

SURVEY OF THE PONDS OF NAPHILL COMMON

Tony Marshall and Holly Bennett of Prestwood have been contracted to carry out an ecological survey of the ponds on Naphill Common in 2013. The survey is funded by the Chilterns Conservation Board in response to an application by the Friends of Naphill Common, who wished to know more about the current ecology of the ponds in anticipation of carrying out conservation and restoration work. Tony has carried out many ecological surveys in the area, with special emphasis on plants and invertebrates. He was lately Recorder for Amphibians and Reptiles for Bucks. Holly has a degree in ecology and is seeking to join a firm of ecological consultants. Her special interest, and subject of her Masters, is amphibians.

The team carried out a similar survey of Mannings Pond on Downley Common for the Downley Common Society in 2012, in which it was found that considerable change had occurred since earlier surveys 20 years before. In the case of Naphill Common they will be joined by Neil Fletcher, who lives at Walter's Ash, and has a particular interest in moths and other insects.

The intention is to survey all the ponds or former ponds known on the common for their general condition and species related to a wetland environment. The report will include an assessment of the state of each pond and options for future management. Of the eight known ponds, five (Daisy, Dew, Lady Horse, Willow and Shipwash) will receive particular attention. The others are now either permanently dry or only temporarily wet. There is still interest in these vestigial ponds, however, because of old records of Fairy Shrimps from the common, rare creatures (nationally endangered) that utilise shallow impermanent water to breed to avoid predation by amphibians. They require open light conditions, however, and it is feared that the common - which was once heathland with scattered trees - is now too overgrown and shady. Juniper, heather and other heathland plants are similarly disappearing as the common rapidly becomes woodland. The increase in shade has also affected the ponds that still hold water year round and it is likely that many aquatic species have been lost as a result. Formerly the ponds would also have been regularly managed and the margins trampled by cattle, favouring a series of rare creatures and plants that may now have disappeared, including most notably Starfruit, a plant now close to national extinction which grew until the 1990s at Daisy and Mannings Ponds. Other modern threats to the health of our ponds are the introduction of garden throw-outs, which unbalance the natural eco-systems, and dogs bathing in them regularly, muddying the water and thus reducing light levels for submerged plants and animals, and possibly introducing dangerous chemicals from their fur. In some cases people encourage ducks at ponds by feeding them, which causes overpopulation, water pollution and usually complete eradication of all other forms of life.

Our ponds, which are the richest of all local habitats for natural wildlife, are therefore under many threats and need our help and protection. At one time they were essential for watering or cleaning animals or farm-carts, but they have now lost their original rationale and hence the continual management they once received. It is therefore up to societies like FONC to take action to preserve them for their biodiversity and scenic interest.

As part of the survey the team have laid down squares of roofing-felt near most of the ponds. These are for use in surveying for reptiles and amphibians and people should refrain from interfering with them through 2013. In some ponds they will also be placing plastic strips to help survey for amphibians breeding, and these should similarly be left undisturbed. We would be grateful for everyone's co-operation in this. The team would also welcome any casual observations that people make in the course of this year at any of the ponds. Please e-mail ecorocker@gmail.com.