Adders have a bad reputation being the UK’s only venomous snake, but they are beautiful and very shy creatures; much happier to turn tail and hide, unless you are a vole or a mouse! They can grow to around 90cm and are generally grey/brown with a distinctive dark zigzag pattern down the back. They are acutely sensitive to noise and vibration and for that reason they are seldom seen. Adders are in serious decline with populations all over the country dwindling. Sadly the reasons are not completely understood.

Greenham Common is believed to hold the best adder population in Berkshire, which makes the site vitally important to the long-term future of the species in the county. It also makes the common a perfect study site.

We know the general habits and behaviour of adders as they have been studied in the UK for a long time. But interestingly we still know little about how they actually live in the spaces available to them on Greenham Common. For example; where they hibernate (October to Spring), where they give birth, how they move around the site and how they interact with one another. These questions all have implications for our efforts to conserve the species and our management of the common in general.

Tags and Patterns

To try to answer some of these questions, we have attached tiny, but powerful, radio transmitters to the backs of a number of snakes. We will use the radio transmissions to track and record their movements between now and when they return to their hibernation sites in the autumn. An adder expert has helped us to set up the project and carefully tag the snakes so that we don’t affect their ability to hunt or mate. The tags are shed when the snake out-grows its skin and “sloughs” it off. We must then attempt to recatch the snake and attach a new tag. Using the unique pattern of markings upon the snake’s head we make sure that we attach the transmitter to the right animal.

The information will be used to generate maps of where the snakes travelled throughout the summer. These maps can then be used to direct our management of the adders’ preferred habitat and make sure we do not negatively impact very important hibernation locations. Also it is important for populations of adders to be able to integrate otherwise detrimental inbreeding may occur.

A Bright Future?

Information is key to safeguarding this intriguing animal and maintaining Greenham Common as a stronghold into the future.

Tags and Patterns

To try to answer some of these questions, we have attached tiny, but powerful, radio transmitters to the backs of a number of snakes. We will use the radio transmissions to track and record their movements between now and when they return to their hibernation sites in the autumn. An adder expert has helped us to set up the project and carefully tag the snakes so that we don’t affect their ability to hunt or mate. The tags are shed when the snake out-grows its skin and “sloughs” it off. We must then attempt to recatch the snake and attach a new tag. Using the unique pattern of markings upon the snake’s head we make sure that we attach the transmitter to the right animal.

The information will be used to generate maps of where the snakes travelled throughout the summer. These maps can then be used to direct our management of the adders’ preferred habitat and make sure we do not negatively impact very important hibernation locations. Also it is important for populations of adders to be able to integrate otherwise detrimental inbreeding may occur.

A Bright Future?

Information is key to safeguarding this intriguing animal and maintaining Greenham Common as a stronghold into the future.

Fact File:

**Latin Name:** Vipera berus berus

- Size up to 90cm, females are longer than males
- Venomous, rarely dangerous and most bites are caused when trying to pick the snake up
- Females: Pale brown to gingery-red with dark brown zigzag along back
- Males: Lighter, grey to beige with a black zigzag along back
- Melanistic (black) adders are common
- Preferred habitat is heathland and thick scrub
- Food: Small rodents, frogs and newts
- Mate in May, females give birth to between 5 and 25 live young in August/September
- Protected by law in the UK
Who is BBOWT?
The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) is one of 47 Wildlife Trusts working across the UK to achieve the shared aim of securing a better future for wildlife. For over 50 years we have worked with local people to make Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire richer in wildlife.

BBOWT currently has around 54,000 members and more than 1,300 active volunteers. We do not receive any core governmental funding.

Since 6th January 2014 BBOWT has been managing nine reserves which includes Greenham and Crookham Commons and the Nature Discovery Centre, on behalf of West Berkshire Council (WBC). We had already been working in partnership with WBC since 2008 with our Living Landscape Project. Our joint vision for these sites is to deliver increased and lasting benefits for people and wildlife through effective and sustainable site management.

Steve Backshall (right) is a British naturalist, writer and television presenter. He took on the role of President of BBOWT because of his passion for local wildlife.

Just some of the people looking after Greenham and Crookham Commons for you!

James Stevenson
Access Project Officer

Adrian Wallington
Countryside Ranger

Liz Fricker
Reserves Officer

Elaine Ingram
Assistant Countryside Ranger

Roger Stace
Living Landscape Conservation Officer

This spring saw the start of the annual Breeding Bird Surveys on the Common as part of BBOWT’s West Berkshire Living Landscape monitoring project. An ecologist is undertaking surveys of key bird species including woodlark, lapwing, little ringed plover, nightingale, Dartford warbler and tree pipit. Preliminary indications show the woodlark, Dartford warbler and nightingale have 14, nine and five territories respectively. Skylark and meadow pipit sightings are down so far this year.

Gorse cutting with a large forage harvester continued this year as part of the work to keep the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in good health. Creating a variety of gorse age structures also benefits a variety of other wildlife.

During March/April the annual great crested newt survey within two ponds on the Common was undertaken. This survey aims to record numbers each year to provide a picture of the rise and fall in population. So far numbers are up. This forms part of a broader pond management plan within the required Higher Level Stewardship scheme to improve the ponds and surrounding habitats.

The Exmoor ponies now have a team of volunteer stock-watchers to help inspect and monitor their wellbeing on a daily basis. BBOWT has 14 ponies in total, ten at Snelsmore Common and four at Greenham and Crookham Commons. We are always looking for volunteers to help!

