



BLACKNEST FIELDS



2023 ANNUAL REPORT





Thanks and acknowledgements



Binsted Parish Council, as Trustee for the Blacknest Fields and Holt Pound Oval Charitable Trust that owns the site, is indebted to many organisations and individuals for their amazing support, without which this year's progress at Blacknest Fields would have been impossible. 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' assisted us in many practical ways, as well as participating in community events. Particular thanks to:

Dedicated local wildlife volunteers:

- ★ Erica Evans, for fabulous habitat creation and advice on wild bees and other pollinators;
- ★ Cathy Wilson and Keith Shepherd, for continued guidance and leadership of work parties;
- ★ Alex Potts, for her wonderful photographs, that are invaluable for verifying wildlife sightings - several of which are included in this Annual Report;
- ★ Martin Angel and Libby Ralph (Farnham Biodiversity Partnership) for championing the site; and
- ★ Volunteer wildlife recorders: Cathy Wilson (botany and bats); Martin Angel and Myung-hye Chun (moths); Dr June Chatfield (fungi, moss, lichens and lungworts); Ian Chisholm (geology); Tony Mundell (botany); Pete Gillatt and Pete West of HIWARG (amphibians and reptiles); Sarah Womersley (butterflies); Mark Elsoffer (birds and dragonflies), Darren Hill (spiders); Alan Cox (birds); Lynn Whitfield and Ross Baker of Surrey Bat Group (bats); John Oates (butterflies); Hive Helpers (bees and pollinators); Jason Ralphs (mammals); Ben Hamlin (trees); and the wildlife recorders at Bealeswood Common Nature Reserve.

Professional wildlife advisors, including:

- ★ South Downs National Park, particularly Paul Bushell (for help and stalwart attendance at a soggy Meadows Day) and South Downs' Volunteer corps (for hedge laying); and
- ★ Fiona Scully and Pete Eeles (Butterfly Conservation); Hannah Graves, Karima Smith and Emily Roberts (Hampshire County Council).

Local businesses, including:

- ★ Callum Kilby (Hampshire Tree and Garden Ltd), for donating a steady supply of wood chip and lending climbers to get our beautiful bird boxes up into trees;
- ★ Volunteers from Ground&Water, for all their hard work on the Jubilee hedge;
- ★ Nikki and David (Pear Tree Solutions), for gifting the beautiful bird boxes erected this Spring;
- ★ Rachel and Nigel Walter & James Dineen (Farm and Garden Supplies), for end-of-season hedging;
- ★ Ally Blaber (Blaber Enterprises), for power-harrowing the meadow for yellow rattle sowing; and
- ★ Site contractors: Dave Bradbury; Nathan Jones; Ed Dale; Royston Hopcroft; Rob Knight; Katy Poulson, Nigel and Phil Bone at Poulsons Plant Hire; and Jonny King of Wooded Spaces.

All who provided help in other ways, including:

- ★ Grants from: The Tree Council; The Hampshire Forest Partnership; CPRE Hampshire; South Downs National Park, Hampshire County Council and Binsted Fete & Flower Show;
- ★ Bird food donated by various 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' to supply the bird feeding station and ladders kindly donated by Royston Hopcroft to enable the bat monitoring on the site;
- ★ Food donated to keep our volunteers fed and watered by: various 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' and by Farnham Community Farm; Alton Community Cupboard; and Tesco;
- ★ Shelters loaned to keep the working parties dry by the Arrowsmith family and Lee Turk;
- ★ Permission from the Jolly Farmer pub to allow volunteers to use the pub carpark for some events;
- ★ Inspirational engagement from Cornish ceramicist Bridget Macklin and local photographer Alex Potts, whose artistic partnership has resulted in the Allen Gallery exhibition taking place in 2024;
- ★ Help with publicity and promotion of events, including: Melanie Oxley (Petersfield Climate Action Network); Jenny Griffiths (Alton Climate Action Network); Alison Melvin (Binsted Eco Network) and Pip Eldridge (Binsted Parish Councillor).



Executive Summary

Blacknest Fields' second year as a site dedicated to nature and community greenspace has been busy and fun. This 8 acre site, near 'The Jolly Farmer' in Blacknest, Hampshire, borders the Alice Holt Forest, in one of the South Downs National Park's darkest areas.

In the two years since Binsted Parish Council decided to open the site to the public and manage it for wildlife, significant improvements have been made to the Fields, which have already become a much-loved community asset, used both by lovers of nature and the great outdoors, and by an exciting mix of wildlife.

