

2017 Mid-Season newsletter

Dear Members

Welcome to the Mid-Season newsletter. There is a lot to tell you about. With this newsletter, you will also be receiving the results of the Membership Survey undertaken in the first quarter of this year. And for our Owner and Keeper members, a letter and questionnaire on swan damage to river weed and how it might be controlled. Please do respond to the questionnaire. We cannot do anything about the problem without the evidence your responses to the questionnaire will provide

The Rivers

As I write, the rain is falling steadily out of a leaden July sky. It therefore seems a little odd to start with some words about depleted aquifers, low river levels and flows and lack of rainfall, but they have been a major pre-occupation over the last few months. The rainfall total for the last 12 months (July-June) for the whole of Solent and South Downs was the lowest July-June total since 1992. For the Upper and Middle Test Valley, the 12 month rainfall totals (July-June) were the lowest since 1976.

In June, river flows on the Test, Itchen and Meon were all consequently low. The Itchen at Allbrook and Highbridge, and the Test at Broadlands and Chilbolton, were below normal. The Meon at Mislingford was notably low. With groundwater levels also below normal across the region, river flows are likely to deteriorate further. For those of you interested in more of the detail, the latest official hydrology data from the Environment Agency is available in the Members Archive section of the Association's website (www.testanditchen.co.uk). The password you need to access the Members Archive is "**browntrout**".

The situation is currently seriously concerning rather than alarming. Significant rainfall over the last few days will have reduced demand a little and has led to a temporary increase in some river flows which, if nothing else, will have helped clear the weed down the rivers at the end of the July weed cut. But we need some serious rain this winter to refill the aquifers: if we have another dry winter then the outlook for next year will be alarming. Two preceding dry winters is what made the 1976 summer drought, which many of you will remember, so bad.

The fishing

With low river levels and flows and some hot summer weather, I have approached the riverbank with some trepidation over the last few weeks. But I need not have feared. I have enjoyed some fantastic fishing this season, possibly the best I have had in more than 30 years of casting a fly on the Hampshire chalk streams. Some of that might be down to the quality of some very kind invitations I have received from our

members, but even on those beats I have fished consistently over the years the results have been outstanding, with lots of fish rising to relatively abundant fly-life. One golden week in late May when I was lucky enough to fish three times on the Lower Itchen will stay in the memory for a long time.

The highpoint was possibly a day at Brambridge on the Itchen Navigation where my middle son not only listened to his father's advice, but followed it, and was rewarded with a fantastic day catching trout on a Grey Wulff pattern. If there is more fun to be had than watching a lovely trout in crystal clear water rise slowly to the surface and suck in a Mayfly imitation - given a little animation to make the trout think dinner might be about to escape, I am not sure I have found it. Anyway, son number two is well and truly hooked.

Reports from up and down the rivers suggest I have not been alone in having some good sport this summer. Five river keepers have kindly been producing fishing reports every few weeks. These are published on our website in the River Reports section. Go and have a look for some up to date information on how the rivers are fishing and what you might try to improve your chances of success. As we approach August, the best advice seems to be to stay as late as you can on the riverbank. Pictured to the left is a happy Executive Director who did just that one evening earlier in July on the Anton – though I am a bit alarmed by the appearance of a double chin! I hope you too have enjoyed some good days on the river.



'A happy Executive Director with a less happy Anton trout'

Invertebrate monitoring

I haven't spent all my time fishing. Implementing plans to improve the quality and sustainability of invertebrate data has been a theme running through the last few months. In March and April, the Association trained more than 20 members to become invertebrate monitors as part of the Anglers RiverFly Monitoring Initiative (ARMI). And in June we ran two advanced RiverFly Invertebrate Identification and Monitoring (RIIM) courses for 10 of our members at Kimbridge. The RIIM course enables monitors to identify invertebrates to species level which in turn tells you a lot about the quality of the river environment and the stresses it is under.

