

Recording & Monitoring Report

2025

Introduction

There has been a lot of exciting recording and monitoring work that has happened at Earth Trust in 2025. From bird surveys at the River of Life projects to reptile releases in Paradise Wood and a whole suite of surveys being organised for our regenerative farming projects. The data we collect from these surveys is incredibly valuable. It allows us to understand the current state of our reserves and inform future management practices. Without our dedicated team of recording & monitoring volunteers this work would not be possible. Thank you for everyone's hard work this year.

Regenerative Farming Project

This year saw the first boots on the ground action happening in Bessie's Field. In April we had a large team of our volunteers out hand casting chalk grassland seed across a third of the arable field. Seeds were collected from over 10 different chalk grassland fields across the the Cotswold National Landscape. With several weeding sessions in the summer to keep the arable weed growth under control.

This was followed by lots of training provided by Sundew Ecology for our volunteers. Including surveying for reptiles, mammals, birds, butterflies, and completing soil assessments and rapid condition assessments. Some of these surveys have already begun but the majority will start collecting data in 2026. This will help us monitor how successful the regenerative farming project is and assess its impact on biodiversity and soil health.

Orchard planting took place in H6 as part of our silvoarable. With 127 trees planted comprising of 94 apple, 18 pear and 15 plum. Along with two strips of nut trees; one row of 35 cobnuts and a second of 22 sweet chestnut. Across from H6 is H5 which has had 12

standards planted as part of the silvopasture project including pedunculate oak, field maple, large and small-leaved line and disease resistant Ademuz elm.

Slow-worms in Paradise Wood

Earth Trust entered into an agreement with the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) which saw Paradise Wood being selected as a slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*) receptor site. Slow-worms are a species of legless lizard and are one of only six native reptiles to the UK.

This translocation from a local development site into the woods sees slow-worms returning to our landscape for the first time since they were recorded in Little Wittenham Wood in the 1980s. This doesn't mean they have not been present, as they can be an elusive animal, just not formally recorded.

Several areas across our landscape and community reserves were assessed as suitable release sites. With Paradise Wood being selected in the end for its perfect mix of woodland, scrub, and open grassland, with plenty of deadwood for shelter. The wood is also excluded





from the public providing peace from people and pets.

River of Life Bird Surveys

We have several different bird surveys that are on-going at both River of Life I (RoL1) and River of Life II (RoL2). The first has been running since 2018 with Robert Gray covering Clifton Meadows (RoL2) and Geoff Wyatt surveying RoL1 at Shillingford and Church Farm (RoL2). These surveys are a part of BTO's Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) project which monitors internationally important non-breeding waterbirds in the UK. More information about the project can be learnt [here](#)¹.

Highlights from their surveys this year include:

- A glossy ibis ([Plegadis falcinellus](#)) at RoL2
- First time since surveying for WeBS >100 snipe ([Gallinago gallinago](#)) were recorded at RoL2
- Hobby ([Falco subbuteo](#)) was regularly recorded in the Church Farm area
- A short-eared owl ([Asio flammeus](#)) recorded day roosting in willow plantation at Church Farm
- A female marsh harrier ([Circus aeruginosus](#)) visited Church Farm half a dozen times through spring & summer

Ranger Jake has been leading on a different set of bird surveys with a team of volunteers. This involves walking a transect route through Clifton Meadow, Little Mead, Thomas's Meadow, and an additional two fields outside of Earth Trust land along the riverside at RoL2.

Highlights from Jake's surveys include sightings of:

- Reed warbler ([Acrocephalus scirpaceus](#))
- Sedge warbler ([Acrocephalus schoenobaenus](#))
- Common sandpiper ([Actitis hypoleucos](#))

- Cattle egret ([Bulbulcus ibis](#))
- Great white egret ([Ardea alba](#))
- Goosander ([Mergus merganser](#))
- Snipe ([Gallinago gallinago](#))
- Little grebe ([Tachybaptus ruficollis](#))

Invertebrates

John Bloomfield has been out again surveying invertebrates across our landscape. Records have dropped this year compared to 2024 with John focussing on his Masters degree at Reading University. Nevertheless he still had some interesting finds this year.

Common clubtail ([Gomphus vulgatissimus](#)) was recorded again in Little Wittenham Wood. This is a black and yellow dragonfly listed as Near Threatened in the British Odonata Red List. It has a very localised distribution in England but the Thames in Oxfordshire is a local hot spot for this species.