The progress made is thanks to our amazing group of committed and friendly volunteers who actively support the site. As well as members of the Blacknest Fields Community Facebook group and subscribers to the quarterly 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' newsletters, we have been fortunate to receive generous support from several local businesses.

Significant Achievements		
	Cumulative totals:	
	By 31 Dec 2022	By 31 Dec 2023
Wildlife species recorded	324	520
Butterfly species	22	29
Rare fauna recorded	27	36
New hedges planted	245 m	255 m
Hedges laid	0	130 m
Dead hedges made	25 m	30 m
Orchard trees planted	9	9
Field trees planted	20	25
Bat boxes	2	2
Bird boxes	5	5
Log piles, bee banks & hibernacula	5	7
Facebook Group followers	138	220
Newsletter subscribers	148	198
Newsletters published	3	7
Funding & Donated Goods	£ 30,181	£ 43,798
Number of grants obtained	12	19

Our site management is influenced not only by the site's soil, geology and microclimates, but also by the site's interesting history of different uses over time, illustrated in the maps on page 8. Our site is part of the wider wood-pasture landscape that historically had shifting mosaics of grazing lawns, open-grown trees, thorny scrub and wetlands. The Site Management Plan¹ aims to improve the wildlife potential of all the 'mosaic' habitats found on-site – not just its wildflower meadows but also its trees, hedges and banks. Keeping browsing herbivores on this small site would be difficult, but manmade lopping enables us to improve habitats by mimicking the natural disturbance generated by herbivore browsing at larger 'rewilding' sites.

This report describes the main activities undertaken in 2023, and progress achieved. It is organised under the main themes of our work:

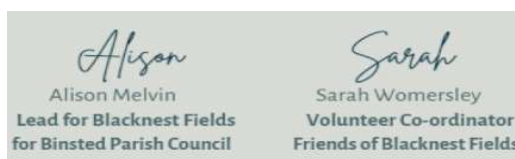
Wildlife Observation

Habitat Enhancement

Education & Celebration!

We have exciting plans for 2024, as outlined on pages 13 - 14. Successful funding awards mean we can make further improvements, for wildlife and for visitors; and Blacknest Fields will be the subject of an exciting exhibition at the Allen Gallery in Alton, with associated talks, walks and workshops as well as activities for our local schools.

We look forward to the new projects, and to welcoming more wildlife - and well-behaved humans - to Blacknest Fields over the coming months.



¹ The Blacknest Fields Site Management Plan is published at www.binstedparishcouncil.org.uk.



Wildlife Observation

Until July 2022, there were no formal wildlife records for Blacknest Fields. However, we knew that ecologists would *expect* the site to be a wildlife hot-spot:

- Woodland-edge locations are important habitats: more woodland birds are found in the edges of woodland than their heart; the story is similar for plants.
- The site's 'mosaic' of meadows, woodland, hedges and scrub create a richness of biodiversity that would not occur if these habitats existed in isolation.
- Its meadows - not "improved" by agriculture - are amongst the UK's rarest habitats - 97% of UK wildflower meadows have been lost since the 1930s²;
- Nearby Bentley Station Meadow Reserve SSSI³ and adjacent Alice Holt Forest are important, protected, biodiversity reserves.

Thanks to the energetic involvement of our volunteer wildlife recorders, the site has already developed an impressive pan species record. An amazing 520 species (155 flora, 330 fauna and 35 bryophytes, fungi and lichens) have so far been recorded, including: 29 butterfly species⁴ (up from 22 species recorded in 2022); 173 moth species; thriving populations of common lizards, grass snakes and common toads; and many birds. Amongst the fauna so far recorded, over 36 species are notable for their rarity at a national or county level, as detailed opposite. These include the Barbastelle bat, one of the UK's rarest mammals and the Alcaethoe bat, about which very little is known as it was only discovered in the UK in 2010.

This Autumn we were delighted to record a clear migration of juvenile common toads across the meadows towards the forest, where they will hibernate over the winter months. There must be a breeding pond nearby, most likely on the other side of Blacknest Road, which the toads will have to traverse to return to the safety of the forest. We hope our planned introduction of a wildlife pond at Blacknest Fields will enable the toads to breed closer to the forest and save them from crossing the roads.

We have benefitted enormously from site visits made by some extremely knowledgeable wildlife experts and volunteers who have generously lent us monitoring equipment to monitor species such as bats and moths for a prolonged period of the year. We have also been delighted to welcome numerous new recorders to site, and we receive great photos from people regularly sharing photos of their sightings at the fields. Having photographs of the rarer species seen means we can record these species with confidence, knowing that those records are verifiable. All verified records are shared with the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC) and they help inform the site's Management Plan, ensuring that management decisions take account of the wildlife already found at the fields.