Species level identification and analysis has been carried out previously at 11 sites on the Test and Itchen by Salmon and Trout Conservation UK under their RiverFly Census project. The Association has funded the third year of this project on the Test and Itchen and has extended it to the Meon for the first time, working with Wessex Chalk Streams and Rivers Trust (WCSRT). The results of the Spring and Autumn 2015 and 2016 surveys on the Test and Itchen are on our website in the Members Archive Section. They show that whilst there is often a good range of species present, they are not there in the expected abundance.

With an emphasis on training our members, we hope that we will be able to



continue RiverFly Census standard monitoring beyond the planned and funded three-year period – it is expensive when done by outside experts. As the Environment Agency has to scale back the amount of monitoring they do, it is vital that the Association and like-minded organisations do what we can to ensure that this important data on the state of our rivers continues to be available.

'An ARMI training day for new monitors'

We hope to run some more ARMI and RIIM monitoring courses next year, if you were unable to take part this year. The science involved in the RIIM course is not as challenging as you might imagine, particularly as previously analysed samples from your part of the river are used during the instruction period. Knowing what you are looking for makes life significantly easier! My own personal highlight was examining a cased caddis under a powerful microscope during the RIIM course: it was breathtakingly beautiful and would not have looked out of place scaled-up in a Bond Street jeweller's window.

Problems, problems

As the monitoring data shows, all is not well or as good as it should be in our chalk streams. One of the problems is over-abstraction of water from the rivers and aquifer leading to lower river levels and flows. The main abstractors are the Public Water Supply companies. It would be nice to report some concrete progress towards reducing the amount of abstraction and the development of alternative supplies of water, but in truth I cannot. The byzantine process of licensing abstraction by the

water companies lumbers on, and the equally byzantine process by which the water companies develop their long-term water procurement strategies moves on without any perceptible action taken to implement alternative procurement options.

Those who have been involved for many years more than me in the consultation process bear the scars of false hopes and constantly missed opportunities. If one is looking in the bureaucratic gloom for some glimmer of hope, it would be that the Environment Agency has recently taken a number of steps to reduce downwards the licensed levels of abstraction from the Test and Itchen. Southern Water have challenged the Environment Agency action and they will be the subject of an Inquiry or Hearing in front of an inspector, probably in early 2018. Meanwhile, the rivers suffer.

The Association continues to engage at various levels with the water companies and the Environment Agency, concerting our efforts with like-minded organisations. We make formal representations at the required points. But the water companies are as much influenced by the quantity as the quality of comment on their plans. You don't need to be an expert. Look for opportunities to contribute your views on the Southern Water website. Previous newsletters have contained material you might use to make your points if you are struggling to think what best to say.

Some of you might have seen me on BBC South commenting on abstraction a couple of weeks ago. Appearing in front of the camera at two hours' notice with no prior indication of the questions I was going to be asked was a slightly alarming prospect. And being interviewed on the banks of the Itchen Navigation about abstraction from the River Test befuddled the geographer in me. But it seemed to come out OK.

Getting the Association's message out there in the public domain is something the Board have encouraged me to do more. Having been in the job for just over a year, I am beginning to feel that I might have some things to say which are worth listening to. Somewhat to my surprise I found myself on BBC South again a couple of weeks later as part of their coverage of a public meeting of Eastleigh Borough Council considering options for siting 6,000 new houses. I was happy to be taken under the wing of the excellent Campaign for the Protection of Rural England who are leaders in influencing planning decisions. Eastleigh's plans for siting these new houses in ancient woodland north of Bishopstoke, adjacent to the Itchen, are more than usually idiotic, but that doesn't seem to stop local councillors supporting them.

The Association does not have the time and resources to fight every planning issue, but some of these massive new developments adjacent to or in the river valleys are where we will focus our energy. I am still struggling to understand why some bright spark thought it was a good idea to start the construction of lots of new houses in what is called Fishlake Meadows just north of Romsey, on the Test. Wouldn't the name

alone have given pause for thought? Mind you, many of us would welcome enough rain to induce a bit of a flooding this winter, even if the house owners in Fishlake Meadows might not agree.

