

DOWNLAND THYMES

NEWS FOR THE SOUTH DOWNS VOLUNTEER
RANGER SERVICE ISSUE 65 | AUTUMN 2014



The group pausing for breath on their guided walk across the South Downs. © Kamran Jamshidi

WALKING & TALKING

ALAN JONES MET WITH MEMBERS OF A FARSI SPEAKING COMMUNITY FOR A DAY OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE SOUTH DOWNS

Some time ago, Ian Hartle asked for volunteers to help run a day collaborating with an organisation who encourage recreational walking among ethnic communities which do not have a tradition of walking in the countryside for pleasure. I enjoyed this so much that when Ian recently asked for volunteers to help with a day working with a group of Farsi speakers, I was very keen to get involved.

MEETING THE GROUP

Farsi is the language spoken in Iran and other areas in the Middle East. The London based organisation we were working with offers support in a number of ways, largely to members of the Iranian community living in London.

The group consisted mainly of young Farsi speakers together with their group leaders. I was immediately struck by

the enthusiasm and interest of the young people. Having travelled from London everyone was ready for a cup of tea and, whilst Ian was preparing for the day, I chatted with the early arrivals answering questions, as best I could, about the history and work of the Volunteer Ranger Service and the nature of National Parks.

When everybody had arrived Ian gave a presentation about the National Park; the group leaders were extremely interested in all aspects and asked many perceptive questions, the youngsters lacked the confidence to ask questions but listened attentively.

TALKING WITH SOME OF THE GROUP LEADERS ABOUT THEIR WORK WITH MEMBERS OF THE FARSI COMMUNITY WAS MOST INTERESTING.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Our day began with light pond clearance work in Kingston. It was a warm day and it was somewhat amusing to see how the youngsters

responded to Ian's instructions on how to use the tools. It seemed to me that many of them had little experience in handling basic garden tools and I have never seen so many ways of using garden shears! A reassuring sight was how quickly, for some

of the youngsters, early enthusiasm for the work turned to fatigue and conversation; no different from any group of adolescents unused to that kind of work. *Continued page 9...*

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CHAIRMAN’S CORNER

Welcome to the September issue of the *Downland Thymes*, which this time is a bumper one, with more articles than ever before, so I will attempt to keep things brief!

As the new VRS Chairman the first thing I should like to do is to pay tribute to my predecessor, Ron Wilder, for his really excellent chairmanship during his two year tenure. Ron’s leadership, enthusiasm and energy have definitely moved the VRS forward – as a result I believe our profile within the SDNPA is now well established. So Ron, on behalf of the VRS Committee, many thanks indeed.

I attended the excellent South Downs Open Day on Sunday 27 July as one of the many volunteers helping manage the VRS stand throughout the day. The one thing that seemed to surprise visitors the most was the number of different projects and tasks, over and above scrub bashing, which were undertaken by the VRS – some of these were well illustrated on the stand itself. My thanks to all those who gave up some of their day to help out on the stand. By the time you read this we will have hopefully done something similar at the Secrets of the Heath event on Petersfield Heath on 30/31 August.

Finally, a reminder to those who were unable to attend the AGM, please have a look at the South Downs National Park Authority intranet where you will find approved copies of the VRS Financial Accounts as well as the new VRS Constitution.

Hope you all enjoy the rest of the summer.

NEVILL BROOKE, VRS CHAIRMAN



UPDATE FROM THE VRS TEAM

IAN HARTLE GIVES YOU THE LATEST NEWS WITHIN THE VOLUNTEER RANGER SERVICE.

Things are settling down in our new offices; Cris Savill is now based here too, while Vicky is still at Stanmer. As I write, we have just offered Sarah Brett the new post sharing the role of Volunteer Support Officer with Cris. Vicky Wakefield-Jarrett decided not to apply, but I hope she will stay with us until the end of her temporary contract in October.

LONG SERVICE AWARDS

Thanks to all of you who joined us at the AGM – local free-range hog roast and ice-cream from Langrish – fantastic! The meeting went well with Trevor giving out five Silver badges for 10 years’ service and two Gold badges for 20 years’ service. See AGM highlights below for the names of all those receiving awards this year. Thanks are due to everyone who received these, especially to Mike Pearn and James Tolson – if ten years is a huge commitment, how do you describe twenty? I know both Mike and James care deeply about the South Downs and the VRS have been really fortunate to have their help for such a long time.

HELP AT THE CENTRE

Thanks very much to those who responded to our call for help with Saturday opening of the South Downs Centre – we will be helping to run this pilot scheme during August and September. Volunteers joining the VRS for this role took part in a VRS Introductory Training Day late in July, closely followed by a half day session on Customer Service ‘front of house’ training and information about local facilities in Midhurst. This has been a joint effort with Chichester District and Midhurst Town councils; at the end of the season everyone involved will review the project and look at what should follow next year.

