BLACKNEST FIELDS

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Thanks and acknowledgements

Binsted Parish Council, alongside the trustees of the 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, wild bee records and advice on wild bees and more;
- ★ 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 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); Keith and Carol Shepherd (butterflies); Hive Helpers (bees and pollinators); Ben Hamlin (trees); and the wildlife recorders at Bealeswood Common Nature Reserve.

Professional wildlife advisors, including:

- ★ South Downs National Park (for pond planning advice and construction), particularly Paul Bushell and the South Downs rangers team (for guidance and hands-on support);
- ★ Daniel Banks, for introducing bird ringing to the site under the British Trust for Ornithology programme and starting formal bird recording at the fields; and
- ★ Fiona Scully (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 for hedge mulching, and lending his climbers to get our bird boxes checked and straightened;
- ★ Rachel and Nigel Walter & James Dineen (Farm and Garden Supplies); and
- ★ Site contractors: Ed Dale; Hampshire Tree and Garden Ltd; Royston Hopcroft; Rob Knight; Katy Poulsom, Nigel and Phil Bone at Poulsoms Plant Hire; Jonny King of Wooded Spaces; Mark Howard and Martin Lucas.

All who provided help in other ways, including:

- ★ Grants from: East Hampshire District Council s106 Environment funding (for bridleway surfacing, tree safety work, bird hide, hedge laying and pond co-funding); Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (for wildlife recording kit); The Hampshire Forest Partnership (for trees and saplings); CPRE Hampshire; South Downs National Park, Hampshire County Council Pollinator Network, Hampshire County Councillor Mark Kemp-Gee, and the Binsted Fete & Flower Show;
- ★ Inspirational engagement from Cornish ceramicist Bridget Macklin and local photographer Alex Potts, whose artistic partnership resulted in the Allen Gallery exhibition held in May and June. Dawn O'Toole kindly fired the 'bee bricks' made by local children in her kiln;
- ★ Bird food donated by various 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' to supply the bird feeding station, in particular Peter Stephens who also made a wonderful rodent-proof bird food storage container;
- ★ 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; and
- ★ A shelter loaned to keep the working party dry by Lee Turk.

Executive Summary

Blacknest Fields is an 8 acre site in Blacknest, Hampshire, which borders the Alice Holt Forest in one of the South Downs National Park's darkest areas.

This report describes the main activities at the site in 2024, and progress achieved. It is organised under our three main themes:

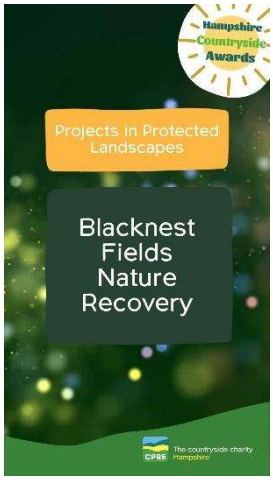
Wildlife Recording

Habitat Enhancement

Education & Celebration!

Our overall goal is for Blacknest Fields to be a community asset that is enjoyed by both wildlife and the local community. The site management plan[1] aims to improve the wildlife potential of each of the 'mosaic' habitats found on-site - the wildflower meadows, trees, hedges and banks – taking account of factors such as their soils and microclimates.

Since Binsted Parish Council decided to open the site to the public and manage it for wildlife, the Fields have been significantly improved, and visited by an expanding range of people and wildlife. The site's third year has been its best yet. Particular highlights have included: witnessing kestrels successfully raising their young (page 6); 64 new species discoveries (including our 30th and 31st species of butterfly - see page 8); construction of a new wildlife pond (page 10); and an amazing summer art exhibition held at the Allen Gallery (pages 12-13).



We are very proud that the site has won the Countryside Charity CPRE's 2024 award for the top 'Project in a Protected Landscape' in the Hampshire Countryside Awards. It is great to have shown that 'lay' volunteers and passionate communities can make a real difference for nature conservation.

All progress made is thanks to the amazing group of committed and friendly volunteers who actively support the site, including the 276 members of the Blacknest Fields Community Facebook group. We have been fortunate to win 6 further grants and generous support from several local businesses this year; and we are also starting to benefit from the site's charitable status, which opens fund-raising routes not previously used. In total, the value of grants and donated goods received since 2022 (including bridleway resurfacing grants) has now topped £52,000.

