



Biodiversity Monitoring and Action Group (BMAG)

# NEWSLETTER ONE

February 2024

## 1. Sarah inspired us...

Sarah Olney sadly died unexpectedly in 2020. Sarah worked for Natural England and was the driving force behind the development of the new “Eco Area” beyond Calais Field and, before that, the Woodland Walk and the very successful “woody dams” along the Littlestock Brook; MuW has a lot to thank her for. She was an adherent of letting nature take its own course and the “re-meandering” of manicured streams to reduce flood damage and make a natural landscape. She was also passionate about soil health – see the inscription on the memorial seat below.



**A memorial tribute to Sarah Olney**

Sarah's Seat: the inscription reads; "The Earthworm Champion of Soil Health, Aerating and Recycling. For Sarah Olney Champion of Soil Health in the Evenlode Catchment".

Her contribution has been recognised in the making of a wonderful memorial seat now placed in the Eco Area. Sarah's passion for soil quality is acknowledged in the seat's shape as a worm. The seat was "unveiled" by Andrew Russell of Natural England on 18 December, 2023 on a cold and windy day with a small group of former colleagues and local farmers who had benefited from her advice and support for various biodiversity initiatives. The seat was made from an oak tree at Blenheim Palace by Rodas Irving.



### **Unveiling Sarah's seat**

Do take a walk in and around the Eco Area, remember Sarah, admire the superb artistry and craftsmanship, and rest your weary bones on this stunning memorial seat - it is a lovely asset to MuW's Eco Area.

More about the "Eco Area" in the next section...

## 2. Advice on our new “Eco Area” and hedgerows from Wild Oxfordshire experts



**Looking at one of the new ponds in the Eco Area**

On a very cold and damp afternoon, January 3rd, two members of the Wild Oxfordshire team, Imogen Parker, Community Ecologist and Jess Bouwer, Hedgerows and Partnerships Officer, made a visit to various sites of interest in the parish with Pat Ward and Elaine Brittan. In spite of the horrible weather, we were both excited about the visit and its outcomes!

### **The future development of the Eco Area**

Imogen gave good advice about management of the Eco Area (the area across Simmons Brook from Calais Field) much of which will remain wet all year round. This included reducing the willowherb, preferably by “cultural” methods rather than herbicides; replacing some of the trees lost to drought; allowing scrub to increase in certain areas; and wildflower enhancement in others. Retaining some tussocky grasses and rushes would provide good cover for various animals, including many bird species, amphibians, reptiles, and small mammals. Bird surveys would be useful in having a better understanding of which birds are using the area and how to benefit them...we are delighted that local bird enthusiast, Chris Barnes, has agreed to assist with this. *Thank you, Chris.*

In looking at other initiatives in the parish, Imogen was suitably impressed by the effectiveness of the bed check dam (our “woody” or “leaky” dam!) near the allotments which was in full flood after all the heavy rain in December. This is part of the Littlestock Brook Natural Flood Management scheme. And also by the Community Orchard and Woodland Walk – *Well done MuW!*

## **Restoring hedgerows and planting new ones – we may get help from Hedgerow Heroes**

Jess and Imogen looked at the sites we are proposing for help from “Hedgerow Heroes”, a national project run by the Campaign to Protect Rural England delivered through Wild Oxfordshire. Initially, more than 1150 metres of hedgerows have been identified with four enthusiastic farmers/ landowners (Roger Hartley, Peter Rawlins, Philip Watson and Ed Reynolds). Our bid will go in for possible funding 2024/25.

Our grateful thanks to both Imogen and Jess, and fingers crossed for the funding!

In addition to the above, Pat Ward is negotiating with Oxford County Council for more trees to be provided by them for parish use, and another 50 trees are being personally nurtured by him and others for the Eco Area. These include beech, horse chestnut and oak and will be planted next autumn.

***Stop Press.*** *We will be providing a map and more information on progress on the Eco Area, and the bid for funding for hedgerows in the next Newsletter.*

### 3. Our own Springwatch – April, 2024

Milton under Wychwood

## Springwatch 2024

**We value our green environment and biodiversity!**

**What have you seen - or heard - recently?**

- ◆ flowers
- ◆ birds
- ◆ reptiles
- ◆ water life
- ◆ mammals
- ◆ butterflies, moths, other insects
- ◆ any other wildlife?