² <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/meadows-matter>

³ <https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/reserves/bentley-station-meadow-hampshire>

⁴ The whole of the UK has 65 recorded butterfly species and 33 of those are regularly recorded in Binsted Parish. 29 species have been recorded at Blacknest Fields between July 2022 and December 2023.

Notable fauna species recorded on site by 31 Dec 2023

Amongst the 330 species of fauna recorded on site since July 2022, the following 36 species are notable for their rarity or scarceness on either a national or county level:

Species	Designation
White Admiral butterfly (<i>Limenitis Camilla</i>)	Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' species for Binsted Parish & listed as a Species of Principal Importance in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (a "SPI")
Dark Green Fritillary butterfly (<i>Speyeria aglaja</i>)	Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' species for Binsted Parish & listed as a SPI
Brown Hairstreak butterfly (<i>Thecla betulae</i>)	Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' species & listed as a SPI
Sharp-angled carpet moth (<i>Euphyia unangulata</i>)	County scarce for Hampshire
Dwarf pug moth (<i>Eupithecia tantillaria</i>)	County scarce for North Hampshire
Double kidney moth (<i>Ipimorpha retusa</i>)	County scarce for North Hampshire
<i>Ypsolopha horridella</i> micromoth	County rare for Hampshire
Oak Lutestring moth (<i>Cymatophorina diluta</i>)	County Scarce North Hampshire & listed as a SPI
Feathered Gothic moth (<i>Tholera decimalis</i>)	County Scarce & listed as a SPI
Dusky Thorn moth (<i>Ennomos fuscantaria</i>)	County Scarce North Hampshire & listed as a SPI
Beet moth (<i>Scrobipalpa ocellatella</i>)	Nationally scarce
Dark spectacle moth (<i>Abrostola triplasia</i>)	County Scarce for Hampshire
Green-brindled crescent moth (<i>Allophyes oxycanthae</i>)	County Scarce North Hampshire & listed as a SPI
Figure of eight moth (<i>Diloba caeruleocephala</i>)	County Scarce & listed as a SPI
Light Crimson Underwing moth (<i>Catocala promissa</i>)	A rare Red Data Book species. A priority species under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. It was thought to be confined to the New Forest and two large woodlands in south Wiltshire but various sightings from across the local area have been reported in 2023
Orb Weaver spider (<i>Cercidia prominens</i>)	Nationally scarce
Oak jumping spider (<i>Ballus chalybeius</i>)	Nationally scarce
Marsh Tit (<i>Parus palustris</i>)	Listed as a SPI & included on the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 'Red List' published in 2021 (the "Red List") ⁵
Starling (<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>)	Listed as a SPI & included on the Red List
Dunnock (<i>Prunella modularis</i>)	Listed as a SPI & included on the Red List
House Martin (<i>Delichon urbicum</i>)	Included on the Red List
Mistle Thrush (<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>)	Included on the Red List
Spotted flycatcher (<i>Muscicapa striata</i>)	Included on the Red List
Common Lizard (<i>Zootaca vivipara</i>)	Listed as a protected species under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (the "WCA") and a SPI
Grass snake (<i>Natrix Natrix</i>)	Listed as a protected species under the WCA and a SPI
Slow-worm (<i>Anguis fragilis</i>)	Listed as a protected species under the WCA and a SPI
Common toad (<i>Bufo bufo</i>)	Listed as a protected species under the WCA and a SPI
Common pipistrelle bat (<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA & listed as a SPI
Soprano pipistrelle bat (<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA & listed as a SPI
Barbastelle bat (<i>Barbastella barbastellus</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive (a "EPA"). Listed as Near Threatened on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.
Alcathoe bat (<i>Myotis alcathoe</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA & a EPA.
Serotine bat (<i>Eptesicus serotinus</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA & a EPA & listed as Vulnerable on the GB Red List.
Noctule bat (<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive.
Natterer's bat (<i>Myotis nattereri</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA & a EPA.
European Hedgehog (<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>)	Protected in the UK under the WCA. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. IUCN Red List for British Mammals - vulnerable to extinction.
Downy Emerald (dragonfly) (<i>Cordulia aenea</i>)	The species has a very limited distribution across the UK and has a stronghold in the Southern counties, reliant on woodland ponds.

⁵ In addition to the 6 bird species listed as 'red' on the Red List, recordings have also been made of seven species listed on the 2021 Birds of Conservation's 'Amber List' (and whose conservation status is therefore of 'moderate' concern): Rook, Tawny Owl, Grey Wagtail, Redwing, Wren, Kestrel and Meadow Pipit.