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Above: Cris Savill mans the VRS sash making table at the South Downs Centre Open Day.
© SDNPA/Anne Purkiss

Other volunteering roles being developed include:

- Our Landscape Lead, Chris Fairbrother needs help studying how tranquil different parts of the National Park are. The aim is to assemble evidence which can support the new Local Plan for the National Park and help objective decision making on proposed new developments.
- The ‘Secrets of the High Woods Project’ will be recruiting from late September for help with ground survey, research, events and ‘oral history’ recording.
- The successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, by the Heathland Reunited project, will also be looking to recruit volunteers to new work over the next few months.

We’ll tell you more about these projects soon and, as always, thanks to all of you for the time that you give for the South Downs.

IAN HARTLE, VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

AGM HIGHLIGHTS

ELECTION OF NEW OFFICERS

Chairman – Nevill Brooke
Treasurer – Alistair Stewart
Secretary – Martin Cowell

LONG SERVICE AWARDS

Gold, 20 Year Service:
James Tolson and Mike Pearn

Silver, 10 Year Service:
Sue Payne, Shirley Brice, Linda Parker, Richard Walker and Ron MacKenzie (David Lishman, Coralie & Rob Abbott also received the awards but weren’t present.)

A VERY SPECIAL RIVER

ALTHOUGH HAVING NO SPECIFIC CONSERVATION DESIGNATION LIKE THE WORLD FAMOUS RIVERS, TEST AND ITCHEN – THE LITTLE RIVER MEON IS WIDELY REGARDED BY THOSE WITH A PASSION FOR RIVERS AS BEING A MORE NATURAL SYSTEM, AND HAS A NATIONAL REPUTATION FOR BEING A VERY SPECIAL RIVER.

WILDLIFE TO WATCH

The river is particularly noted for its wild brown and sea trout population. These trout are one and the same species but with differing life strategies, with some fish living out their whole lives as small resident brown trout, while others swim to sea and return to spawn in the same manner as salmon. A good Meon sea trout can easily be mistaken for a salmon as they easily match an average Itchen salmon for size.

It’s a well kept secret that the Meon also supports a small salmon population. However, these fish are not thought to run the river upstream of Wickham, unlike the sea trout of which some will reach West Meon and beyond in an autumnal high flow. Watching as these fish excavate

huge amounts of gravel with their powerful “shovel” like tails to spawn is truly a wonderful wildlife spectacle for the lucky few who have witnessed it.

The Meon also supports a range of coarse fish, eel and strong populations of brook lamprey, a very primitive and mysterious species, as well as the bullhead, both of which are designated as species of conservation importance under the EU Habitats Directive.

SHAPED BY THE EARTH

For much of its length the river displays classic chalk stream characteristics such as clear water, low soft margins and an abundance of in-channel aquatic plants dominated by water crowfoot, starwort, watercress

and water-moss. As with most chalk rivers the channel is heavily modified over most of its length and in-channel habitats are heavily influenced by the numerous structures and milling impoundments found throughout its length.

HELPING AN ECOSYSTEM THRIVE

In the last few years the Meon Valley Partnership, a group hosted by the South Downs National Park Authority and supported by the Environment Agency, The Hampshire County Council, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and the Wild Trout Trust have been working together to try and improve and protect this wonderful river. Several small scale projects have already been delivered, with the

most recent project involving the enhancement of a heavily modified concrete channel running through the centre of East Meon village.

The first phase of the project has now been completed and much credit must go to the South Downs National Park Volunteer Rangers who rolled up their sleeves and pitched in to help introduce 20 tonnes of assorted stone and gravel which will provide a better environment for aquatic plants and insects, as well as improving opportunities for small fish, especially bullhead and small trout. East Meon now has a stream rather than just a concrete drain but there is still much to do and I for one hope we can call on the Volunteers to make it happen.

ANDY THOMAS, CONSERVATION OFFICER, WILD TROUT TRUST

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Below left: Volunteers working on the River Meon.



Red tailed bumblebee
(*Bombus lapidarius*).
© Jan Knowlson

HOW TO HELP BUMBLEBEES



MOST PEOPLE ARE FAMILIAR WITH BUMBLEBEES, THOSE LOVELY BRIGHTLY-COLOURED FURRY THINGS THAT BUZZ AROUND, GIVING US MUCH ENJOYMENT AND POSING NO DANGER. ALL PLEASURE FOR US AND NO PRICE TO PAY!

WILDLIFE SOS

Unfortunately there is a hidden problem – they are in serious danger. Since 1930 humans have destroyed 97% of their life-sustaining hay meadows and flower-rich grasslands, with the sad result that two UK species have become extinct and seven species are now on the endangered list.

The public is only just beginning to become aware that bumblebees and other pollinators are essential because they pollinate 33% of the food we consume, 84% of European crops, and 60-90% of the flowering plants.

SUNNY OUTLOOK

However, we can help – if we are willing – by slowly reversing these damaging trends and

starting to re-establish habitats in which bumblebees can thrive again.

The National Park provides a huge range of habitats that can easily be developed to include bumblebees as part of the on-going works to construct connected wildlife corridors. Rangers and VRS volunteers in all areas can help!

TWO STEPS TO HELP

Elementary bumblebee conservation is done in two basic steps; the first is to gain an understanding about bumblebees and the second is to develop habitats for them.

