

Hi everyone,

We wanted to provide a brief update to you all on activities from the Otter Valley Association. This email comprises two parts – a quick one-page overview, and then more detailed information on each point for reading at your leisure. We appreciate that a lot of information is being shared and you may not read every item in detail, but we hope that this shows the growing momentum of activities and programs that the OVA is undertaking. If you would like to help and volunteer for any of these it would be lovely to speak with you. Do let us know.



Our printed newsletter was delivered to all members in January. We would like to apologise for the cover-page curling that some of our members have noticed. We have taken this up with the printer and hope to have it sorted for the next issue. Please continue to provide feedback and contact us if you did not receive it.

This email update contains the following items:

### [Help: Looking for volunteers - Village Reps and Events](#)

- We are still looking for additional volunteers to help the OVA. Specifically, village reps plus an event's organizer to help us arrange our Spring event. Can you help?

### [OVA Talks:](#)

- We have one talk left in our winter series – local naturalist David R. White will be talking about local wildlife on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> March. Meanwhile we were treated to a delightful talk on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> February when Stephen Powles, naturalist and chairman of the mid-devon Nature society shared his love of Otters with the talk “Otters – coming to a river near you”. Read the talk report below.

### [OVA Walks:](#)

- We have a great line-up of weekly walks. Details below – everyone is welcome. We are also well into the plans and publication of a brand new “14 walks across the Otter Valley” booklet. Read more below.

### [OVA Built Environment:](#)

- Two major plans are out for public consultation. Please make your views clear for the East Devon Local Plan, and the East Devon National Landscape Plan. Also checkout comments made by the OVA for local planning applications.

### [OVA Water Quality Group:](#)

- We have agreed the name “Otter River Catchment Action” or “ORCA” as our campaign name. Thankyou to all the 40+ volunteers who have signed up to help with the water testing program. We are busy sorting the testing program, purchasing relevant equipment and discussing engagements with South West Water and the farming community. Read more on this important initiative below.

### [OVA Flora, Fauna & Fungi Group:](#)

- We are continuing to document the local flora, fauna and fungi of the Otter Valley on the OVA web. We are looking to build out a new children's section on the web and working with local schools to showcase the variety of wildlife on our doorstep. Read more about this important initiative below. PLUS a request from the Devon Wildlife Trust concerning the Great Crested Newt.

### [OVA History Update:](#)

- Devon in the 1920's - the role of village halls
- Blue Plaque ceremonies coming to a street near you!

### [OVA Social media update:](#)

- Our Facebook group continues to grow. We now have over 880 members. Here you will find regular updates from the OVA, as well as amazing photographs, village updates and community programs across the valley. Please do login to Facebook and engage, or simply view what is going on.

==== End of Email Summary (February 2025) ====

## 1. Help: Looking for Volunteers - Village Reps & Events

Sadly Mr. Bob Wiltshire will be stepping down from his role as the Budleigh town rep. We are massively indebted to Bob for his many years of positivity, engagement and support – both as a rep but also as a past chairman. Thankyou Bob for everything you have done – you are amazing, and we wish you and Maureen best wishes for your post-OVA executive committee life!

We are looking for additional volunteers to help the OVA. Specifically, four village reps, an Events organizer to help us arrange our spring event, and a Natural Environment co-ordinator. Can you help?

Here are our current village representatives:

- Budleigh Salterton: **(position open for a new volunteer)**
- East Budleigh: Olly Watts (07837 861354)
- Colaton Raleigh: Michaela Manning (07718 287480)
- Otterton: Dee Woods (01395 568822 ) and Geoff Porter (01395 567055)
- Newton Poppleford: **(position open for a new volunteer)**
- Tipton St John **(position open for a new volunteer)**
- Ottery St. Mary **(position open for a new volunteer)**

## 2. OVA Talks:

We have now completed all but one of our winter talks. Thankyou everyone for being so supportive – we have enjoyed full houses regularly! Our next talk returns to the Otter valley on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> March when we host David R. White, local naturalist, who will be looking into the wildlife that we can see across the Otter Valley.

You can find full details of all the talks here: <https://www.ova.org.uk/ova-diary/category/talks>

### OVA Talk Report 1: Otters – coming to a river near you



The Otter Valley Association (OVA) were delighted to welcome Stephen Powles, naturalist and chairman of the Mid Devon Wildlife group, to an OVA talk at the Peter Hall.