He also recorded the willow emerald damselfly ([Chalcolestes viridis](#)) again this year. A recent colonist to the UK arriving in 2009 and slowly moving north-west across the country. It has been recorded in Oxfordshire for a few years now.

A good range of leafhoppers were recorded, including [Psammotettix alienus](#), which is a first record for the Berkshire vice-county and only the 6th record for the UK (based on records in the NBN database).

Another highlight for his year was recording the cramp-ball fungus weevil ([Platyrhinus resinosus](#)). These are large, strikingly cryptic weevils that are designated as





nationally scarce.

Butterflies

Every year our team of butterfly surveyors head out onto our community reserves to collect important data which is used to assess ecological health, climate change impacts and potential ecosystem degradation. Butterflies have a rapid and sensitive response to habitat change which makes them a key ecological indicator. Last year saw record low numbers of butterflies across the UK which was supported with the dip in total counts seen across our reserves (see Figure 1). Whilst 2025 has indicated a recovery from the record low last year the overall figures are still only considered average when taking into account the long-term, significant declines for over 50% of UK butterfly species^{2,3}.

Despite numbers not being as good as initially thought there were still some exciting recordings from this year and it is still encouraging to see a rise in numbers from last year. We had recordings of clouded yellows (*Colias croceus*) by Mike Towndrow on Thrupp Lane which is not far from Thrupp Lake. Along with purple hairstreak (*Neozephyrus quercus*) and purple emperor (*Apatura iris*) seen at Besselsleigh Wood. The new butterfly transect routes for Tuckmill Meadows and Besselsleigh

Wood have now been officially set up and are ready for recording to begin this April. Along with 3 routes being established around Wittenham Clumps.

Terns at Thrupp Lake

Every year our volunteers help take in and put out two tern rafts at Thrupp Lake which is quite an undertaking. This year we did some important maintenance work on the rafts to bring them back to good condition. It looks like the terns appreciated this work as this year we had a successful nest on one of the rafts with three chicks reported.

Great Crested Newt Surveys

We headed back into Little Wittenham Wood this April for our annual great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) surveys. Only three survey visits were made this year meaning population estimates cannot be made and peak counts should not be considered accurate. Levels of duckweed on pond 2 made counts by torchlight nearly impossible to complete. Therefore, the counts for pond 2 this year are almost entirely from one bottle trapping session which makes the figures look very low.

