

Downlands Trust Newsletter

SPRING 2025

From the Chairman

Peter Wakeham

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter. It was pleasing to welcome so many of our members to the AGM in October, at which an update on the Trust's activities over the previous year was followed by an engaging talk by Dominic North about the management and wildlife of Happy Valley, Coulsdon. Happy Valley is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and features extensive areas of chalk grassland that are home to a variety of rare plant species. In addition to the grasslands, the valley also contains areas of ancient woodland, including Devilsden Wood, making a visit to this special site so rewarding.

"Volunteering makes a difference" was a feature headline in a recent issue of the RSPB magazine and this is a good opportunity to highlight the importance of volunteering in our local countryside. We are fortunate in having many groups of volunteers dedicated to maintaining sites of conservation importance, especially chalk grassland, and including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs). Some groups are comprised solely of volunteers, others are led by staff employed by organisations such as the Downlands Partnership or the Surrey Wildlife Trust. Many Downlands Trust members are also conservation volunteers and we are very grateful for their additional support via membership. The contribution made by volunteers is invaluable; in 2023-4 volunteers contributed 20,000 hours to the Downlands Partnership, equivalent to 12 FT staff. Tasks undertaken included scrub, pond and woodland management, control of invasive species and stock checking.

A key objective of conservation volunteering is that of preserving the biodiversity of a particular ecosystem, but there are numerous incidental benefits to be enjoyed by volunteers. These include mental and physical wellbeing, the opportunity to learn about nature, and the development of a sense of community and teamwork. If you can spare a few hours or a full day as a conservation volunteer then this can make a huge difference for nature and people. If you are

interested in volunteering, follow [this link](#) to see opportunities available with the Downlands Partnership and [this link](#) for opportunities with local groups. If you represent a local group seeking more volunteers, do get in touch and we will add your group to this web page.

We were informed in March last year that the Trust was a named beneficiary in the will of a former member and in November we received a very generous legacy, for which we are extremely grateful. For the Trust, this means that we will be able to fund projects that are more ambitious than was previously possible, with commensurate benefits for the local countryside.

The Trustees



(from left to right)

Elsbeth Pringle (Social Media),
Pam Mascall (Grants), Peter Wakeham (Chairman),
Geof Haseler (Newsletter), Sarah Milan (Membership),
Roger Findlay (Treasurer), Noreen Siba (Marketing)

DON'T FORGET OUR AGM:

- **Tuesday 21 October at 7.45 pm**
- **The Banstead Centre, The Horseshoe, Banstead SM7 2BQ.**

Dates for your diary

The information below was correct at the time it went to press but please check on each organisation's website beforehand to make sure that the day and time have not changed.

- **Sunday 4 May** (TBC) Dawn Chorus Walk in Oaks Park led by David Warburton, Senior Biodiversity Officer for Sutton. Starts 6 am. There will be a charge. Booking is essential. See website for details.
- **Sunday 4 May** Guided Tree Trail in Oaks Park. No charge. Come along and learn more about the trees, their importance and the history of the park. Meet outside the café at 2 pm. Duration 1 hour. Further walks will be on the first Sunday of each month (except August) ie 1 June, 6 July, 7 September and 5 October.
- **Sunday 18 May** Banstead Arts Festival. Flowers and Butterflies on Park Downs, a 2 hour walk led by Jill Hall and Peter Wakeham. Meet 10.30 am at the Holly Lane car park.
- **Sunday 8 June** *** **EezeSport Bug Hunt at the Teddy Bear Picnic, Nonsuch Park (in aid of Padel for Poverty, NCT and Downlands Trust)**
- **Saturday 14 June** Summer Flowers and Skylarks. Guided walk on Farthing Downs, details on page 7.
- **Sunday 15 June** Farthing Downs Open Day to celebrate 75 years since the SSSI designation. Stalls, walks and a talk. 10.30 am to 3.30 pm.
- **Saturday 21 June** Summer Flowers and Skylarks. Guided walk on Riddlesdown, details on page 7.
- **Saturday 28 June** Sutton Landscape Artist of the Year Competition in Oaks Park. 10.30—3.00 pm.
- **Saturday 12 July** *** **Old Coulsdon Rotary Fair, Grange Park**
- **Monday 26 August** *** **Carshalton EcoFair, Carshalton Park, Ruskin Road SM5 3DD**

To reserve a place on a **Banstead Commons Conservators'** event, please call **07919 251512** or email enquiries@bansteadcommons.org.uk. Numbers are limited and there is a suggested donation of £5 to reserve a place. Places will be issued on a first come first served basis. Dogs on leads are welcome.

