

Chair's Report for FoLV AGM 2026

Judy Webb, 06.09.2026, Bullingdon Community Centre

Wildlife Success News

This time last year we were in a drought and we are in a drought again, yet the valley fen survives. If I think back 10 years to 2016 we had the boardwalk, but it snaked its way through a tunnel of reed that was intimidating and boring. Now the valley is open, sunny and the boardwalk takes you through a valley of flowers, this year the early marsh, common spotted and marsh helleborine orchid numbers have been better than ever and currently there are 1000s of our logo flower the **Grass of Parnassus** dotting the western slopes where there was just reed in the past. This is now the place to come to see abundant bees and butterflies. How has this been achieved?

It's volunteer work that keeps the valley biodiverse and looking beautiful all to simulate the **natural light grazing** by stock of cows or horses the fen habitat needs and is now impossible.

Volunteer Work in the Valley

Regular **Wednesday morning work parties** have carried on all year (22 people on my list, average 8 per week turn up-). We meet weekly except Christmas and New Year. (Most very local folk who walk and cycle to the site). This amount of work is really transforming the valley.

This year we welcomed new volunteers including a corporate group for a day from **Amey Ltd**. We had help from the **Oxford Conservation Volunteers** for a big sessions raking up cuttings and controlling scrub in the **south fen**. Last October we also had a group of 6 students from the **Oxford University Conservation Society** for one session.

Just recently a group of four younger folk who have started up an **early evening weekly working group** which will help until they run out of daylight.

Mostly in the North Fen, an average of 1000 volunteer work hours a year is delivered by FOLV managing this council site. Jobs are scything, raking, scrub chopping, digging out problem plants, collecting fly tipping and rubbish, making signs, seed collecting and spreading plus lots of bank defence work and dry fen areas being re- wetted under the leadership of Rod d'Ayala – big thanks to him as he often works long hours after all others have gone home. Major aim is to try and combat erosion from run-off from road drains and save clean spring water for re-wetting peat and keeping fen plants happy.

Keeping our **peat reserve wet** and carbon safely stored safe is a very important part of volunteer work.

Big thanks due to all practical volunteers who turn out regularly in cold, rain and heat and are kind enough to do whatever I ask of them.

We continue to receive many appreciative comments on a Wednesday from passers-by as we volunteers work in the valley.

Rare Plant propagation - Volunteers who cannot help practically have **grown on rare plants (e.g. cotton grasses) from our own seed** and we plant them out in the valley or dryland species at Rock Edge to increase populations.

We had the help of **Oxford City Council staff** in some autumn machine cutting of the south fen and provision of wood and lots of hazel poles for the bank defence work.

Signs

All our small signs are frequently removed and it is a big job to keep replacing them, one volunteer **John Marjot** does this. He replaces them when he can, including small signs at Rock Edge. He is working on better signs for this site.

Climate Change in the Lye Valley - is now really having an impact

Heavy rain storms last winter increased run-off erosion and made volunteer work difficult, but abundant water did fill up rock aquifers that feed the springs.

Heat over 30 degrees in the last months have limited volunteer sessions, some have been cancelled. Recently we have had to start early at 8 and finish early in the day before peak heat. **We have just had the driest July since records began in 1836.**

The valley is green when all around like Rock Edge are brown grass, because the most of the valley springs have still run from the underground water store in rock. However all the lower ponds have dried out affecting wetland wildlife like dragonflies and no rain in forecast currently.

Dry conditions have led to Fires or Arson

(Fires used to be common in the valley until the group started in 2013 and started our work which **reduced dead reed** near the footpaths.)

Last year in late July in a drought we lost **3m of plastic boardwalk** to deliberate arson. This year in April a hot and dry few weeks meant **three fires on dry cuttings and a big crack willow was burnt**. Two weeks ago someone was disturbed setting fire to some raked cuttings. Just two days ago a 20m section of the grass at the Slade entrance was burnt. Moving cuttings immediately well away from paths is a priority.

Volunteer Tools storage

There has been much committee discussion on this and we are still trying to locate a safe and accessible position for a tool store. Vandalism is a big risk here.

Talks, walks and events (outreach)

Last September I gave a talk to members of the **Oxford Preservation Trust** on '**Spring fens in Headington**', mentioning Lye Valley and the Trust's tiny spring fen at **Larkins Lane**.

Committee members attended the **Headington Festival in June** with a stand which generated good public interest.

In June the group had a stall showing off features of the Lye Valley fen at the **Oxford Festival of Nature on 27th June at the University Natural History Museum**.

Awards

Last September we were nominated by a volunteer for an **Ecology and Biodiversity** award in the **Oxford 2025 Climate Awards**, Whilst we were not the winner of this section we did well and were pleased to get through to be one of the final three nominees.

