

Forum News

Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum

The last 19 years – an overview

Craig Blackwell, retired County Ecologist



Photo: Neil Rowntree

One grey morning in January 1991 I started work with Oxfordshire County Council as their first County Ecologist.

Initially, the brief was to focus on the restoration and after-use of mineral workings. As a result, a number of sites where nature conservation is the priority after-use have since been established. Many of these also have the benefit of long-term management agreements as well as some provision for public access.

One area we concentrated on was the Lower Windrush Valley to the south of Witney. This is an area of

major sand and gravel extraction and two nature reserves, at Standlake and Rushy Commons, are now well on the way to becoming important bird sites in the county. Some of the funding secured through the planning process contributed towards Alison Hopewell's post. Over the years she has done a superb job working with landowners, mineral operators and other stakeholders to deliver significant gains on the ground. Other partners, such as the RSPB, have added their expertise particularly in relation to the potential creation and management of reedbed habitats on restored sand and gravel workings. Camilla Burrow will be taking responsibility for

planning and ecology after I leave and I am sure she will enjoy tackling the many challenges which lie ahead.

In the early days another success was the establishment of a network of road verge nature reserves throughout the county. Working closely with a number of local volunteers and experts we surveyed around 80 verges and this was eventually whittled down to around 25 which were marked with 'RVNR' posts and cut annually to maintain their biodiversity interest.

Right from the outset I was also keen to engage with the many organisations and individuals in Oxfordshire with a common interest in nature conservation. Before I arrived there had already been some discussion with the Nature Conservancy Council (that dates it) about preparing a Nature Conservation Strategy for the county. I welcomed the chance to get involved and eventually, in 1993, the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Strategy was published.

It highlighted a number of key objectives around which several working groups coalesced. One key

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ONCF Round up

Cynth Napper,
Community Officer

Bulletin

Our weekly environmental e-bulletin now goes directly to 1150 subscribers, many of whom report that they forward it on to others or use items from it for their parish magazines, etc. More people are sending in items too, which is broadening the bulletin's scope and appeal, and giving it more strength. Please encourage friends and colleagues to sign up.

Local Environment Groups Conference, Spring 2008

This was held at Langtree School, Woodcote, on Saturday 26 April last year, with a visit to Greenmoor Ponds, which are managed by Woodcote Conservation Group, our hosts for the day. Approx 55 delegates attended, from 26 local environment groups/societies. We held workshops on creating a wildflower meadow, moth identification, rare plants, assessing your pond and Wildmap, which is a hand-held computer allowing on-site identification and recording of species. The wildflower meadow workshop was extremely popular, with 20 delegates, but then our speaker was the renowned Charles Flower of Flower Farms.

Local Environment Groups Conference, Saturday 26 September 2009

Perhaps we should add Parish Councils to the title from now on as several joined us this year, a very welcome addition. We were hosted by Wootton Conservation Group in the Village Hall and Primary School in Wootton village, near Woodstock. It was a glorious day and following workshops on 'entomology for botanists, environmental auditing, running your group safely, traditional orchards, wildknowledge,

and species of limestone grassland', the 40 delegates enjoyed a walk around the superb Jubilee Meadows, at the confluence of the rivers Glyme and Dorn.

Conservation Target Areas/ NERC Act

(NERC stands for Natural Environment and Rural Communities) and the NERC Act of November 2006 ushered in both Natural England, and the requirement for local authorities, including parish councils, to 'have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity'.

From a very slow beginning back in 2007 when I sent out hundreds of letters to Parish Councils explaining about both Oxfordshire's new CTA strategy and the NERC Duty and offering a short presentation I am now being kept busy and have given parish-specific talks to about 30 parish council meetings or annual meetings, with at least another eight talks pending in the autumn.

I have been able to help match fund some parishes to meet with an ecologist to discuss what they can do, receiving a comprehensive report to help them make future decisions. Deddington, Horton-cum-Studley and Goring Heath have all had reports. I have also met with Berinsfield Community Services, who do grounds maintenance for 16 parish councils. After giving them the talk so that they could understand what parish councils are being required to do, we discussed the constraints on their team and looked for compromises. I am happy to visit other grounds maintenance teams if any parish councils would like this, just let me know.