The first step is best started by going on a local guided walk, learning about bumbles and developing basic identification skills. At Stanmer Park the first one of these has just taken place, attended by a group of enthusiastic VRS members.

IDENTIFYING SPECIES

SDNPA Ranger Jan Knowlson arranged the group, selected the route and acted as the flower expert, whilst I acted as the

FUTURE MONTHLY WALKS WILL STRENGTHEN IDENTIFICATION SKILLS AND EXPAND INTO SIMPLE SURVEYING.

bumblebee guide. We focussed on the eight common bumblebee species to keep it easy and simple, with each person being given a free colour ID guide provided by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT).

The two-hour session started with a talk about various aspects of bumblebees, their lives and their habitats. A sunny

walk then followed where bumblebees were caught with a net, closely inspected using a small magnifying pot, and then identified using the BBCT guide. By the end of the walk many species were being confidently identified by eye only whilst still on the flower. Future monthly walks will strengthen identification skills and expand into simple surveying.

FIND OUT MORE

See the Trust's website; www.bumblebeeconservation.org for more information and to download one of their identification guides.

If you would like a talk or a guided walk in your area please let me know (cliff@gas1.co.uk) and I'll try to do one for you. Walks are best done during the bumblebee season of March to September but meeting-room talks can be done anytime.

CLIFF HEPBURN, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

VRS FARMING & WILDLIFE COURSE: JULY 2014

THIS YEAR THE VRS AGAIN SET UP ITS OWN EDUCATIONAL COURSES FOR VOLUNTEERS. ALL COURSES WERE PROVIDED BY THE SUSSEX WILDLIFE TRUST AND PROVED VERY POPULAR.



Main image: Farming and Wildlife course lunch. **Inset:** Looking out over Sompting Downs.

One course was based in The Downs Barn at Upton Farm which, with two adjoining farms, forms the Sompting Estate (www.somptingdowns.com), and focused on farming and wildlife.

To start the course Peter Thompson, our tutor, introduced the Stewardship Scheme and its objectives with examples from around the country. Some 73% of all farms are now in a scheme – Peter graphically demonstrated the benefits of these schemes to sustaining biodiversity. Forthcoming changes in the Stewardship Scheme will require more collaboration between neighbouring farms and Peter is currently encouraging 'clustered farm' schemes to make implementation of these changes more economical.

After an outdoor lunch we had a brief introduction to the need for a careful balance of planting whilst looking at the species of flowers and grasses around us. We then set off on a tour of the Estate which took a circular route across a restored chalk grassland meadow and into the mountain woodland, which consists of mixed deciduous and conifer trees. Glades have been created edged with shrub species to provide more varied and continuous cover, and ground level planting includes primroses, orchids and a thriving insect population.

We then made our way back along the uppermost boundary of the meadow with views across the coastal plain to the sea. Returning along the track, with its own varied flora we looked at the adjacent restored pond and under-sown barley field and margin.

This traditionally 'under-planted' arable field contains spring barley which, once at a suitable height, is 'under-sown' i.e. between rows meadow or fodder species are sown. Not only do these provide seed and cover for wildlife after harvest, but in a rotation cycle the succeeding fodder is already established. The seed bearing

margin with last year's kale provides a rich supply of seed and over the coming years other species will be added such as millet and quinoa.

Along the way Peter and Mike Tristram, the Managing Trustee, explained the aims, achievements and the many dilemmas facing environmentally sensitive farming management, particularly within the Stewardship system.

The day raised numerous issues such as, what is biodiversity? Is it 'all of life' or something more focused? Can we reconcile food production with wildlife? How can this all be managed sustainably for future generations?

The course showed that there's much room for hope, on the strength of the efforts being made by forward-looking farmers working with experienced and knowledgeable conservation bodies. The pressure to achieve greater food production and security will potentially continue to conflict with the existing environment, but both can thrive with the right balance.

BY SIMON ROGERS, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER



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FROGS IN THE GARDEN



Recently we had been receiving heavy rain and, having a sloping garden with clay soil, the rain flows quickly over the surface and floods low lying ground. So I decided to do something that would retain the water and supply me with a reservoir in times of drought. This I felt would not only solve the flood but would be good for the environment by saving water, and allow me to wash the car, clean the patio or water the plants etc.

I dug a catchment pit, made a lid for it with ventilators and placed a submersible pump in it. The water level would be controlled by a floating arm, rather like a control valve in a toilet cistern.

I thought I had found a foolproof solution whereby when the water level became too high the floating valve would trigger the pump into operation and pump surplus water to the end of the garden out of harm's way – however, this is where the frogs came in.

VISITORS ARRIVE

Working in and around the garden I frequently heard a hissing noise – not sufficiently noisy to cause annoyance but it was persistent. I decided to investigate. The noise came from my new catchment pit. I lifted the lid and found that frogs had

adopted the float control arm as a sort of perch. They had laid across in twos and threes and weighed it down into the water, which must have been great fun for them. But for me the valve was not shutting off the way it was intended to.

