

The Thames Water Wild Trout Trust Conservation Awards 2013

This annual competition is often hard-fought and the 2013 entries amply lived up to this reputation. This year, three trophies were awarded in the following categories:

- **Professional** (best project carried out by a professional body – often on a comparatively large scale with attendant budgets)
- **Amateur** (best project undertaken by non-professionals in an innovative way – often smaller scale with highly innovative use of limited resources)
- **Partnership** (best project carried out as a partnership between a charity or volunteer group enabled by collaboration in a partnership with other bodies and groups)

Runners-up this year (in no particular order) were the following fascinating range of projects:

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust & Aquascience with their wonderfully forward-thinking restoration of lush marginal flora and fauna of the Itchen Navigation, alongside restoring and enhancing public access and interpretation. Especially noteworthy was the provision for solid future custodianship of a wildlife-rich and publicly-accessible valuable green space.

Galloway Fisheries Trust incorporated mixed limestone and ordinary river gravels and allowed them to be redistributed by natural processes to form spawning beds in High Cree. This innovative work, along with a demanding programme of sampling and measurement, has noted successes in significantly increasing salmonid egg and alevin survival. Human-induced impacts of acid rain have exhausted the soil's capacity to "buffer" low pH flushes in this watercourse. The project takes a considered approach to ameliorating acid-flush impacts on aquatic communities – and quantifying the results.

Environment Agency works to improve fish passage (notably sea trout) at a bottleneck of structures on the Cadnam River in Paulton's Park. Tackling four obstructions that are concentrated together in a very short reach of river is intended to open up more than 90% of the catchment for fish. An educational programme (incorporating the life-cycle of sea trout) aimed at the 15,000 schoolchildren who visit the park annually is planned - as is the installation of cameras to relay video of fish passing the structures. Working closely with the Park proved crucial to completing these works.

Lincolnshire Chalk Streams Project shared their Laceby Beck River Corridor management and habitat creation works over around 3 kilometres of river with the judges. This included a section of river within the grounds of a local golf club – and the engagement with its members has been central to the success of works there. As well as canopy management to promote in-stream productivity, the creation of a wetland shelf, ongoing assessments of changes in bat, invertebrate and fish population, a local village-residents' group has been formed to care for the beck in future.

Hillington Fly Fishing Syndicate turned an impounded estate lake back into a flowing section of chalkstream on the River Babingley. In doing so, fish passage has been eased and a transition from

chironomid-based insect life now means there is a greater diversity of fly and plant life that are classically associated with chalk stream habitats.

For the professional category winners – a heroic reinstatement of natural river processes at both Buxted and Spring Meadows sites by **Ouse and Adur Rivers Trust** was recognised. This was achieved by removal of significant structural impoundment and also reinstating a previously-straightened river into its historic, meandering channel. The project also incorporated a strong ethos of pre-project consultation (with responsive adaptations to feedback) and diligent engagement initiatives. Clever cost-controls by rescheduling and redistribution of asset deployment between parallel ongoing projects were also achieved in the face of inhospitable weather conditions during the works. A thorough understanding of river processes, key impacts and winning the support and acceptance from local stakeholders were all crucial factors in this project.

Pickering Fisheries Association fishing club took the amateur project award. They utilised interventions to both surrounding land-use and extensive volunteer-led in-channel works to generate increased variety in the structure of the whole river corridor in the Pickering Beck in North Yorkshire. Noting terrestrial wildflower and butterfly diversity in combination with Riverfly Partnership aquatic invertebrate monitoring and improved angler catches has already demonstrated biological improvements that have resulted from a very large volunteer work effort. Working parties that encouraged attendance by family members of all ages were also a key mechanism for engagement as well as labour. The work also dovetailed with, and contributed to, the efforts of the “slowing the flows” project that is designed to generate floodwater storage upstream of a notorious bridge bottleneck for flooding the town of Pickering. Inventive use of heavy-horses to undertake coniferous forestry management also solved difficulties with vehicular access.

Action for the River Kennet (ARK) took the prize for best partnership project to create the wonderful habitat in Stonebridge Wild River Reserve in Marlborough. Access measures were designed so that public enjoyment of the site did not degrade or destroy the sensitive flora and fauna. The owners of the left bank, St John’s Foundation Trust, offered ARK a peppercorn lease agreement allowing a boardwalk, new hedge and river habitat work to be completed. After initial resistance to conservation works from the previous owner of the right bank, ARK was able to purchase the 15 acre meadow and around 800m of river in partnership with Marlborough Town Council. This allowed significant development of the project. Work was conducted using a volunteer workforce alongside targeted use of contractors for tasks too dangerous or specialised for amateurs. The site is now maintained by volunteers and has seen improved densities of wild trout as well as providing homes for a wide variety of reptile, amphibian and bird species of special conservation value (such as the rare grasshopper warbler).

The judges Paul Gaskell (WTT) and Jenny Mant (River Restoration Centre) would like to reiterate their sincere thanks to all applicants for finding the time to talk to us and having the patience to grapple with Skype. The sheer enthusiasm and drive of all the individuals involved was really inspiring. We look forward to hearing next year's 'tales from the riverbank'. So start thinking about your entries now.