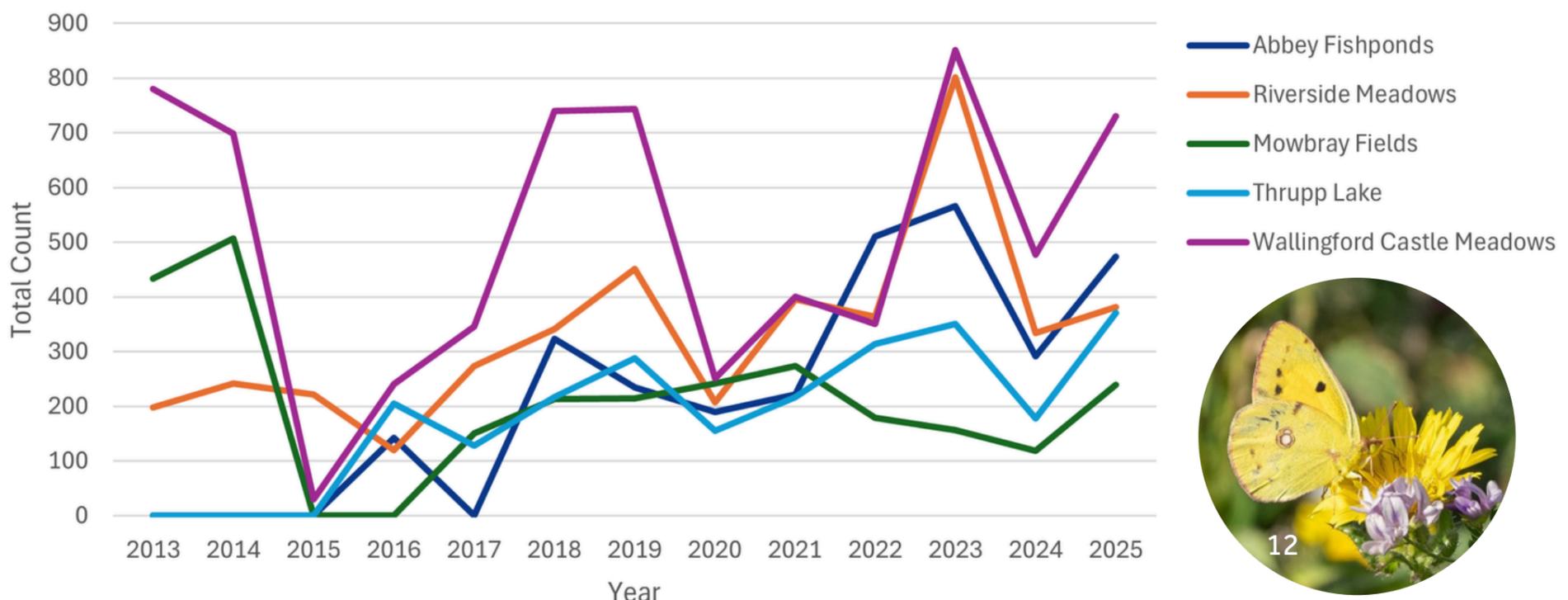


Figure 1. Earth Trust UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme (UKBMS) total count data across our 5 community reserves from 2013 to 2025.



Pond 1 saw a peak count of 42 great crested newts this year compared to 73 from last year. While pond 2 only had a peak count of 9 newts this year following on from 95 last year. We are looking to improve our pond visits for 2026 so we can get a more accurate population estimate of great crested newts living in the ponds in the woods.

Despite the low numbers of newts recorded this year it was great to take volunteers and staff out to the ponds to get some experience of newt surveying.

Mammal Box Checks

John Baker from BSG has continued with his monthly checks of our mammal boxes in Little Wittenham Woods this year. We have increased our box numbers from 25 to 50 with the help of a fantastic team of corporate volunteers from Corteva who put the boxes together.

April and June checks saw lots of birds using the boxes for nesting including mostly blue tits but also some wrens. Later in the year had reports of a pygmy shrew (Sorex minutus) along with numerous mammal nests mostly consisting of wood mouse (Apodemus sylvaticus) and yellow-necked mouse (Apodemus flavicollis).

Bioblitz Events

We held three 'bioblitz' events on our community reserves this year. Which were all about getting people out into nature and learning about the different species they have living on their doorsteps. The first was at Abbey Fishponds and was a dusk event looking for bats, moths, and newts. With highlights of hearing a

Nathusius's pipistrelle (Pipistrellus nathusii) and seeing a water scorpion (Nepa cinerea). The second was at Thrupp Lake looking at wetland birds with Dave Eccles, invertebrates with John Bloomfield, meadow plant identification with Charley Scales and a butterfly walk with Tim Read. Followed by an orchid count at Mowbray Fields in Didcot.

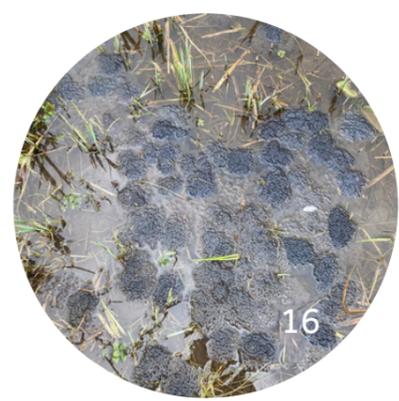
Stoats Spotted

Another bit of exciting news from this year was reports from the local villagers in Little Wittenham of a group of stoats (Mustela erminea) playing on the unnamed road between Little and Long Wittenham not far from the Earth Trust Centre. So remember to take it slow when coming to visit us.

Biodiversity Monitoring Project

Over the past year the Land Management team has been working on organising all of Earth Trust's biodiversity data. This has included digitising paper records dating back to the 1980s and sorting through data saved in the Trust's SharePoint. All of the species data is being inputted into a backed up master document. This document is formatted like the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre's (TVERC) data system for easy data sharing with the local records centre. With the end goal of being able to view all of Earth Trust's species and habitat data in one location.

A Reporting Index has been developed which allows us to easily locate relevant biodiversity reports from our system depending on year, location, subject or author/organisation. A lot of time has been put into categorising and cataloguing all of our reports. With





reports dating back to the early 1980s to now, covering species specific surveys, to scientific papers and monitoring reports. A lot of this work could not of been done without Colin Johnstone who has been providing support as our Land Management Office Volunteer.

Lastly, we have produced a Recording & Monitoring schedule. This document allows us at a glance see what surveys are currently happening at Earth Trust. Along with who is leading them, where, and what time of year. It also provides information on the purpose of the data, who owns it, and access to the methodology.