**YES THE GARDEN
MAY MARGINALLY
LOOK RATHER MORE
UNTIDY, BUT I'VE
MADE SOME GOOD
FROGGY FRIENDS
DON'T YOU THINK?**

A SOLUTION

I'm such a softy I couldn't shoo them away or block up their access. Instead I put the cistern into manual mode thus limiting the amount of play time during operation time. I made a wooden float for the frogs

so they could relax and chill out on it so they would not feel deprived and now they are happy with the two options. It's nice to know they are content and that their world is fine.

I purchased a compost bin for green refuse but have since realised that by composting my waste in the normal way it was providing an over-winter shelter for dozens of small frogs. In consequence, at this time of the year, I've emptied the bin to restore their traditional winter home.

Yes the garden may marginally look rather more untidy, but I've made some good froggy friends don't you think?

**CHRIS HICKS, EASTERN DOWNS
VOLUNTEER RANGER**

SHIRLEY BRICE FINDS OUT
WHAT HER LOCAL OWL
POPULATION HAVE BEEN
UP TO BY INVESTIGATING
THEIR PELLETS.



LOST & FOUND

Objects found when working as a Volunteer Ranger in various, sometimes isolated places often provoke interest. Whilst checking the number of dormouse boxes at Arlington Reservoir I discovered three owl pellets on a lid, so I popped them in my pocket for further investigation. They were not sticky or smelly but presented in small, dry sausage shapes wrapped in grey fur and had probably been regurgitated by a tawny owl.

Owls swallow prey into their gizzard where food is separated from non digestible matter such as bones, beetle cases and fur and is passed down to the stomach. The gizzard then contracts to compact the unwanted material into pellet shapes which the bird then regurgitates. Two or three pellets are produced every twenty four hours and their specific shape assists in identification of the bird responsible. Accurate analysis of pellets can produce important information on habitats, prey and predators.

To carry out my investigations I laid out newspaper, a small skewer and a bowl of water, rubber gloves and a plastic tray on

the greenhouse work table. Darning needle and small tweezers were quickly added to assist my several hours of effort.

Soaking one pellet at a time enabled me to tease out the rodent fur and I was delighted to find lots of tiny bones within it. These were carefully separated, cleaned, naturally dried and later identified. They included skulls, vertebrae, ribs and limb bones.

It was clear that the owl had eaten voles and wood mice as my collection included skeletal parts of several of these small mammals. I labelled and displayed them on white card and still find them interesting. Recently they helped me to engage the interest of my seven year old granddaughter and classmates as we talked of food chains and of what they may find on a walk in the countryside.

**SHIRLEY BRICE, EASTERN DOWNS
VOLUNTEER RANGER**

**Top: Tawny owl. ©SDNPA
Left: Barn owl pellet. Right: Vole skull
found in tawny owl pellets. Visit www.hawkandowl.org for more information on
owls and conservation. © Hawk and Owl Trust**

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IT IS INTERESTING HOW WE NOTICE WHAT IS OF INTEREST TO US AND MANAGE TO FILTER OUT THINGS THAT WE DON'T LIKE. WHEN IT COMES TO SEEING LITTER THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION DOESN'T LIKE IT AND FREQUENTLY FILTER IT OUT OF THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS.

CONFESSIONS OF A LITTER PICKER

Recently I was on Seaford Head with a group of volunteers. I took a litter bag for the usual collection of 'dog-poo' bags, sweet wrappings and drinks bottles that get trapped under bushes. As we cut back scrub I like to remove litter, yet on this occasion my fellow volunteers didn't spot the litter until I pointed it out and I wonder if they would have left it there if I hadn't been around.

THE PICKY ONES

I first became a rabid litter picker over 10 years ago. Walking my dog at Tidemills near Seaford most of the time my brain filtered out the litter mess in favour of the lovely views. Then Jim Skinner, at that time a South Downs Volunteer Ranger, suggested setting up a regular litter picking group which I joined. Since then we've met every month to clear the beach, the foreshore and the land around the ruined buildings. Initially we were dealing with many years worth of accumulated rubbish deposited by the wind and visitors and it was common to fill 30-40 large plastic bags in just two hours. Now, between gales, we have the area virtually clear of litter.

THREE TYPES

I and two other Eastern Downs volunteers (Linda and Keith Sutton) regularly deal with litter around the Seven Sisters Cliffs and Seaford and we now realise that litter falls into three categories. The most dramatic, but luckily not the most common

is fly tipping. Linda and I once cleared out a drainage ditch on the edge of Friston Forest that contained everything including the kitchen sink. Someone had obviously installed a new kitchen and had dumped their old kitchen in its entirety.

Litter in the form of dog waste bags is very commonplace and we are all familiar with trees and bushes bedecked with poo-bags. On the stretch of footpath that runs across the Seven Sisters Country Park to the sea we once picked up around 100 discarded bags.

The final category is the general waste that is deliberately or inadvertently dropped or blown on the wind. People go to extraordinary lengths to hide their rubbish, presumably in the belief that once it is hidden it can't be seen but can be forgotten. Sweet wrappings pushed into cracks in tree bark, beer cans appear to have a natural home under blackthorn and there is a ditch near Seaford which perennially attracts vodka bottles in large quantities. I have also noted that sticking litter into the metal fixings of sign posts is not uncommon.