James Stevenson has completed an access audit of Greenham and Crookham Commons to investigate the current accessibility of the site. This includes its physical structures (gates and barriers etc.) and also the information available on the internet and signage upon the site which should aid visitors experience and learning. The report was sent to key stakeholders for consultation and the information gathered will form part of the management planning for the whole site. James’s early work can already been seen with new welcome signs at the car parks, entrances and on Bury’s Bank road.

Four nature reserves across West Berkshire are set to benefit from a grant of more than £53,000 from Grundon Waste Management Ltd. The money will go towards improving access to Greenham and Crookham Commons, Snelsmore Common, Hosehill Lake and Padworth Common. Enhancements such as new visitor information boards, waymarking and better access for disabled visitors will help to improve enjoyment and understanding of the sites.
A short history of Greenham and Crookham Common...

1873. Crookham Golf Course opens making it the third 18 hole course in England.

1941. The commons were requisitioned for the building of an airstrip and associated buildings marking the end of the historic Crookham Golf Course.

1947 – 1951. The commons were de-requisitioned, reverting to management by Newbury Borough Council. In 1951 the common became a US airfield.

1980. Defence Secretary announces Greenham Common will house 96 cruise missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

1981. Women’s peace camp starts after four women march from Cardiff to Greenham and chain themselves to the fence demanding a televised debate on nuclear weapons.

1986. The GAMA (Ground launched cruise missile Alert and Maintenance Area) was completed consisting of six bunkers, one of which was designated as rapid response with launch team on standby. Two minutes was the time to launch the missile and 20 minutes to reach Russia. The Russian rocket could reach the UK in four minutes after detection of a UK missile launch.


1997. Greenham Common Trust purchase the airbase for £7 million and sells back 514 hectares to West Berkshire Council for £1.

2002. Greenham and Crookham Act is passed to restore the land as common land open to the public, make provision for the conservation of the natural beauty and restore commoners’ rights. Management of the land is by West Berkshire Council.

2008. BBOWT & WBC sign an agreement to deliver the West Berkshire Living Landscape Project

2014. 6th January, Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust signs an agreement with West Berkshire Council to manage Greenham and Crookham Commons on behalf of the council.

What to see on Greenham...

All three species of heather, Bell, Ling and Cross-leaved heath will be in flower creating a vivid display of pinks and purples. Heather is often out-competed by faster growing species so top soil is scraped away to remove nutrients.

Autumn is approaching and the fruits of the summer are ripening. Blackberries and elderberries (above) are a great energy-rich food source for birds and mammals to prepare for the colder days ahead.

Keep an eye out for the many species of fungi found on the common and woodlands. Please only look so they can be viewed by others and will have a chance to release their spores. Photo - yellow brain fungus on gorse.

Protecting local wildlife  www.bbowt.org.uk  Tel: 01865 775476
The Birds of Our Town and Garden
West Berkshire Museum, Newbury
Wednesday 22 July, 6pm - 7:30pm
An inspiring introductory talk by John Swallow about the wealth of summer birds in our local town and gardens. There is a chance to join John for a short walk after his talk to see what birds can be spotted nearby.
Suitable for years 11+, Price £2.50 per person. Contact the Museum 01635 519562

Pond Dip and Bug Hunt Day
Greenham Common Main Car Park, Bury’s Bank Road
Friday 7 August and Friday 28 August, 10am - 3.30pm. Sessions all day.
Book a session with the ranger and search Greenham & Crookham Commons for bugs. Use a net to look for creatures in our wildlife pond, followed by a bug hunt.
Suitable for all ages. £5 per family. Booking Essential. Contact 01635 874381

Greenham Common Bird Walks
Control Tower, Main Car Park, Bury’s Bank Road
Wednesdays, 12 August, 9 September and 14 October, 10am - 12pm
Join enthusiastic birder Graeme Stewart for one or more of a series of monthly strolls around Greenham Common. Free. Booking not required.

Linking the Landscape: Heathland Haven Walk
Crookham Car Park on Old Thornford Road, SU 499651
Saturday 19 September, 10am - 12:30pm
Take a closer look at some of the plants and animals found in this very special and threatened habitat with walk leader Roger Stace.
Suitable for adults and older children (under 16’s accompanied by an adult). 2 - 3 miles, mostly flat natural surface paths. No dogs please. Contact 01635 500886

Linking the Landscape: Make Hay in the Meadow
Audrey’s Meadow, Rosyth Gardens, RG14 7WD
Saturday 22 August, 10am - 3pm
Come and join us for the annual hay cut at Audrey’s Meadow. Traditional scything demonstration, learn how to identify common meadow plants and a family bug-hunt.
Bring the whole family and have a picnic!
Suitable for all ages. Contact 01635 500886 or wbl@bbowt.org.uk

Greenham and Crookham Conservation Volunteer Group (GCCV)
3rd Sunday of each month - Contact the West Berkshire BBOWT office on 01635 35157 or adrianwallington@bbowt.org.uk

West Berkshire Wednesday Mid-Week Team - Greenham Common
Learn new skills by helping with practical tasks plus wildlife surveying. Contact Roger Stace on 07889 116353 or rogerstace@bbowt.org.uk

Bowdown Wood volunteers - near Newbury
1st Sunday of each month from October to April (1st meet is on 4 October)
Contact Roger Dobbs on 01635 268318 or roger.dobbs@care4free.net

Nature Discovery Centre, Thatcham
Volunteer work party - 2nd Thursday of each month and has a variety of tasks from conservation work and mending fences to clearing paths. Other opportunities available are working in our wildlife garden, helping at events, or helping our visitors discover more about wildlife.
Contact The Nature Discovery Centre 01635 874381 or ndc@bbowt.org.uk