Oxfordshire Goes Wild, Saturday 14 March 2009

Our annual event for children to meet with wildlife was held earlier than usual this year to fit in with celebrations for Charles Darwin's bicentenary. It also gave me the opportunity to go global

and bring in some exotic creatures for a change - including a boa constrictor, tarantula, tortoise and tuatara! This went down so well that I will probably celebrate Charles Darwin's bicentenary + 1 next year.

Altogether 18 contributors, bringing bats, owls, pond life, botanical exhibits, a wormery, soil life, as well as exotic animals and even a wonderfully rotting tree kindly gave their time, mostly for free, to let children see wild plants and animals close up and learn about them in a controlled environment. Over 4,100 attended, the largest public event the Oxford University Museum of Natural History has ever known.

Finances

I'm afraid the financial news continues to be bad, probably as for the rest of you working in charity and voluntary organisations. We don't have any significant additional funding secured for the coming year.

Many thanks to those that have supported us this year including:

All our members who pay their annual subscription
Cherwell District Council
Natural England
Oxford County Council
South Oxfordshire District Council
Vale of the White Horse District Council
West Oxfordshire District Council

Plus the recycling efforts of Oxford Instruments for their toner cartridges and Cynth for her aluminium mountain.

Cynth@oncf.org.uk www.oncf.org.uk

Diary Dates

Recorders Conference
27th Feb 2010

Oxfordshire Goes Wild
Natural History Museum
Saturday 20 March 2010, 12 - 4 pm

Movers

Craig Blackwell

Craig Blackwell, County Ecologist for Oxfordshire County Council retired on 2nd October. Camilla Burrow, Ecologist Planner, has been working with Craig at OCC for the last two years and will be taking over as the advisor for biodiversity and landscape issues. Camilla will focus on advising on enhancements in relation to County and District planning policy documents, minerals & waste planning applications and restoration schemes, County Council planning applications and District planning applications of strategic importance within the county.

Camilla.burrow@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Jonathan Durward

Oxfordshire County Council have employed a new member of staff, Jonathan Durward, who is the Protected Species Officer. Jonathan will develop and deliver protected species advice for a range of services within OCC. He will be involved in protected species surveys, assessment of impacts, drawing up mitigation plans and overseeing mitigation works on County Council property such as schools and roads.

Jonathan.durward@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Tom Pocklington

I'm currently studying at Harper Adams University College, doing a BSc(Hons) in Countryside and Environmental Management. Having completed the first two years I am now working for the Cotswold Conservation Board until next summer before returning for my final year. One of my main tasks at the CCB is to produce Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) applications on behalf of landowners within the Cotswolds and specifically within Gloucestershire. Other tasks over the next year will include assisting with the rural skills courses and competitions, working with the Cotswold Way team and carrying out walling surveys as a follow up on the 'Caring for the Cotswolds' project.

Tom.pocklington@cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

Biodiversity Project

2009-2012

Neil Rowntree
Biodiversity Project Manager, ONCF

I began working for ONCF as Biodiversity Project Manager in May 2009. Previously I have worked at environmental education centres in Oxford, the Brecon Beacons, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, as an outdoor learning leader, as well as managing land for nature conservation, and advising schools on wildlife areas

I have been passionate about wildlife and nature conservation since childhood. I have been leading working holidays for the National Trust for twenty years and have volunteered with several local Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB.

My job is to manage the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan, ensuring that Oxfordshire will deliver its 2015 habitat targets (see <http://www.oncf.org.uk/biodiversity/habitats.html>) through the Conservation Target Area (CTA) process. I will be building on the great start with CTAs put in place by my predecessors Tom Butterworth and Rob Davies. Tom has since played a key role in the take up of the CTA approach by the rest of the South-East Region (though they have called them Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs)). See <http://strategy.sebiodiversity.org.uk/pages/habitat-species.html> for more information.

Since starting in post I have been on a whirlwind tour meeting some of the many people working in nature conservation in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire is a fantastic county to be working in with so much going on in nature conservation and I have been impressed by the amount of goodwill and co-operation that exists in the county. I have a particular interest in the influence of geology, soils, hydrology and land management on habitats and species and this makes Oxfordshire an endlessly fascinating place to work due to the immense diversity of geology and landforms and the consequent variety of habitats.