Habitat Enhancement and Creation

2023 saw significant enhancements to the site's habitats, and the creation of new habitats. Improving the condition of Blacknest Fields' wildflower meadows, trees and hedges significantly increases pollinators' diversity and abundance, cascading benefits to the whole chain of other animals that eat insects, such as birds, hedgehogs and bats.

Hedges and Scrub

The site's old and gappy hedges were improved by two work parties run during February using the ancient craft of hedge-laying:

CPRE Hampshire generously funded a day's hedge laying demonstration, led by Jonny King of 'Wooded Space', to enable eight volunteers to renovate 30 m of Path Strip hedges.

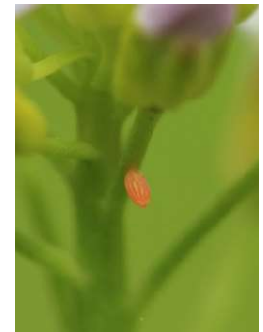
The South Downs National Park rangers and their volunteer corps kindly undertook further hedge laying to rejuvenate 100 m of ancient, gappy hedges in the Butterfly Meadow.

Volunteers from local firm Ground&Water put in a hard day's work in November, to weed, mulch and 'gap up' our 70 m Jubilee Hedge. Planted in Spring 2022, this suffered in 2022's drought. Thanks to the volunteers' hard graft, donated wood chip and new saplings funded by CPRE Hampshire, the hedge is now back on track as an important new wildlife passageway across the site.



Scrub gets a bad press but is amazingly important for wildlife. It was heartwarming to see the direct benefits of intentionally not cutting back young blackthorn plants last Autumn: we were delighted to discover the eggs of the rare Brown Hairstreak butterfly on the young blackthorn plants. No recordings of the adult butterfly have ever been made at the Fields, so it was a real success story to find their distinctively shaped eggs, which resemble miniature sea urchins.

Eggs of Brown Hairstreak, Purple Hairstreak and Orange-tip butterflies have all now been found at the Fields (*photos left to right*).



Trees



Five hybrid elm trees were planted in the Back Field in October. We are very grateful to the Hampshire Forest Partnership and the Tree Council for supplying these trees, developed by scientists to be resistant to the 'Dutch Elm' disease that, by 1980, had killed most mature elms in England. This loss had a dramatic effect, not only on the landscape, but also on the White-letter Hairstreak butterfly which lay their eggs almost exclusively on mature elms, so were also nearly wiped out. We hope our new elms will help boost their numbers in the future.

Meadows

Planting yellow rattle and delaying 2022's hay cut until late summer - after meadow wildflowers had set seed - seemed to positively improve the diversity and abundance of our meadow wildflowers. A fair proportion of the yellow rattle sown in Autumn 2022 germinated and flowered - better in some locations than others. The Common knapweed so beloved by pollinators was more vigorous in 2023 than 2022, perhaps because the later hay cut had allowed it more space and light to grow in the Spring.



These encouraging outcomes spurred the team to continue our seed-sowing efforts this Autumn. Ally Blaber kindly helped us power-harrow 150 square metres of the Butterfly Meadow this Autumn, which volunteers sowed with more yellow rattle. We hope this will reduce the vigour of some of the grasses next year to let the wildflowers flourish in greater abundance.

New Habitats

A fantastic stag beetle hibernaculum in the Copse was built in the Spring by the 'HH' youth group run by local conservation organisation 'Hive Helpers.' Much hard work went into the project and it was fantastic to see so many young people passionate about wildlife enjoying the Fields.



Some beautiful barn owl and kestrel boxes were built for us by talented local carpentry firm Pear Tree Solutions. These were installed in February by local tree surgery firm Hampshire Tree and Garden Limited – our brilliant supporters lending their skills when we most need them!



A magnificent habitat mound for solitary bees was built by Erica from Hive Helpers in October with her volunteers. We are keen to get a better understanding of the different bee species which use the Fields and hope the new mound will offer them a safe home.



