MOLE MATTERS

LOWER MOLE COUNTRYSIDE TRUST

Promoting Countryside Management



AUTUMN 2026

False Widow Spider
Credit: Graham Carey

Lower Mole Project - Task Update

by Rachel Benn, Senior Countryside Partnership Officer, Lower Mole Partnership

It has been a challenging spring and summer for the Lower Mole team, with volunteers braving some exceptionally high temperatures to keep conservation work moving forward. Thankfully, many of our projects have been based in woodlands, where the shade has provided welcome relief from the heat. Despite the conditions, our volunteers have continued to show incredible dedication, contributing hundreds of hours to improve habitats, visitor access and biodiversity across the area.

Seasonal Highlights

One of the standout projects this season took place at **Ashtead Park**, where volunteers transformed an access route from the car park around the pond. The project involved scraping off the old path surface and laying a brand-new one, significantly improving accessibility for visitors.

The team also constructed a new bridge over a cleared ditch to help manage surface water flooding and undertook scrub clearance to further improve access.

This was a fantastic opportunity for volunteers to put their practical skills to use, with several trained operators taking the controls of dumpers and rollers throughout the project. Feedback from volunteers suggests this was the highlight of the season, combining teamwork, machinery operation and a visible improvement to a much-loved site.



Access improvements @ Ashtead Park



Workshop session

April saw us spending much of the month at Horton Country Park, making good use of our **workshops** while also catching up on a variety of essential jobs. Between workshop sessions, we returned to **Epsom Common** for our annual week working on behalf of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council. Volunteers repaired gates and cattle pens across this nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) ahead of the arrival of grazing cattle. Conservation grazing plays a vital role in maintaining the area's acid grassland habitats, providing the right conditions for a wide range of plants, reptiles and birds to thrive.

The first half of **May** was spent working for Surrey County Council at **Norbury Park** and **Sheepleas**. Returning to areas previously coppiced by our volunteers, we installed deer fencing to protect young regrowth from browsing deer, helping ensure these woodland management efforts continue to flourish. We then headed back to **Horton Country Park** to improve access by cutting back vegetation along key paths. The final two weeks took us to **The Nower**, where we rebuilt steps leading to the viewpoint, before moving on to Hogsmill Open Space, where volunteers tackled invasive Himalayan balsam along the riverbanks.



Re-built steps @ The Nower



New gate @ Horton Countrty Park

June began at **Cowey Sale**, where we resurfaced a well-used desire line linking two paths and removed further stands of Himalayan balsam.
From there we returned to **Horton Country Park** to support the Newt Conservation Partnership, installing fencing and gates around two newly created ponds designed to benefit amphibian populations.
The month finished with two weeks of invasive species control at **Bonesgate Open Space and Elmbridge Meadows**, where volunteers worked along river corridors to remove Himalayan balsam.

As temperatures continued to rise, **July** brought some challenging working conditions. Unfortunately, one of our three planned days at **Headley Warren** had to be cancelled due to the heat, but volunteers still managed to remove significant amounts of ragwort and clear scrub from this important chalk grassland habitat. The following week saw us at Nonsuch Park, removing more ragwort ahead of hay harvesting later in the season.

The final weeks of July, and the beginning of **August**, were dedicated to the major access improvements at **Ashtead Park**, where volunteers completed the path resurfacing project that became one of the year's standout achievements. The first week of August brought slightly cooler weather, allowing us to focus on habitat management at **Jubilee Wood**, where volunteers coppiced around the pond area and tackled invasive plant species. We then returned to the beautiful woodlands of **Norbury Park** for the first of two weeks splitting chestnut from previously coppiced timber. These materials will be used in future fencing projects across the site, ensuring the benefits of woodland management continue long after the coppicing work is complete. Back at the workshops at Horton Country Park, volunteers produced fingerpost signs for installation on Ashtead Common and carried out meadow management work on **Castle Hill.**







Splitting chestnut @ Norbury Park

September was another busy month. We began by returning to **Norbury Park** to continue splitting coppiced chestnut logs. The team then moved to **Arbrook Common**, where new horse barriers were installed to help protect path surfaces from damage. From there we headed to **Juniper Hill**, carrying out scrub clearance and mowing work in preparation for conservation grazing by sheep provided through the Downlands Trust on this SSSI site.

A productive week followed at **Moor Lane Conservation Area**, where volunteers undertook scrub management, coppicing and litter clearance to improve the site for both wildlife and visitors.