Have you seen new life in our new ponds, seen a hedgehog, heard a cuckoo?

**What are you doing in 2024 in your garden or window box, on your patio, allotment or farm to enhance biodiversity?**

**Please tell us** – *no form to fill in and it won't take long!!*

Just make a phone call, send a text or email to ...

Cllr Pat Ward on 07764 921464 or email [patrickwardpc@gmail.com](mailto:patrickwardpc@gmail.com)

Or Nicola Boulton on 07779 570236 or email [nicolaboulton1973@gmail.com](mailto:nicolaboulton1973@gmail.com)

In early May, we will compare this information with what you told us about in 2022. It's not scientific but, at least, it's a start in getting an idea of what wildlife we have.



**Biodiversity Monitoring and Action Group (BMAG)**

For further information, contact Councillor Pat Ward [patrickwardpc@gmail.com](mailto:patrickwardpc@gmail.com)

Or Elaine Brittan [ebspamfree@gmail.com](mailto:ebspamfree@gmail.com)

## 4. What is happening in our streams and rivers?

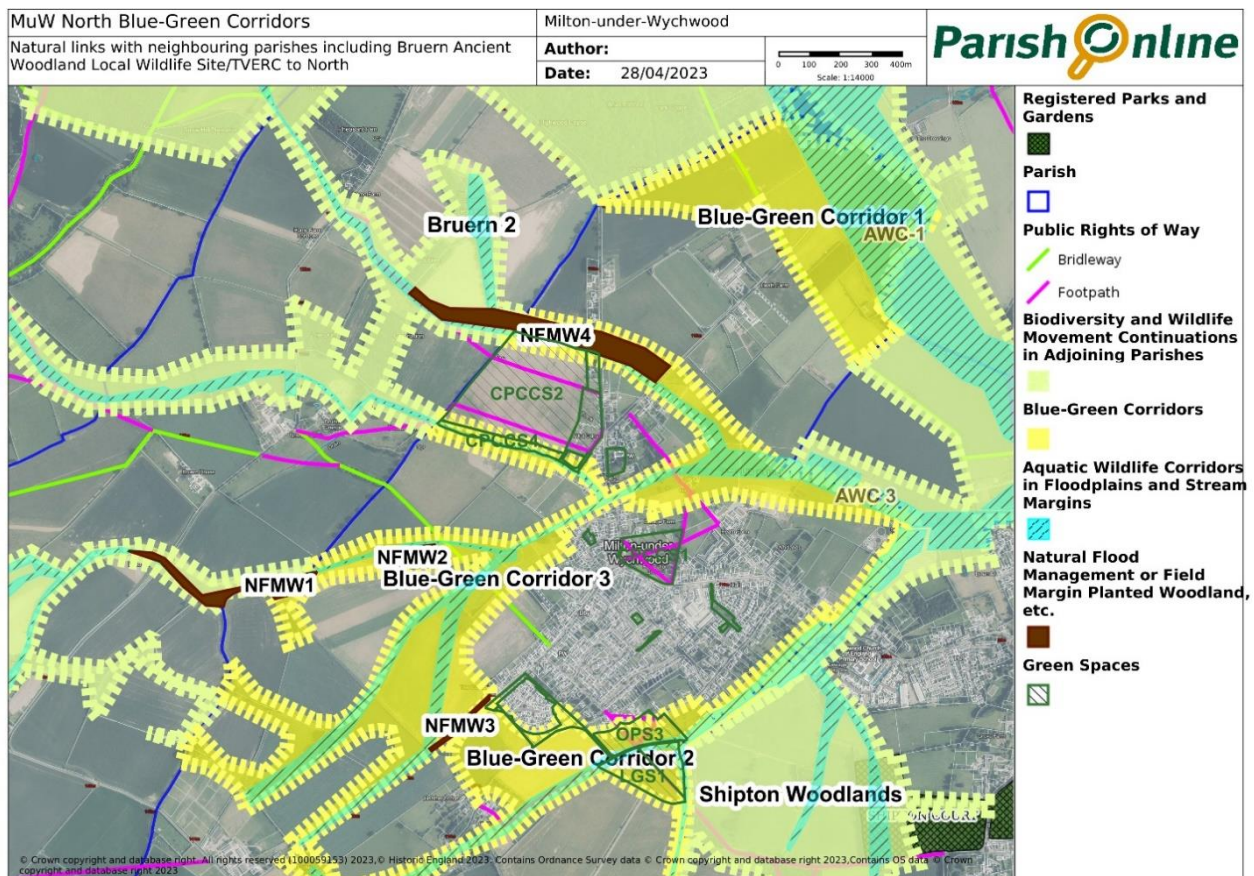
### Water is life

If we are serious about our living world in Milton-under-Wychwood (MuW), then we need to know more and take more action to protect our streams and rivers.

