



Devon
Wildlife Trust

The Avon Valley Project: ten years of woodlands and wildflowers





A special place

The Avon Valley is a very special place. From Aune Head on Dartmoor, the River Avon flows through mires, ancient woodlands, floodplain meadows and fields, tidal marshes and mudflats, down to the dunes and sandy beaches at Bantham, 25 miles from its source.

17 separate tributaries flow into the main river. These mini-valley systems, knitted together with mature hedgerows, woods and orchards, are home to a spectacular array of wildlife, including many rare and threatened species. The Avon Valley boasts the country's largest remaining heath lobelia colony and supports healthy dormice populations at a time when these animals are disappearing elsewhere. The very rare grey long-eared bat breeds here, as does the greater horseshoe bat who has an important maternity roost in the heart of the valley. Meanwhile, the river itself provides feeding and breeding territory for otters and Atlantic salmon.



Connecting people, re-connecting habitat

In 2011 Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) was pioneering conservation on a 'landscape scale' - an approach that involves creating more, bigger, better protected and better connected nature rich areas across whole landscapes.

Recognising that the Avon Valley catchment's wildlife was under threat from development pressure, intensive agriculture, land abandonment and habitat fragmentation, we identified the Valley as a priority area for rebuilding biodiversity and restoring and reconnecting wildlife sites. With three DWT nature reserves in the catchment - Lady's Wood in the north, South Efford Marsh in the south and Andrew's Wood at its heart - the Avon Valley Project was launched to embrace the whole landscape from source to sea.

Generous funding from South Devon Nature Trust helped us to offer more hands-on practical assistance and to engage with anyone who owned or managed land in the Valley. Loss of flower rich meadows emerged as a clear issue, so in partnership with enthusiastic landowners, we have set about bringing them back.



The last ten years have seen the wonderful Avon Valley community coming together with great enthusiasm to conserve and protect this special landscape. As well as enhancing their own holdings, landowners have donated wildflower seed, shared their knowledge with neighbours, given their time and money, and bequeathed land to help spread the network. Their goodwill has helped to restore special nature-rich places way beyond their own doorsteps, allowing wildlife to thrive across the Avon Valley. It is thanks to them that we have been able to achieve all that we have over the last decade.

Ten years of achievements in the Avon Valley

These headlines represent just some of the project's achievements:



Photo: Skylark © Steffan Johansen


3,300 hectares of land in the Avon Valley influenced by the project

Winter and autumn conservation grazing reintroduced to grassland restoration sites **12**

400+ individual landowners involved

6 NEW County Wildlife Sites surveyed and designated

1,800 site visits made by the project's **two** project officers

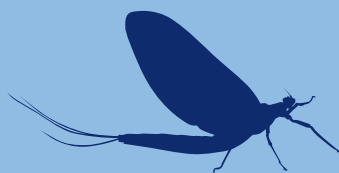

200+ metres of fencing installed to enable conservation grazing management

Coppicing to renew woodland at

4 County Wildlife Sites 

40ha+ of **NEW** wildflower meadows established at 30 sites

DORMICE recorded at **14 new sites & 8 new nest box** schemes established



Riverfly monitoring established to carry out regular counts of **mayflies, caddisflies and stoneflies** – all important indicators of river health

Habitat diversity reinstated by thinning scrub on **5ha+** across **6 Local Wildlife Sites**

675m of **NEW** hedgerows planted across 2 sites to link fragmented woodlands

2 **TREE PLANTING:** hectares of new woodland and shelter belt established 

The Avon Valley Project has been able to achieve so much thanks to the support of South Devon Nature Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust members along with: Aune Fisheries Association, Avon Estuary Forum, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Cows in Clover, Devon Biodiversity Records Centre, Devon Mammal Group, Environment Agency, FWAG South West, Highways Agency, Moor Trees, Moor Meadows, National Lottery Heritage Fund (via the Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat and Back from the Brink projects), National Trust, Natural England, ParkLife South West, Plymouth Environmental Action, South Brent 4 Bs, South Brent Island Trust, South Devon AONB, South Devon Avon Valley Facilitation Fund, South Hams District Council, South Hams Society, South West Water, Wakefield Trust, Woodland Trust, and the incredible energy and enthusiasm of local landowners, volunteers and communities.