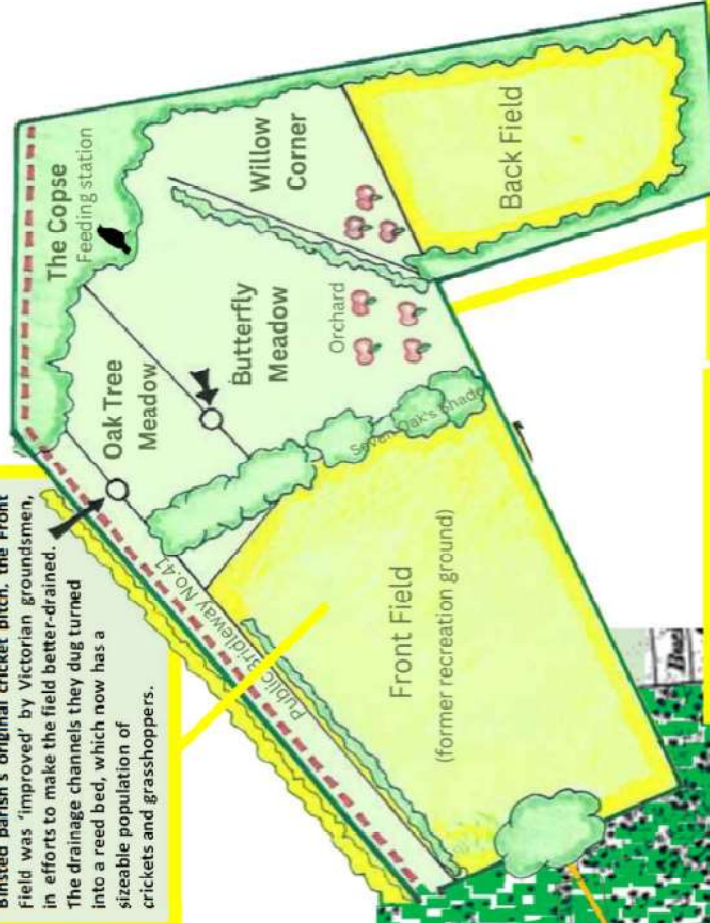
Understanding Blacknest Fields from its history

In Norman times, Blacknest Fields would have lain within the wood pastureland of William the Conqueror's royal hunting forest, which extended across a large area and would have included most of the nearby copes. Butchers' broom and common spurge are amongst the ancient woodland indicator species found at Blacknest Fields.

Blacknest Fields lies outside the Alice Holt forest boundary after the massive 1815 oak replanting programme redefined Alice Holt's boundaries. Replanting was felt necessary after the Napoleonic Wars, to produce timber for the Royal Navy. The area's clay and slightly acidic soils suit oak and explain why Blacknest has so much oak and little ash.

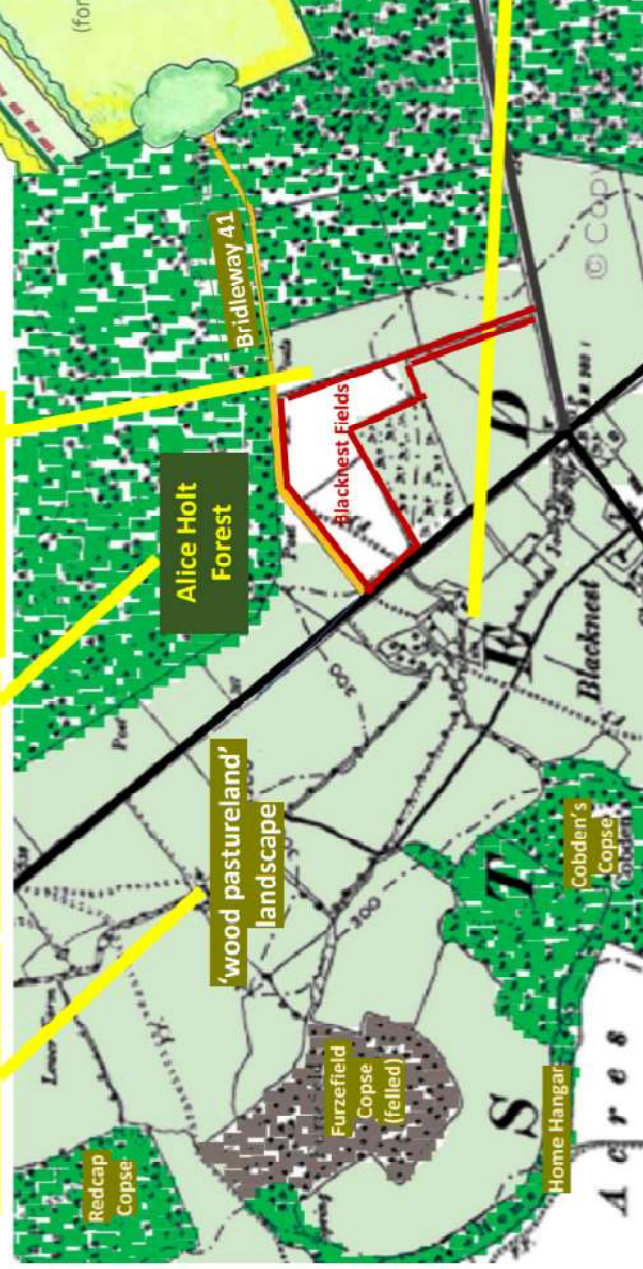
Blacknest Fields acquired its charitable status in 1857, as Binsted drew up its Inclosure Awards, after 1852 General Inclosure Act. The site's award to the 'Overseers of the Poor' (precursors to parish councils) arose because the land was classified as 'waste' land. Like common land, 'waste' land was used by poor households and not privately owned).