We rounded off the month at **Esher Common**, joined by colleagues from Surrey County Council's Governance and Contracts team. Together, we cleared scrub and dead hedging along a watercourse, creating access for machinery to clear a blocked drainage inlet and improve water management on the site.



Common Blue Butterfly @ Juniper Hill



George Frater - Countryside Partnership Manager

All Change At The Moles

As well as Helen retiring from the Operations Manager role for the Partnerships, Freya also moved on from her role as Senior Partnership Officer at the Moles in early July after nearly 3 years. She'd had a long commute from Kent but following the birth of Quinn, she'd become keen to secure a role closer to home and secured the role of Estate Manager at Leeds Castle, just 20 minutes from home.

Freya has been replaced by Rachel Benn, who started in early August. Rachel previously worked in the tree team at Surrey County Council (SCC), organising tree planting projects with local communities, corporate volunteers and landowners, so great experience to build on with the Moles. As there was no overlap with Freya or Helen, and Louise and John both had holidays in August, she really had to get to grips quickly with how the Moles work.

Helen has been replaced by George Frater, who job shadowed her from April until she retired at the end of July, he also previously worked for SCC in the wider Countryside team, with a focus on various aspects of SCC's Countryside Estate from tenant farms to biodiversity net gain. Some of our long-standing volunteers also remember him from about 2012 when he spent a year in the wider Countryside Management Projects team (as we were then) on a Heritage Lottery funded scheme 'Skills for the Future', so he came to this role with prior knowledge of the wide variety of biodiversity and public access related projects that the team undertake with our amazing dedicated volunteers.

Hanging Up My Boots!

After 36 years working within the Surrey Countryside Partnerships team I have hung up my boots! Back in the mid 1980s it never occurred to me that I would end up on the fringes of London. I had always lived in Devon, including studying geography at Plymouth Polytechnic, which convinced me that I wanted to work in nature conservation (my parents enthusiasm for walking and birds in particular may have played a part too!). After my degree I first volunteered full time for BTCV Devon supporting local volunteer groups and leading working holidays, until I secured my first paid role working for Torbay Borough Council on a joint project at Berry Head over the summer with the RSPB, 'Showing People Birds' to celebrate the RSPB's centenary, in this case it was the 'Brixham Penguins'.

In the meantime I had met my future husband, Stewart, who helped run South Devon Conservation Volunteers and worked for the South Devon Small Woodlands Project. In the autumn of 1989 he landed a job as Countryside Ranger at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council. As my job was coming to an end I decided to move up here with him and by chance got an interview for Ashtead Common Project Officer with the Lower Mole Countryside Management Project, however I didn't get that role (Dave Page did, who has also recently retired after over 30 years at Elmbridge Borough Council). But it did introduce me to the Moles so I started volunteering and after a couple of months was offered a temporary role (those were the days!).

Then in May 1990 I was offered a permanent role as Assistant Project Officer at the Moles. A role I loved primarily due to the amazing volunteers and their unwavering commitment whatever the weather, plus the unexpected (to me coming from Devon)



countryside and range of habitats on the edge of London, with most of my days spent working out on site.

I continued with the Moles, including part time, whilst our two daughters were pre teen, until 2010 when the Lower Mole Project Manager left and I firstly acted up into, then secured the role. Then in 2014 the whole Countryside Mangement team, including Downlands and Heathlands, went through a major restructure. An unpleasant experience which saw some team members lose their jobs or be downgraded. At the end of this process I became Operations Manager for the Surrey Countryside Partnerships, managing the Moles, Downlands and Heathlands, a daunting prospect!

This introduced me to a whole new area of work, conservation grazing and expanded my knowledge of chalk downland management. There had always been friendly banter between Moles and Downlands, that the Moles had rivers but the Downlands had chalk grassland, but my love of chalk plants, butterflies (and even sheep, goats and cattle!) started from that point. There isn't really any chalk grassland in Devon, the closest is Berry Head which is made of limestone, so I had briefly experienced very small plants in short grass.



It also introduced me to the joys of making budgets balance, keeping multiple local authority officers and members from the partners informed and happy with our work, and being ultimately responsible for the health and safety of the staff and volunteers, but the occasional chance to see stunning sites and cute lambs helped make up for this, plus the knowledge that management of important rare habitats on the fringes of London has improved vastly.

However again, it was the people that made the job, the dedicated staff and volunteers, making the Surrey Countryside Partnerships come up as a major regional group for conservation volunteering in south east England on a google search. A fantastic achievement which we should all be proud of.