We have come a long way since 2022; and we have exciting plans for 2025, as outlined on pages 14-15.

Alison Melvin
Lead for Blacknest Fields for Binsted Parish Council

Sarah Womersley
Volunteer Co-ordinator Friends of Blacknest Fields

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

Wildlife Recording

Until July 2022, Blacknest Fields had no formal wildlife records. Thanks to our energetic volunteer wildlife recorders, the site has now developed an impressive pan species record. All verified flora and fauna records are shared with the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC). Records also inform the site's management.

An amazing 584 species have been recorded at Blacknest Fields to date - 162 flora, 387 fauna and 35 bryophytes, fungi and lichens.

These include: 31 butterfly species[2] (up from 29 species recorded in 2023); 190 moth species; 30 bee and wasp species; 47 species of bird and thriving populations of grass snakes, common lizards, slow worms and toads. Our volunteers' surveying skills have also been improved thanks to training from the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Amphibian and Reptile Group who kindly armed a group of volunteers with the knowledge and skills necessary to properly survey the new wildlife pond.

Wildlife Records (cumulative totals)

Wildlife records:	By Dec 2022	By Dec 2023	By Dec 2024
Total wildlife species recorded	324	520	584
Butterfly species	22	29	31
Total notable fauna	27	36	43
Birds ringed under BTO scheme	0	0	161

New this year: A total of 64 new species were recorded at site this year, including two new species of rare butterfly and 17 new species of moth. We were also delighted to find our first Harvest mouse nest and to be trusted to release two hedgehogs at the Fields after their rehabilitation by local HART Wildlife Hospital.

Rarities: Amongst the fauna so far recorded, 43 species are notable for their rarity at a national or county level, as detailed on the next page. These include the Barbastelle bat (one of the UK's rarest mammals), the Downy Emerald dragonfly (left) and the Long-horned bee (right), both spotted by Alex Potts.

[2] The whole of the UK has 65 recorded butterfly species and 33 of those are regularly recorded in Binsted Parish. 31 species have been recorded at Blacknest Fields between July 2022 and December 2024.

Amongst 387 species of fauna recorded on site by Dec 2024, 43 species are rare or scarce at a national or county level:

Species	Designations	Species	Designations
White Admiral butterfly *(Limenitis Camilla)*	BC-HP, SPI	Small Heath *(Coenonympha pamphilus)*	BC-HP, SPI
Dark Green Fritillary butterfly *(Speyeria aglaja)*	BC-HP, SPI	Dingy Skipper butterfly *(Erynnis tages)*	BC-HP, SPI
Brown Hairstreak butterfly *(Thecla betulae)*	BC-HP, SPI	Long horned bee *(Eucera longicornis)*	FALK
Sharp-angled carpet moth *(Euphyia unangulata)*	CS-H	Dusky Thorn moth *(Ennomos fuscantaria)*	CS-NH, SPI
Dwarf pug moth *(Eupithecia tantillaria)*	CS-NH	Beet moth *(Scrobipalpa ocellatella)*	NS
Double kidney moth *(Ipimorpha retusa)*	CS-NH	Dark spectacle moth *(Abrostola triplasia)*	CS-H
Ypsolopha horridella micromoth	CR-H	Green-brindled crescent moth *(Allophyes oxycanthae)*	CS-NH, SPI
Oak Lutestring moth *(Cymatophorina diluta)*	CS-NH, SPI	Figure of eight moth *(Diloba caeruleocephala)*	CS-H, SPI
Feathered Gothic moth *(Tholera decimalis)*	CS-H, SPI	Light Crimson Underwing moth *(Catocala promissa)*	RED, HP-BAP
Marbled Pug moth *(Eupithecia irrguata)*	NS	Dotted Chestnut moth *(Conistra rubiginea)*	NS
Orb Weaver spider *(Cercidia prominens)*	NS	Oak jumping spider *(Ballus chalybeius)*	NS
Marsh Tit *(Parus palustris)*	RED, SPI	House Martin *(Delichon urbicum)*	RED
Starling *(Sturnus vulgaris)*	RED, SPI	Mistle Thrush *(Turdus viscivorus)*	RED
Dunnock *(Prunella modularis)*	RED, SPI	Spotted flycatcher *(Muscicapa striata)*	RED
Woodcock *(Scolopax rusticola)*	RED, WCA	Downy Emerald (dragonfly) *(Cordulia aenea)*	VLD
Common Lizard *(Zootaca vivipara)*	WCA, SPI	Slow-worm *(Anguis fragilis)*	WCA, SPI
Grass snake *(Natrix Natrix)*	WCA, SPI	Common toad *(Bufo bufo)*	WCA, SPI
European Hedgehog *(Erinaceus europaeus)*	WCA, HP-BAP, IUCN-V	Serotine bat *(Eptesicus serotinus)*	WCA, EPA, RED-V
Soprano pipistrelle bat *(Pipistrellus pygmaeus)*	WCA, SPI	Natterer's bat *(Myotis nattereri)*	WCA, EPA.
Barbastelle bat *(Barbastella barbastellus)*	WCA, HP-BAP, EPA, RED-V	Noctule bat *(Nyctalus noctula)*	WCA, HP-BAP, EPA
Alcathoe bat *(Myotis alcathoe)*	WCA, EPA.	Common pipistrelle bat *(Pipistrellus pipistrellus)*	WCA, SPI
Harvest Mouse *(Micromys minutus)*	HP-BAP		