The grassland at the front of the site is less wildlife-rich than the meadows at the rear. As Binsted parish's original cricket pitch, the Front Field was 'improved' by Victorian groundsmen, in efforts to make the field better-drained. The drainage channels they dug turned into a reed bed, which now has a sizeable population of crickets and grasshoppers.



The meadows at the rear of the site are 'unimproved' meadows that we understand have never been ploughed. Their grasses include species typical of ancient hay meadows. After 1857's Inclosure Award, it seems these fields were used by locals to graze animals (including pigs, keen on the acorns), and to accommodate itinerant hop-pickers.

Blacknest's community was much larger in Victorian times and explains why the parish's original cricket pitch was located here. The Cricketers' pub, opposite Blacknest Fields, remained in business until 1921. Blacknest also had two churches - a Bible chapel and the Anglican 'Church of St Alban the Martyr', built opposite Blacknest Fields in 1899.





Education

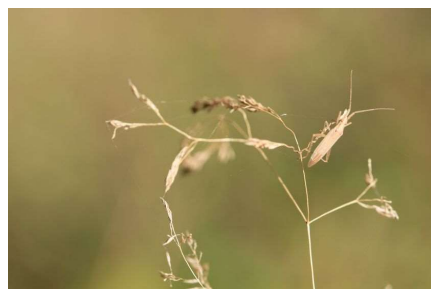
School groups from Rowledge and Binsted schools, and young people from the Hive Helpers Youth Clubs, all visited the Fields in the summer. It is always challenging for schools to fit field trips into their curriculum, so we were delighted that both of the parish's primary schools were able to pay a visit, using the period after the Year 6 SATS tests to get outdoors.



We've all been learning from the beautiful and carefully observed photographs taken by visitors to the site. Sharing these on our Blacknest Fields Community Facebook page is great: people who haven't much knowledge about wildlife say how much they enjoy learning about plants and animals seen at the Fields. It is also a great way of getting wildlife experts to help us to identify and record new species. We're gradually starting to understand the specific niches that the site's different wildlife species choose - the different heights of the oak trees used by specific butterfly species; and the locations of sunny banks and log piles favoured by our lizards and grass snakes.



Getting out to see for ourselves is always educational, too: spotting well-camouflaged species, such as the Meadow Brown butterfly (left) and the grass bug *Stenodema laevigata* (right) keeps our wildlife recorders on their toes.



Collaboration with Butterfly Conservation is helping us understand how best to support woodland butterflies. The Circular Walk⁶ we developed with them has proved a big success. Launched in April 2023, we ran a guided walk as part of May's 'Alton Walking Festival' and another guided walk, in collaboration with Butterfly Conservation, during 'peak' butterfly season in July.



Inspirational conservation work undertaken at other local wildlife sites, such as at Knepp in Sussex, is training us to keep an open mind about what new species might arrive if we can improve habitats. And, while we cannot keep longhorn cattle or other browsing herbivores on our site, manmade cutting and lopping enables us to improve our habitats by mimicking the natural disturbance generated by herbivore browsing.

⁶ The Circular Butterfly Walk is available for printing at home from the Binsted Parish Council website: <https://binstedparishcouncil.org.uk/parish-council/blacknest-fields>



Celebration

Our goal is for Blacknest Fields to be a community asset that is really enjoyed! Being outdoors is fun, and being close to nature

gives us a fantastic sense of wellbeing - watching wildlife captures our attention in an effortless, restorative way. Neuroscientists now say that exposure to nature is a necessity rather than a luxury, and recent research suggests that places rich in wildlife have particularly dramatic effects on reducing anxiety and lifting mood.

Celebrating Earth Month. We were very proud that Alex Potts' wildlife photos from Blacknest Fields and her map of local wildlife corridors featured in April's 'Earth Month' exhibition on local green spaces at Aldershot's West End Centre.



Learning to Dance in the Rain! We chose exceptionally wet days for both our big community events, but luckily this didn't seem to matter very much to our volunteers!