For **Oaks Park** activities [click here](#) to check meeting times and location.

*** **Downlands Trust will have a stall at these events. Please contact Noreen Siba on 07770 417796 if you can offer help on any of these days.**

Volunteering

Robert Zeitz

It's been three years since I retired and gave up 50 years' working full time. I figured I had plenty of existing pastimes and hobbies to keep me busy in my retirement, but I also wanted to fit in some volunteering. Fortunately for me I saw a notice in the small wood opposite Old Lodge Farm looking for volunteers to work at the farm one day a week. The farm is a ten-minute cycle ride from my home, which is perfect. I contacted Sean, from the Downlands Partnership, who arranged an induction which went well, and I've been cycling to and from the farm one day a week ever since.

Sean and his assistant Damien have made me feel very welcome and I'm now enjoying being part of a friendly team of regular farm volunteers. The Partnership has its own flock of sheep and manages its own lambing season every spring and during my time at the farm I've learnt many new skills associated with the sheep, such as handling and moving them, carrying out regular MOTs to check their general health, sheep shearing and pregnancy testing. I have also successfully completed a grinding wheel course; a brush cutting course and obtained a first aid certificate.

As one of the task leaders on corporate days I've overseen various tasks including the construction and installation of two cattle shelters, clearing scrub and laying a new pathway inside our small copse, helping with the digging out and preparation of a new wildlife pond and hedge laying to name a few. I get to help out at local countryside public events as well.

An opportunity arose to become a volunteer livestock checker at Banstead Downs which I've been doing for the past 18 months. This involves a once a week trip to the site to count the sheep, check on their welfare and making sure the fenced enclosure remains secure. I also volunteer for Lucy from Banstead Conservators carrying out tree popping and scrub clearance at her various sites. I enjoy both these roles and the opportunity they bring to meet like-minded people.

Since August the Trust have awarded 24 grants totalling £18,370 which include:-

Three-legged Tripod Ladder

A three-legged tripod ladder for the Grazing team. This allows them to work safely on tasks such as driving tall posts into the ground as well as helping with the maintenance of taller scrub and trees and of the polytunnel and chicken run at Old Lodge Farm.



Water Bowser and Hay Baler



The Trust has also helped the Grazing team secure two grants from the Farming in Protected Landscapes Program (FiPL). 80% of the cost of these two items was funded by FiPL and 20% by the Trust.

A 2,000 litre water bowser for the Grazing team to transport water to sheep grazing in paddocks at sites like Happy Valley. This makes such a difference as, in the past, water had to be transported in jerry cans.



A hay baler for the Downlands Partnership task team. An important part of their work is habitat management including cutting and raking off vegetation on species-rich chalk grassland. The baler allows larger areas of grassland to be cut and the clippings collected at the same time. This will be very popular with the volunteers who will no longer be required to rake up the clippings. The baler will also allow the cuttings to be used as bedding and feed for livestock.



Tree Poppers for the Downlands Partnership

Four tree poppers provided by a grant to Downlands Partnership will enable small scrub, particularly Hawthorn, to be removed relatively easily from chalk grassland sites enabling volunteers and corporate groups to clear larger areas as the poppers pull the scrub out by the roots reducing regrowth.

Tools and Personal Protection Equipment for the Woodchips

Saws, safety helmets and gloves have been provided for The Woodchip Conservation Volunteers for their Winter and Spring program of coppicing hazel trees and removing copes on the chalk grasslands of Chipstead Downs.



Lambing Hurdle

A grant was given to purchase a lamb hurdle for use at Old Lodge Farm during lambing to help adopt lambs onto ewes as well as for getting ewes to accept their lambs and allow them to suckle. The hurdle has also been used when scanning the ewes.

Other grants that have been awarded recently include tools:- brushcutters, hay forks and a pole saw for the Downlands Partnership to use on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area (SWCA) and for work by the Partnership at Long Hill in Woldingham and at Happy Valley. Water systems have also been granted for grazing on Banstead Commons. The Trust also provided funds for the Oaks Park Tree Trail leaflet (see page 5.)

Polytunnel at Old Lodge Farm

Sean Grufferty



Thanks to the Plant Nursery funded by the Downlands Trust in 2022 we have been able to supply wonderful wildflowers to our partners, local groups and the public. A fantastic local source for many key species, particularly chalk grassland herbs that support an array of other wildlife. Thanks to further funding from Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) with match funding from the Downlands Trust, we were able to purchase a Polytunnel at cost which has enabled us to drastically reduce loss over the winter, bring on plants ready for the shows this year and increase our success rates with seedlings. It also provides a fantastic learning space of comfort when groups of young people visit during bad weather! (A volunteer's day in the polytunnel —see page 5).



Anthills are a common feature of undisturbed chalk grassland and are created by the Yellow Meadow Ant (*Lasius flavus*). They can be found in abundance in places such as Farthing Downs, Kenley Common and Riddlesdown. The nest is built below the surface and may extend down to a depth of up to a metre, resulting in mounds of fine-grained soil being deposited on the surface. Over time, anthills will grow significantly in size and individual anthills may remain in place for decades.

The mounds have a different soil composition, nutrient and water content, and microclimate from that of the surrounding grassland. The result is the creation of a secondary habitat that affects the types and distribution of many species of plants, invertebrates, fungi and micro-organisms, so increasing biodiversity.

Yellow Meadow Ant colonies have a single queen that can live for up to 10 years and contain between 8,000-40,000 worker ants that normally spend their life farming a species of root aphid that feeds on the roots of the specific plants that clothe the mounds. Ants protect the aphids and milk them for honeydew, a symbiotic relationship that provides them with a sugar rich diet. For this reason, Yellow Meadow Ants are rarely seen foraging on the surface, unlike species such as the Black Garden Ant (*Lasius niger*).

The two plants most commonly found growing on anthills, but not in the surrounding grassland, are Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*) and Rock-rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*). Short-lived ephemerals such as Hairy-bittercress (*Cardamine hirsuta*) are also common in early spring.

Anthills provide the conditions required by these plants to thrive:

- the constant addition of soil to the anthill maintains bare ground, creating a seedbed for germination which is not available in the surrounding grassland
- anthills have their own microclimate on account of being raised above ground level and therefore having a greater surface area. This means that they are significantly warmer than the surrounding ground, encouraging germination and growth.
- they are significantly drier as a result of their greater surface area and warmer microclimate, enabling drought tolerant plants such as Wild Thyme to thrive at the expense of would-be competitors.

The caterpillars of the Chalkhill Blue butterfly have a close relationship with Yellow Meadow Ants. They are protected and attended by the ants and again the relationship is symbiotic in that the ants are fed sugary secretions by the caterpillars. Green Woodpeckers are another beneficiary and they are often seen feeding on anthills. Their diet consists almost exclusively of ants, of which they may consume up to 2000 a day.

Yellow Meadow Ants are sensitive to environmental damage and in turn this will have a direct impact upon local biodiversity. Physical damage to the mounds is the greatest threat and this will inevitably be the result if chalk grassland is managed mechanically by mowing. Conservation grazing, or for smaller areas scything, should ideally be used.



Anthills at Priest Hill SWT reserve, Ewell



Wild Thyme on anthill



Yellow Meadow Ant 'milking' root aphid for honeydew

Where there's a wool there's a way...

Damien Laing

My name is Damien and I started my journey at the Downlands Grazing Partnership as a work experience placement in February 2020, whilst studying for my Level 3 Animal Management qualification. I enjoyed it so much that I asked to start volunteering with them as a grazing/farm volunteer, as this is the career I wanted to get into e.g. conservation/farming.



I regularly volunteered with their team for just over two years until April 2022, then I applied for the position as their permanent full time Grazing Assistant (my predecessor was leaving to take up a new senior grazing role elsewhere) and was very pleased to successfully get the job.



Damien with some of the Downlands Partnership Grazing goats (Downlands Partnership Grazing)

Time has flown by and I have now been in post for nearly three years! I am thriving in my busy role and really enjoy working with my great colleagues, all the animals and dedicated, amazing volunteers.

I strongly believe that volunteering both at [Downlands Partnership](#) but also prior to that at a City Farm for 5 years significantly helped me in getting my current paid position. This is because you can gain so many valuable skills and it also allows you to network and gain contacts which can help you when finding a job in farming/conservation. I found that volunteering was easy for me as I started at a young age which helped me to gain the experience and skills needed to be employed in this sector. I gained communication skills, practical skills and also learnt a lot from the experienced staff and volunteers and this greatly helps to build you ready for an employed role in this sector.

I would strongly encourage young people to start volunteering at a younger age if possible, as I believe it helps you to get a foot in the door of the industry and provides you with a head start when it comes to knowledge and experience, which is what a lot of employers do look for when considering who to employ.

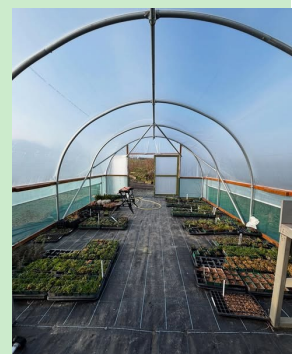
This article was originally published in the February 2025 edition of [Countryside Jobs](#)

Polytunnel at Old Lodge Farm

Elsbeth Pringle



A lovely day in early March volunteering at Old Lodge Farm, the HQ of the Downlands Partnership Grazing team. The first job of the day was potting up Birdsfoot Trefoil and Salad Burnet seedlings (two chalk loving plants) which, when mature, will be sold either directly from the farm or at the various events the team attend in support of the Downlands Trust. Although it was a little chilly outside, it was warmer inside our new polytunnel.



This is a great asset to the farm, not just in terms of growing the chalk loving plants, but also as an extra space for use with local Beaver and Cub groups and corporate groups. The polytunnel was funded by grants from FiPL (Farming in Protected Landscapes) and the Downlands Trust. Another great example of partnership working!

Oaks Park Tree Trail

Anne Pearcey



The Friends of Oaks Park have recently revised and reprinted their Tree Trail leaflet which has been so popular in the park. This has been done with the generous support of the Downlands Trust, which is very much appreciated. The trail aims to draw attention to some of our many special trees but also to make visitors more aware of the importance of trees to our climate, biodiversity and well-being. The trail can be done in around an hour. Details can be found on page 2 "Dates for your diary".



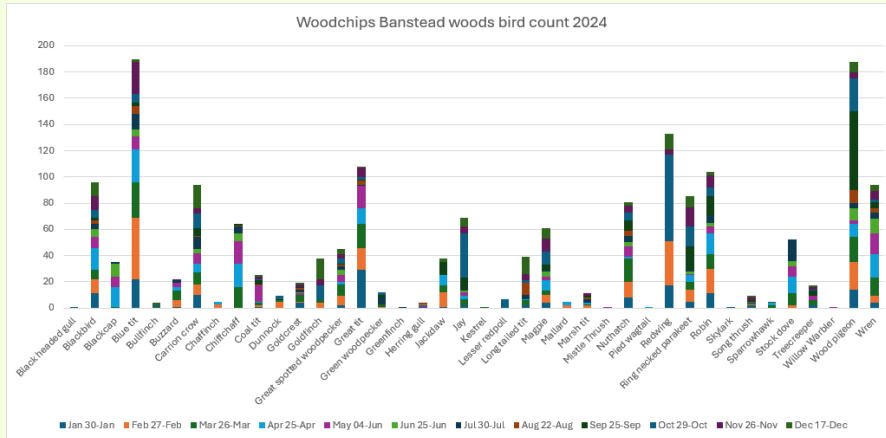
Trails can be arranged for groups on request.
More details on our website: www.friendsofoakspark.co.uk

Bird survey - Banstead Woods

Liz North

The Woodchips Conservation Volunteers have been conducting a monthly bird survey in Banstead Woods since the start of 2024. We follow roughly the same route each month and record the birds we see, or sometimes hear, whilst walking through the woods. We do not count birds we hear or see outside the woods so the Skylarks that we hear virtually every month over Canons Farm are not counted, but we do record the Buzzards flying directly overhead.

We report our findings on our website (<http://www.thewoodchips.org/bird-count.html>) and send them to Reigate and Banstead Borough Council.



We have seen a good variety of birds and are always delighted to see something new or less common such as the Willow Warbler which we spotted in May. It is great to mark the seasons when birds like Redwing, Redpolls and Chiffchaffs appear and disappear as they migrate. The graph shows what we saw in 2024 but please note that the annual totals are to be taken with a large pinch of salt as the same birds are very likely to be counted several times over in different months.

Restoring Stagbury Downs Grassland

Richard Carter



Stagbury Downs are a wonderful stretch of chalk grassland on the steep hillside between Banstead Woods and Outwood Lane. Over the years the scrub, mostly Brambles, Hawthorn and Dogwood, has encroached down the slope and destroyed the precious habitat.

The Woodchip Conservation Volunteers were asked by Natural England to remove some of this scrub so that it could revert to grass and also provide a more varied habitat for wildlife. It has taken us three months to achieve this using Silky handsaws and cutters, kindly funded by the Downlands Trust. The arisings at the top of the slope have been made into piles that resemble a dead hedge and which will serve as a habitat for wildlife and a shield to hide the metal link fence that runs along the top of Stagbury.



Photo: Graham Kenward

Unfortunately, some of the shade loving plants such as Arum Maculatum (Lords and Ladies) may not survive this exposure to sunlight but we look forward to seeing how the grassland regenerates and whether there will be a display of chalk grassland flowers next Spring.

Junior Corner—Wordsearch

Can you find the names of 13 birds that can be seen on the Downs or in your garden?
Which is the largest and which is the smallest?

Answers at the bottom on page 7

Q A G Z S P I R E T
B L U E T I T E C H
A I L M A M H V F C
R S L P R C R O W N
N O B A L U U D O I
O A M Z I Y S U R F
W R E N N O H N R F
L R P I G E O N A A
R E D K I T E I P H
K L A N I B O R S C

Be a Hoverfly Hero!

Surrey Wildlife Trust

Surrey Wildlife Trust has launched an initiative to help Hoverflies which are important pollinators. Hoverflies are helpful garden guests. They eat aphids, recycle waste and pollinate plants. But, like many other insects, hoverflies need our help. Become a hoverfly hero by making more space for these incredible insects.



Whether you have a garden or just a window ledge to spare, you can lend hoverflies a hand. If you would like to read about how you can help, follow [this link](#) to the SWT website.

Boosting Beautiful Birdsong on the South London Downs

Peter Wakeham

The City of London Corporation awards grants for projects that fall within its Enjoying Green Spaces and the Natural Environment category, and last year the Downlands Trust and the Downlands Partnership were delighted to learn that their application for funding to support the proposed "Boosting Beautiful Birdsong on the South London Downs" project had been successful.

This two year project aims to increase the opportunities for Londoners to experience the songs of two iconic bird species of conservation concern: the Skylark and the Yellowhammer. Both are widely distributed nationally, but an unusual sight in London, and both have distinctive songs and so can be easily recognised. The project aims to safeguard existing populations and support the recovery of these species on two sites owned by the City of London, Riddlesdown Common and Farthing Down.



Partnership staff and volunteers have been actively managing scrub habitat for Yellowhammers and have created temporary fenced enclosures to protect Skylarks from disturbance. The next stage will be to encourage community engagement, and volunteers will be recruited at both sites and trained to monitor populations of Skylarks and Yellowhammers. In addition, a guided walk "Summer Flowers and Skylarks" will be offered at each site and these will inform local users and visitors to the South London Downs NNR about the importance of these sites for wildlife on the edge of London.