In front of a packed audience, Stephen gave a wonderful presentation about Otters. He shared personal insights and amazing videos of Otters near his home (including a video from the BBC ONE Show) covering information about their biology, behaviour and habitats. Did you know for example, that while at the average human has about 100,000 hairs on their head, and Otter has 50,000 hairs in one square cm of their body!

However, there was also a very serious side to his talk - highlighting the drop and then resurgence of Otter numbers across the UK - particularly in the South West and Wales.

A big take-away for me is the role that we can all play in helping protect our rivers and improving the natural ecology.

We all know that our sewage infrastructure is creaking and leaking - so we must be very careful about what we flush down the toilets! We should also be very careful about other issues - such as how we manage our own pets. Did you know, for example, that giving your pet dogs anti-flea medicine can cause significant havoc to wildlife as it leaks into the river ecosystem? It is a staggeringly small amount that can soften the eggs of bird-life - thereby reducing their ability to breed and so reducing numbers over time, while not killing them outright.

Thankyou Stephen for an interesting and insightful talk. Our next talk is on the 26th March when naturalist David White will be talking about the wildlife across the Otter Valley.

You can see more from Stephen at his website [ [here](#) ].

You can also visit the Mid Devon Wildlife group [ [here](#) ].

You can read about the issues of dog-flea treatments in this recent BBC article [ [here](#) ].

### 3. OVA Walks Update: Weekly walks

We have some incredible walks scheduled through to the end of April. Why not come out and enjoy the scenery, meet friends and learn about our local surroundings? Everyone is welcome.

Please always check the OVA website for last minute updates, cancellations or changes – one can never be sure what weather awaits us next week, let alone next month!

- **Tues 04 March: 'Sidmouth Ring east (anti-clockwise)' – 10.15am – 7 miles. 3.5 hrs.**
- **Tues 10 March: 'Avocet Line Amble' – 10;15am – 5.5 miles, 2.5 hrs.**
- **Wed 19 March: 'Exmouth Circular' - 10.00am - approx. 7 miles. 3 - 3.5 hrs.**
- **Thur 27 March: 'In Sir Walter's footsteps' – 10.00am – 6 miles. 3.5 hrs.**
- **Tues 08 April: 'Otterton - Colaton - Yettington Circuit' – 10.00am – 9 miles. 5 hrs.**
- **Thur 10 April: 'A historical stroll around Newton Poppleford' – 10.00am – 1.5 miles. 2 hrs.**
- **Tues 15 April: 'A Walk Around Commons and Plantations' – 10.00am – 8.5 miles. 4.5 hrs.**
- **Tues 22 April: 'Otter to Sea' – 10.00am – 5.5 miles. 3 hrs.**
- **Sat 26 April: 'Knowle to Bystock Figure of 8' - time and details to be confirmed nearer the time (check OVA website).**
- **Tues 29 April: 'Belstone Cleave and some moor'– 10.00am – 8miles. 5 hrs (Booking required)**

We have been approached by a number of people asking if we do shorter walks, or more nature walks. To cater for this, we have been talking to the team at Seachange who offer regular shorter walks. You can find out more information about Seachange walks on their web [ [here](#) ].

We also work very closely with the team over at Pebblebed Heaths. They also do regular ranger walks. Again, you can find more information about their walks on their web [ [here](#) ].

### 4. OVA Built Environment

The constitution of the Otter Valley Association is to help support and protect the Lower Otter Valley. One of the focus areas we use to contribute to this is what is called "the Built Environment". This relates to contributing to both strategic as well as local plans across the parishes within the Otter Valley area. You can find a copy of all comments made by the OVA towards both strategic and local planning applications on the OVA web [ [here](#) ].

There are some very significant plans out for consultation at the moment and we would encourage everyone to spend a few minutes to review these and determine if you want to make comment:

#### East Devon Local Plan:

EDDC have advised that consultation on the East Devon Local Plan: Publication Plan (Regulation 19) is now live. Consultation closes at 9:00am on Monday 31 March 2025 and comments should be submitted by the date/time. East Devon District Council is intending to submit the East Devon Local Plan to the Secretary of State in Autumn 2025 for examination.