Key:

BC-HP Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' species for Binsted Parish
HP-BAP 'High Priority' under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework
SPI A Species of Principal Importance under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006
CR-H County Rare for Hampshire
CS-H County Scarce for Hampshire
CS-NH County Scarce for North Hampshire
FALK Listed as a Notable Species in Falk's (1991) paper *'A review of the scarce and threatened bees, wasps and ants of Great Britain*' and a Priority Species in the 2007 UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Terrestrial Invertebrate Species
NS Nationally Scarce
RED Included on the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 'Red List' published in 2021 (the "Red List")[3]
RED-V Listed as Vulnerable to extinction on GB Red List
WCA A protected species under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (the "WCA")
EPA European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive
IUCN-NT Near Threatened on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species
VLD Very Limited Distribution in UK – reliant on woodland ponds

[3] In addition, twelve species of bird on the 2021 Birds of Conservation's 'Amber List' have also been recorded on site.

Wildlife Breeding successes

A wonderful highlight of the year for volunteers has been witnessing wildlife using the fields to breed and raise their young. The newly-installed kestrel boxes saw a brood of very fluffy young kestrels fledging this summer (left); and one of the barn owl boxes was occupied by tawny owls who successfully raised their young in it (below).

A family of Great Spotted Woodpeckers stayed at the fields for several days with their fledglings, slowly working their way through the oak trees and teaching them how to find caterpillars and insects in the foliage (right).
Long tailed tits were seen collecting feathers to line their nest which they sensibly built in the wonderful hedge along the bridleway (below). To the great delight of the bird ringing team, one of the adults seen collecting feathers had a monitoring ring around its leg (cover photo).

It is heartening to see that nature is reclaiming the site and making full use of what it has to offer. Caterpillars of Orange Tip butterflies were discovered in the spring, munching their way through the Cuckoo flowers (Cardamine pratensis) in the Front Field.

Nests of both Harvest mice (left) and Spiny legged spiders (right) were found in the tall grasses of the wildflower meadows. The team are especially delighted to have found evidence of Harvest mice using the fields, in part because their preferred habitat is also that of glow worms – see page 14 for exciting news on that front.

Bird Ringing Programme - new for 2024

After 12 months of looking for a qualified bird ringer to join the recorders at Blacknest Fields, in January we were delighted to welcome Daniel Banks. Daniel not only rings during his spare time but is also a Citizen Science Officer at the Surrey Wildlife Trust, so he brings a wealth of recording and conservation knowledge with him. He explains below about the British Trust for Ornithology bird ringing programme that he is now running at the Fields:

2024 has seen the first year of bird ringing take place at Blacknest Fields.

What is bird ringing? Well, it is the process of catching birds in a mist net, and then applying a small metal ring around their leg which has an individual number that is unique to the bird who wears it. This helps conservationists to track the migration routes of migrant birds as well as providing valuable data about the birds that utilise a site year round. The bird's biometrics are taken as well, including a wing length and a weight; on some species, fat and muscle scores are taken as well.

Sessions have taken place at Blacknest Fields on roughly a monthly basis throughout the year. A wide range of species have been caught; the latest total stands at 20 species caught and ringed at Blacknest Fields. The first session took place back in January and after catching 51 birds in total, it felt like it would be a great site to ring at. As the year has gone on, numbers have fluctuated but, in the end, 161 individual birds have been ringed. This is an excellent start to the programme.

