

OTTERHEAD ESTATE TRUST

Frog Spawn

Otterhead Estate is fortunately placed fairly centrally in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Landscape as it is now known and has a good population of Common Frogs *Rana temporaria*. I am a member of the Somerset Wildlife Trusts Reptile and Amphibian Group and have had a lifelong interest in these animals. I have been monitoring the frog spawn as well as other Amphibians and Reptiles on the Estate for a number of years. My observations have two main objectives. One is to monitor the population densities and be aware of any variation, especially with environmental changes such as climate, habitat and water quality. The quantity of spawn in the leat is reduced this year, but this might just be a natural event or the frogs may have moved to a different location which I have not observed. The populations in the woods around Royston Lake are still high and seem to be increasing.

My other interest is in Phenology, the study of the timing of recurring natural events in relation to climate. Growing up in Wellington not too far from the Blackdowns in the sixties the first frog spawn was usually on or around the 14th February, whilst the first in 2024 at Otterhead was 30th January. These results are fairly constant and correspond with results from the UK Phenology Network and I am hoping to continue with this work. I am also interested in recording any other Amphibians and Reptiles on the site, and whilst it was disappointing to see so many trees removed recently due to disease, this is a great boon to sun loving

Reptiles as well as others such as Grasshoppers and Butterflies, and I look forward to the warmer months.

I would be grateful to receive any other sightings of Reptiles or Amphibians any one might make, please e-mail me on john@johnhorseyhorticulture.co.uk with location and any other details you might have. I would like to thank the trustees for allowing me to visit restricted areas in my research.
John Horsey 18 04 25



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Introduction

We hope you've been enjoying some of the benefits of the warm, sunny weather. Certainly plenty of folk have been spending time at Otterhead Lakes and it's good to see families and friends spending time together in the countryside and appreciating what nature has to offer. Sadly some visitors have an unwanted impact: there was the case of a disposable Barbecue tossed into the lake. Others spent time eating and messing about then tossed all their rubbish into a clump of trees. We're grateful to visitors who let us know of the problems and especially those who found time and made the effort to remedy the situations. When you are on site please encourage others to help safeguard the beauty and tranquillity of the place. There are plenty of opportunities to be involved and all help is appreciated.

Current and ongoing works by Wessex Water at the Driveway Bridge and dam.

Following structural investigations and site meetings contractors will be working on site during the school holidays. During that time vehicles will not be permitted over the bridge and at times there will be restrictions on pedestrian access. They hope to finish by the end of August. They are putting in a gate just before the Ash tree on the left after the bridge. They will remove the railings and store them at the Coach House. They will put scaffolding against the wall of the bridge, take down the stone wall, put in reinforcement and rebuild the wall. Then they will put in Post and Rail fencing. They will use the Quarry site for lorries to turn and will store some materials on the House site on the left side as you go in the gate. Tarp or matting will be put underneath. The culvert with the leat water will be avoided.

The Boot scrub at the car park was replaced by the team at WW. Our local volunteer Tim checks it regularly.

Work parties

Work parties:-held on the first Saturday of the month (weather permitting)

Saturday 1st March Only 5 of us for this morning's work party. We were pleased it turned out warm and sunny after a very heavy frost. The time was spent mostly cutting and clearing Laurel from the side of the path along the House leat. It was piled away from it and some tidying up was done.

Tim wielded his trusty little chainsaw and cut the branch ends off the tree that had fallen across the leat and path near the "No entry" gate. The end of it is in the leat but wouldn't seem to present a problem. He and John cleared much of the brash, placing it alongside the DWT Beaver fence, possibly acting as a deterrent. 2 obstructions were cleared from LH side up from the stone bridge and some Laurel was cut at the RH side, brash placed behind a fallen tree. That area is very wet.

Saturday 5th April Lovely morning over at Otterhead for the work party but only 6 of us. Tim removed the broken part of the Boot scrub, now "out of order" and removed to repair.

The task of cutting and clearing some of the vegetation at the "Heritage" railings got done - it had been on John's list for quite a while. Some of the area behind the Walled garden was strimmed and some clumps of bramble were clipped back from the side of the path.

Saturday 3rd May (= Bank holiday w/e and a clash of events: no work party). May was the time to be enjoying the beauty of the site: it's wildflowers and associated pollinators, cultivar rhododendrons and specimen shrubs. Narcissi, bluebells and primroses had been replaced by campion, foxgloves, buttercups.