The East Devon Local Plan is the local plan for land within the East Devon District Council administrative boundary for the period to 2042, though noting policy reference is made to development beyond this date. The Local Plan allocates sites for development for new homes, employment and other uses and contains policies for the determination of planning applications.

- For more information on this current stage of plan making and to find out how to make comments or submit representations see: <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/.../regulation-19-local-plan.../>
- EDDC particularly encourage representations to be submitted through their online consultation portal: <https://eastdevonlocalplanreg19.commonplace.is>

- You can find out more about the new local plan in general by visiting this page: <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/.../emerging-local-plan-2020-2042/>

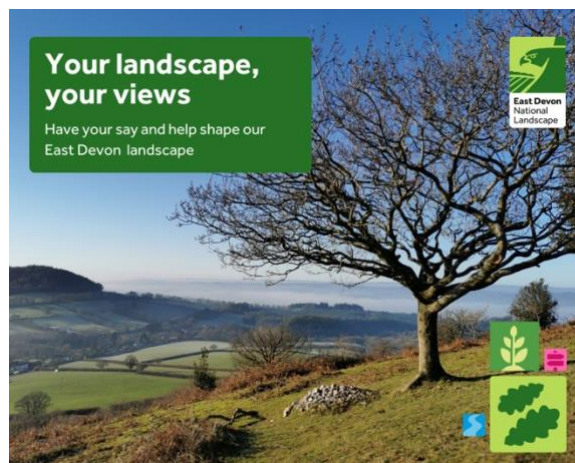
Here, amongst other matters, you will find links to background report and evidence papers and links to past stages of plan making.

## East Devon National Landscape (EDNL):

The Former AONB (which most people were familiar with) last year became the EDNL with mostly new staff. They have spent the time since preparing their Management Plan, in consultation with those in the partnership, which includes the OVA, and have now produced their draft for publication.

This plan is designed to help protect nature, tackle climate change, improve public access, and celebrate our heritage.

Everyone has the opportunity to comment on these plans, to share what you love about this landscape, what you think needs protecting, and how we can continue to support nature, heritage, and access for everyone. To do so, use this [ [link](#) ].



## 5. OVA Water Quality Group Update

The water quality group has now been meeting since July 2024, and we have been focussing on how we can improve the poor quality of the river Otter. Our overall aim is that the middle and lower areas of the Otter move from poor ecological status to moderate or good.

Our focus covers several areas

- Testing – we need robust data to demonstrate where the main problems are occurring and their impact
  - Citizen science testing - testing 12 key areas along the Otter every 2 weeks, using 4 teams of testers. We had a very successful volunteer evening, and we have over 30 volunteers signed up for this. We have bought 1 testing kit and are looking for additional funding to purchase a further 6 kits, and the reagents. We are co-ordinating with the Pebblebed Heaths team who plan to test the brooks running off the heath as well. We ran a further trial on the lower 5 testing sites on the 27<sup>th</sup> Feb (having completed the upper 7 sites previously) and have been busy updating the full field test instructions and user guide. Our volunteers are being organised into teams and we will soon be arranging our schedule of training and start testing.
  - Sonde measurements – this is continuous water monitoring; we would like to install some sonde particularly above and below the Honiton treatment works - we are currently working to understand the most effective way to do this. Sonde equipment is expensive, so we need to make sure we get the most out of them.
  - Ecological testing – this looks at the numbers of invertebrates in the river and is a good way of examining the impact of poor water quality.
- South West Water (SWW) – We suspect that SWW are major contributors to the water pollution in the lower Otter. We are keen to liaise with them. Haylor Lass (our chairman) is keeping an eye on OFWAT plans. There will be a short talk from the SWW “Upstream Thinking” expert to accompany the OVA AGM on 17<sup>th</sup> June.
- Farming - We know that farming is also a contributor to poor water quality. We are liaising with groups working on upstream thinking projects and partners such as the West-Country Rivers Trust who work with farmers. We need to make more contacts along the catchment particularly in the Honiton and Ottery areas. We need to encourage people to report pollution incidents including those of soil pollution to the EA.
- Communications - We are calling ourselves ORCA – the Otter River Catchment Action. Publicising the issue is a key part of making changes, so we plan to raise awareness on social media and locally along the catchment, including with local councils and our local MPs. We have met with

David Reed MP and have invited Richard Foord MP to join in some water testing! Please do keep an eye on the OVA web for updates and information.