Swans

Swans have caused many of you much anguish. Nobody minds a healthy breeding pair every half mile or so along the riverbank. In fact, they are a rather noble and splendid sight.

The trouble is caused by large packs of immature swans stripping the riverbed of weed. Owners and keepers will be receiving a letter and questionnaire with this newsletter setting out what the Association proposes to do about the problem and asking for the supporting evidence we will need to obtain a licence from Natural England to control it. Do please complete the



'Weed strippers at work on the Test'

questionnaire. The licensed activity would be the removal of some eggs from nests which, over time, will reduce the numbers to more sustainable levels: such a programme on the Upper Avon has reduced the numbers of immature, non-breeding swans by 40% over the last eight years. So, egg removal is not a quick fix but it does work. If you are not in the category of membership receiving the letter and questionnaire and would like to see what they say, you can find them on the website in the Members Archive section under Swans. Not all of you will agree with the proposed action, but the majority of you are clearly concerned by the problem and want something done about it.

Membership Survey

Concern about too many swans and too few invertebrates are two of the themes that emerged strongly from the Membership Survey. The results and how the Board have directed that we should respond to them are in the documents enclosed with this newsletter, so I will not repeat here what is said there. Modesty prevented me from recording all the nice things that many of you said about Jacqui and I, but thank you for your support. It is good to know during the fourth hour of a Borough Council meeting or the fifth hour of a Southern Water Working Group that our efforts are

appreciated by the membership. I would prefer to spend my time talking to you on the riverbank, but duty does on occasions require me to spend time in dark places, far from the light.

Website

Another theme from the Membership Survey was that the website, to put it charitably, required attention. Attention it has got. We hope there is a lot more content of interest to members and potential new members. The River Reports and the Membership Archive are full of new material which I at least find interesting. I have not strictly followed the Chairman's wise advice that I should not embark on projects I do not have the time to sustain: some parts of the website have enjoyed occasional bursts of activity rather than the constant TLC they really need. I will try and do better.

One area of the website we are looking to reinvigorate is Late Availability Fishing. Owners will shortly be receiving letters explaining how they and their management teams can use the website to offer late availability fishing to members of the Association. The only stipulation is that the fishing is offered at a discount equivalent to or greater than the £35 cost of the annual subscription for an Ordinary member.

Why are we doing this? We have no ambitions to become a fishing agency, but everybody is potentially a winner if this takes off. The Owner might be able to sell some additional late availability fishing. The Ordinary or Sporting member can potentially enjoy some fishing at a competitive price on an otherwise inaccessible part of the river. And the Association potentially gains new members attracted by the opportunity of fishing some of the hallowed waters owned by our members. We are going to trial the website-based system in the latter part of this season. If all goes well, we will aim to launch it with the closest we can muster to a fanfare of publicity in time for the start of the 2018 season. Tell us what you think.

And finally

There is not enough space here to cover the whole range of Association activity in what has been a busy few months. But the following deserve a short Mention in Dispatches. Keepers cut weed judiciously in the June and July cuts to mitigate the effects of low river flows. The cuts passed off without any widespread problems, although there were some local difficulties, particularly on the Dun. A number of you have asked if the start of the June weed cut on the Test can be pushed back a few days in 2018 – it has crept forwards over recent years. We will be pursuing that idea and seeking your views.

The Association awarded two Keepers Bursaries in March. The lucky recipients will be telling us what they have done with their awards later in the year at an Association event or in the annual Rivers Report publication.

The Board met in June and looked at the results of a Membership Survey. They also looked at what we could do to offer a more attractive range of meetings to our membership, on which more anon.

Oh, and there is an option being considered to turn the lower part of the Itchen into a white-water canoeing facility. I am not joking. If you don't believe me, take a look at the options at the following link:

<http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/south/News/river-itchen-consultation>

and then tell them what you think.

It just remains for me to wish you a successful and enjoyable end to the season.

Best wishes

Jeremy

Jeremy Legge, Executive Director

25 July 2017