I am delighted that the CTAs have such an enthusiastic range of individuals from many organisations taking on the Lead role. Leads co-ordinate the partnership work of maintaining, restoring and creating habitat in these special areas of Oxfordshire's habitats. The hard work put in by so many partner organisations means over 20 of the 36 CTAs now have a partnership in place and active work taking place within them. I will be supporting work in many CTAs, with a special focus on several where I can add capacity to deliver key UKBAP habitats.

My current focuses are the fabulous Chilterns CTAs and the newly activated Swere Valley and Upper Stour CTA. The Swere Valley and Upper Stour is a gem of an area where years of careful management by landowners has created a range of quality habitats including fen, lowland meadow, calcareous grassland and woodland. I look forward to working with landowners and conservation organisations in this and other CTAs to support the conservation of Oxfordshire's wildlife.

bap@oncf.org.uk





The phrase Ecosystem Services is becoming a regular one in the ecological press, and is also starting to be used more widely. However, it is often used without an explanation of what is meant by the term. So what does it mean?

The term has been around for a long time, and stems from the concept of "environmental services" which arose in the 1970s. This was a recognition that the natural environment provides "services" to man – soils allow us to grow food, rain provides us with water and so on. The phrase "ecosystem services" became widely used after the publication of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment by the United Nations. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment brought together the work of over a thousand scientists to assess the importance of functioning ecosystems for humankind, and to review their current health.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment split ecosystem services up into four different categories:

Provisioning services. The production of direct benefits such as food and drugs, water or energy.

Regulating services. Where ecological processes impact on the abundance or quality of resources, including pollination, pest and disease control, decomposition of waste or water or air purification. Carbon sequestration is also considered to be a regulating service.

Supporting services. Those services which support the others, such as nutrient cycling or soil formation.

Cultural services. These include recreation and tourism, scientific discovery or more abstract issues such as enjoyment or inspiration.

Reminding policy makers, and the public, that biodiversity and the wider environment is vital to the maintenance of so many services that keep people alive and well is clearly a very valuable message. Unfortunately, when used without an explanation, the term "ecosystem services" can obscure that message instead of reinforcing it.

However, the concept has been useful to those working with government to underline the importance of the natural environment both nationally and internationally. DEFRA has



Photo: BBOWT

What on Earth are Ecosystem Services?

Matt Jackson,
Head of Planning Policy and
Wider Countryside, BBOWT

produced a guide which sets out approaches that can be taken to valuing ecosystem services so that the real costs of decisions which impact on the natural environment can be clearer, and last year they funded a study of the Otmoor area to investigate what information is available to assess the ecosystem services provided by a real area. The European Union has also been investigating ways to value the importance of ecosystem services, and the first phase of

their report into "The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity" has been produced, and they are currently asking for evidence for the next phase of their study.

The approach of assigning economic value to ecosystem services is not universally approved of though. Some policy makers and scientists worry that applying economic principles to the natural environment effectively puts a price on the head of any species or ecosystem. Writing in Nature in 2006 the American scientists Douglas J. McCauley said that "We will make more progress in the long run by appealing to people's hearts rather than to their wallets. If we oversell the message that ecosystems are important because they provide services, we will have effectively sold out on nature."

What is clear is that the value of natural ecosystems and wildlife is misunderstood by a large proportion of both the general public and policy makers. Concepts that underline that value may be very powerful, but not if phrases such as ecosystem services are used in isolation without an explanation of what they mean in practice.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment reports can be seen at <http://www.millenniumassessment.org/>, DEFRA's guide to valuing ecosystem services at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/pdf/natural-environ/eco-valuing.pdf> and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity first phase report at http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/economics/teeb_en.htm.

Matt.Jackson@bbowt.org.uk

Chilterns Chalk Grassland Project

Giles Strother,
Head of Reserves, BBOWT



Photo: Peter Creed

Hartslock

BBOWT's Chilterns chalk grassland sites in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire include some of the best chalk grassland sites in the region. They are home to significant numbers of rare species such as the small blue butterfly and include the national strongholds for the military and monkey orchid.