5. We are talking to and building partnerships with others involved in projects along the Otter including West Country Rivers Trust (WRT), Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT), Environment Agency (EA) and those working on the river Tale.
6. Planning – We are conscious that with 1600 homes likely to be built along the catchment we will need to campaign to ensure that sewage facilities are upgraded to cope with the increase in population. We want to ensure this is done before the new homes are built and you can add your comment to the policy document using the link under the Built Environment section (below).

You can find all the latest information on this important initiative, including published articles, on the OVA Web [ [here](#) ].

## 6. OVA Flora, Fauna & Fungi Group Update




### The Natural Environment of the Otter valley

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The Otter Valley Association has a working group focused on showcasing and protecting the Natural Environment of the Otter valley. The goal of the group is to protect and enhance the wildlife in the lower Otter area. You can see information about this group by scrolling to the bottom of this page.

Click on any of the images to drill into an overview of the flora, fauna & fungi that has been observed in the Otter Valley. Enjoy local photographs taken by the local community showcasing amazing example.



**Please note that this is work in progress and some areas are still under construction.**

					
Birds	Insects & other Invertebrates	Mammals	Fish, Amphibians & Reptiles	Fungi	Plants

**Published Articles:**

				
The Importance of Hedgerows	Protecting Pollinators	Did you know? All about Aphids	Observations of a Moorhen family	An intriguing story about Pheasants

**Wildlife in your Garden:**

		
Birdlife seen at, or near, gardens	Guide to Bird boxes in your garden	Guide to Bug Hotels in your garden

Are you interested in the environment around us? Are you curious about what flora, fauna or fungi you may see while walking around our villages, countryside or nature reserves? Are you interested in helping to enhance, protect and enjoy the natural environment around us?

If you are, then please do checkout the OVA website - we are building a showcase of our natural environment for everyone to view (see image and link above). Using local photographers and a team of local naturalist volunteers, our goal is to highlight those species that are easily seen across our valley, and those that might be seen with a little more investigation.

This is a "work in progress", so please be aware that some sections have not been completed ... but please do check it out and help us build a wonderful showcase for everyone to use.

We'd like your help! If you have pictures of an unusual plant, a bird, an insect or a fish ... a picture of the landscape vista across the hills or a wonderful sunset ... and you'd like to help build out this site ... we'd love to hear from you -)

Simply send them as an email to "editor@ova.org.uk".

## A Request from the Devon Wildlife Trust

We have been approached by the Devon Wildlife Trust with regard to a project they are running on the Great Crested Newt. Can you help? Do read on ...



### Great Crested Newts: Background Information

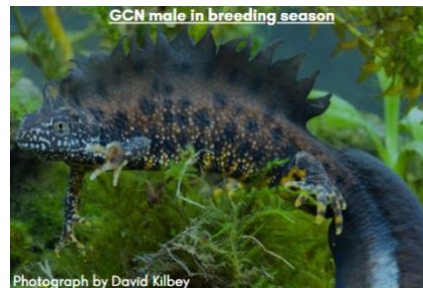


Great Crested Newts (GCN) are found throughout lowland Great Britain, though they are absent from Ireland. These distinctive amphibians can grow up to 17 cm long, making them larger than the more common hedgerows and boggy grassland where they hunt for invertebrates in summer.

They then stay hidden in piles of leaves or logs to lay dormant over winter. They return to the ponds in spring, to mate, preferring ponds with no fish or waterfowl. Males have a very extravagant courtship display at night at the bottom of the pond to woo females by standing on their front legs, arching their back, and waving their tail around.

Key identifying features of GCNs include:

- Warty, dark brown or black skin
- A bright orange underbelly with irregular black splotches (these are unique, it's their version of a thumbprint!)
- Males have a jagged crest along their back, a white stripe on their tail, and a distinct gap between the tail and the crest.
- Ringed toes
- Up to 17cm long, larger than other species



### Why do they need our help in protecting them?

Despite being a European protected species, GCN populations have declined significantly. This is due to the deterioration of suitable terrestrial habitats, often resulting from agricultural intensification, and the loss of suitable breeding ponds. They are on the edge of their range in Devon, and their conservation has been especially difficult because of patchy and inconsistent data. That is why we are working to map their presence and identify key habitats that need protection. By gathering accurate data on GCN populations, we can ensure conservation efforts are properly focused and that these newts are effectively monitored and supported. GCNs are protected under the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, meaning it is an offence to kill, capture, or disturb them, or damage or destroy their habitats.