I know I said it was time to hang up my boots, but actually I have been primarily office bound since 2014 so I'm looking forward to volunteering in my retirement, so may well appear on future task days, although we are moving away so I won't be bothering you too much!

Helen Cocker



Grazing to Return to Juniper Hill on Epsom & Walton Downs

This exciting conservation project will help restore and maintain the unique chalk grassland habitat that makes Juniper Hill such a special place. It will bring sheep grazing back to Juniper Hill, which is seen as essential for the maintenance and restoration of this nationally scarce and important habitat.

One of the three main objectives of the current five-year Epsom and Walton Downs Habitat Management Plan (2023-2028) was to draw up a project plan to reintroduce grazing to Juniper Hill.

Juniper Hill contains an area of very diverse calcareous grassland. However, with current resources, the rougher grasses and scrub are becoming invasive, leading to a reduction in this diversity.

Despite valiant efforts by volunteers over the years to push back invading scrub and keep the grassland cut and cleared, grazing is the preferred management option on Juniper Hill. It has been responsible for creating and maintaining the biological interest, allowing the wildflowers to flourish and a vital aid in controlling the scrub.

Funding for the project has been secured by the Lower Mole Trust from Your Fund Surrey and grant funding has also been provided by the Downlands Trust. We hope to start grazing under the guidance of the Downlands Partnership Grazing team in 2027 and is likely to occur January to April / May and September to December each year.

The animals will be kept in two paddocks ensuring that the main paths in the area remain open to the public.

Sarah Clift
Senior Countryside Officer,
Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

The location of Juniper Hill is shown in the photos below.
W3W///poet.punch.frost





How You Can Help

Get involved and volunteer to be part of the team carrying out daily checks of the animals and infrastructure.

All training and support provided.

💬 **Get in touch**
We'd love your feedback and support!
Contact: Sarah Clift
Email: countryside@epsomewell.gov.uk
Phone: 01372 732000
Website:
www.epsomewell.gov.uk/residents/access-nature/countryside-and-parks/epsom-and-walton-downs



Photos: Graham Carey

False Widow Spiders in Great Britain

You may have noticed the recent increase in false-widow spider species around our homes, in many cases supplanting the familiar house spiders. This family have received negative press in the past regarding the painful bite of the Noble False Widow (Steatoda nobilis) which has been likened to a wasp sting at worst. This article aims to summarise their ecology and how climate change is enabling them increase their range in the UK

The Noble False Widow Steatoda nobilis is one of six false widow (Steatoda) species that may be found in and around buildings in Britain. Four are now common and widespread in our area: Steatoda nobilis, Steatoda bipunctata, Steatoda grossa and Steatoda triangulosa.

Identification
All Steatoda species have very shiny dark abdomens with a more-or-less distinct white half-moon around the anterior edge. They are often likened in appearance to small blackcurrants.

The Noble False Widow is a native of the Canary Islands and Madeira probably repeatedly imported into this country with bananas. It was first reported in Britain near Torquay in 1879. For the next 100 years or so it appears to have been confined to a few populations along the south coast but it is now spreading, probably as a result of global warming. By 2015 it was recorded across the southern half of the country and it is highly likely that it will continue to spread northwards. The species is now widespread across western and central Europe but there it is rarely blamed for biting.

All these species may be confused with other common British spiders – visit the Spider Recording Scheme website https://britishspiders.org.uk/false-widows for more information. In particular these spiders could be confused with Amaurobius similis, which does have a similar body pattern and is a common species found on walls, fences, garages and outbuildings, the web of which is a lace-like pattern of irregular silk surrounding a hole, often with a blueish tinge.

Habitat
Steatoda species have colonised gardens, sheds, window frames, garden furniture, dark corners inside and cracks in exterior walls in houses, and anywhere amongst stored materials in gardens.
They have happily made homes in the crevices around my windows and in stacked clay tiles and plant pots around my home. In common with other spiders, Steatoda species are excellent as natural pest control.



Life history

Adult Steatoda males are usually found between July and November. Adult females can be found throughout the year but numbers generally peak at the same time as the males. Males are thought to live for only one year and die after mating but females take two years to become adult and may survive for a third year. Eggs are laid in a small, white, spherical egg sac anchored close to the web. The young hatch within the egg sac after two to four months, emerge and disperse by ballooning on silk threads.