July Meadows Day: July 2023 was '*one of the wettest on record*' - and 22nd July was the wettest day of all. Nevertheless, everyone who came along had a great time and learned a lot - from tales of dormouse rescues to hedgehog shenanigans and moth trapping antics. Particular thanks to Hive Helpers; our South Downs rangers; the Alton Natural History Society; and Martin Angel from Farnham's Biodiversity Partnership for making the day so special.



October's Volunteer Work Party was also exceptionally wet. Undeterred, a grand total of 38 people turned out to help including the Binsted Parish 'Rights of Way' volunteers. A wide range of projects were completed, including the elm tree planting, yellow rattle sowing and bee bank construction described in the preceding pages. But it is worth saying that the food, camaraderie and good humour were as exceptional as the conservation work completed.



Celebrating both ‘Scarce’ and ‘Common’ Wildlife species

We’ve been thrilled to increase the number of rare species recorded at the site. The number of fauna recorded which are rare at a national or county level increased from 27 to 36 this year, as noted in pages 4 - 5. There are undoubtedly further rare and exciting species yet to be discovered. Our oaks are a haven for a colossal range of species, and oak deadwood provides a niche for some extremely rare invertebrates as well as a basking habitat for our population of common lizards.



Collaborating to record bat species at Blacknest Fields – Lynn Whitfield, Surrey Bat Group

“This year Surrey Bat Group was able to provide on loan a static bat detector (SongMeter SM2Bat, Wildlife Acoustics), which was mounted on a tree at Blacknest Fields for periods of several days during April, June, July and August. These detectors are programmed to record bats’ ultrasonic calls throughout the night, triggered automatically by passing bats. As bat activity in one location can vary from night to night, and indeed throughout the night, static detectors like this provide a much more comprehensive picture of which species use the site and when than dusk transect surveys. Files from the detector were analysed using auto-i.d. software (Sonobat and BTO Pipeline), supplemented with manual checking. Recordings between April and July confirmed that the site is used by at least six bat species, namely common and soprano pipistrelle, noctule, serotine, barbastelle, and “Myotis species”. This latter genus is very difficult to separate to species as their calls are very similar. However, among the August recordings there were a few of sufficiently good quality that they could be identified as Natterer’s bat (M. nattereri) and Alcahoie bat (M. alcahoie), taking the species tally to at least seven.

Of particular interest is the internationally rare barbastelle: this was recorded on detectors by the Bat Group at Alice Holt in 2018-19, but not caught so we were unable to radio track bats to find out where they were roosting. This species was regularly recorded at Blacknest an hour or two after sunset, suggesting that the roost was not nearby, but potentially providing an opportunity for future trapping. As mentioned above, Alcahoie bat was new to science in 2001 and only recorded in this country in 2010. Since then, it has been recorded all over Surrey and Sussex but rarely elsewhere, so extending the records into Hampshire has provided additional insights into its distribution.

These findings show that Blacknest Fields provides a great range of habitats for bats. Most of these roost in tree holes, crevices or flaking bark, so retention of such features should be a priority when managing woodland. Trees are also used for winter hibernation, so tree work is best carried out in the autumn, avoiding both the breeding and hibernation periods. Maintaining a dense understorey would also be beneficial in providing a warmer microclimate within woodland - barbastelles are known to emerge and forage even in the depths of winter.”



The abundance of more ‘common’ species at the site gives us an equal amount of pleasure. As well as large populations of butterflies, moths and grasshoppers, we were amazed by the numbers of odonata - 11 species of delicate damselflies and stocky dragonflies such as the Downy Emerald pictured above have already been recorded on site, despite the site having (as yet!) no pond.

This is down to courtship rituals - just like at a nightclub, male dragonflies convene at a ‘lek’ so females know where to find them! We can’t wait to see how many dragonflies we attract when we do get a pond.

Celebrating our Awards

Blacknest Fields won a 'Highly Commended' award in the Landscape category of Hampshire CPRE's annual awards. The judges particularly praised our committed volunteers' hedge and meadow restoration work, our educational contribution to local schools and groups, and publicity about conservation undertaken.



Another honour was a site visit from South Downs Chief Executive, Trevor Beattie. The support we receive from Paul Bushell and the South Downs team is invaluable.

We were also pleased to have won several further funding grants, enabling us to continue to fund our projects without drawing down Parish Council reserves.

Articles about the new community greenspace at Blacknest Fields written by Petersfield Climate Action Network (PeCAN) and Alton Climate Action Network (ACAN) were further nice compliments. It is always so worthwhile to talk and share ideas with like-minded groups. As well as discussing our experiences with PeCAN and ACAN, we have also very much enjoyed participating in Hampshire Countryside Service's Pollinator Network, including a visit to Gabriela Poliakoff's inspiring wildflower meadows in Empshott.