### eDNA Surveys

Several techniques have been used to detect GCN, including traditional trapping methods and even training sniffer dogs to locate them on land. A newer, non-invasive method called environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling allows us to detect their presence in ponds by analysing water samples for traces of their genetic material. This is a much simpler, faster approach, and does not require users to have a licence. Last year, with the help of trained volunteers, we conducted multiple eDNA surveys across Devon. This year, we are concentrating on an area near Ottery St Mary, where we have old records.

### How You Can Help

If you think you've spotted a Great Crested Newt, we'd love to hear from you! Your sightings can help us build a more complete picture of their distribution and improve GCN conservation efforts.

- Email Ellie at [eknott@devonwildlifetrust.org](mailto:eknott@devonwildlifetrust.org) with your observations and sighting location. Every piece of information on GCNs helps us protect this amazing species.

### Plastic Free Budleigh:

The OVA attended some recent meetings of the "Plastic Free Budleigh" group. This group is a volunteer group that is working with Budleigh Town Council and local business to help drive an environment that minimises the use of plastic across the community. It is an extremely important ecological initiative that we fully support as the OVA. Within the program, the team are looking for businesses to act as champions, and for associations to act as allies. The OVA will become one of these allies.

If you would like to help, we know that the team are looking for volunteers. Please do contact us at [editor@ova.org.uk](mailto:editor@ova.org.uk), or contact them directly. You can also support their work by following and engaging with them on facebook here [ [link](#) ].

## 7. History: Devon in the 1920's – the role of village halls

### **A request for your help from the Devon History Society:**

The 1920's saw an unprecedented growth in village halls, particularly in rural areas. Diverse in character, they were built in response to the need for communities to commemorate the First World War, facilitate social and recreational activities and more generally to celebrate local life.

Little research has been conducted on the role that village halls played in the development of village life in Devon during the inter-war period. We have, therefore, started to compile a county-wide list of halls built during the 1920's. whilst some information is available about these buildings, details are few and far between.

We are looking for images of village halls that depict any form of celebration, commemoration or other activities during this period. Additionally, we are seeking stories or sources that could shed light on how, why and who built these halls.

We would love to hear from you if you have any information on your local hall, including, for example, its architectural features, the materials used, benefactors, funding or community involvement. The aim, in the first instance, is to compile a visual record for exhibition purposes, and/or include on the Devon History Society website as part of the 1920's Research Collection.

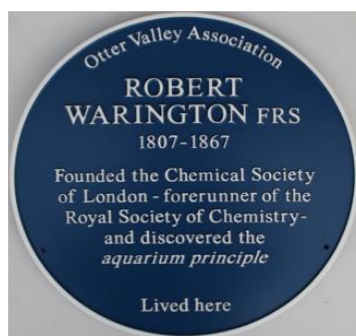
If you have any information about a 1920's hall you would like to share, please contact Sally Sutton at [sally.sutton12@icloud.com](mailto:sally.sutton12@icloud.com).

### **Blue Plaque Ceremonies:**

The Otter Valley Association has been working with Michael Downes, local historian, and the Farlynch museum to investigate and arrange for new blue plaques to be installed in celebration of local historical figures in the valley. You can find a map of current blue plaques on the OVA website [ [here](#) ].

There are two ceremonies taking place in March that everyone is welcome to attend – celebrating two local figures – see below:

- **Robert Warington FRS, Sunday 16 March at Poplar Cottage on Fore Street Hill.**



Mr Warington was born at Poplar Cottage and grew up there. The plaque came about after research carried out by local historians for the Otter Valley Association that Robert Warington (1807 – 1867), a renowned early Chemist lived and died in Budleigh.

Warington was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1864. He was the founder of the Chemical Society, which later became the Royal Society of Chemistry. He was the discoverer of the 'Aquarium Principle'. This is the principle that plants added to water in a container would give off enough oxygen to support animals.

The sign will read 'Budleigh Past and Present, Robert Warington FRS 1807-1867. Founder of the Chemical Society of London, later to become the Royal Society of Chemistry and discovered the 'aquarium principle' lived here.