One of the main ringing locations on site has been the woodland copse, with an array of woodland specialists caught, mainly the different species of tits which can be found at Blacknest, the most common being the Blue Tit. So far, 72 individual Blue Tits have been caught, with 10 of those being recaptured. A recapture is a bird already ringed that is caught again, allowing recorders to measure them again. It was with great pleasure that we also caught and ringed one of the Marsh tits which use the site in November. We are keen to learn how many Marsh tits use the woodlands at Blacknest, so this is a great start.

The other location for ringing was the hedgerow to the south of the Back Field, which arguably yielded much more diverse results with some very interesting species.

In May, it was noted that Swallows were flying around a woodchip pile here. A net was set up alongside it and, within moments, a Swallow was caught. This was very exciting as Swallows are difficult to catch in nets. Even though it was a damp morning, the weather forced the Swallows down into the hedge line and 3 were caught in total. This winter they will hopefully be enjoying warmer weather than us in Africa.

As the season progressed, our efforts remained on migrant birds. With the help of a tape lure, Willow Warbler and Blackcap were officially added to the ring list and to the bird list at Blacknest Fields. 1 Willow Warbler and 2 Blackcap were caught; these numbers are small but it is evidence they use the site and hopefully more will be caught in 2025.

As Autumn rolled on, the excitement continued to grow with Redwings, Chaffinch and Song Thrush all being great additions to the list for ringing this year.

The aim is to continue ringing next year and to try some new areas with hopes to add to the species list. The numbers will continue to grow.

Encouraging Pollinators

A great site for butterflies: We were excited that two new species of rare butterflies were recorded at the site for the first time in 2024: the Dingy Skipper and Small Heath. This brings our butterfly records to an incredible 31 species. To put this in context, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight as a whole are home to only 46 butterfly species[4].

Equally excitingly, our first adult Brown hairstreak butterfly (left) was spotted on blackthorn for a fleeting moment - their favourite! Caterpillars of this rare butterfly rely on young blackthorn. After intentionally *not* cutting back young blackthorn last year, our volunteers were delighted to discover the eggs of this rare butterfly on the site's young blackthorn plants last winter - and to spot an adult Brown Hairstreak on site for the first time this summer.

It has become clear that Blacknest Fields' sheltered, wet meadows are important as a nectaring spot and breeding place for meadow and woodland butterflies, moths and other pollinators. This is perhaps not a surprise, given that Blacknest Fields is in a near-identical landscape to, and only two miles away from, Butterfly Conservation's Bentley Station Butterfly Meadow SSSI. Both sites demonstrate how well pollinators can thrive in plots that aren't stereotypical chalk wildflower meadows.

A disastrous year for UK butterflies and bees: Despite the arrival of our exciting new species, 2024's weather was unfavourable for many, including most of the butterflies and wild bees that use the site (such as the Green-eyed flower bee photographed by Alex Potts here). The spring was mild, but with very little sunshine; and Britain had its sixth-wettest April of the last 189 years[5] (111.4mm of rain, compared to the average of 71.9mm). This had very real implications for many of the species usually seen at the Fields - and some were impacted for the entire year. Volunteers undertaking the monthly butterfly count at Blacknest Fields noted shocking declines in butterfly numbers. We only hope they make a remarkable recovery in 2025 - which thankfully butterflies can do in the right conditions.

Insect records were very low across the whole of the UK. Butterfly Conservation's 2024 Big Butterfly Count saw the lowest average number of butterflies per 15-minute count in the survey's 14-year history, and a third of species had their worst summer on record. Over 85,000 volunteers recorded their sightings of butterflies but over 9,000 people saw no butterflies at all[6].

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[4] https://www.hantsiow-butterflies.org.uk/

[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/articles/cz44911j2d4o

[6] https://insideecology.com/2024/09/24/for-many-in-the-uk-2024-was-the-year-without-a-butterfly/

Bumblebee Transects - new for 2024

A great way to assess bumblebee populations is to establish a fixed monitoring route (a transect), which volunteer 'BeeWalkers' walk once a month to record the abundance of each bumblebee species seen. The data collected is submitted to the Bumblebee Conservation Trust and informs the site's conservation efforts. Despite a few species of bee found in the UK expanding their ranges, the majority are suffering declines - three of the UK's 25 species of bumblebee have gone extinct.

