

Restoration and engagement for water voles, wetlands and woodlands

Thames Water: Smarter Water Catchments Programme. River Crane Catchment

Project Description

This project aimed to improve riverside and in-channel habitats for water voles and other nature on the River Crane, through funding from a Section 106 and the Environment Agency. The project also supported the future growth of the small remaining water vole population through a release of captive bred animals in 2024. It was also designed to improve and create off-line habitats in adjacent land (including wet woodland, backwater ditches and ponds), remove non-native invasive plants and achieve a net-benefit in terms of flood storage capacity. The project also aimed to help the local community to understand why the river and woodland is being restored and educating them on the importance of the return of water voles. **Start date:** 03/10/2022 **End date:** 30/09/2023.

Project Costs

Total Costs: £54,980

Thames Water contribution:
£18,980

Public funding:

LBRuT: £16,000

Environment Agency: £20,000

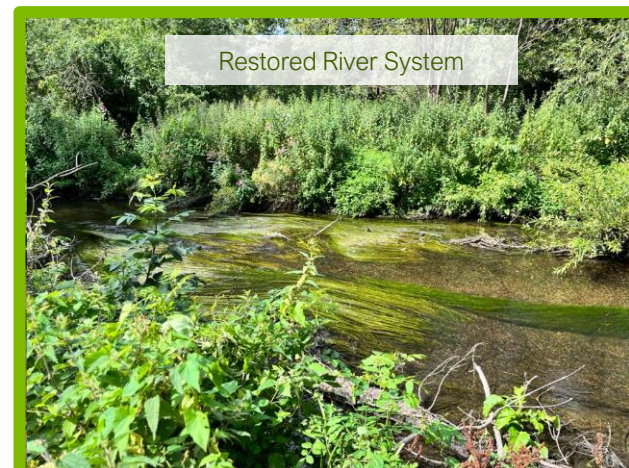
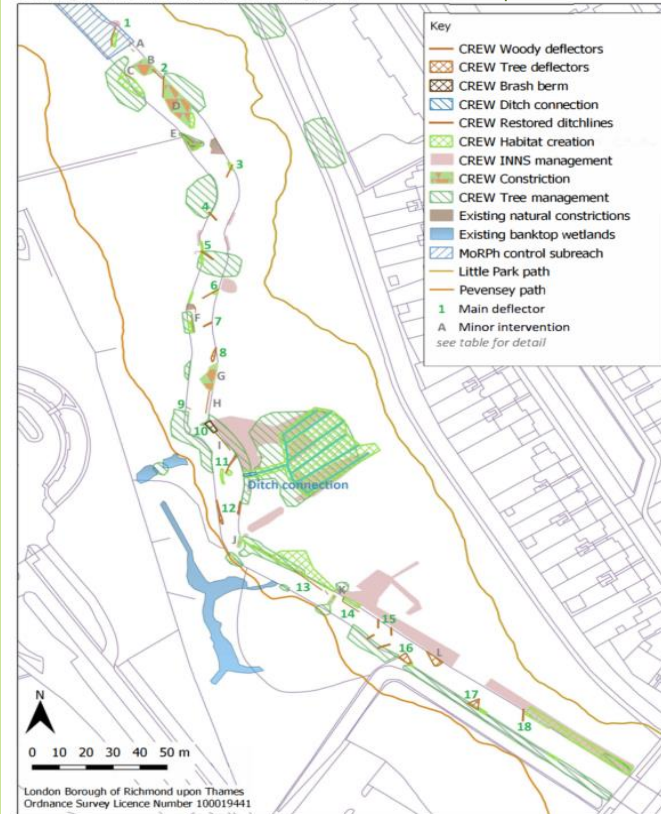


Newly installed deflectors

Objectives

1. Create project baseline data through a Modular River Survey, Phase 1 habitat survey, and water vole eDNA.
2. Formalise existing in-stream tree falls and install additional channel habitat structures to diversify the river channel's geomorphology.
3. Restore and reconnect remnant ditches to main river.
4. Reduce tree canopy shading to maximise light and establish marginal / bankside habitat in selected areas.
5. Selective removal of non-wet woodland community species from along selected ditches and replant with appropriate species
6. Identify and remove non-native invasive plants.
7. Engagement of volunteers in practical work, monitoring activities and onward engagement with site users, fostering local ownership and protection of the site's wildlife.
8. Raise awareness of the site's value for people and wildlife.
9. Monitoring of habitat development through repeat Phase 1 and MoRPH surveys and species monitoring via mink rafts, water vole latrine rafts and trail cameras.

CREW Project - Little Park & Pevensey Road NR, August 2023 Detailed map of all the works



Outcomes

- Worked with 8 separate partners, engaging with 320 people.
- 1.4 ha of habitat enhancement / restoration.
- Removed shading from around 400 metres of river bank and planted with native marginal species.
- Created new habitat structures within the reach to improve channel diversity by adding 18 deflectors and 12 other minor features including brush berms and improved ditch connection.
- Established 1,267 sqm of new wet woodland in the glade.
- Restored 200 m of ditches.
- Engaged with 240 volunteers across 19 organised tasks plus informal activities.
- Created a net benefit for flood relief.

Lessons Learnt

Managing shading caused by invasive species such as Himalayan balsam will require ongoing and intensive volunteer efforts.

Vehicle access was unavailable, necessitating the use of on-site materials.

Occasional issues with antisocial behavior were encountered on site, and therefore continued engagement with the local community is required.

Project Highlights

Success is credited to the dedication and hard work of the many volunteers.

Observation of the rapid response of the habitat and river to project changes, demonstrating nature's resilience. This highlighted that **it is never too late to get started** and nature does return quickly when given the opportunity in these systems.

Successfully created a very natural environment. The project demonstrated the effectiveness of relatively small-scale interventions in environmental restoration.

Future Plans

Release of captive-bred water voles in summer 2024 to reintroduce water voles to former colony sites and other suitable habitat from Little Park downstream to Crane Park Island.

Recognising the dynamic nature of the system, meaning that the project will require continuous management, maintenance, and adjustments.

Ongoing monitoring of marginal vegetation, the functionality of the restored ditches and their river impacts, particularly related to flooding.

Enhance public interpretation to help people understand and value the project. Furthermore, there is an aim to improve site access to allow more people to experience this stretch of the Lower Crane.