Noble False Widows are actually shy and rather sluggish. They spend most of their time in their webs although males may wander in search of females. False widow webs are a tangled scaffold of silk with the spiders usually confined to a crack or crevice in the wall or similar structure. They set silk strings loaded like springs attached to surfaces. When a prey brushes against these threads, it triggers the booby trap and the animal is lifted off the ground. The spider can then release other threads and hoist the prey with exceptional ease using its silk threads like a pulley system. Once the prey is immobilised with silk, it paralyses them with a venomous bite. The spider expels digestive enzymes into it and sucks back the broth of softened flesh and digestive juices.

They can generally eat whatever is available, including other spiders, woodlice, flies, centipedes, wasps and bees. **But most striking is S. nobilis' ability to prey on animals significantly larger than themselves: lizards, bats and shrews have all been recorded as part of their diet.**

Venom

Noble false widow spiders are close cousins of the "true" black widows and share roughly the same arsenal of toxins in their venom. This includes a group of neurotoxins called latrotoxins that are particularly lethal to small animals with backbones. These proteins bind to nerve endings and disrupt the messages they send, causing muscles and organs to miss signals from the brain which can lead to paralysis and death. Their venom, which is up to 125-times more potent than the giant house spider (Eratigena atrica), has proved instrumental in their spread, as they can often turn our native spiders into their next meal! The issue isn't that Steatoda nobilis prey upon native spiders. Many spiders eat other spiders, including their own species. Steatoda nobilis and its allies are just more adaptable and more successful at colonising new areas than many native spiders.

They have these advantages: Noble False Widows have a variety of hunting tactics they can utilise. **They live for longer than most native species. They can breed and reproduce faster, and for more months of the year, than native species. Females can lay a sac containing up to 200 eggs every three to four weeks between April and September. Many native spiders lay only one to three egg sacs a year. They can be active in far colder temperatures than many native species.** Although primarily a synanthropic species (meaning it lives in close association with human environments) they can also reside in a huge variety of different habitats.

People and Noble False Widow spiders

Although the vast majority of spiders use venom to subdue their prey, only a very small number of the larger species in Britain can bite into human skin. None of these species ever attack people, unprovoked. The only risk of being bitten comes from putting your hand into a web, handling a spider roughly or sitting or lying on one by mistake. Media reports of spider bites usually focus on Noble False Widows and, occasionally, on the smaller Steatoda grossa (the much smaller Steatoda bipunctata is extremely unlikely to be able to penetrate the skin of humans or pets).

Although the Noble False Widow does have a more toxic bite than any native British spider, there are very few confirmed cases of them biting and none of serious injury as a direct result. Reliable evidence is hard to come by. In the absence of a bee or wasp, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that a spider is the culprit, but the perpetrator is rarely caught in the act for accurate identification. Their bites have been compared with a wasp sting; the pain is usually short-lived and (in rare cases) may result in feeling unwell for a day or so. In contrast to wasp and bee stings, spider bites are extremely unlikely to cause an allergic reaction. Serious problems with spider bites are likely to arise only if the bite becomes infected or if the person is already weakened by other health issues. As with any other injury, if swelling or ulceration results from a suspected spider bite you should seek immediate medical help.

Like many other species that have been accidentally introduced to Britain through global trade, and then been able to thrive in our warming climate, the Noble False Widow is here to stay. They have been living unnoticed in many houses for decades. By learning to identify them and understanding their habits you can reduce the very small risk of being bitten.

DAVE PAGE



Climate Change & Citizen Science

By Rodney Shaw



One of the abiding images I have of this record-breaking summer is of someone leaning over a bridge staring into the river below. I stopped to chat to him, but mostly we observed in silence the fish below gathered in oxygen-depleted pools; all that was left of the River Arun.

The summer of 2026 has certainly broken records: the hottest summer on record, the driest July on record, 70% of England designated as being in drought and 78 consecutive days of over 20 degrees centigrade.

The mean maximum temperature recorded was 26.9 degrees together with a mean minimum temperature of 14.3 degrees – all new records. Locally, the Reigate weather station recorded 52 days without rain. The flow of the River Mole at Leatherhead was around 43% below the 2023-2025 average.

With the arrival of autumn, lower temperatures and some much-needed rain, the landscape has begun to recover at least superficially. But we are left to speculate on the long-term impact of the very hot weather on species and the habitats that support them. Is it all bad news?

Do some species benefit from hotter summers? What are the recovery rates for different species and what are the long-term prospects if temperatures continue their upward trend?

Looking at the websites of organisations such as the RSPB and Butterfly Conservation it is possible to get an insight into the impact of this summer on a range of species and habitats. River Mole Watch, for example, has published the results of the chemical sampling of the catchment of the River Mole, that is worth a read online. Interpreting their results demonstrates the complexity of our ecosystems.

