to the iRecord database, supporting national wildlife monitoring
- Installed Swift nesting boxes to support local colonies and mapped hedgehog sightings to create "hedgehog highways" that expand their range

Involved the community:

- Built a growing online presence with 109 Facebook followers and a regularly updated website
- Published a quarterly e-newsletter, now enjoyed by over 100 subscribers
- Hosted family-friendly events, including bat walks, glow-worm walks, and wildflower identification sessions, as well as hands-on activities for children like pond dipping and bug hunting

Supported local projects:

- Designed plans for a community orchard and gardens at The Park which are now being developed and managed by the Parish Council
- Proposed the restoration of the Lower Marsh and worked alongside partners to keep conservation priorities on track
- Secured grant funding for hedging along Postman's Path and adjacent to the old airfield as well as for trees and bird boxes

Built partnerships:

- Collaborations include the Earth Trust, BBOWT, Butterfly Conservation, and others (see below); all strengthening efforts to protect local wildlife

Over the next year, we plan to:

- Plant 200 more meters of hedging, along with disease-resistant elms and rare Black Poplars
- Install additional Swift nesting boxes to expand colonies
- Continue identifying species and contributing to biodiversity records
- Explore new opportunities to protect and enhance South Stoke's environment

Your input matters:

We're always open to suggestions and would love to hear your thoughts on how we can make an even bigger impact

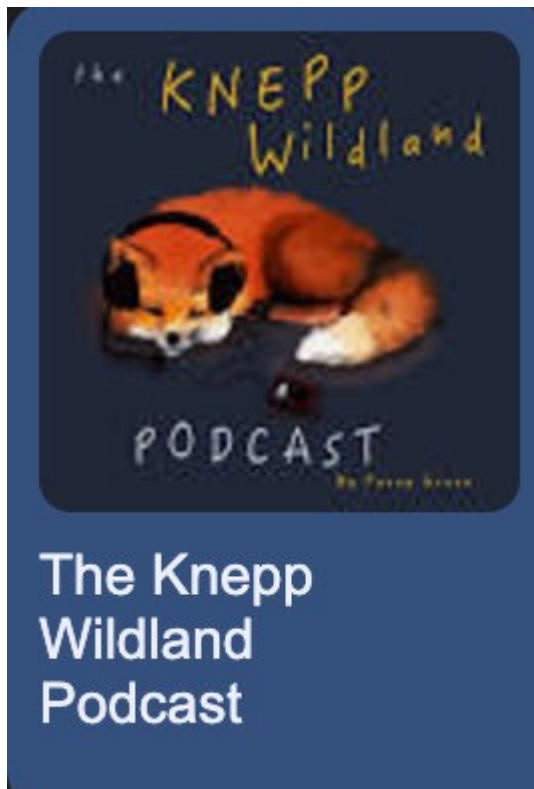
Email: contact@southstokewildlife.org

Visit: www.southstokewildlife.org

Together, we can make a real difference for South Stoke's wildlife



And a couple of podcast recommendations:



Knepp Wildland Podcast

Join Knepp ecologist, Penny Green, and experience some of the wildlife wonders encountered, the secrets uncovered and the remarkable people who are part of the Knepp Wildland project.

Wild About Wellbeing is a podcast by The Wildlife Trusts. Join Rob Gordon and Dom Higgins as they talk about all things to do with nature and health.



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