LOOKING FORWARD

Whilst I bemoan the litter in our beautiful part of the country I note with some small pride that it is not as bad as some other parts of the UK, but this is no excuse for not taking action to try and reduce it further. We need to make children much more aware of the consequences of leaving litter in the towns and countryside and we need to instil in them a pride in their surroundings that leads them to naturally want to take their litter to a bin or home. Litter picking shouldn't be used as a punishment for bad behaviour.

ON THE STRETCH OF FOOTPATH THAT RUNS ACROSS THE SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK TO THE SEA WE ONCE PICKED UP AROUND 100 DISCARDED [DOG POO] BAGS.

I don't know what will be the successful solutions to reducing litter on our beaches and in our countryside. I don't know how to stop irresponsible dog owners

and picnic groups from leaving a mess, but I think we need to find a solution and soon. In the meantime whilst us Volunteers are clearing away the brash we should also do our part and take away the litter.

MARION TREW, LITTER PICKER AND EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER



TIME FOR A CHANGE

As I write this it feels like I'm in a dream. This dream starts just over eight years ago when, after several years of enjoying working breaks with BTCV, I decided to preserve my sanity and get out of the rat race with a move into environmental conservation.

I thought some more formal volunteering might help so I joined the South Downs VRS and started planning my escape. I was lucky to have the opportunity of a redundancy a year later and didn't have to think too long about whether to apply for it! That bought me time to do some training and more volunteering to build my experience.

WORKING FOR FUN

After recharging my batteries a bit I started mid-week volunteering with Surrey Wildlife Trust, did an NVQ Level 2 with BTCV and Plumpton College, spent two summers volunteering with the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, and then about ten months full-time volunteering with the RSPB in Cumbria. All the while I continued with the Sunday VRS teams of the North and West areas (as they were then). Basically life became one big holiday!

TIME TO GET A REAL JOB

However, it was time to get some paid work, and I was lucky to quickly get a post as a

Ranger with the National Trust for Scotland on their amazing Cairngorms Mar Lodge Estate. I originally went for six months but stayed two and a half years. Even though I was now being paid, it still felt like I was on holiday and I managed to still get out with the VRS on breaks back home.

BACK TO THE SOUTH

Such was the pull of the South Downs that I decided to leave Scotland and become unpaid again in the hope that 'something' would come up in that area. Then one day it did – with the four new Assistant Ranger posts for the National Park. Somehow or other (the interview is a murky blur) I was offered the post in the Wealden Heath team.

So I have now turned from poacher to gamekeeper and started working with the gang at Midhurst. Although I'm leaving the VRS I'm looking forward to still working with the Sunday volunteers and to meeting and working with the mid-week volunteers.

I still can't quite believe it and it feels like I'm in a dream. Which perhaps I am – one that came true!

ALISON PITTS, SDNPA ASSISTANT RANGER, WEALDEN HEATHS AREA

A DAY WITH A DIFFERENCE...

Continued from front page.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

I got to know much more about individuals during lunch by the pond and as we were later guided across the Downs. All members of the group could speak English, although some were more fluent than others.

One young man had ambitions to read 'Genetic Science' at Oxford and wanted to study Latin so that he could read certain documents in the Vatican library. He spoke several languages and persuaded me that Farsi and English were not so very different! This theory was put to the test as I received instructions from some of the other members of the group on how to speak Farsi. I can now introduce myself in Farsi and ask people how they are.

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

Talking with some of the group leaders about their work with members of the Farsi community was most interesting. It is rare that in this part of the world I get an opportunity to discuss these kind of issues with people directly involved.

The walk, about 4 to 5 miles, eventually ended – not too soon for some of the youngsters who were clearly unused to this sort of activity. We said our farewells and it was clear that the day had been a most enjoyable experience for our visitors but I returned home thinking that I had benefitted from the day just as much as them.

ALAN JONES, VOLUNTEER RANGER, SEVEN SISTERS WEEKEND GROUP

LOVE IT OR HATE IT...

...Tell us your thoughts about *Downland Thymes*. What new features would you like to see? Which articles did you like? Would you prefer to read it online?

Downland Thymes is put together by an editorial team, made up of SDNPA communications team members, the VRS team and Russell Cleaver from the VRS Committee.

We'd love to hear your views, so please send your feedback to dt@southdowns.gov.uk or to russanne.cleaver@gmail.com

If you'd like to download a copy of *Downland Thymes*, visit the National Park website: www.southdowns.gov.uk/get-involved/volunteering/volunteer-newsletter

METICULOUS COUNTING

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS GET TOGETHER TO COUNT GREEN-WINGED ORCHIDS...

The programme said 'Green-Winged Orchid Count, Piddinghoe'; so up the Ouse Valley? No, Piddinghoe reservoir is on the outskirts of Peacehaven. It's an underground reservoir with a thin earth covering that has proved ideal for orchids. We joined Alex Stephens from South East Water who informed us that, to the best of his knowledge, green-winged orchids were the only orchids on the site – just as well since they superficially resemble several other species.

1, 2, 3...