“

Congratulations on the ten-year anniversary! The Avon Valley Project has transformed our land and our lives. Our meadow hums with insect and animal activity in the summer such as grasshoppers, crickets, grass snakes, hedgehogs, green woodpeckers, tawny owls and buzzards! Our herd of conservation grazing cattle has grown and never seem to be out of work. We feel part of a local community with a common aim and are inspired and hopeful for the future.

”

Desley & John,
‘Cows in Clover’

Did you know?

The Avon Valley Project has its own film. Watch on YouTube by searching for ‘Devon Wildlife Trust – Avon Valley Project’

Making meadows

When the Avon Valley Project was launched ten years ago, wildflower meadows in the area were few and far between. What remained was fragmented, hanging on in scrub-encroached slopes or limited to marginal strips.

In 2013 we began to create a wildflower meadow network. Seed was expensive and we had no donor sites that we could collect seed from in the area, so we set about creating some. We started with one site, a keen landowner and some yellow rattle seed.

Creating a wildflower meadow doesn't happen instantly. We advocate patience and enjoyment in the process! We encourage landowners to focus on bringing back the common, rather than aiming for the rare. We provide management advice, practical assistance, and ongoing monitoring to help keep landowners enthused, especially in the first few years when results aren't so visible. We also work in partnership with local graziers, Cows in Clover, and with Moor Meadows, a superb hub of expertise on meadow making.

In our tenth year we look back with pride at the wildflower meadow network that is being established, with more than 40 hectares of new wildflower meadows on 30-plus sites involving over 150 individuals. The project is enhancing everything from former arable land to horse-grazed pasture and reclaiming meadows suppressed by early grazing or cutting practices.

Our results are heartening. Having visited all the meadows in transition this year, even when invertebrate declines have been so noticeable, all sites have been buzzing with bees, butterflies, crickets and grasshoppers and the range of wildflowers is increasing each year. We have witnessed a steady improvement in habitat diversity, and we now have a handful of new donor sites, extending meadow making even further across the valley.

All this is achieved through relationships and goodwill, as much as by hard graft and funding. Although the former can't be achieved without the latter! Thanks are due to the farmers and landowners who generously allow us to harvest from their flower rich meadows; and our amazing volunteers who play an invaluable practical management role on sites where grazing isn't possible.

The project is a partnership success story on every level and one which will continue long into the future, creating wildlife havens for decades to come.

Lynne Kenderdine,

Land Management Advisory Officer – Avon Valley





Photo: Buff-tailed bumblebee © John Hawkins

Brimridge: nature reserve of the future

Brimridge was previously a mixed grassland and arable farm, on steeply sloping land from which many hedgerows had been removed. When the current owners arrived, they replanted hedges and re-seeded the arable fields to create permanent pasture to improve soil quality and prevent flooding.

In 2012, the year of the London Olympics, the landowners decided to go for gold and, with the Avon Valley Project's advice, the land was rested for a year. Between 2013-19 the owners worked with Devon Wildlife Trust and a local farmer. During that time, the land was grazed sensitively, ponds were installed, six hectares of formerly intensively managed grassland was seeded with wildflowers, 1,000 trees were planted and a barn was built.

The benefits to nature's recovery have been outstanding and continue to grow, with an increasing variety of wildflowers, more insects, breeding harvest

mice and barn owls, brown hares, glow worms, greater and lesser horseshoe bats, snipe, stonechats and flocks of meadow pipits. A marsh harrier's feather has even been found on site – hinting at its possible presence.

Thanks to the vision and generosity of its owners, this land is now bequeathed to Devon Wildlife Trust and will continue to benefit the Avon Valley's wildlife for generations to come.

“

The Avon Valley Project is a great success. It brings farms large and small together in the name of conservation. Our 20 hectares are now helping to wild the land and we are already seeing a great change, with all manner of creatures and wildflowers appearing thanks to Devon Wildlife Trust.

”

Mary Clark,
Brimridge



Photo: Barn owl © John Hawkins



What's next for the project?

The Avon Valley Project has shown how ten years of targeted effort can reconnect fragmented wildlife habitats and bring back wildlife in abundance. From dormice in hedgerows to bats whizzing through flyways, pollinators buzzing in meadows to birds of prey breeding and thriving, the Avon Valley is reversing nature's decline.