In total, 30 different species of bee and wasp have been recorded by volunteers using the varying habitats at Blacknest Fields to date. Several new species were added to our records thanks to a new bumblebee transect and from reports received from visitors.

However, as with the butterfly records for the year, numbers of wild bees recorded on site were considered very low this year.

Erica Evans, Director of Hive Helpers CIC, explains:

In February volunteers began to walk a monthly bumblebee transect at Blacknest Fields.
The transect data for the year indicates that the most common bumblebees using the fields are (in order) the Buff-tailed bumblebee (Bombus terrestris), the Common carder bumblebee (Bombus pascuorum), the White-tailed bumblebee (Bombus lucorum), the Red-tailed bumblebee (Bombus lapidaries) and the Southern cuckoo bumblebee (Bombus vestalis). Bumblebees were mainly seen visiting Bramble, Euphorbia, Fleabane, Knapweed and Spear Thistle.
Sadly 2024's weather was unfavourable for bees, so the number of bees recorded by the transect were low, but the transect did throw up some interesting observations:

- *Firstly, very few honey bees were recorded visiting the site. This may seem positive for wild bees, as it means they have less competition for nectar at the fields - but it is unusual for honey bees not to be found on sites such as this. It raises the question "why are they absent?"*
- *Secondly, it is very positive that a species of cuckoo bumblebee has been recorded on site. Cuckoo bees are 'cleptoparasites' of other bumblebee species. Much like the cuckoo birds from which they get their name, they take over the nest of their host species. In the case of the Southern cuckoo bumblebees found at Blacknest Fields, their hosts are Buff-tailed bumblebees. A female cuckoo bumblebee will enter the nest of its host and kill the queen, then lays her own eggs to be reared by her workers. The presence of Southern cuckoo bumblebees at Blacknest Fields indicates a good population of Buff-tailed bumblebees locally, as they rely on this species to survive.*
- *A final observation is that neither the relatively common Garden bumblebee (Bombus Hortorum) or Early bumblebee (Bombus Pratorum) were recorded at the fields during a transect (though the later was seen on site in 2023). We would like to see these bumblebees in good numbers at the fields ideally and cross our fingers that 2025 will be a more abundant year for wild bees - not just at Blacknest Fields but across the country.*

Habitat Enhancement

Blacknest Fields' rich wildlife stems from the site's "mosaic" of different habitats: its meadows, woodland, hedges and scrub create a richness of biodiversity that would not occur if these habitats existed in isolation.

It is a top priority to improve the quality of these habitats. 2024 saw significant enhancements to the site's existing habitats and the creation of some new habitats.

A new wildlife pond

Wildlife experts emphasise the huge wildlife benefits of building ponds, both for species already present and to attract new ones. Many ponds have been lost in our landscape, both locally and nationally. Introducing a wildlife pond to Blacknest Fields has therefore been a core ambition, to benefit biodiversity, increase the site's reliance to droughts/heatwaves, and attenuate the risk of local flooding.

'Willow Corner' was the obvious location for the pond, as temporary rainwater pools often form here in the winter. Natural springs in Alice Holt Forest form an ephemeral stream that crosses Blacknest Fields via a ditch with clay pipes that were installed by the Wey Valley Water Company many decades ago.

Our pond design mimics natural pond habitats, with a variety of depths and shallows to support a wide range of wildlife and ledges that take advantage of the ditch linkage points. After all the time spent on site surveying**,** fundraising and getting planning permission, it was exciting when the South Downs rangers arrived onsite with a digger in July. After the pond was dug, it was lined with Bentonite, a natural clay mineral formed from weathered volcanic ash. This modern and environmentally sensitive construction method is in harmony with our forebears' traditional 'puddled clay' pond building methods, but with less likelihood of leakage due to cracking in droughts.

One of the benefits of a wet autumn has been proof that the pond will fill up! A surprising amount of rainwater accumulated during a very wet September; and in late November the pond received its first water from the Alice Holt stream, after the forest soils re-hydrated and the forest springs started to flow again after 'Storm Bert'.

Reaping the rewards of more scrub and thicker hedges

Scrub gets bad press but is amazingly important for wildlife; and thick hedges and wide hedge bottoms are also vital. Birds appreciate thick hedge 'fortresses' in which to safely nest; and wide hedge bottoms create good wildlife corridors that enable wildlife to move safely around - and provide the ideal habitat for our new hedgehogs.