To count them in a systematic way we used a cats-cradle of ropes, which anyone who has counted hairy mallows at Folkington will be familiar with. When sorted out, a 10m x 10m square if formed and this is subdivided with more 10m ropes into as many 10m strips as there are volunteers to count (up to 10). After each square is accounted for, the whole square is "flipped" to count the next 10m section, leaving corner "pins" in place so that the next sequence of squares will not overlap.

Some plants had already flowered and were over; some had their flowers nibbled by rabbits, or had not flowered at all, and some were at their beautiful best, so we not only counted flower heads, but basal leaf rosettes as well. Using a pointing stick mentally helped you to remember which plants you had already counted. Fortunately they were all big enough to see standing up, unlike hairy mallow seedlings where you have to bend double, or end up crawling on your knees along your 10m strip.

It's not the best named flower in the guide book, being more purple than anything else, however the leaves are plain green without any spots. After meticulous examination we decided there was just a hint of green on the outer petals (or perianth segments, as they are sometimes referred to).

LOTS TO SEE

There were many other flowers including a sword of scarlet pimpernel, and what I thought was a forget-me-not but not a garden variety. I thought it was blue, but when looking more closely it was white and turned out to be a Changing Forget-me-not, a plant that I hadn't seen before.

The reservoir is on two levels. We had completed the count on the lower level and took a look at the upper level where there were lots of bluebells, distinctively different at first glance but they could be confused. A late comer was seen studiously counting bluebells – that square had to be recounted...

TOTTING UP

As we sat down for lunch, listening to the white throats in nearby bushes and admiring the distant channel views beyond the suburbia of Peacehaven, we were asked to guess how many plants we had counted. All of us underestimated the number; some by quite a lot. Two thousand seven hundred and four was the final score.

BY TIM VISICK, EASTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER



UNDER THE BOARDWALK. DOWN BY THE... MEON

(WITH APOLOGIES TO THE DRIFTERS 1964; THERE ISN'T MUCH ROOM UNDER THIS PARTICULAR BOARDWALK ANYWAY...)

At the end of last year a request to find a solution to a perennial problem was made on behalf of local residents by Simon Greenly, warden of Church Meadow, Meonstoke, in the Meon Valley. The objective was to allow the inhabitants of Corhampton and Meonstoke villages to visit each other without getting their feet impossibly muddy using the footpath that connects the road by Corhampton to St. Andrews Church, and village pub, in Meonstoke. So, a rights-of-way project was born under the guidance of Elliott Rowe (HCC Access Officer) and Elaina Whittaker-Slark (Western Downs Ranger).

The path crosses the River Meon over two bridges and then goes beside the church with its distinctive wooden-clad bell tower and on by a small lane

to the pub. The section near the second (wooden) bridge is often waterlogged in the winter so a boardwalk was proposed. The footpath is not muddy in the summer so it was decided that the boardwalk should be removable to allow the vegetation to recover, as well as to make the project that little bit more challenging!

Elaina gave me the opportunity to run this as a mini-project which was a real vote of confidence for the volunteers. This involved developing the design, agreeing the materials, making the thing and getting it installed – and I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed all of it!

Following a site survey, the boardwalk itself was designed in January with six modular sections, each of which could be

handled by a couple of helpers, and fabricated off-site at the VRS "workshop". There was also a triangular section needed to connect the walkway with the wooden bridge as the two didn't line up. Materials, the cost of which were funded through the Western Area "grass roots" fund, arrived early in Spring this year and so the boardwalk was constructed and installed, without a hitch, in early July. In future Simon Greenly has agreed to look after the installation with his group of local volunteers.

Many thanks to the construction team of Chris and Eddie (both volunteers) and also to Simon (HCC, Rights of Way Team) for help with the installation.

MARTIN COWELL, WESTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER

Above left: Construction of the wooden boardwalk.

© SDNPA Elaina Whittaker-Slark

Top right: The wooden bridge before the boardwalk was installed.

© SDNPA Elaina Whittaker-Slark

Bottom right: The boardwalk fully installed and in use.

© Martin Cowell

YOUR REVIEWS

This section is all about sharing reviews of your favourite things. Tell us about books you've read, pubs you've visited, tools or gadgets you've used or even websites that you'd recommend to other volunteers. Email your reviews, of up to 100 words, to dt@southdowns.gov.uk with a picture.

TRADITIONAL
INN AWARD



Volunteers, if you know of a pub that deserves this award, please let us know. We're talking about good old-fashioned public houses, rather than gastro pubs or themed inns. We want to know about places where you don't need to take your boots off before crossing the threshold! Send us a photo and 100 words explaining why the pub you nominate should be recognised.

THE SWAN INN, FITTLEWORTH, PULBOROUGH RH20 1EN

With its large timber arch across the road you cannot miss this distinctive pub.

From outside you see a typically tiled, historic hostelry. Inside it's more elegant than expected; the hand of an interior decorator has been at work here. The wooden floors, simple clean lines and a warm welcome from behind the bar, made us feel wanted even in our muddy boots. The food was excellent, the ale was Fullers or Harveys and they had a super wine list. All this and a secret, walled (beer) garden.