This project will focus on practical works on chalk grassland habitat at all 13 of BBOWT's nature reserves in the Chilterns (12 of which are Sites of Special Scientific Interest). In doing so, it will also seek to act as a catalyst and inspiration to other landowners about the national importance of Chilterns chalk grassland. Working in close partnership with Natural England and the Chilterns Conservation Board this project will create high quality grassland and seek to share best practice, equipment and other resources to benefit the habitat in the wider regional landscape.

gilesstrother@bbowt.org.uk



Photo: Gavin Hageman

Swifts

Chris Mason
Kirtlington resident

The decline in the number of Swifts nesting in Britain is now well-documented, and has received a fair amount of recent publicity. There are various reasons for this decline, but there can be little doubt that one of them is the loss of nest sites.

There are several things we can do to try to reduce this loss. The first and perhaps most important is to preserve existing nest sites if at all possible. That is why I have been involved with the Cherwell District Council in a project to identify the places where they nest, and to try to ensure that those sites are not damaged.

Another option is to create more nest sites. This can be done for instance by incorporating Swift bricks into new buildings. These provide Swifts with a specially designed nest site and have been included in the Spiceball Centre in Banbury. New buildings do not have the spaces under eaves and cavities in the walls which are essential for Swifts to nest in. So hopefully this example can be copied much more widely in new building elsewhere.

Another even simpler method is to provide nest boxes which are now widely used by Swifts. The idea of placing nest boxes in churches is an especially appropriate one because Swifts have probably nested in church buildings for hundreds of years. Recently however building repairs and the use of wire mesh to exclude messier birds have limited this. Using churches for nest boxes also makes sound sense because once installed, a nest box in a church is likely to remain undisturbed for many years.

There are at least a couple of villages in Oxfordshire which have Swift boxes in the church. One is St Mary's Kirtlington, where I got permission from the Parochial Church Council in 2006 to install some in the louvred windows in the tower.

The boxes each contain several nest spaces. They are fixed immediately behind the louvre so that birds cannot get into the building itself. We have been playing a CD of Swift calls to try to entice them in, because although there are a few pairs in nearby buildings, they have not been nesting in the church itself recently. So far we have not attracted Swifts into these boxes, but this method has been successfully tried in several churches around Cambridgeshire and I am confident that in time they will use ours.

The hope is that by using these different means of helping our Swifts, our children and grandchildren will still be able to enjoy these charismatic summer visitors.

mason@cando.eclipse.co.uk





Set aside – The Campaign for a Farmed Environment

*Ben Underwood,
Deputy Regional Director, CLA*

The CLA alongside the NFU have been developing a proposal to put farmers in the driving seat in terms of set aside mitigation. The industry proposal was initiated following the governments plans to demand that farmers manage between 4–6% of their land specifically for environmental outputs through cross-compliance.

This was not the same as former set aside since farmers would need to choose from a limited range of environmental land management options and if any of these were to fail, farmers Single Payment Scheme (SPS) payments could be at risk. It has been estimated that this would force an additional 240,000 ha of land out of production.

The CLA and partners felt that the government proposals failed to acknowledge the enormous amount of high quality environmental management already taking place and could potentially jeopardise all that has been achieved to date. The industry approach known as The Campaign for a Farmed Environment (CFE) has been developed to recognise the environmental management already being delivered by land managers both through agri-environment schemes and also through other unrewarded mechanisms.

The campaign is formed on the belief that there are many challenges still to be overcome

whether it be food security, climate change or those presented under the Water Framework Directive. If we are to address and overcome these we will need all farmers to take a part and the campaign offers a mechanism for the industry to work with government and conservation bodies to ensure that all future challenges can be addressed but in a way that has a proportionate impact on farming businesses.

The Campaign aims to recapture and exceed the delivery of environmental benefits that were previously provided by set-aside on arable land. It will do this by focusing farmers and land managers attention on three key themes:

1. **Resource Protection** – protection of soil and water-courses
2. **Farmland bird habitats** – management and creation of the 'big 3' for farmland birds – namely safe nesting sites, spring/summer feeding opportunities for chicks and overwintering seed sources for adults
3. **Farmland biodiversity** – maintaining and enhancing key arable farmland habitats

The Campaign has agreed to meet a number of National (England) targets over a three year period (July 2009 – June 2012). These include:

- Supporting increased uptake of Entry Level Scheme (ELS)
- Doubling the take-up of key in-field options within ELS
- Retaining a proportion of uncropped land (179,000ha) and seeking to enhance the environmental management on at least a third of it
- Increase the adoption of voluntary environmental management options being undertaken on land outside of agri-environment schemes by 30,000ha over current levels
- Encouraging 60% of farmers currently not engaged in agri-environment agreements to undertake the Campaign's voluntary environmental management options on their land

