



BLACKNEST FIELDS

2022 ANNUAL REPORT





Executive Summary

Blacknest Fields' first year as a site dedicated to nature and community greenspace has been a busy one.

The 'hunch' that Blacknest Fields is a good site for nature has been conclusively confirmed. With support from amazing local volunteer wildlife recorders, we've found birds, bats and butterflies aplenty. So far, 324 species have been recorded, of which 27 species are notable for their rarity at a national or county level, as detailed on page 5. This will guide future management plans.

The transformation of the site into public greenspace is well underway. The Oak Tree Meadow opened to the public in April. There have been challenges. We have faced extreme Spring mud, a prolonged summer drought, then an icy December interspersed with torrential rain and floods. Getting the funding and approvals to improve the bridleway condition was challenging, as was the work itself. However, we're seeing progress, thanks to the encouragement, advice and funding of many organisations and specialists; and our site contractors' patience and humour. It's great to now have a community of advisers and contractors with the knowhow and skills to manage the site well for the future.

The site's new user community is developing well, with visitors already taking pleasure in seeing how the site changes through the seasons. The aim is for Blacknest Fields to become a well-loved, quiet greenspace: a halt for walkers, riders and cyclists; and a welcoming, tranquil place for local people to enjoy.

The progress made is thanks to the great community of volunteers and 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' who are actively supporting the site. Social events and working parties have been fun. The Blacknest Fields Community Facebook group now has 138 members; and the first 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' newsletter was published this Autumn, to 148 subscribers.

We have exciting plans for 2023, as outlined on page 18. Successful funding awards mean that we'll be making further improvements to habitats for wildlife and for the community; and we already have some interesting social events planned.

Significant 2022 achievements

324 wildlife species recorded
27 rare or protected species

245 metres new hedges
220 metres stock fences
25 metres 'deadhedges'
1 community orchard
20 field trees planted

2 bat boxes
5 bird boxes
4 log piles
1 hibernaculum

11 community events
138 in FoBF Facebook group
148 newsletter subscribers
2 newsletters published

£32,081 grants & donations
14 grants secured

Alison

Alison Melvin
Lead for Blacknest Fields
for Binsted Parish Council

Sarah

Sarah Womersley
Volunteer Co-ordinator
Friends of Blacknest Fields

*This 2022 Annual Report
was published in December 2022*

Blacknest Fields and its history

An 8 acre site near 'The Jolly Farmer' in Blacknest, Hampshire.

Blacknest Fields is located three fields from 'The Jolly Farmer' pub in Blacknest, adjacent to the Alice Holt Forest. It lies within the South Downs National Park, in one of the darkest areas of the Dark Skies Reserve.

The history of Blacknest Fields, and its local community, helps us to understand the site and its relationship with Alice Holt Forest.

In Roman times, Alice Holt's native woodlands and thick local Gault clay made this area an important centre for pottery production - the 'Stoke-on-Trent' of its day - with vast quantities of grey Alice Holt kitchenware supplied across Roman Britain.



Under William the Conqueror, Alice Holt forest was managed as a royal hunting forest, and Blacknest Fields was included in this forest area. Local inhabitants were prohibited from living in 'the king's forest' and killing deer or game was strictly punished.

From the 1770s, the Alice Holt forest was devoted to producing oak for the Royal Navy. Warships took up to 5,000 oaks to build. In 1815, after the Napoleonic Wars, a massive re-planting programme was undertaken at Alice Holt, all oaks. Forest boundaries changed, with Blacknest Fields now outside the newly-planted forest.

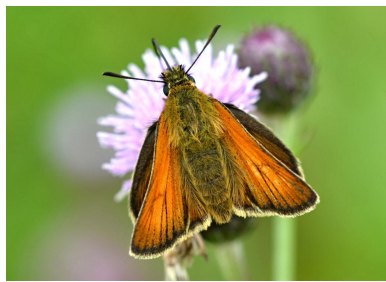
In 1852, after the General Inclosure Act, Binsted drew up its Inclosure Map and awarded 8 acres at Blacknest Fields to the 'Overseers of the Poor' (precursors to parish councils) for '*the labouring poor*' and '*for exercise and recreation*'. The Front Field was Binsted parish's original Recreation Ground and remains a registered Village Green.

Blacknest's community was larger in Victorian times. A second pub, 'The Cricketers' - conveniently opposite Blacknest Fields' cricket pitch - was the site of an infamous murder: the landlord shot his wife, for which he was later hanged. Blacknest also had two churches. Non-conformists attended the Bible Christian Chapel. The Anglican 'Church of St Alban the Martyr' opened opposite Blacknest Fields in 1899, nestling between the 'Jolly Farmer' and 'The Cricketers'.



In World War II, the Ministry of Supply took over Blacknest's cricket pitch. Three big steel tubes were installed, forestry girls brought cordwood to burn, and charcoal was manufactured, for explosives and flares. Local men and New Zealand soldiers felled thousands of forest trees, many exported as railway sleepers to Iraq or Iran.