Fund raising/Grant Funding/projects

We thank our local councillor last year **Judith Harley** for a second ward budget grant for **new tools** for the volunteer group.

Freshwater Habitats Trust have applied for further grant-funding to help the whole length of Lye and Boundary Brooks right down to the Thames to reduce run-off, flooding and erosion and restore fen areas wherever possible. Included are actions in the catchment area to increase water entering the soil to feed springs (rain gardens, soakaways) This 3-year project is just starting, **£30,000** for this year. We of course are delighted and will work with the Trust on plans.

We are in the process of a grant applications for **extensions to the boardwalk**, to cover areas that were a quagmire from springs in the wet years 2023-24. Progress has slowed as we are having to re-think previous proposals due to the recent arson events and risks to additional boardwalk lengths and the news that one possible grant funder no longer funds plastic boardwalks. Volunteer Martin Crane is dealing with this.

Our Research on the valley wildlife

We continue to monitor and record all wildlife in the valley including amphibians and reptiles. There continue to be thriving populations of frogs, toads, slow worms, common lizards and grass snakes and the rare Brown Hairstreak butterflies.

Insect and Spider expert **Steve Gregory** has reported on his studies last summer and we are grateful to Headington Action for a grant-funding his visits and report. **The biodiversity of small invertebrates living in the valley**

continues to be astounding Over 400 invertebrate species found so far in one survey, 80 spider species. We had a visit from another expert entomologist specialising in **leafhoppers and bugs** just yesterday.

Educational use of the Valley

University students have benefitted this year from studying the valley.

Brookes University geography undergrad students again visited the site last October to learn **peat coring techniques** with their staff in the North fen. Staff and students returned this April to take cores from the **south fen** for a particular student undergraduate project – calculating carbon, studying lead deposits from the Civil War and radiocarbon dating.

A student from Exeter university has studied the tipped embankment down from the Peat moors field – he also took soil samples from this and from the fen below.

A Student from Southampton University is re-recording the vegetation monitoring squares I set up in the north fen in 2017 to study fen restoration progress and she will return soon to take peat samples for analysis.

In June I took a group of ecologists from a consultancy through the valley teaching them the **finer points of sedge identification from our 17 sedge species.**

Planning- Developments near to the valley

We commented on the **City Local Plan 2042**, opposing loss of green spaces to development, especially within the rain catchment of the valley.

We thank **Stephanie Jenkins for alerts** as to upcoming planning issues.

After achieving some significant changes in the plans, we wait to see the effect the new **Clinical Biomanufacturing Facility (CBF)** being built on the Churchill Hospital site has on water flow to the fen adjacent and on winter flooding of the Footpath 80 along the top of the valley.

The **Warren Crescent** Development (10 houses adjacent to the North Fen has a SUDS infiltration 50m long soakaway/swale that is **still not yet being maintained by the council**. Ground-water testing from boreholes continues, no contamination problems yet.

We **regularly object to any house extensions in the fen catchments**, every loss of a green back garden, however small, makes a difference.

The City council paid for a study and report on the Lye Valley fen's water catchment and sensitivity to development. This is now finished and part of the City's Local Plan documents. A **draft Technical Advisory Note (TAN)**

applying to all developments in the catchment is now in place and should shape developers plans so as to minimise harm to the fens.

The committee could very much do with more help from anyone skilled in planning issues and planning legislation.

Rock Edge (LNR and SSSI)

Apart from general wildflower seeding, the city council has helped our plans by scraping off low-biodiversity turf with diggers in some areas and we have been seeding them for four years now. We are grateful for a grant-fund from a local councillor that has paid for the most recent turf removal.

Previously seeded-scrapes have been very successful. Some grown plug plants have been added. Since 2025 droughts have caused poor seed germination and it is taking two years or flowers to appear, but the scheme is definitely a success. There is now very much better scrub control at Rock Edge from the City Council Thursday volunteer group.

Recently there have been a number of fires set at Rock Edge but prompt action by locals have prevented them from spreading.

Publicity

I'm still writing the **small wildlife newsletters** three times a year. Printed versions are very useful as hand-outs at any events. We now have a **small general information leaflet** on the Valley Wildlife.

Big thanks to **Tony Gillie** for taking wonderful photos of valley wildlife and for running our Social Media **Bluesky** and **Facebook** accounts accessible from the website. Friends of Lye Valley currently have **1000** followers on **Facebook** and **949** followers on **Bluesky**. **A WhatsApp group is just starting up.**

Concluding thanks - Thanks for the support of all committee members in their various roles and to Stephanie Jenkins for running our website which is full of useful information.

We also thank our local **City Councillors** for support and are grateful for the **Parks ODS department of the City Council** for help in site management. I deeply appreciate being able to hold meetings right next to the valley in this lovely community centre.