Too good to be true? Go find out for yourselves...

CAPTION COMPETITION

CAN YOU CREATE A WITTY CAPTION FOR THIS PHOTOGRAPH? EMAIL YOUR IDEAS TO DT@SOUTHDOWNSGOV.UK



The winner of last edition's caption competition was...

"SORRY CRIS, I CAN'T FIND YOUR WIG ANYWHERE."

NEVILL BROOKE, WESTERN DOWNS VOLUNTEER RANGER.

HOW OTHERS MIGHT SEE US...

A group of volunteers, clothed as always in their distinctive uniforms, are toiling away in the hot sun pulling Himalayan Balsam out of a roadside ditch. Two passers-by look quietly at each other and one says knowingly to the other: "Just look at that. I never realised that they could still make you do Community Service when you were that elderly".

A group of volunteers, having worked all morning on the 'Marwell meadows' march purposefully forward with eyes fixed on the horizon where their Landrover and lunch is to be found.

They carry rakes and long scythes and various other paraphernalia.

A mother leans over and whispers to her eight year old daughter: "Look Darling! They are off to hunt a Troll."

MARTIN COWELLS



PIC IN THE PARK

Poppies are sown and grown under licence in the South Downs as opium is needed for medical supplies. Specific farmers operate under strict guidelines with drug companies to fulfil this need. This photograph was taken near Beauworth, Hampshire, by Volunteer Ranger Terry Doyle, Western Downs.

In every issue we will display a new 'Pic in the Park'. So send in a photo of a quirky corner, special place or hidden gem that you think would suit this feature. Just email dt@southdowns.gov.uk

Please also supply a succinct description of 50 words and give details of its precise location, such as its grid reference or post code, so we can state where to find it (please note, it must be publicly accessible).

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR...

THE NEXT DOWNLAND THYMES WILL BE OUT IN DECEMBER WHICH MEANS IT'S THE CHRISTMAS EDITION!

For this festive newsletter we want to know your favourite Christmas cracker jokes, festive recipes or even your suggestions of that perfect Christmas gift to help your fellow volunteers with their last minute shopping.

There's also a Christmas Competition – you are invited to complete a 16 line poem starting with:

'It was Christmas Day at the workhouse, And the volunteers were...'

...take it where you wish and the winning poem will be published in December's edition. Good luck!

Please send all your ideas, articles and poems to dt@southdowns.gov.uk.





A NEW IDENTITY FOR THE NATIONAL PARK IS BEING INTRODUCED ACROSS THE SOUTH DOWNS.

Refreshed, visitor-led photography really shows the South Downs off to its best.

THE NEW SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK SHARED IDENTITY

Those of you who have visited the South Downs Centre since the end of July will have seen some of the new visual identity including graphic language and photography posted on the walls throughout the building and the Memorial Hall.

Alternatively simply take a closer look at the new design of this publication...

The swirls, colour palette and font of the new identity will now be used by us and our partners to identify ourselves as part of the South Downs National Park.

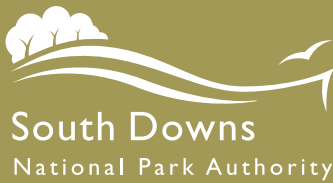
Here is a list of key projects coming up that will showcase the new identity:

- A new and improved website for the National Park
- Publications such as this *Downland Thymes*, the new Volunteering leaflet, a Community Planning toolkit and lots more
- Waymarker signs at Eartham Woods – working in partnership with the Forestry Commission
- Route signage and interpretation on the Meon Valley Trail and the Egrets Way
- Signage at Hampshire railway stations

The team are also busy finalising the toolkit for the new identity which will be made available to partners across the National Park helping them to use the new designs, colour palette and font in their own publications and other work.

If you haven't yet had a chance, please visit the South Downs Centre to have a look at the identity at a scale which really allows you to appreciate the amazing textures and colours which have been inspired by the landscape we all love and work so hard for.

WHO'S YOUR NEW ASSISTANT RANGER?



Name: Alison Pitts
Area Team: Wealden Heath
Major projects: I expect the first few months will be a whirlwind of site visits to get to know the area. One of my projects will be to work with parishes to map the habitats in their parish, helping them with some Phase 1 surveying. But most of all I'm looking forward to working with our volunteers.

Where I've come from: See article on page 9 for how I got here.

Favourite food: Anything with spinach!

Other interests: My passions are hillwalking and wildlife, of any size. I'm known as the 'Ant Lady' on the Isles of Scilly – it's a long story!



Name: Sam Buckland
Area Team: Central Downs
Major Projects: As part of the 'South Downs Way Ahead' Nature Improvement Area I will be reconnecting Duke of Burgundy butterfly populations through landowner engagement and liaising with Butterfly Conservation. Another major project will be the extension of Centurion Way, a route for cyclists and pedestrians between Chichester and West Dean on a section of the disused Chichester to Midhurst railway line.

Where I've come from: Prior to starting with the SDNPA I was a Trainee Volunteer Assistant Reserve Officer with the Sussex Wildlife Trust, carrying out practical management on over 35 reserves across Sussex. When I had a free weekend I was out with the VRS from Stanmer.