After the war, Binsted Parish Council took back management of the site, but the cricket pitch was abandoned, a superior pitch now having been acquired in Binsted. Blacknest Fields became a forgotten asset, used only for horse grazing. - Until now!



Blacknest Fields' wildlife

What we anticipated

Until this year, there were no formal wildlife records for Blacknest Fields. However, we knew that ecologists would *expect* the site to be important:

- o Woodland-edge locations are important habitats: more woodland birds and plants are found in the edges of woodland than their heart;
- o 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.
- o Its meadows - not "improved" by agriculture - are amongst the UK's rarest habitats: 97% of UK wildflower meadows have been lost since the 1930s¹;
- o Long-term monitoring in Bentley Station SSSI Butterfly Meadow² and Alice Holt Forest amply demonstrates these sites' importance as biodiversity hot-spots.

What we're discovering

The generous involvement of volunteer wildlife recorders has supercharged documentation of the site's flora and fauna. An amazing 324 species (122 flora, 202 fauna species) have so far been recorded, including: 22 butterfly species³; 96 moth species; breeding populations of common lizards, grass snakes and slow-worms; and many birds including three species found on the 'Red List' which use the fields. Amongst the fauna so far recorded, 27 species are notable for their rarity at a national or county level, as detailed on the opposite page, including the barbastelle bat, which is one of the UK's rarest mammals.

What is the scope for further nature recovery?

At the site itself: improving the condition of Blacknest Fields' wildflower meadows, trees and hedges will significantly increase the diversity and abundance of wildflower pollinators, and in turn the whole chain of animals that eat insects will benefit from these improvements - reptiles, birds, hedgehogs and bats. Ensuring that the site has the right habitats and micro-habitats, such as sunny banks and log piles, will help species notable for their rarity, and familiar species we have regarded as 'common or garden', including many wild bees, moths and reptiles that are in alarming decline.

Blacknest Fields can also act as a significant stepping-stone: The UK government's 2010 Lawton Report on the State of UK Wildlife concluded: *"There is compelling evidence that UK wildlife sites are too small and too isolated, leading to declines in many species, which will worsen with climate change. Not only do we need more space for nature; we also need to greatly improve the connectivity between biodiversity hot-spots, preferably with green corridors or alternatively with chains of stepping-stones to facilitate dispersion."* Blacknest Fields can act as a stepping stone that links Alice Holt to other biodiversity hot-spots across Hampshire and Surrey.

¹ <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/meadows-matter>

² <https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/reserves/bentley-station-meadow-hampshire>

³ The whole of the UK has 65 recorded butterfly species and 33 of those are regularly recorded in Binsted Parish according to Butterfly Conservation. 22 species were recorded at Blacknest Fields between July and December 2022.

Fauna Notable for their rarity at a national or county level recorded in 2022 ⁴	
Species	Designation
White Admiral butterfly (<i>Limenitis Camilla</i>)	Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' for Binsted Parish & NERC SoPI ⁵
Dark Green Fritillary butterfly (<i>Speyeria aglaja</i>)	Butterfly Conservation 'High Priority' for Binsted Parish & NERC SoPI
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 & NERC SoPI
Feathered Gothic moth (<i>Tholera decimalis</i>)	County Scarce & NERC SoPI
Dusky Thorn moth (<i>Ennomos fuscantaria</i>)	County Scarce North Hampshire & NERC SoPI
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 & NERC SoPI
Figure of eight moth (<i>Diloba caeruleocephala</i>)	County Scarce & a NERC SoPI
Orb Weaver spider (<i>Cercidia prominens</i>)	Nationally scarce
Oak jumping spider (<i>Ballus chalybeius</i>)	Nationally scarce
Marsh Tit (<i>Parus palustris</i>)	On 2021 Birds of Conservation Concern 5 'Red List', and NERC SoPI
Starling (<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>)	On 2021 Birds of Conservation Concern 5 'Red List', and NERC SoPI
House Martin (<i>Delichon urbicum</i>)	On 2021 Birds of Conservation Concern 5 'Red List' ⁶
Common Lizard (<i>Zootaca vivipara</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 ⁷ and NERC SoPI
Grass snake (<i>Natrix Natrix</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and NERC SoPI
Slow-worm (<i>Anguis fragilis</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and NERC SoPI
Common toad (<i>Bufo bufo</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and NERC SoPI
Pipistrelle bat (<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>)	NERC SoPI
Soprano pipistrelle bat (<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>)	NERC SoPI
Noctule bat (<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and UK Priority Species
Barbastelle bat (<i>Barbastella barbastellus</i>)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and UK Priority Species
Myotis species bat (<i>Myotis</i> of some type)	Wildlife & Countryside Act Schedule 5 and UK Priority Species

⁴ All of the species listed in the table were recorded at Blacknest Fields between July - December 2022.

⁵ Listed as a species of Principal Importance in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

⁶ Seven species listed on the 2021 Birds of Conservation 5 'Amber List' (and whose conservation status is therefore of 'moderate' concern) have also been recorded on site: Rook, Tawny Owl, Dunnock, Grey Wagtail, Redwing, Wren and Kestrel.

⁷ A protected species under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Site Developments in 2022

January: New year, new plans, new logo



A new development plan⁸ and a new Blacknest Fields logo were agreed by Binsted Parish Council on 4 January. The site will be managed for nature recovery, with an area of public space for low-key recreation. It was agreed that funding for site improvements will come from grant applications, with funding for basic site maintenance coming from continuing equine grazing, over a reduced area. The Council also reviewed governance arrangements, to align with its obligations as Trustees for the Blacknest Fields & Holt Pound Oval Charitable Trust (Charity #301743) which legally owns the land.

February: Jubilee hedge planted

Jubilee Hedge – 70 metres of new hedge was planted in the Butterfly Meadow, thanks to funding from the Tree Council's Branching Out Fund⁹. Planting, carried out over two afternoons, was led by Ben Hamlin, Binsted's Tree Warden, with help from volunteers from across the parish, including children from pre-school, home school, Binsted Primary School, Rowledge Primary School and Lord Wandsworth College. We were lucky with the weather, but the site was muddy. Tree Warden Ben sank so deeply into the mud that he had to be dug out; someone else slipped in the mud and had to return home to change their trousers!



March: Making the site safe

In preparation for opening Blacknest Fields to the public, parish councillors and other volunteers removed the site's rusty nails, barbed wire and trip hazards; and our tree surgeon removed deadwood from site trees, to ensure that the site, when open to the public, is as safe as possible. This includes providing information about seasonal risks such as ticks, doing risk assessments for work parties, having first aid kits at community events, and including 'WhatThreeWords' locations on signs, so locations can be easily identified in an emergency.

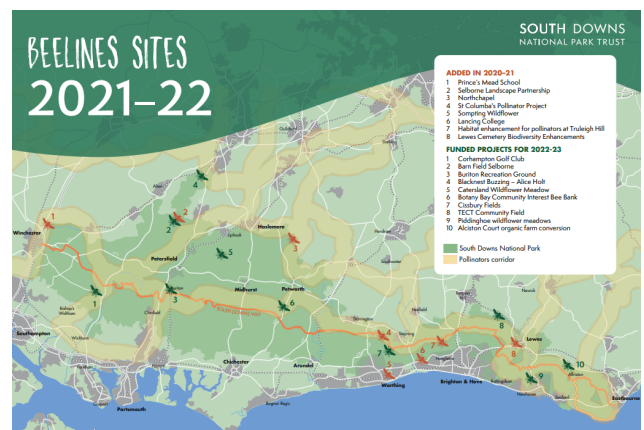
⁸ 'Blacknest Fields Development Plan' is published on Binsted Parish Council website:

<https://binstedparishcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Blacknest-Fields-Development-Plan-Jan2022-BPC-meeting-.pdf>

⁹ The Tree Council's Branching Out Fund focuses on involving young people, schools, community groups and Tree Wardens in planting trees, hedges and orchards. The value of our grant was £1,000.

April: Blacknest Fields opens to the public

The Oak Tree Meadow was formally opened to the public in April, with new signage and site map to provide information about which areas of the site are open to the public, and rules for using the site safely and responsibly. Site rules echo the 'Country Code', emphasising aspects relevant to woodlands. High deer populations make it important to be tick aware; and BBQs and fires are prohibited due to the need for vigilance against forest fires. Dogs on leads are welcome in the Oak Tree Meadow, but not in the areas of the site where sensitive wildlife needs protecting, nor in the areas which are rented for grazing.



May: The meadow experts' assessment

Conservation charity Plantlife's¹⁰ meadow specialist Matt Pitts visited Blacknest, to assess our 'Get Blacknest Buzzing' project application for 'Beelines' funding. Plantlife is offering its expertise to the National Park for its Beelines initiative. Matt is one of the top meadow experts in the country. Reassuringly, within minutes of arriving on-site, Matt found grass species indicative of ancient hay meadows! Matt's conclusion was that Blacknest Fields has all the ingredients to be a high-quality meadow for pollinators, provided its management regime is improved.

Securing Beelines funding¹¹ was great news. Blacknest Fields is one of only 10 sites in the South Downs National Park to win such funding this year (as shown in the map above), and is the only project in this northern part of the National Park. To improve the meadows' wildflower diversity and abundance, we will be cutting the grass later (after the wildflowers have set seed); removing the grass (as hay), to prevent the soil becoming too nutrient-rich; encouraging hedges to flower and fruit, to extend the nectar season for pollinators; and improving site fencing, to enable livestock to 'aftermath' graze the meadows after the hay harvest in future years.

Hampshire County Council's Nature Recovery team also visited Blacknest Fields and contributed many helpful suggestions. Binsted was amongst the first Hampshire parishes to make formal 'pollinator pledges': it is now benefiting from advice from the very useful network of expertise that HCC's Nature Recovery team is developing amongst the participating parishes.

¹⁰ Plantlife' Meadow Management guidance: <https://meadows.plantlife.org.uk/3-maintaining-meadows/>

¹¹ Value of SDNP 'Beelines' grant - £5,000.

June: Clouds of butterflies; and children's laughter

Fine weather blessed our Midsummer Community Picnic, held on 25 June, which was well-attended and fun. It was an opportunity to enjoy the copse and Butterfly Meadow in their full summertime glory. The pathway cut through the meadow revealed a living tapestry, with clouds of butterflies over grass, flowers and crickets. Erica and Juliet Evans, from 'Hive Helpers', organised a delicious honey tasting and provided ideas for supporting the site's wild bees. Local woodsman Jonny King of 'Wooded Space' discussed coppicing, hedge-laying and other woodland management approaches. The children took part in butterfly surveys, built dens and played tug-of-war. It was a delight to hear children's laughter echoing through the woods.



Blacknest Fields' lack of car parking is a limitation, but we can provide on-site parking on the Oak Tree Meadow at community events in summertime, when the ground is dry. Except at these times, vehicle access is limited to maintenance contractors and wildlife volunteers. In time, the council would like to improve vehicular access, so that minibuses used by local schools and care groups can turn and exit the site front-first.



Assistance from the professionals: It was helpful to have a further site visit from the South Downs rangers, to discuss habitat improvements for different site areas, and how to knit our project plans into a long term Site Management Plan. Inevitably, the more our knowledge increases, the more our ignorance unfolds! Ecologists introduce us to a world in which 'ephemeral' ponds, 'fuzzy' edges and 'scallops' are desirable; and 'gappy' and 'knuckled' hedges must be banished. There's clearly a lot of potential to improve the site for wildlife - and for the local community - and it feels good to be making a start on the work needed.



The 'County Scarce' Feathered Gothic (left) and Oak Lutestring (right) moths, both recorded on site in 2022 and both listed as 'notable species' in Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.



July: A butterfly bonanza - and a drought



The weather throughout July was near-perfect for butterflies and Blacknest Fields enjoyed clouds of them throughout the month. Sadly this was not the picture nationally: Butterfly Conservation's 'Big Butterfly Count'¹² revealed that the UK's worrying decline in butterfly numbers has continued, despite the favourable conditions. As Butterfly Conservation's Head of Science wryly commented, *"The sun could shine for days on end, but we won't see more butterflies unless more is done to protect and restore habitat for them."*

Hampshire's driest July since records began left our new Jubilee hedge parched. As the site has no mains water supply, Hampshire County Councillor Mark Kemp-Gee kindly provided a grant¹³ to enable a water bowser to be brought onsite during the drought, to help volunteers to keep the hedge alive during the dry weather.



A new kissing gate and five-bar gate were installed at the entrance to the Oak Tree Meadow. Long-awaited changes to the site's Blacknest Road entrance configuration were also made. The kissing gate at the roadside entrance was a legacy from before the bridleway's post and rail fence was erected, when livestock roamed across the whole site. Removing this kissing gate improved accessibility for horse riders and cyclists, who no longer need to stop to open the five-bar gate. It also means that the five-bar gate can now be locked, to increase site security.



¹² Undertaken between 15 July and 7 August, Butterfly Conservation's 'Big Butterfly Count' is the largest citizen science survey of its type - [Results of 2022's Big Butterfly Count revealed](#)

¹³ Value of Hampshire County Council Councillor Grant - £750.

August: Monitoring; moths; meadows; and mohicans



Our wildlife monitoring programme got properly underway in August, thanks to the generous help of local volunteer wildlife recorders. Cathy Wilson substantially expanded our botanical records. Local moth expert Martin Angel organised highly successful moth trapping evenings, the first of which alone caught 60 different moth species. Pete Gillatt of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Amphibian and Reptile Group (HIWARG) set up an amphibian and reptile monitoring programme¹⁴, and we have found that the site has a thriving population of common lizards and grass snakes. Bird, dragonfly and spider experts added to the records. We are using online wildlife recording databases to log and confirm records¹⁵, and maintaining a pan-species monitoring record. Each record we can gather adds to our understanding of the site's wildlife.

Why moth trap?

Moth species are effective indicators of biodiversity and seasonal changes. Britain has over 2,600 moth species - some common, some rare and some immigrants from abroad. 893 of the species are larger macromoths; the rest are smaller (usually) micromoths which are harder to identify. 760 species of macromoths are residents, the remainder are migrants from Europe. Some migrants occur every year; others are rarely recorded, carried to the UK during extreme events such as Saharan dust storms.



Alice Holt Forest's close proximity makes the Blacknest Fields data particularly significant. Alice Holt is one of 137 trapping stations in the UK which monitor moth and aphid diversity and abundance (<https://insectsurvey.com>), and is important in helping to unravel and understand the complex fluctuations in insect populations. All records of the moths we find in Blacknest Field are submitted via i-Record and so contribute to the national database. Butterfly Conservation has accumulated over 25 million records since 1960, and this recording effort provides the evidence essential to persuade policy-makers of the impacts of habitat loss and fragmentation.

Blacknest Fields is not only important as a local reserve, but also an ecological stepping stone for species to disperse both to and from Alice Holt. Britain has been exemplary in protecting biodiversity hotspots, but these hotspots are increasingly isolated by our infrastructure of roads, housing and agriculture. The hot-spots can be subject to one-off ecological catastrophes, such as floods and wildfires, resulting in local extinctions. Any site that has become totally isolated will not be re-colonised so its diversity and the reason for its conservation will be irretrievably eroded. Our moth data has the potential for providing evidence for the value of Blacknest's role, highlighting not only its importance as a local reserve, but also in the conservation of the complex interactions between all species across the country.

Dr Martin Angel, volunteer moth recorder and member of the Farnham Biodiversity Partnership

¹⁴ HIWARG volunteers laid several refugia sheets at the site, which HIWARG volunteers inspect periodically. HIWARG kindly provides this monitoring, free of charge, to help landowners to protect native UK species of amphibians and reptiles. HIWARG's data records are collated online and provided to the parish Council. For more information, visit HIWARG's website: <https://groups.arguk.org/hiwarg>

¹⁵ Records are logged as follows: Moth, butterfly and other insects (iRecord); flora (Living Record), arachnids (British Spider Recording Scheme and /or iRecord); amphibians and reptiles (HIWARG RecordPool database) and Bats (the Bat Conservation Society hold records of the survey and they have been submitted to the Hampshire Bat Group in addition).

Meadows Open Day. To enjoy the wildflowers before the meadows were cut for hay, we hosted a small-scale ‘Open Day’, involving several local flora and fauna experts, members of the public, the parish Council team, and Hampshire County Council’s local Nature Recovery officer. Bringing together experts with different specialisms proved extremely useful for informing our ideas about site layout, bad-weather shelters, and the practicalities of different livestock for aftermath grazing. There is strong consensus that introducing a wildlife pond, or ponds, would be the single most beneficial change that we could make for wildlife - although the discovery that ponds need planning permission was less welcome news!



Mowing the Meadows – The annual meadow cut took place on 8 August in the Front Field, Oak Tree Meadow and Butterfly Meadow¹⁶, after the wildflowers had set seed, with baling following shortly thereafter. On the advice of wildlife groups, we left ‘Mohican strips’ across the mown areas and wide borders around each field, to provide small ‘sanctuary’ areas. It’s surprisingly demanding to manage meadows well, not just because of seasonal changes in weather conditions, but also to find contractors with the right-sized tractors and hay balers, who’re available for hay-making at the required time - the period after the wildflowers have set seed is a hectic one for farmers, many of whom are busy with combine harvesting!

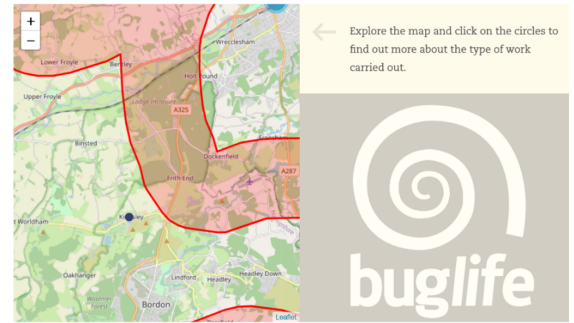


¹⁶ Due to the very dry summer, the Back Field was not cut, as the tenant leasing the Back Field decided the grass was needed for her horses, rather than being cut for hay.



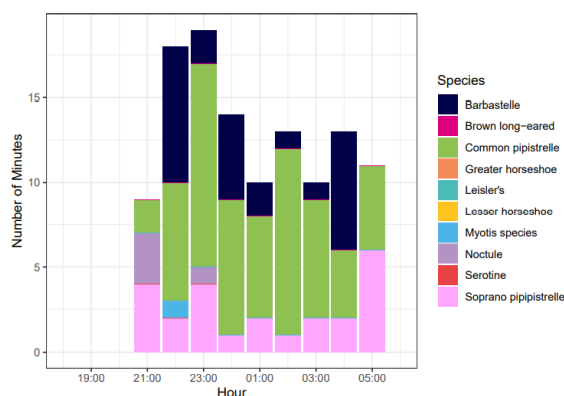
September: Insect super-highways, walks and foraging

Discovering that the charity Buglife¹⁷ has drawn an aspirational B-line¹⁸ right through Blacknest, our 'Get Blacknest Buzzing' project set itself the goal of creating a 3-mile 'insect superhighway' from Bentley to Dockenfield, to supplement our efforts to improve pollinator habitats on-site at Blacknest Fields. We want to improve pollinator habitats from Bentley Station Butterfly Meadow's Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)¹⁹, past Blacknest Fields, and on to Dockenfield's Bealeswood Common, another important biodiversity hotspot.



To realise this aspiration, and raise awareness of the Blacknest area's magnificent butterflies, we're designing a new circular 'butterfly walk' between Bentley Station Butterfly Meadow and Blacknest Fields, which we plan to include in Alton's Walking Festival next May. Fine weather provided the perfect day to map out the route with Butterfly Conservation and its Bentley Station Butterfly Meadow volunteers. We're also in discussion with the Bealeswood Common naturalists, to figure out how best to enhance the insect 'super-highway' through to Dockenfield.

Bats of course use the local insect 'super-highways' in their own special ways. Bat surveys conducted in 2021 had already shown that pipistrelle and sonata pipistrelle bats use the site



as their hunting ground. By participating in the 2022 Bat Conservation Trust 'NightWatch' survey, we discovered more. Recordings taken with an 'AudioMoth' acoustic monitoring device showed at least five bat species foraging at the site. In addition to the pipistrelles already recorded, Blacknest Fields also has Noctule, Barbastelle and Myotis species. The NightWatch results (left) gave insights into their different emergence times.

The barbastelle bat is one of the UK's rarest mammals and has a distinctive, pug-shaped nose. It likes pastoral landscapes with deciduous woodland and wet meadows, where it forages on micromoths.

¹⁷ The Buglife charity is dedicated to the conservation of all invertebrates - everything from bees to beetles, worms to woodlice and jumping spiders to jellyfish.

¹⁸ Buglife's 'B-Lines' are 'insect pathways' running through Britain's countryside and towns, along which habitats are being restored to create a series of wildflower-rich areas that link existing wildlife areas to benefit pollinators.

¹⁹ <https://butterfly-conservation.org/our-work/reserves/bentley-station-meadow-hampshire>

One of the regular visitors to the small feeding station which was set up in the Copse this summer has been the marsh tit. Despite their name, marsh tits are most often found in broadleaf woodland, copses, parks and gardens. They are classified in the UK as 'Red List species' under the Birds of Conservation Concern 4: the Red List for Birds (2021) and are a Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. We must carefully manage the Copse, to protect the hollow tree trunks they favour for nesting.



An Autumn Walk: A sunny September day was spent with local forager Emma Green, who led an enjoyable foraging walk for 'Friends of Blacknest Fields'. After looking at moths that Martin Angel had trapped the previous evening, we set off in search of edible plants and seeds. Emma identified several meadow plants that make great additions to salads, brewed up some nettle tea and showed how to dry wild garlic mustard seeds for use in cooking.



Emma let us sample some of the delicious preserves that she makes from hedgerow fruits. And although our foraging wasn't intended to be a 'fungal foray', we found huge parasol mushrooms, apparently edible (- perhaps next year!)

Hot topics: many of the species which inhabit the site made the most of the late warm weather which the Autumn offered this year. The last sighting of a grass snake at the fields was on 28th October, with Common Darter dragonflies being seen as late as 9th November.



Both grass snakes and dragonflies are reliant on bodies of water to survive and thrive. The UK has lost half a million ponds over the last 100 years and one in five remaining ponds are thought to be in poor condition²⁰. The Parish Council is taking professional advice on the viability of adding one or more wildlife ponds to the rear of the site.



²⁰ According to the Wildlife Trusts: www.wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/freshwater/ponds

October: habitat improvements and planting

Our hedge contractor was busy at Blacknest Fields in October. Site hedges are now being cut in a four-year rotation, to produce more blossom and berries. Hedge-cutting here must be done in autumn, after the bird nesting season, but before the clay becomes too sodden.

Tree work was also carried out: removing deadwood from the middle oaks, for safety; and felling a fallen willow. Woodland rides and glades are important as they enable sunshine to penetrate the woodland floor, increasing the diversity of its plants and invertebrates. We plan to thin the bridleway's holly canopy, to create sunny patches in the Blacknest Fields copse, as well as giving horse-riders sufficient head-height and helping the bridleway to dry out faster after rain.



The warm autumn brought out some extraordinary fungi in both the meadows and copse:



*None of these fungi are particularly rare, but some of them have odd properties. The common puffball, *lycoperdon perlatum* (top right) is spiky when young, and can be eaten as long as its flesh is white throughout. The gelatinous 'witches butter', *tremella mesenterica*, (bottom left) is apparently also edible, although it doesn't look very appealing! The 'candlesnuff fungus', *xylaria hypoxylon* (bottom centre) is a bioluminescent fungus - phosphorus in its mycelium reacts with oxygen and other chemicals in the fungus to produce a continuous glow, like the glow from a candle's wick when it's extinguished.*

October Half Term volunteers created new wildlife habitats from the bonanza of dead wood generated by the tree surgeons. Keeping dead wood on site returns nutrients to the soil and helps the 2,000+ species of saproxylic invertebrates that live on decaying wood - mini-beasts and larger insects like stag beetles. We used the dead wood to make a further 10m of dead hedges, another log pile for lizards, and a wonderful hibernaculum (pictured). The hibernaculum does look uncannily like a hastily-dug grave, but will help to keep amphibians and reptiles alive in extreme temperatures, both in the winter and in heatwaves. Since the photo was taken it has been covered in soil as a finishing touch.



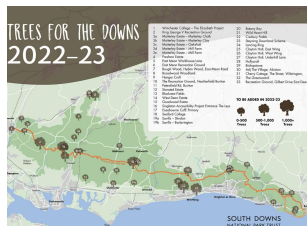
Sowing wildflower seeds: We planted bulbs and wood anemone tubers, and sowed lots of wildflower seeds in the meadows, including yellow rattle. Often called 'the meadow maker', yellow rattle is a native wildflower that is partially parasitic on grass, meaning the meadow grasses' vigour is reduced and more space is created for other wildflowers. Yellow rattle seed needs a four month period of 'vernalisation' (low temperatures) to germinate, and so must be sown in autumn.



An army marches on its stomach - Blacknest Fields volunteers being no exception. In this case our lunch contained some special ingredients: the soup was made from the prizewinning pumpkin grown by Rowledge school's gardening club; our biscuits were purchased with a Community Award voucher kindly donated by Tesco.



November: A planting bonanza



South Downs National Park 'Trees for the Downs': Blacknest Fields is one of 32 sites funded this year by SDNP's 'Trees for the Downs' scheme and we were delighted to receive 735 hedge whips, plus 20 alders for the wetter areas of the site, along with all the necessary stakes and tree guards.

... and a new community orchard. We also received a very generous £1,000 donation from Waitrose's 'Community Matters' fund, enabling us to plant a small community orchard in the Butterfly Meadow and 'Willow Corner' which will add fantastic extra spring foraging for pollinators. We chose 7 fruit trees grafted onto vigorous rootstocks, which should grow well in the meadow's tussocky grass, and two damson trees, to include in the new hedge.

Many hands make light work! Saturday afternoon teamwork from 25

volunteers enabled a staggering 100 metres of mixed

native hedging to be planted along the Front Field fence, and three timber tree guards built for the new orchard. Our volunteers included wildlife enthusiasts, local residents and our ever-supportive tree warden, plus pupils from

Alton, Eggars and Rowledge schools and Duke of Edinburgh participants. We'd rotavated the ground in preparation - but on the wettest day of the year - so the ground was very squelchy. There were inevitably

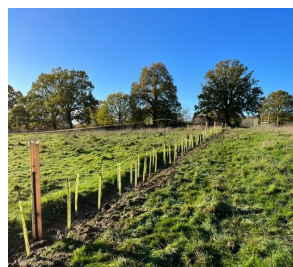
quite a few "lost wellie" incidents! Sarah's excellent soup was much appreciated. Alex Potts and Angela Shaw kindly acted as our photographers, capturing a lovely day.

Sunday brought further luck. Paul Bushell and his group of South Downs National Park



volunteers arrived to plant all of our remaining hedge whips. This created a further 65m of new hedging in the Back Field.

Three further, smaller working parties enabled us to finish building the remaining fruit tree guards, get the fences erected and to plant the fruit trees and alders before the frosts finally arrived in December.



December: Owls, boxes, benches, bridleways - and ice!

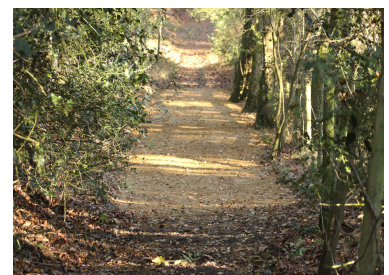
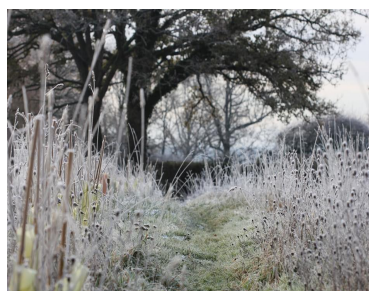
A kind grant from the Binsted Fete & Flower Show committee enabled us to commission and install a beautiful owl sculpture from talented local chainsaw artist Jona Cleaver. Grants from East Hampshire District Councillors provided a lovely bench too.



Further woodwork wizardry, by David and Mike at Pear Tree Solutions, produced four beautifully constructed barn owl and kestrel boxes, kindly gifted to us. Jona made and donated a further lovely tawny owl box. We look forward to installing these in the New Year.



To round off the year, long-awaited improvements to Bridleway 41 were finally carried out: to combat flooding at the easterly section of the site, and improve the surface at the Blacknest Road entrance ('before' pictures at top); and to rectify tyre ruts in the pathway. Securing the funding, approvals and contractor was challenging; and the work itself proved equally gruelling. We're grateful to SDNP and HCC for their funding²¹; and to Dave and Luke for working through two weeks of sub zero temperatures (with mornings at minus 6), followed by days of torrential rain and floods. We'll assess any further work needed when things dry out.



²¹ SDNP s106 contribution value £12,404; HCC Rural Parish Partnership Delivery grant value £4,800.

Plans for 2023

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

- ★ We will continue **recording and sharing wildlife observations**, formally through online wildlife recording databases, and informally on social media.
- ★ We will continue to deliver our three year '**Get Blacknest Buzzing**' **Beelines** project, to enrich the site meadows and hedges and improve their management regime. We'll explore local green hay exchanges and hope to create a 3-mile 'insect super-highway' along Buglife's²² aspirational B-line²³ route from Bentley via Blacknest to Dockenfield.
- ★ We'll take action to improve the condition of the site's **hedges**, by hedge-laying their gappy sections, with the help of SDNP volunteers and CPRE grant funding.
- ★ Blacknest Fields is shortlisted as a site for SDNPA's new '**Space4Nature**' funding scheme, which we hope may open interesting new funding routes, including from new 'Biodiversity Net Gain' legislation.
- ★ We're seeking permissions and funding to **build a wildlife pond** (or ponds!) and by the end of 2023 hope to have firm plans to fulfil these ambitions. Experts emphasise a pond will bring huge wildlife benefits, especially against droughts, which have such detrimental impacts and are forecast to become more common in the future.