But there is so much more to be done. In the last year enquiries to the project from people seeking advice on managing their land for wildlife have more than doubled. There is a huge appetite for change amidst the alarming climate crisis, and we can significantly grow our Avon Valley network to make an even bigger positive impact.

Over the next five years our goals are to:

- Engage at least 100 more landowners in the Avon Valley area, bringing more land into favourable management for wildlife.
- Engage further with farming communities in areas where there are gaps in wildlife friendly land management, to create nature recovery corridors.
- Support the increasing number of community groups in the Avon Valley who want to transform public spaces into havens for wildlife.
- Diversify existing wildflower meadows to extend their flowering seasons. Plus, provide more support for landowning communities to monitor meadows and the benefits they are bringing for wildlife.
- Work more closely with groups of landowners, enabling them to share their knowledge and to continue to develop the amazing network of support in the Avon Valley.

To achieve this, we need to grow the support for the project to meet increasing demand and make the most of the opportunities to create a wilder landscape across the whole of the Avon Valley.





Can you be part of our vision for a wilder Avon Valley?

The involvement of communities and local landowners and the generosity of local donors have been critical to the success of the Avon Valley Project. There are a number of ways that current and future meadow makers can help us achieve our vision for nature's recovery in the Avon Valley.

Donating to the project so that we can increase support on the ground to meet increasing demand.

- £300 could fund online training, providing expertise on managing land for wildlife or meadow making
- £750 could provide a workshop for landowners, offering practical training and support
- £2,200 could fund surveys at five meadow sites, evidencing the benefits for wildlife
- £5,000 could fund a year's activity to harvest and donate wildflower seed, or fund an advisory programme for ten new landowners, bringing additional land into favourable management for wildlife
- £20,000 and above could help us buy land to support project aims

Raising awareness – continuing to extend our network is vital if we are to expand the area of land being managed for wildlife. Please continue to spread the word, speak to neighbours and other landowners in the Valley and encourage them to get involved.

Involving businesses – if you know a business who could support the Avon Valley Project, please let us know. Businesses could help in a range of ways, from sponsoring a meadow to hosting a training event. We'd love to discuss other ideas.

Sharing machinery, resources or seed – the success of the project to date has been down to the amazing goodwill of people sharing resources. As the project grows, we need to grow the network of machinery sharing and meadow donor sites.

Keeping in touch – please continue to attend our events and share your knowledge with others in the Avon Valley and beyond. Our enthused, inspired and



Photo: Meadows © Rebecca Hoskins



increasingly experienced network of landowners is a huge asset to the Avon Valley.

If you have other thoughts or ideas on the vision for the Avon Valley Project, or how you would like to get involved, please let us know. We would love to hear from you.

With your support for continued, focused effort we can achieve even more for nature's recovery. We will see more wildflowers, pollinators and other wildlife, and protect the special landscape that is the Avon Valley.

Contact **Lynne Kenderdine**
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Devon Wildlife Trust

Tel **07392 865905**

Email **lkenderdine@devonwildlifetrust.org**

Be part of our vision for a wilder Devon

Over the next ten years, Devon Wildlife Trust wants to double the area of wildlife habitat on land and at sea. We want all Devon's soils, rivers, farmland and urban areas to be managed sustainably, so the air we breathe, the water we drink and the fields and streets we walk through make us healthier and happier. And we want at least a quarter of the population to be actively engaged in wildlife.

Our vision for a wilder Devon is ambitious and we cannot achieve it alone. We need the help of our members, volunteers, partners, funders...our community of supporters and everyone who cares about wildlife.

To find out more about the wider work of the Trust you can contact us at:

Tel 01392 254439

Email contactus@devonwildlifetrust.org

Write to us at Devon Wildlife Trust, Cricklepit Mill, Commercial Road, Exeter, EX2 4AB

We're part of something bigger

Devon Wildlife Trust is part of The Wildlife Trusts - a national grassroots movement of independent charities made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds, with a mission to restore at least a third of the UK's land and seas for nature by 2030. We believe everyone, everywhere, should have access to nature and the joy and health benefits it brings.

No matter where you are in the UK, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people about nature and standing up for wildlife and wild places. Each Wildlife Trust is an independent charity formed and led by local people working together to make a positive difference to wildlife, climate and future generations. Together we have more than 850,000 members, over 42,500 volunteers, 2,000 staff and 600 trustees.



Photo: Yellow rattle and ringlet butterfly © Ross Hoddinott