The first challenge for the CFE has been to demonstrate to ministers and government officials that the industry is fully behind the campaign. We were instructed to form county liaison groups for all key stakeholders in the top 15 arable counties in the country, Oxfordshire being one of them. We held the first county liaison group meeting on the 1 July at Mays Farm near Wallingford. The Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum, Environment Agency, Natural England, RSPB, Wildlife Trust and British Trust for Ornithology were all in attendance. The liaison group will take forward local actions, chaired by a CLA member and taken forward by an employed county co-coordinator, funded by Defra. The Campaign will be officially launched in early November.

Ben.underwood@cla.org.uk

Update on ONCF members meeting

*Robin Buxton,
Chair of ONCF*

on the ground, conservation projects, despite the anticipation that this sort of activity might be attractive to more donors (and funding is an issue). However, some of the conclusions of the meeting were uncomfortable, particularly a sense that our networks are not as strong as they used to be and we need do considerably more to reach out and engage, particularly with the farming organisations and with Councillors.

Several questions emerged about Membership, especially what sort of organisations can become members. Some people favoured admitting anybody, individual or organisation, regardless of their role and methods of working. Others were hesitant of allowing campaigning groups to be members, fearing they might undermine ONCF's jealously guarded independence and impartiality. On our website is a note titled "ONCF Purpose, Values and Boundaries" and it was agreed that provided that ONCF itself and its members stick to the spirit of this paper, there should be no difficulty admitting any organisation that wishes to become a member. So all applications for membership will be welcomed, but we will stick to the mechanism that is written into the Constitution that requires all applications to be approved by a general meeting.

I think we still have challenges in implementing the decisions from the March meeting. We continually need funds and our refusal to go the route of becoming a more practically focused organisation is seen as an obstacle to reaching many of the potential sources of money. On the other hand we now have 80 active local community groups and over 30 of them are actively managing land and so we do have direct links to practical outcomes that we are justly proud of. The BAP processes have agreed a new Conservation Target Area – the Swere Valley and upper Stour – and Craig Blackwell is leading this, with his usual vitality and vision, as he retires from the County Council. We do need to strengthen the network and relationships and there is little staff time to focus on making this happen, so there are challenges ahead, but I am confident that we will find the right people to rebuild these links and make them as dynamic as they were in the early days of ONCF.

Robin.buxton@btinternet.com

A year ago I gave you the question "What is ONCF for?" and asked you to tell us whether it is performing well and delivering what you want. Then an impressive number of you met in March to discuss these issues. The really encouraging message from the meeting was that you still value ONCF for its original purpose – to be an active networking and co-ordinating organisation leading the local BAP project and supporting community conservation groups. You were quite clear that ONCF should not refocus itself on doing practical,

Water Vole Update

*Julia Armstrong,
Water Vole Recovery Project
Officer, BBOWT*

Thanks to a great volunteer effort 500 sections of watercourse were surveyed for water voles by the BBOWT Water Vole Recovery Project last year. In Oxfordshire, following the national trend, the continued decline of the water vole was evident on some watercourses including the Oxford Canal and the River Thames at Abingdon and Iffley. Only very low numbers of water voles remain on these watercourses today. Since areas of good vole habitat still exist this decline is likely to be due primarily to the prevalence of American mink and we are working to extend the current mink control schemes in place.

The good news was that water vole populations on the Letcombe Brook near Wantage, the lower Glyme at Woodstock and the River Windrush near Witney were continuing to do well. Water voles were released by Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit on the lower Windrush in 2005 and last year's surveys revealed that the voles were thriving and had significantly expanded their range from their re-introduction site. Three years post-release, this vole colony can now be considered a truly 'wild' population and the Water Vole Recovery Project will continue to monitor their progress with a full survey of the river planned for 2010.

The 2009 survey season is now almost over and initial results indicate that water voles are continuing to do well on the Ginge Brook in south Oxfordshire and on the River Ock catchment at Abingdon. Full results will be available early next year.

juliaarmstrong@bbowt.org.uk





objective was the establishment of an Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum which was launched in 1993. As you all know ONCF has grown in strength over the years becoming a registered charity in 2000. It employs its own staff and is quite unique in the way it operates particularly under the wise guidance of Robin Buxton and the invaluable support of Clare and Cynth.

