

14-10-21 Blyth River Project

The subject for our October talk at the Blyth Valley and Southwold wildlife group was the Blyth River Project, with speaker Alice Wickman. Alice, from the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, is the project manager, and she has been working with the Environment Agency to improve water quality and bio diversity in the whole Blyth catchment area, which suffers from agricultural run-off, silting, overgrowth, and changes over time in the direction of water courses.

Alice put together teams of volunteers to tackle problems on several fronts. Training was given, and the work began. Covid slowed things down, but work continued throughout. River wardens surveyed their chosen stretch monthly, recording habitat welfare. Invasive species, notably Himalayan Balsam, have become so successful that native plants have been crowded out. Balsam dies back in winter, leaving the banks open to erosion. Groups of volunteers worked hard to pull and cut the balsam in the upper reaches, where the effects are best felt overall. Others trained to look for water vole activity, and the good news is that these attractive but elusive creatures are doing well in our region. Riverfly monitoring has proved particularly useful as an indicator of water quality.

Some activities seem counterproductive at first sight: logs and leaky log jams fixed in the water encourage faster flow beneath and through them, scouring the stream beds, and allowing native plants to grow at the shallower sides. This creates a variety of habitats for fish to spawn, and insects to feed. The planting of individual trees along the edges will give shelter and shade to water insects and fish, their roots helping to stabilise the banks. Elsewhere, small riverside woodlands will encourage habitat diversity.

Alice continues to advise farmers and landowners who wish to help with this process, and their active participation has been very helpful.

The initial two year project has been extended twice, and Alice, plus the trusty volunteers, will plant a further 200 native trees over the winter. It is hoped that a role for volunteering in this area will continue.

It was a lively and interesting talk, and of particular interest as the Blyth is so local to us.

Our next meeting is at 7.30pm on Thursday, November 11, at the Southwold Arts Centre, IP18 9EQ. The cost is £3 to include refreshments. Under 25's free. All are welcome.

Darren Tansley will be speaking about "Taming the Flood – a beaver's tale".

Penny Mansfield. Contact us at swtblythvalley@gmail.com