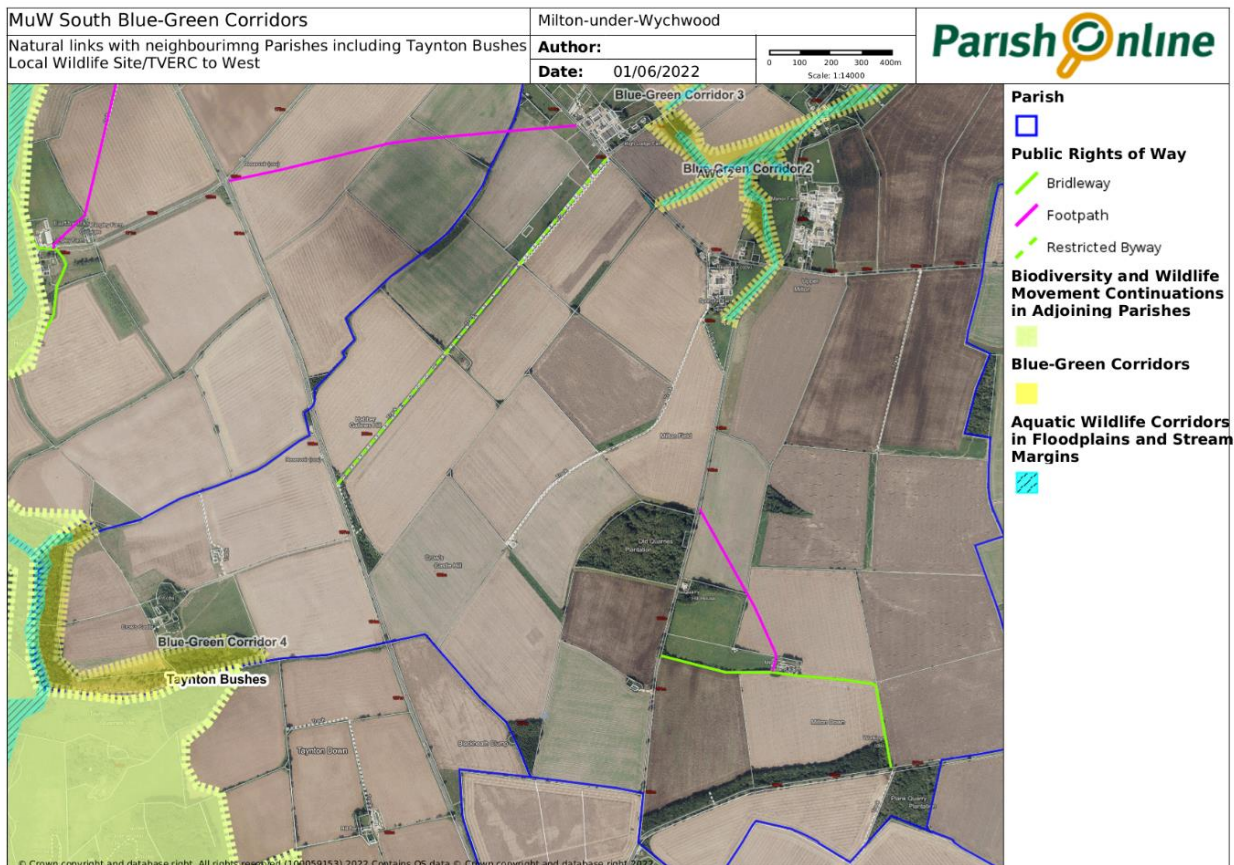
John Pratt has a deep interest in these matters and has written a fuller account of the state of the place in MuW which we have summarized below.