It has provided the focal point for shared working throughout the county and many of the projects which have been undertaken can trace their success back to ONCF and its associated partner organisations

The original Strategy, and its various working groups, has now largely faded into history but I am proud to say that the good old Local Authority Working Group still meets twice a year to share good practice (and the occasional pub lunch).

Although Local Authorities have been under constant financial pressure over the years we still managed to jointly support a number of successful projects including

- Local Wildlife Sites Project which has been hosted brilliantly by BBOWT in partnership with Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)
- Support for the work of ONCF
- Landowner advice through preparation of Whole Farm Plans by FWAG
- Support for the work of TVERC.

I cannot move on without making specific mention of TVERC. As an organisation it has made a massive contribution towards our understanding of the county and its associated habitats and species. When I first arrived there were no decent maps providing this basic information. By developing the work previously undertaken by BBONT (another historical footnote) we eventually created a series of 'Alert Maps' primarily to inform our planning colleagues at both County and District levels. Graham Hawker must take a lot of credit for this and, fortunately, he is still adding his immense experience and knowledge to the work of TVERC.

Even though the Local Authority partners in Oxfordshire and Berkshire contribute significantly towards the work of TVERC the project would never have been successfully launched in the first place without the support and determination of English Nature.

Around this time we also embarked on a three year landscape character and biodiversity assessment of the county with financial backing from the County Council, English Nature, the Countryside Agency and the Northmoor Trust. This piece of work became known as OWLS (Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study).

With further development work from TVERC this led to the identification of 36 CTAs (Conservation Target Areas) throughout Oxfordshire. In case you didn't know already, these are specific areas which support most of the main BAP priority habitats within the county. Through consultation and partnership working they have become the focus of our efforts to help safeguard, manage and extend the biodiversity resource in Oxfordshire. I am particularly pleased that all our Local Authority partners are taking CTAs into account as part of their work on Local Development Frameworks.

ONCF has once again been central to the CTA process through the employment of LBAP officers. It is their job to co-ordinate action across the CTAs and link this to the BAP process locally, regionally and nationally.

Natural England, in partnership with TVERC, has since mapped similar areas throughout the whole South-East Region. These are now being promoted by Tom Butterworth, our previous LBAP officer, as Biodiversity Opportunity Areas across the Region. It is good to see our influence extending beyond the county boundary.

Another important piece of work which grew out of the original Nature Conservation Strategy was the publication of the Parish Conservation Plan (downloadable from ONCF website). This encouraged local communities to become involved with practical conservation

work ranging from hedgerow surveys to acquisition and management of land such as the Hurst Water Meadows at Dorchester. Over a third of parishes in Oxfordshire became involved one way or another. This successfully came together in 1998 at the Environmental Extravaganza, organised by ONCF, at Deddington. The good work continues to this day with Oxfordshire Goes Wild and I like to think that the very successful annual Wychwood Fair, organised by Friends of Wychwood, derived some inspiration from that first extravaganza.

I could easily go on and on but it is probably a good idea to stop at this point.

In conclusion I would just like to add that I have had a wonderful 19 years as County Ecologist and much of the pleasure is down to the fantastic people and organisations who I have worked with over this period. What we have achieved collectively (with comparatively few resources compared to many other counties) is absolutely phenomenal.

It is enormously satisfying to note that our understanding of Oxfordshire, and the organisations and individuals who care for it, are much better placed to deal with the challenges ahead compared with the situation when I first arrived nearly two decades ago.

Thanks again for all the happy memories and good luck for the future.

Love and best wishes

Craig Blackwell
(retired County Ecologist)

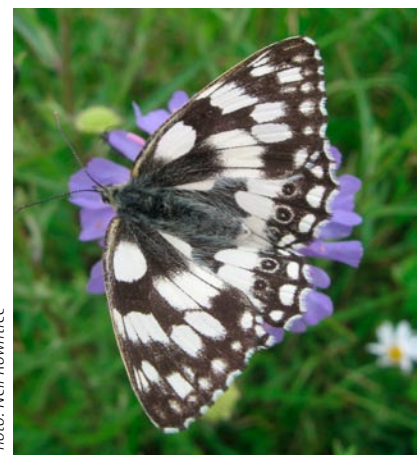


Photo: Neil Rowntree