Deer browsing damage has been a problem for our new hedges – the adjacent Alice Holt Forest has very high deer populations, so we have taken action to protect the new hedges with wire mesh, to help the hedges to get established now that they have grown above their protective spirals.

Richer meadows

Enriching the site's wildflower meadows by improving their management regime has been a key aspect of our 'Get Blacknest Buzzing' *"Beelines"*[7] project, which aims to boost the abundance and diversity of the site's pollinators. After two years, the benefits of changing the management regimes of the meadows and hedges are becoming clear, with a greater abundance of flowering plants and a greater diversity of plant species.

Good wildflower meadows rely on being cut in late summer, after the flowers have set seed, to ensure a succession of new wildflower plants. But finding a farm contractor willing to cut hay in late summer is well -nigh impossible for small sites like ours, when contractors are busy harvesting more valuable crops.

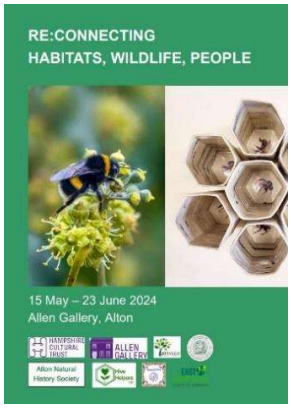
'Cut and Collect' mowers offer an interesting alternative to traditional haymaking. This

large-scale lawn mower collects the cut grass and deposits it in large piles that are ideal for slow worms and grass snakes. Luckily the National Park rangers needed a site on which to test out their brand-new 'Cut and Collect' mower … so obviously we quickly volunteered Blacknest Fields as a trial site! The experiment was successful: we will be looking to repeat this method of cutting the meadows next year.

Habitat improvements made (cumulative totals)

	2022	2023	2024
New ponds created	0	0	1
New hedges planted	245m	255m	260 m
Hedges laid	0	95m	135 m
Dead hedges created	25m	30m	32m
Orchard trees planted	9	9	9
Field trees planted	20	25	40
Bat boxes	2	2	2
Bird boxes	5	5	5
Log piles, bee banks & hibernacula	5	7	8

[7] Buglife's 'B-Lines' are 'insect pathways' across Britain, where wildflower-rich stepping stones link wildlife-rich areas to benefit pollinators. The Buglife charity is dedicated to the conservation of all invertebrates - everything from bees to beetles, and worms to woodlice.



Re:Connecting: a joyful and educational exhibition at Alton's Allen Gallery

In May and June, the Allen Gallery in Alton hosted a fabulous exhibition entitled 'Re:Connecting: Habitats, Wildlife, People' - all about Blacknest Fields.

This exhibition featured specially commissioned ceramics and photography that celebrated the restoration of Blacknest Fields and demonstrated the power and joy of community action in reconnecting habitats, wildlife and people. Reconnecting people with wildlife and habitats is essential if the steep declines in our wildlife being seen locally and worldwide are to be addressed. The exhibition demonstrated that local green spaces and volunteer community groups can play a powerful role in the recovery of nature; and in the process the volunteers involved benefit from reconnecting with nature - improving our own joy and wellbeing and enabling us to learn enormous amounts from the wildlife experts with whom we are collaborating.

Bridget Macklin, whose exquisite ceramics featured in the exhibition, was formerly a teacher and is passionate about children having the opportunity to study nature through art. She kindly led an art outreach project for **pupils from Binsted primary school** who paid a visit to Blacknest Fields under Bridget's guidance and used their time outdoors to draw images of the nature they saw. The drawings were refined back at school and turned into ceramic tiles which subsequently became a splendid frieze, now installed at Binsted school.

Pupils from Rowledge primary school created 'bee bricks' for solitary bees as part of a habitat creation project run by Hive Helpers CIC at the school's annual Eco Day. Huge thanks go to both Hive Helpers and Bridget for running the events; to the Binsted Fete Committee for funding the projects; and to Dawn O'Toole for kindly firing the bricks.

Alex Potts' beautiful and carefully observed wildlife photographs taken at the Fields formed the other part of the Allen Gallery exhibition. Alex and Sarah also ran a very popular Cyanotype workshop at the gallery. Wildlife photos taken at the Fields greatly help us to identify and record new species, and to understand which specific site niches the different wildlife species choose - the heights of the oak trees used by specific butterfly species; and locations of sunny banks and log piles favoured by our lizards and grass snakes.