### Why do we need blue-green corridors?

MuW's 2023 Neighbourhood Plan identified 'blue-green' corridors along our watercourses to help maintain and improve their biodiversity. The corridors have natural connections with neighbouring parishes and comprise each watercourse and a reasonable margin of uncultivated land on both sides. Therefore, they act as corridors for animals on land as well as in water. Some of MuW's farmers are protecting these margins, e.g. the Astor and Izod farmers, and others are joining them. So it is still possible, for example, to see snipe (a marshland bird) on these margins (see maps below).



MuW North - map showing Aquatic Wildlife Corridors and MuW Blue-Green Corridors



**MuW South - map showing Aquatic Wildlife Corridors and MuW Blue-Green Corridors**

## Are your children and grandchildren safe in our watercourses?

Appendix 7 of the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) demonstrates the health of the brooks rising in the parish or in neighbouring parishes. The Littlestock Brook under Church Road and the smaller tributaries that join it from the West, likewise the Simmons Brook passing Milton Service Station, support good populations of aquatic invertebrates and smaller fishes. It is probably not a coincidence that they have very low concentrations of dissolved phosphate, invariably less than 0.05 mg/l. Our aim is for all watercourses to carry no more than this throughout the year. But...

## The parlous state of the River Evenlode

Sadly, in high summer the low water flows of the River Evenlode in our parish and the Littlestock Brook in Shipton-under-Wychwood, suffer phosphate concentrations 10 to 20 times more than our hoped-for level. This is largely due to the daily discharge of phosphate-rich wastewater from our sewage works into the Brook and the same from works serving upstream populations into the Evenlode.

The impact is dire. When the River Evenlode reaches our parish at Lyneham Bridge in high summer, it is low, turbid and the colour of oxtail soup due to algae nourished by excessive phosphates and other nutrients including nitrates that have come downstream from settlements. The algae shade out larger rooted water plants; waving beds of Ranunculus in gravelly shallows have, sadly, become a rarity and often the riverbed is bare.

## **Why is this - and what is happening about the Sewage Treatment Works?**

Agriculture in our community may be a contributor to phosphate levels but it is a minor one. The Sewage Treatment Works (STW) operator Thames Water recognises the problem of excessive phosphate release from its STW !

## **What is Thames Water doing about it?**

Thames Water is discussing this with the Environment Agency and OFWAT. But the discussions are long winded and lead to unacceptable deferral of investment decisions.

Sadly, discussions are not yet focussed on stripping out phosphates; most are simply about increasing treatment capacity which - since privatisation of the industry - has alarmingly lagged behind expansion of settlements for generations.

## **Then there is the release of raw sewage...**

STWs are permitted to release untreated sewage into watercourses during periods of high rainfall and when their surge storage systems cannot cope. Many of the storage tanks have not been upgraded and expanded in decades and much of the storm surge problem is due to faulty surface drainage pipe connections.

A troubling revelation from the forensic work of Windrush Against Sewage Pollution and other volunteer analysts from the public is the abuse of the Environment Agency's permitting system. Strangely, some STWs have been found to release raw sewage during periods of low rainfall. This is illegal.

## **Your safety...**

It is therefore wise to keep away from rivers and streams when they are, or have recently been, affected in this way.

If you wish to take your children or grandchildren for a summertime paddle, keep them well away from the Evenlode and seek out the healthy headwaters of our little brooks with confidence!

John Pratt, January 2024.

If you want to know more about our blue/green corridors and what you can do to help our mission of purer water for ourselves and wildlife, please email John at [consultjohnp@btinternet.com](mailto:consultjohnp@btinternet.com)



## 5. Farmers feeding birds...the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster...

There is much going on around MuW in support of building back biodiversity, not least the work of the 140+ farms of the NE Cotswold Farmer Cluster... The Wychwoods are right at the heart of the Cluster's area in the Evenlode and Windrush river catchments.

### Why are these farmers feeding birds on their farms?

Most farmland bird species are insectivores and play an important role in the biological control of pest populations. ... and they have many other roles in the ecosystem including pollinating, seed dispersing, and nutrient cycling. Overall, farmland birds are good indicators of the quality of the farmed environment. We know the benefits of connected and diverse habitats but still birds need some extra help in the lean times of the year.