Favourite food: Sunday roast with all the trimmings.

Unusual fact: Whilst at Cardiff University I did a charity hitch-hike from Cardiff to Morocco, taking 6 days to hitch-hike the 1,600ish miles through England, France and Spain.



Name: Matthew Dowse
Area Team: Eastern Downs
Major Projects: One of my first projects is going to be taking on organising the volunteer task rotas for the Stanmer and Seven Sisters volunteers, liaising with our partners throughout the Eastern part of the National Park. I'm also going to be looking into open access land in this area and ensuring that the 'furniture' enabling access to it is being maintained and fit for purpose.

Where I've come from: Previously I was working as a Field Officer for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation in Surrey where I was responsible for carrying out practical management of heathlands for rare reptiles and other fauna.

Favourite food: At this time of year, freshly grown peas from my allotment.

Other interests: I enjoy long distance running, and living about four miles from the Stanmer office, I'm hoping to be able to combine training with commuting. I am also a keen amateur naturalist and currently learning to identify grasshoppers and crickets from their species-specific songs.



Name: Laura Deane
Area Team: Western Downs
Major projects: To start with I'll be mostly helping out with the Western Downs Rangers current projects which include the reintroduction of water voles in the Meon as well as the Dark Skies at Night and the Barn Owl Box projects (Operation BOB). Then once I'm settled in I will hopefully start my own project.

Where I've come from: My previous role was as an apprentice woodsman/coppice worker for the Kent Woodland Employment Scheme which involved getting ancient, over-stood woodlands back into management by felling a large amount of trees! Before that I was a Trainee Warden for the Kent Wildlife Trust, working mostly in ancient woodland and heathland sites. Before that I volunteered with a wide range of organisations, including working on the eastern part of the South Downs.

Favourite food: As a habitual grazer I have quite a few favourite foods! A good nut roast with all the trimmings probably just about tops the list.

Other interests: Apart from the obvious interests in wildlife, hiking and bushcraft, I'm quite into my music and used to play in a folk band in Kent. I can play a few instruments – violin, mandolin, guitar, tin whistle – and will grab any opportunity to learn more!



WALKING THE WEST HIGHLAND WAY

My partner Anni and I are Volunteer Rangers just outside Lewes so I'm used to walking six miles at a trot. However, my two daughters thought I needed a holiday away from it all which is why, on 1 July, I found myself north of Glasgow in Milngavie (pronounced Mill-guy and don't get it wrong) ready to embark on the West Highland Way, a walk of near on 100 miles with a 14kg rucksack on my back.

What I still can't fathom, now that it's all over, is why it was so wonderfully enjoyable – I can honestly say I loved every step! Even in the teeming rain and howling wind, even fighting the mosquitos at two in the morning when I ventured out of my tent – yes, I was also wild camping.

THE RIGHT KIT

I did an inordinate amount of research. I asked anyone in every camping, outdoor and sports shop I encountered for their one piece of invaluable advice – wear the right socks; wear the right underwear; get anti-mosquito spray.

I bought my first pair of walking boots (I usually walk in wellies), some solid traditional leather ones which was a mild mistake as they were a bit heavy, a pair of walking-poles and rain gear.

I had a bit of luck with the rain gear as the shop I was buying it in had run out of jackets so I decided to take my Ranger top. This proved a real bonus as I was often stopped

by the local equivalent and treated like a member of the same club being given privileged information like where best to wild camp – one guy even opened up his shop for me so I could buy some supper.

I CAN HONESTLY SAY I LOVED EVERY STEP! EVEN IN THE TEAMING RAIN AND HOWLING WIND, EVEN FIGHTING THE MOSQUITOS AT TWO IN THE MORNING WHEN I VENTURED OUT OF MY TENT.

I got brilliant lessons in how to walk with poles and how to adjust my pack so I wouldn't suffer, and I didn't.

LOSE SOME WEIGHT

This meant, however, that when I arrived in Milngavie I had an over-packed rucksack. My friend Phil, with whom I was walking for the first few days encouraged me to dump at least 4kg – shirts,

emergency food supplies, extra trousers, spare this and that. My only insistence was my new pair of expensive walking sandals which by the third day my friend Phil was extremely grateful for.

THE LONG & WINDING PATH

Like any long walk, some bits were a bit dull, some were by a main road and some very challenging – like the scramble along Loch Lomond in weather "not very suitable for walkers" to quote that day's forecast – and of course, being Scotland, there were some breathtaking vistas of snow-capped mountains leading down the valley into a series of Lochs, like walking through a biscuit tin!

There is something wonderfully meditative about trudging along ancient routes. I met some great people and had the sort of experience that was simple but also strangely profound. My dog loved it too but

by the end was so exhausted that on the last day I had to physically lift her out of the tent.

WHAT NEXT?

So I'm back on my own patch but with itchy feet to get out there again – where to next time? Maybe I should actually do the South Downs Way – an exciting thought.

RICHARD WARING, SOUTH DOWNS WAY WARDEN

If you've walked any long distance routes which you think others would be inspired by, send your story and a couple of photos to dt@southdowns.gov.uk