- **Joan Bannister, Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March at Green Mews near the Public Hall**



You may or may not have heard of Joan Bannister (1908-1991), a legendary figure in Budleigh education who taught in the town for sixty years. Actress Belinda Lee and composer Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, both brought up in the town, were among Miss Bannister's pupils but it was for the love of books that many of them remember her with gratitude.

'She was strict, but instilled in me a love of reading,' recalled one. Another former pupil responded enthusiastically to the news of the blue plaque: 'A fabulous teacher. I learned to read very early and have never stopped since. Huge respect!'

So it's fitting that Sarah Harrison, one of Miss Bannister's former pupils and a bestselling author of more than 25 books, will unveil the blue plaque at midday on Thursday 20 March at Green Mews near the Public Hall. This was the site of the former Church Institute where Miss Bannister first established her school.

Coincidentally, a fortnight later, the film 'Mr Burton' will be released in UK cinemas. The film, starring BAFTA winner Toby Jones tells the story of the English teacher from Port Talbot who took Richard Burton under his wing, having spotted the future actor's talent for drama. Many of Miss Bannister's former pupils view her as a similarly inspirational teacher who encouraged them in a love of learning.

## 8. Social Media Update

We broke the 885 members mark on our Facebook group this past week. 9,869 people have viewed posts in last 28 days (up 11.4% on previous 28 days).

We did a few interesting things on the Facebook group this month - including a POLL of people about talks - the results of which were:

POLL for talks (193 people voted) as follows:

- 36% for Natural History (Eg: Birds, Beavers, Otters ...)
- 27% for History (Eg: Churches, Heritage, Blue Plaques ...)
- 24% for Water quality issues of the Otter (Eg: Farm Management, SWW ...)
- 13% for Built Environment (Eg: Planning, EDDC, ...)

Within this a few interesting comments:

- "Thanks, I ticked everything except built environment. I very much value the work that the OVA does related to this, but don't think that it's appropriate for a talk. Unless it's about how the buildings and street scenes in the area have changed over the years in which case I guess it would come under history. I also think that social history would be an interesting topic – for example, changes in the population who have lived here over the years and not just those who have blue plaques! Hope that helps".
- "I have ticked all the boxes because I find all of interest. Currently it's understandable that beavers, otters & co will be popular because of the impact of LORP. However, I think it's worth bearing in mind that the OVA may have been originally conceived as a crusading organisation by Budleigh residents like sculptor, zoologist and conservationist Anita Jennings who were shocked to see the demolition of many of the town's historic buildings. It's tempting to see the Budleigh area as under threat today because of proposed housing developments which will inevitably change the character of the town. I see that Chrissie Howick from Dalditch and Cllr Melanie Martin are among those who believe that the so-called Exmo\_20 development will impact Budleigh as much if not more than Exmouth. Details in this article of 5 February 2025 <https://www.exmouthjournal.co.uk/.../24912889.exmouth.../> So there may well be a place for OVA talks on the subject of planning issues, perhaps even where two sides of the argument are given by opposing speakers at the events".

A few notable posts include (most views):

- Promoting a ranger walk (Chris Boorman - 2,553 views, 5 likes, 3 comments)
- Natural Environment group update (Chris Boorman - 1,955 views, 6 likes, 1 comment)
- Otter Brook overflowing following downpour (Geoff Porter - 1,539 views, 22 likes, 11 comments)
- Water Quality group meeting with MP David Reed (Peter Williams, 1,267 views, 11 likes, 2 comments)
- Budleigh Bay in the storms (Mo Sandford - 1,060 views, 26 likes, 2 comments)



- Otterton Brook water issues (Geoff Porter - 681 views, 9 likes, 4 comments)

Most likes:

- Recent wildlife sightings (David R. White - 495 views, 42 likes, 8 comments)
- Nature photos from reserve (Karl Giles (434 views, 39 likes, 4 comments)
- Recent wildlife sightings (David R. White - 536 views, 35 likes, 6 comments)
- Reaching 850 supporters on Facebook (Chris Boorman - 392 views, 31 likes, 0 comments)
- Barn Owl photos (Paul Jenkins - 346 views, 31 likes, 0 comments)

**==== End of Email Update (February 2025) ====**