Resurfacing the Bridleway at the back of the Copse has made a huge difference to

the ease of access to the site by walkers and local residents (as shown in the 'before' and 'after' photos below). We are

grateful for the funding from Hampshire County Council and to Binsted Parish's 'Rights of Way' volunteers (some of whom are pictured above), who helped cut back the holly overgrowing the path. By improving site access for walkers and cyclists we hope to make it more accessible for local residents.



Plans for 2024

Our number one priority is to continue to improve the site for wildlife.

Vision: By 2025, we will have completed the initial transformation of Blacknest Fields as a place for nature recovery and quiet community greenspace.

Building a wildlife pond (in 'Willow Corner') will be our big project for 2024. Wildlife experts emphasise the huge wildlife benefits of building ponds, both for species already present and to attract new flora and fauna. Funding for the pond has already been secured, so practical planning is now underway, both by the South Downs National Park team contracting this work, and at the site itself, where we'll be hedge-laying to strengthen the old hedge behind the pond area.

We'll continue to deliver our 3-year 'Get Blacknest Buzzing' Beelines project, enriching the site's meadows and hedges by improving their management regime, exploring local green hay exchanges and progressing our aspiration for a 3-mile 'insect superhighway' along Buglife's⁷ B-line⁸ route from Bentley to Dockenfield.



Recording and sharing wildlife observations, formally through online wildlife recording databases, and informally on social media, will also be continuing. In 2024, we will be continuing to encourage and train new wildlife recorders, looking to undertake further surveying for dormice, and establishing a Butterfly Transect. We welcome

volunteers keen to help with these projects.

We are also exploring whether it may be possible to reintroduce glow worms at the Fields. These native beetles, once so plentiful that people read by their luminescence, have had their lights dimmed by a cult of tidiness in the countryside, the loss of wild meadows and light pollution. In an attempt to revive the species, various places are now re-introducing glow worms. We would love to be one of these sites if we can, to see if glow worms can make themselves at home in our very dark night skies area.



We were recently accepted as a hedgehog release site for Hart Wildlife Rescue, so we also can't help wondering if some new hedgehogs might be moving onto the site in 2024!



⁷ The Buglife charity is dedicated to the conservation of all invertebrates - everything from bees to beetles, and worms to woodlice

⁸ Buglife's 'B-Lines' are 'insect pathways' across Britain, where wildflower-rich stepping stones link wildlife-rich areas to benefit pollinators.

We will also continue to improve the site for community greenspace.

- ★ **Work to further strengthen the bridleway surface** will be undertaken early in 2024, to improve access for bridleway users, site visitors and conservation volunteers.
- ★ **A local craftsman is making us a bird watching screen**, which will be installed at the bird feeding station in the Copse, to enhance opportunities for birdwatching.
- ★ **We will continue to work with local schools, colleges and youth groups** to introduce further young people to the site. Getting outdoors is so vital for young people's mental health. We will also be continuing to support Duke of Edinburgh students who want to volunteer at the site. We are delighted that the Binsted Fete committee were recently donated a community gazebo that we can now use to keep school parties dry.
- ★ **Alton's Allen Gallery will host an exhibition based on Blacknest Fields' flora and fauna**, from May 14th – June 23rd 2024. The exhibition will be accompanied by an exciting programme of talks, walks and workshops as well as art outreach sessions to create curriculum enrichment for local schools.
- ★ **Further 'butterfly and flora' walks** to the Fields will be run in the summer, in collaboration with Butterfly Conservation and the Alton Natural History Society.



Fundraising

- ★ **The site's charitable status** gives us the opportunity to fundraise for our conservation work in new ways. We plan to make greater use of this in 2024. For example, we are now registered with 'Easy Fundraising', whereby over 7,000 brands will donate to us as you shop online with them, at no expense to yourself. We would love all of our supporters to sign-up to this brilliant and simple fundraising tool – every penny will be spent by the charity on our conservation work at the Fields.

Blacknest Fields is now registered with Easy Fundraising to raise funds for our conservation work!

www.easyfundraising.org.uk/causes/blacknest-fields

Register using the website or QR code to get raising money for Blacknest Fields every time you shop online without costing yourself a penny!



easyfundraising You shop, brands donate to us

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The 'Blacknest Fields and Holt Pound Oval Charitable Trust'
is a registered charity.
Charity Number 301743

For further information about Blacknest Fields:

follow us on Facebook:

 Blacknest Fields Community Page

Check out our website:

<https://binstedparishcouncil.org.uk/parish-council/blacknest-fields>

or join the mailing list for our quarterly newsletter

by emailing: BNF@binstedparishcouncil.org.uk