Hedgerow Survey Project

In June 2025 we started training a group of volunteers to undertake hedgerow surveys across the 532 hectares of our landscape. The data collected from these surveys will feed into a management plan for our hedgerows, and is contributing to our Landscape Masterplan. It will inform us of the current health and biodiversity of our hedgerows. Along with where gapping up might be required and what growth stage the hedgerow is in. This survey work also allows us to monitor the long-term impacts that the changes to management of our hedgerows has.

We had 12 Earth Trust volunteers trained to survey our hedgerows using the Great British Hedgerow Survey methodology created by People's Trust for Endangered Species⁴. Along with Martin Barrett assisting with data collection and analysis. Overall, 191 volunteer hours were contributed to training, field surveying and data analysis. In total, 121 hedgerows were surveyed across

our landscape which added up to 25km of hedgerow. The species most recorded within our hedgerows was hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) at 90%. It also had the greatest abundance at 47%. Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) were second and third most abundant being present within 51% and 47% of our hedgerows. However, their percentage presence within the hedge was a lot less at 14% and 5%. There were 1167 standing trees recorded within our hedgerows with 884 of those being mature trees (>20cm diameter at breast height (dbh)). Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) was the most common standing tree at 17% of the total trees recorded (203 trees).

We have been looking at different ways to measure the condition of our hedgerows from the data we have collected. One way to measure this is through Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) which has a set of attributes that a hedgerow must pass to be considered in either "good", "moderate" or "poor" condition⁵. Some of these attributes include having more than 1.5m average height and width, and having gaps making up less than 10% of the total length of hedgerow. Using this system we found that 71% of our total hedgerows are considered to be in "good" condition with only 27% in "moderate" and 2% in "poor" condition according to BNG standards.

These surveys have also highlighted to us which of our hedgerows were in need of gapping up (see Photo 18, gapping up this winter at College Farm). As a direct response to the data collected from these surveys we have already gapped up 139m worth of hedgerow across 5 different hedges across our landscape. With almost 700 trees planted within these gaps.



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Photo Credits

Dave Eccles (Land Management Volunteer) - 8 Blackbird nest at Thrupp Lake. 22 Reed bunting at Clifton Meadow. Mike Towndrow (Land Management, Maintenance, Hedgelaying and Butterfly Survey Volunteer) - 9 Comma at Abbey Fishponds. 12 Clouded yellow along Thrupp Lane.

John Bloomfield (Invertebrate Survey Volunteer) - 6 Willow emerald damselfly (*Chalcolestes viridis*). 7 spotted firebug (*Corizus hyoscyami*). 23 Bishop's mitre (*Aelia acuminata*).

Jake Wilkins (Ranger) - 10 Heron at RoL2. 24 Little owl in an old ash tree at the edge of Bessie's Field. 20 Emperor dragonfly at RoL2.

Charley Scales (Ranger) - 1 Gatekeeper butterfly in Mowbray Fields meadow. 2, 3 & 13 Seed casting at Bessie's Field. 5 Chicken of the woods in the coppice coup, Little Wittenham Wood. 11 & 14 Volunteers and staff heading around Round Hill for some newt surveying in Little Wittenham Wood. 16 Frog spawn in a pond at Abbey Fishponds. 17 Orchid counting at Tuckmill Meadows. 18 Hedgerow gapping up at College Farm. 21 Peacock butterfly at the Earth Trust Centre.

Catherine Bilbrough (Ecologist at JBA) - 4 Male great crested newt belly view during newt survey in Little Wittenham Wood. 15 Charley holding a great crested newt during surveys in Little Wittenham Wood.

References

1 BTO (no date) Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Available at: <https://www.bto.org/get-involved/volunteer/projects/wetland-bird-survey> (Accessed on: 21 January 2026).

2 Butterfly Conservation (2025) Butterflies fail to shine despite hottest UK summer on record. Available at: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/big-butterfly-count-results-2025> (Accessed on: 29 January 2026).

3 UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. (2025) More than half of UK butterflies are in long-term decline. Available at: <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/news-and-media/news/more-half-uk-butterflies-are-long-term-decline> (Accessed on: 29 January 2026).

4 People's Trust for Endangered Species (2014). The Great British Hedgerow Survey guidelines. Available at: <https://hedgerowsurvey.ptes.org/survey-guidelines> (Accessed on: 11 November 2025).

5 Staley, J. T., Wolton, R. & Norton, L. (2020). Definition of Favourable Conservation Status of Hedgerows. Natural England.

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