The generous sharing of Blacknest Fields photos with our Blacknest Fields Community Facebook page - by Alex, Sarah and others – is very much appreciated by everyone: people who haven't much knowledge about wildlife say how much they enjoy learning about plants and animals seen at the Fields.

Cathy Wilson from the Alton Natural History Society also took part in the Re:Connecting Exhibition, and led botanical walks at Blacknest Fields in June 2024, bringing new visitors to enjoy the site and learn about the native flora of the meadows.

Ongoing collaboration with the Alton Natural History Society and with Butterfly Conservation is helping us understand how best to support the site's flora and fauna. The Circular Walk we developed with Butterfly Conservation has proved a big success and continues to be enjoyed by walkers. The Circular Butterfly Walk is available to download from Binsted Parish Council's website:
https://binstedparishcouncil.org.uk/parish-council/blacknest-fields

The area of the site that is open for public access has increased steadily since 2021, when only the Bridleway (7% of the site area) was open to the public. This increased to 28% of the site when the site was first opened to public access in April 2022; and to 39% when Willow Corner was also opened to public access in September 2023.

We very much welcome visits to the Fields by school groups and young people. Busy school timetables often make it challenging to fit in field visits, but it's great when they can be organised. It was also lovely when young people from the Hive Helpers Youth Club visited the Fields in the summer.

Plans for 2025

Blacknest Fields' 2021-25 Management Plan set an ambition for the first phase of site transformation to be completed by 2025. Since this has largely been achieved, an updated Management Plan for the period 2025-30 is currently being compiled.

A continuing priority is to improve the site for wildlife:

Fine tuning our new wildlife pond in 'Willow Corner' will be a key task in 2025. Some shrubs were recently planted around the pond. During 2025, the SDNP rangers will work with site volunteers to monitor water levels and fine tune the contours of the pond, to make it as beneficial as possible for wildlife.

We will continue to enrich the site for pollinators. Our 3-year 'Get Blacknest Buzzing' Beelines project concludes in 2025. Next, we are looking to extend the wildflower meadows beyond the initial project areas[8], by restoring the Back Field from a horse-grazing area to a wildflower meadow open to the public.

We will be planting more native honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) in the site's copse and shady hedges, thanks to a grant for this work received from HCC's Pollinator Network. Honeysuckle is the sole food plant for larvae of our rare White Admiral butterflies; and the Elephant Hawk-Moth and Earl Grey moths are amongst the many moths drawn to honeysuckle flowers at night.

We also hope to reintroduce glow worms at the Fields in 2025. These native beetles, once so plentiful that people read by their luminescence, had their lights dimmed by light pollution, the loss of wild meadows and the cult of tidiness in the countryside. 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 dark night skies area.

Recording and sharing wildlife observations, formally through online wildlife recording databases and informally on social media, will continue in 2025. We plan to undertake further mammal surveying; and the summer 'recording weekend' being run with the Alton Natural History Society in July 2025 should also boost site records. We will be training new wildlife recorders and welcome new volunteers to help with this.

[8] Our 2022-25 'Beelines' project focused on Oak Tree Meadow, Butterfly Meadow and bridleway grass strip.

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

★ **We intend to purchase a shelter for volunteers and visiting groups** and are delighted that Hampshire County Councillor Mark Kemp-Gee and the Binsted Fete committee have both generously donated towards this.

★ **We will continue to work with local schools, colleges and youth groups** to introduce further young people to the site. Getting outdoors is 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.

★ **A fun but informative weekend of wildlife observations and recording will take place at the fields** in July 2025 in collaboration with the Alton Natural History Society and the public will be able to join in, explore the Fields and help volunteers to record species they find there.

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 2025. We are registered with 'Easy Fundraising', whereby over 7,000 brands will donate to us if people shop online with them, at no expense to the shopper. During 2024 this has contributed around £160 to our fundraising efforts, which has kept the bird feeders topped up throughout the winter.

★ **We would love all our supporters to sign-up to 'Easy Fundraising',** which is a brilliant and simple fundraising tool. Every penny raised will be spent by the charity on our conservation work.

This 2024 Annual Report was published on 6 December 2024.

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

Our grateful thanks to the many organisations who have assisted Blacknest Fields in 2024, including: