

## Hildersham Natural History

### Connectivity

First and foremost, as Martin Baker, (head of conservation at the local Wildlife Trust) points out, connectivity is the key to helping biodiversity. In Hildersham Parish the River Granta, the Roman Road and the old railway line are all valuable 'wildlife corridors'. All three of these features are characteristic of our chalky landscape, attracting specialist species. The Wildlife Trust, partner organisations and landowners / managers including farmers aim to help create links between existing key habitats such as chalk grassland and chalk streams, and we can all play our part. Parish verges managed for wildflowers are important means for wildlife to move between favourable sites. As an example, the rare Chalkhill Blue butterfly that recently re-colonised the Roman Road has now crossed the A1307 to the Gog Magog Down (probably via Wandlebury and the central reservation). "Magog Down is one of the best sites for butterflies and other wildlife around Cambridge", the local branch of Butterfly Conservation said in November 2022.

Our grass verges and gardens can be stepping stones towards prime sites like this, and areas of Parish Council land such as the South Allotment Holding could have areas set aside for chalk grassland flora, encouraging pollinators and the chalk grassland butterflies. The South Holding has recently been used as a works site for the cycle path building. Areas of the field have been scraped clear right down to the chalk, which could provide favourable conditions for re-establishing chalk grassland flora, possibly through re-seeding (the field is presently good for invertebrates, but dominated by taller plant species). To the south of this site, separated by the A1307 and intensive agriculture, the disused railway line is good for butterflies and all other flora and fauna.

The unused North Allotment Holding is also a prime site for a wildflower meadow, with the existing downland grasses indicating good potential for more varied flora. This links up with the protected verge on the Back Road, and the Site of Special Scientific Interest to the east, Furze Hills. This in turn links, via farm tracks, to meadows at St Margaret's Green, to Chilford Hall Vineyard, and by hedgerow all the way to the Roman Road, another important wildlife area.

### The River Granta

One of the threats to our chalk streams (a rare habitat, with approximately only 200 worldwide) is nitrate and phosphate pollution, especially now that water levels fall so low. This pollution comes from intensive agriculture as well as livestock grazing. In our parish and towards Linton the river runs past water meadows grazed by horses, sheep and cattle, and past domestic gardens rather than arable crops. Landowners or tenants with riparian

rights / access can help mitigate the problem of 'run-off' by leaving areas of natural unsprayed riverbank foliage. This also helps slow down flash-flooding.

There are several local volunteer groups focusing on the Granta. [Cam Valley Forum](#) is one of them. They collect data and use it as evidence and organise working parties. There is valuable information on their websites. [Friends of the Cam](#) is another, and Linton has a working party, 'FROG'.

Hildersham village is very popular for dog-walking, and people love to see their pets enjoying the water. To help prevent bank erosion it would be helpful to encourage dogs in the river only at the ford. Not many people are aware that routine [parasiticides](#) prescribed by vets or bought off the shelf directly poison the invertebrates in our chalk streams. It might be an idea to create a poster explaining this, and to talk to the dog trainer who uses the village hall to help spread the word, or to ask the local vets to be more responsible in advising how it should be used. Pets need to be kept away from water directly after treatment.

Water voles, another endangered mammal, were resident in Hildersham until American Mink decimated them in the 90s. The mink have since been controlled through trapping, and water voles are doing well along the Granta and Cam in other villages. Again, retaining areas of foliage on river banks is essential to create safe habitat for these vulnerable animals.

Hildersham Holy Trinity churchyard - parishioners have made efforts to protect flora such as Harebells and Meadow Saxifrage growing here by communicating with the Parish Council about the mowing regime. Recently residents have won a Bronze award from the Wildlife Trust for promoting wildlife-friendly ideas. Perhaps there is scope for a few more wildlife-friendly native trees such as Rowan in the front drive area?

Bats.

Does anyone know what bat species are present in the village? The rare Barbastelle Bat was identified in Hildersham Wood on the southern boundary of the parish. This is another Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Bat Conservation Trust may have data on other species, and they have volunteers who might like to do a survey and a talk.

Light pollution is a huge problem for our wildlife. Residents are asked to consider switching off very powerful floodlights to help encourage species such as moths and bats.

## Climate change and future-proofing

Our local wildlife benefits from the River Granta, but the village could provide extra sources of drinking water for wildlife further away. Water could be provided in runnels, troughs, small ponds or simply bowls in places where they could be routinely topped up by residents from water butts or taps. In times of drought these water stations could benefit by being sited at the village hall, allotments and church where there are water supplies and frequent human visitors.

Jo Sinclair, 22 December 2022