We will also continue to improve the site as community greenspace

- ★ In the New Year we will be installing an Interpretation board at the site entrance, thanks to a grant from the Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust.
- ★ We will be inaugurating new 'butterfly walks', in collaboration with Butterfly Conservation and Bealeswood Common's wildlife recording group.
- ★ We want to introduce further young people to the site. We're involving young volunteers studying for Duke of Edinburgh awards, and hope to develop our links with local schools and with YoungACAN, the youth wing of Alton's Climate Action Network.
- ★ We want to develop the site to assist with mental health and wellbeing.
- ★ We hope to develop a 'Creative Response' art and poetry initiative, focused on Blacknest's wildlife.

We plan to have fun, with some great events already in the calendar!

- ★ FEBRUARY Hedge Laying demos and work parties
- ★ APRIL Public talk celebrating Blacknest Fields and wildflower meadows
- ★ MAY Our new 'Butterfly Walk' will be inaugurated in Alton's Walking Festival
- ★ JULY We'll be celebrating 'National Meadows Day'.

²² Buglife is a charity dedicated to the conservation of all invertebrates - from bees to beetles, worms to woodlice and jumping spiders to jellyfish.

²³ Buglife's 'B-Lines' are a series of 'insect pathways' running across Britain, along which habitats are being restored to create wildflower-rich stepping stones, linking existing wildlife areas across the landscape to benefit pollinators.



Thanks and acknowledgements



Binsted Parish Council, as Trustees for the Blacknest Fields and Holt Pound Oval Charitable Trust which 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. Thanks to our Parish Clerk Lisa Spindler, our councillors, and to the many others who have given help, including:

All 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' who have participated in community events and working parties and given practical assistance, particularly:

- ★ Sarah Womersley, our all-round dynamo, for her inspirational leadership.
- ★ David Hall and Mike of Pear Tree Solutions, and Jona Cleaver of Bench-Marque, for making us beautiful bird boxes; and to Nikki Hall for providing and transporting materials for habitat improvements; Kate and Ben Hinshelwood, for building and donating the lovely ash benches pictured; Ben Hamlin (Binsted's Tree Warden); Emma Green (for leading our foraging walk); Juliet and Erica of Hive Helpers CIC and Jonny King of Wooded Spaces (for assisting at the Midsummer picnic); the Forrester family (for their hours of hard graft); Mark Elsoffer at Tice's Meadow Nature Reserve and Colin Shearn at Tilford Eco Network (for lending wildlife monitoring equipment); and Binsted Eco Network (for publicising and organising events).



- ★ South Downs Ranger Paul Bushell and volunteers from the South Downs Volunteer corps, for their help with hedge planting and the invaluable advice on ponds offered by Paul and Clive.

All who have given advice about wildlife and habitat management:

- ★ Local volunteer wildlife recorders and photographers: Cathy Wilson (botany and bats); Martin Angel (moths); Pete Gillatt and Pete West of HIWARG (amphibians and reptiles); Sarah Womersley (butterflies); Mark Elsoffer (birds and dragonflies), Steve Lockett (bats and butterflies), Darren Hill (spiders); Sue and Barry Clarke (butterflies and ponds); Nik Knight (the Hampshire Bat Group); Libby Ralph (Farnham Biodiversity Partnership); Adrian Fisher-Shephard; Alex Potts and the wildlife recording team at Bealeswood Common Nature Reserve.
- ★ Wildlife advice from professionals, including: Matt Pitts (Plantlife), Steve Lockett (Butterfly Conservation); Paul Bushell, Sonia Martin-Lorenzo and Laura Tong, (South Downs National Park); Andy Davidson, Hannah Graves and Nicky Court (Hampshire County Council); and Helen Miller and Dan Duncan-Brunt (Forestry England).
- ★ Site contractors and suppliers Nathan Jones, Dan Bray, Ed Dale, Rob Knight, Ben Marshall, Roger Fargeot, Geoff Lucas, David Edwards, Jona Cleaver, Dave Bradbury and Luke Elson.

All who have provided grants and funding advice:

The Tree Council 'Branching Out Fund'; County Councillor Mark Kemp-Gee and District Councillors Ken Carter and David Ashcroft; Elliott Rowe and Hannah Graves at Hampshire County Council's Countryside team; Chris Paterson, Gill Welsman and Miriam Swan at South Downs National Park; Binsted Fete & Flower Show; Alice Butcher at Waitrose Community Matters Fund; Tesco Community Grants; Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust; and the countryside charity CPRE's Hedge Fund.





'Many hands make light work'

Photo credit: Angela Shaw

**For further information about Blacknest Fields
or to join the 'Friends of Blacknest Fields' group
email: BNF@binstedparishcouncil.org.uk.**

 : Blacknest Fields Community Page