The guided walk on Farthing Downs will start at 10.00am on 14th June from the Ditches Lane car park, and the guided walk on Riddlesdown at 10.00am on 21st June from the public car park. If you would like to help with the monitoring or require more information about the guided walks, please email the Trust at info@downlandstrust.org.uk.

Banstead Commons

Lucy Shea

Banstead Commons' four sites (Banstead Heath, Banstead Downs, Park Downs and Burgh Heath) are wonderful open spaces enjoyed by many residents and visitors from further afield. Under the Act of Parliament which set up our organisation, commercial activity is controlled in order to protect the integrity of the Commons and the welfare of its users. With the increasing volume of professional dog walkers, including those displaced from other areas that have already implemented restrictions, it has become necessary to take the responsible step of licensing this activity.

The Conservators have implemented a professional dog walking licence scheme on Banstead Commons from 1 April 2025. All professional dog walkers operating their business on any of the Commons must be licensed to walk on them. Dog walking companies who have not registered their operations will be in breach of our Bye-laws and may risk prosecution.

This scheme will help regulate the numbers of dogs being walked commercially on our sites and ensure that companies are operating safely and treating Banstead Commons, its users and wildlife with respect and consideration.

For further information and how to register, contact enquiries@bansteadcommons.org.uk

The month of March is the beginning of bird nesting season. The four sites of Banstead Commons support healthy populations of Skylarks, Willow Warblers and Meadows Pipits, all of which are ground-nesting bird species and in serious decline across the UK.

Please ensure [#pawsonpaths](#) and keep dogs under close control or on a short lead when walking through our grassland and lowland heath habitats. Working together we can conserve habitats and species for wildlife to thrive and future generations to enjoy. Thank you for your cooperation at this special time of year.



Support us with membership, donation or a legacy

DOWNLANDS TRUST MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

If you are not a member or if you know anyone who would like to support our valuable work in the countryside, we would be delighted to receive the following application form and subscription. Alternatively, you can join via our website.

TYPE OF MEMBERSHIP (please tick)

- Individual (**£10**)
 Senior /student /unwaged (**£5**) Please delete as applicable
 Family (**£15**)
 Group /company /school (**£15**) Please delete as applicable

Please note: Memberships are due for renewal annually on 1st January. However, any memberships taken out after 1st September in any year are covered for membership for the following calendar year.

PAYMENT OPTIONS (please tick as applicable)

- I enclose a cheque for £..... to cover the subscription. You may like to add an additional donation to aid our work.
 I have made an online payment of £..... to your bank account, Downlands Trust 40-09-04 31439820. Please use your name as the reference so that we can connect the payment to your membership.

GIFT AID Please tick the box below if you are in a position to do so.

- I agree to the Downlands Trust claiming tax under the Gift Aid Scheme on all my donations and subscriptions until I advise otherwise. I confirm that I am paying an amount of UK Income and/or Capital Gains Tax that at least equals the amount that the charity will reclaim.

YOUR DETAILS

Title:		Full name:		
Address:				
			Postcode:	
Email:				
Telephone:				
Signature:		Date:		

**Please return completed membership application to:
Membership Secretary, Downlands Trust, 71 Warren Road, Banstead, SM7 1LG**

Support Downlands Trust when shopping online

Use [easyfundraising](#) when shopping and the Downlands Trust will receive donations at no cost to you.

These donations help us fund projects to keep the countryside accessible to all.

Downlands Trust

Registered address: 46 Wilmot Way, Banstead, SM7 2PY

Registered Charity No. 1126535
Company No. 6661092

Email: info@downlandstrust.org.uk

Website: www.downlandstrust.org.uk



[downlandstrust](#)



Follow us

The Downlands Trust Facebook and Twitter pages include forthcoming events, funding initiatives, the most up-to-date news and views on the practical tasks run by our partners and a whole lot more. We are also on Instagram. Please share us amongst your online friends to help us spread the word about our valuable work.

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