Clearing round Heritage railings



Bee and champion



Foxgloves

Saturday 14th June postponed from 7th because of Amber Weather warning. Only 4 of us for the work party today. Tim did a lot of strimming, raking and clearing at the corner where the interpretation panel is at the end of the Main Drive. Surprising how overgrown it had become and Docks were trying to take over. Some of the large Docks at the lower end of the Main Drive were removed. Some of the vegetation was clipped back at the car park towards the ramp: a bit tidier. Spent most of the time at the base of the slope next to the Main Drive, removing some of the Docks before they seed, some of the Willow herb, raspberry canes and cut back some bramble that was coming on to the drive and heritage steps. Nettles at the base of the steps were host to a large number of ladybirds.....why was that? A dumpy bag of unwanted vegetation: mostly docks was removed.

WW have straightened the orange net barrier by the Cascade etc and attached it to wooden posts. Looks better. We were lucky with the weather: just a 20 second shower! Warm & sultry most of the time.

Why not join us in the "Green Gym"? There is always plenty to do. Next work parties 12th July, 2nd August.



Ladybird

Wildlife Sightings/Nature Notes

Otterhead Bird Walk was offered to “Friends” of Otterhead. On the 12th of April local naturalist, Jim Scott, led a small group of enthusiasts on a walk around the reserve to share his experience of the wildlife in the area. The focus was mainly on the birds, where to spot them and tips on recognising their calls. April is a busy time in the woods with the return of migrants such as Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs and Willow warblers as well as a good number of the regular residents including Goldcrest. The group also looked for signs of beavers activity particularly around Royston Lake. The weather was kind to us and everyone enjoyed the morning. Jim Scott managed to get this photo of three male *Eristalis nemorum* hoverflies over the female.”



Blackcap



Eristalis nemorum hoverflies

Forest School

We are grateful for the on-going help that the Forest School team provide. They keep a watchful eye on site in term time: daily checking beaver dams at the leat, removing any litter, dealing with fallen branches on paths, strimming the main paths, putting car park logs back in place etc.

Plea for volunteers

Can you or someone you know help us out by **Volunteering**? Do you visit regularly and could contribute an article to our next Newsletter (to be compiled end Aug/early Sept)?

Are you interested in the Otterhead Estate: History, Environment, Maintenance, “whatever”? The 3 Trustees would welcome others to join in to assist, possibly as a Trustee or to help run the “Friends of Otterhead” or **have you an interest & some experience in Fund-raising?**

If you think you could help, please get in touch by email at info@otterheadestate.org

Next Management meeting is scheduled for:
- 2.15pm Thurs 17th July 2025

Beavers

There continues to be a lot of Beaver activity on site and our team of volunteer monitors and Forest School staff are kept busy checking their impacts mainly on the leat as that affects the running of the hydro system.

A meeting arranged by Devon Wildlife Trust took place on site 18th June pm, for representatives of Wildlife Trusts, Natural England and Environment Agency staff from across the country not specifically for Otterhead Lakes options, but for the attendees to share learning and discuss this site in relation to others in Devon. Wessex Water and Joe of Forest School were in attendance.

OET are in the process of arranging a further meeting specifically for the impacts at Otterhead.

Forthcoming Projects

Tree surveys are on-going and with signs of Ash Dieback more felling may need to be done. The Meadows will be cut but probably not until end of August because access is needed for the tractor. Other projects have been identified but depend on the success of grant applications.

Shifting Waterscapes

For those of you who have been wondering why on recent occasions you may have heard a flute or ukelele being played at Otterhead or seen people being interviewed or meeting in small group discussions.....it's early days in an arts project in conjunction with BHNational Landscape. More detail in future newsletters.

Friends of Otterhead

The Otterhead Estate Trust is a not-for-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers.

Whether you use the reserve regularly or appreciate it from afar (!) we would love to have more "Friends of" members.

It costs £10 a year. The money helps with the upkeep of the site and also means you have a say in how the site is run and can attend members only events. Corporate membership is available at £25. You can join up directly via our website

www.otterheadestate.org. If you'd like to know more about the Friends group, please contact info@otterheadestate.org

Fund Raising

No broken or unwanted jewellery has been forthcoming for our appeal. Ideas are needed as core costs amount to £2600 a year so any management actions and improvement projects have to rely on grants and volunteer inputs. Looking ahead

Buckland St Mary Community Coffee morning on Saturday 11th October 2025.

Of course, **we welcome all donations and "Friends of" membership subscriptions.**

We would appreciate donations from visitors: Use the QR code on the notice board and interpretation panels to connect to the Otterhead website "Donate".



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