For more information - and how you could help - go to

<https://farmlandbirdaidnetwork.org/index.php/aims-and-impact/>

### What are these farmers doing?

Matthew Izod (Priory Farm, Lyneham) and Director of the NE Cotswold Farmer Cluster writes;

“Our farming group has distributed and fed 60 Tonnes of Cotswold grown grains this season. The mix has included wheat, barley, beans, peas (Priory Farm, Lyneham), oats (FarmED), linseed (August Farms, Burford), millet (Aston Farm, Bourton on the Water), oilseed rape (Great Tew) and sunflowers (Bruern Farms).



**Bird seed crop in September at Lyneham**

We feed the birds in areas which we monitor to see how feeding helps bird numbers in the area. Last year was a big success with many farms seeing 16+ different species recorded. Large numbers of yellowhammers, linnets, chaffinches, reed buntings, goldfinches and even a brambling were seen. Bird feeding during the hunger gap (December - April) is a great way to support wildlife on farms.

Also on the farm we are growing crops for birds to forage in over the winter months (the picture above is our birdseed crop in September at Lyneham). They are especially important to provide extra cover on these cold mornings!

For more information on our bird feeding project and all the other great initiatives the members of the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster are doing together, do visit our website:

<https://www.cotswoldfarmers.org/projects>

**Please note** - FarmED is one of the 30 Farmer Cluster members feeding many birds as part of this project, and providing oats for the feeding mix. **Book a free visit to FarmED – see below**

## 6. Visit FarmED for free and see some exciting farming initiatives for yourself

You can visit FarmED at 10 am on Thursday 14 March, 2024. There is usually a charge of £35 for this, but it's free for us on this occasion.



### Learning about sustainable farming at FarmED

The aims of FarmED are to “inspire, educate and connect people to build sustainable farming and food systems that nourish and regenerate the planet”.

About your visit, FarmED write “Explore Honeydale Farm on an inspiring and informative guided farm walk led by a member of the FarmED team.

Enjoy the fresh air and beautiful landscape as you visit the meadows, heritage orchard, kitchen garden, natural flood management and other areas. You will hear about all that's been going on at the farm and plans for the future.

There'll be plenty of opportunities to ask questions and find out about everything from regenerative agriculture and sustainable food to micro dairies and growing heritage wheat for artisan bread making.”

Contact **Pat Ward** on **01993 830028** or **Elaine Brittan** on [ebspamfree@gmail.com](mailto:ebspamfree@gmail.com) if you would like to book a place – numbers are limited!

An interesting and informative visit is guaranteed!

## 7. Want to know more about local birds – do a “Birding Walk” with Chris Barnes

Do you like birds but are no good at naming the ones you see around you?

Are you frustrated at hearing birds but not being able to name them?

Local resident and keen birder, Chris Barnes, is happy to share his knowledge on a local walk lasting about one and a half to two hours. He will also be able to help you identify birds from their calls using a mobile phone App.

He is offering two possible dates, **Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April starting at 10 am.** Venue to be decided.

For obvious reasons, the group will have to be small, may be up to six people.

So, if you are interested please contact Chris on 07897 225895 or email [chrisb288@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:chrisb288@tiscali.co.uk) to be sure of getting a place.



**Did you take part in the RSPB’s Big Garden Birdwatch (26-28 January, 2024) ?**

If so, please send your results to Elaine Brittan or Pat Ward. We will look at the results to start getting an idea of the bird variety in MuW; not exactly scientific but it’s a start!



## 8. Bird boxes for barn owls, swifts – and others?

### The Barn Owl Project

The inspiration for the **barn owl project** came from Henry Astor at Bruern Farm. Henry erected seven boxes for barn owls and five are currently inhabited. In 2023, 12 chicks were tagged, and in the previous year 22. His aim is to put boxes up along the Evenlode from Woodstock to Moreton, creating a fabulous wildlife corridor.

Further south in the parish, work is in hand to put up **three more barn owl boxes**, one in Calais field (courtesy of Philip Watson), and the other two in the copse adjacent to the Eco Area. Advice from experts was taken in relation to choosing the right locations and the work is planned for February, 2024. Barn owls may roost in a box one year and then nest there in the subsequent year.

Let's hope the MuW boxes are as successful as those Henry Astor has established at Bruern!

Further information about this initiative - or if you wish to put up nest boxes for **other birds** - please contact Pat Ward.

### SOS Save Our Swifts!



### Why swifts?

Because they are now in desperate trouble having nested here since at least Roman times. Between 1995 and 2016 we lost over half the population and they are still declining. This is largely due to the demolition of old buildings, replacement buildings lacking suitable provision, and the widespread use of insecticides. (One research suggests that we may have lost 80 % of our insects in recent years).

They are truly remarkable birds - fantastic aerialists and the fastest bird in level flight. They eat, drink, mate and sleep on the wing, only landing to breed. Some can fly at 18, 000 feet over the Himalayas.

Tragically they are now declining at a truly alarming rate but we can make a difference – and it's relatively cheap and easy.

## What we did

In the early part of 2023, we installed three nest boxes for swifts on the side of our house with the help of Swift Conservation who advised us on the best type of box for our house, the best position on the wall, and how to maximize our chances of success in attracting swifts to use them.



### **New swift boxes – take advice on where to locate them**

A very knowledgeable and committed volunteer from Swift Conservation, who lives locally, installed the boxes for us in return for the net cost of the boxes. (We volunteered a donation to Swift Conservation for his labour.)

Our boxes (see picture above) were made of wood by John Stimpson, who makes hundreds of boxes each year for Swift Conservation, and painted in a colour of our choice. There are several other types of boxes available, including an ingenious brick with a cavity inside that easily replaces an existing brick to provide a very discreet nest in a brick built wall. *Developers and builders please note!*

Having installed boxes for swifts, it's best to gain their attention; you can get a recording of swift calls from Swift Conservation and play it through an inexpensive portable speaker.

## **We believe (hope) it worked!**

Late in the season we watched several (young?) swifts flying close to our boxes, apparently showing interest. We were excited by this “fly past” and are cautiously optimistic that we will have swifts in our boxes in this coming season when they return in May from their winter stay in central or southern Africa.

## **More information...**

Swift Conservation's website is really helpful; a wealth of information about swifts, their life cycle, how to attract them to nest near you plus a very wide range of swift boxes from which to choose.

Brian Watson, January 2024

## 9. Great work at Wychwood Primary School

Wychwood Primary School has been doing good work for sustainability and biodiversity for some years. Each class from 5 to 11 years of age sends two representatives to the Eco Council; this year the themes are waste, more eco friendly transport to school, and water. The school will be celebrating World Water Day on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. There is also a thriving after school club, The Forest School.

**Stop Press** - The school also participated in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch – more news of this and their other initiatives in the next newsletter.



## 10. Involving young people in our biodiversity work - photography?

We are keen to involve young people in as many different ways as possible.

A number of young people from different organisations are involved in tree planting (see below), and we are aware of some young people from a local secondary school who are keen on photographing wild life.

Anyone who knows of such young people or has any other ideas for involving young people, please contact Elaine Brittan or Pat Ward.





## 11. Butterflies and moths are also important ...

See the next Newsletter for news about counting butterflies and moths (July).



## 12. Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) - Spring Conference, 16 March, 2024

A number of people in MuW send very useful records of wildlife sightings (birds, bats, hares, butterflies come easily to mind ) to TVERC....if you want to find out more about why records are important or how to do it, TVERC is inviting you to their Spring Conference;

This looks like being a great event - more information from TVERC or Pat Ward.

### Let's get together!

We're hosting a new event, and we'd love to see you there. Join us for TVERC Spring Conference 2024, 16 March 2024 at 10:00 AM.

Our recorders' conference is a remarkable gathering that brings together the vibrant biological recording community. It's an opportunity for all of us to share updates on the incredible work we've been doing.

Whether you are an experienced wildlife surveyor or just starting out, there will be a range of talks and workshops designed to increase your knowledge of wildlife recording, as well as give you the opportunity to network with other recorders in your local area, exchange ideas and build connection within the recorders' community.

Talks and speed updates from different recording and conservation groups including Oxford University, BTO, UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme and more. We hope you're able to join us - register now.

Warm regards,

TVERC

### TVERC Spring Recorders' Conference 2024



Saturday 16th March 2024

Cholsey Great Hall, Fair Mile, Cholsey, OX10 9GW

## **BMAG Newsletter One - February 2024**

**Edited by Cllr. Pat Ward and Elaine Brittan**

Our next newsletter will be in May/June. In the meantime, please send any contributions you would like to make about biodiversity to either Pat or Elaine.

If you have an idea for a biodiversity project but it needs funding to implement, please discuss it with us. It may be possible for us to find funding for certain projects.

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