Information on Butterfly Conservation's website also illustrates the complexity of nature's response to climate change. This summer was considered the second best for butterflies since the Big Butterfly count started 16 years ago, but the concern is for next year because the plants on which caterpillars feed may have withered and died before they finished feeding.

A common theme is the importance of monitoring and on a scale that can capture large amounts of data to help make sense of the impact of climate change. National bodies promote species monitoring through events such as the Big Butterfly Count in July and August, the Big Garden Birdwatch in January and Beewalk from March to October. There are recording schemes for hedgehogs, water voles, bats, stag beetles, hedgerows and seaweed to name a few. The collective name we give to these monitoring exercises is Citizen Science – an opportunity for anyone who is interested to help record species and to do it at a scale that make a difference to our understanding of what is happening to our environment.

Small Actions. Big Community Impact.

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch

29–31 January

BeeWalk – bumblebees

March–October, once a month

River Mole River Watch

Last weekend of every month

Big Butterfly Count

9 July–1 August

Big River Watch

Spring 2027, exact week to be announced

Earth Watch Europe is the champion of Citizen Science. https://earthwatch.org.uk

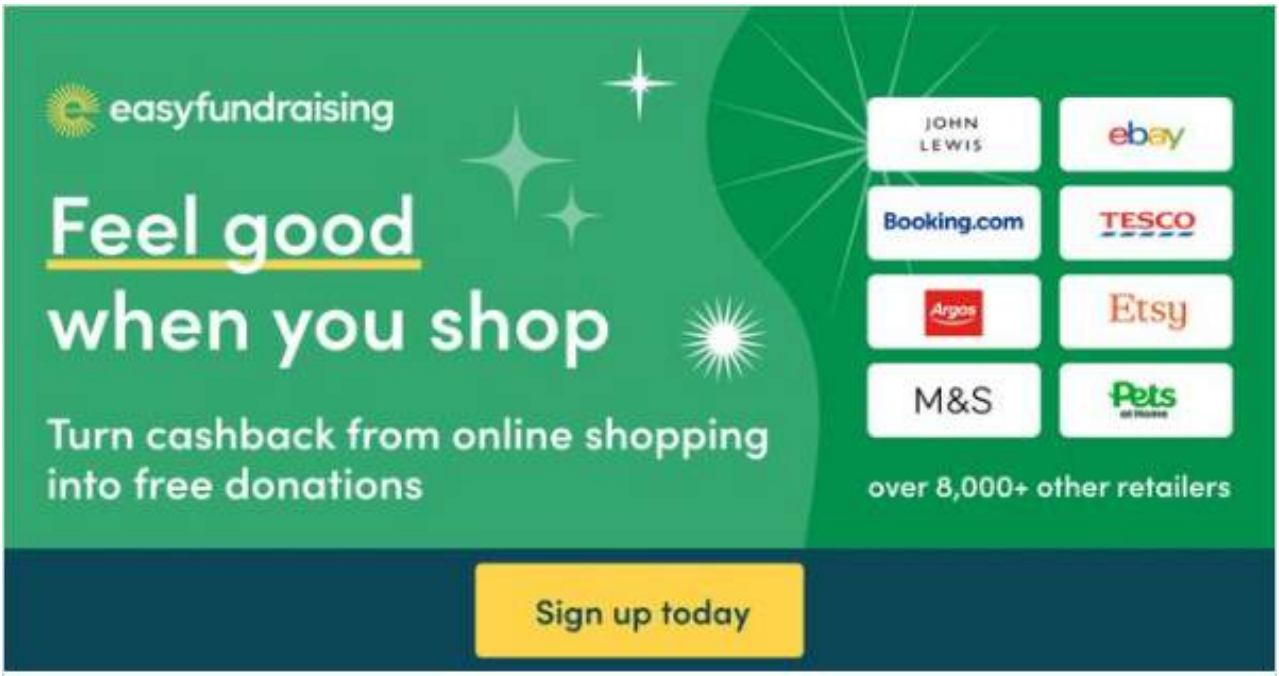
Being a citizen scientist does not require specialist expertise, just a basic grasp of wildlife and it's a great way to learn and be part of something bigger. This summer 101,545 participants in the Big Butterfly Count recorded 1.4million butterflies and moths in the UK. River Mole River Watch has a water testing programme that collects water samples from 32 sites across the Mole Catchment involving 50 citizen scientists.

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust is keen to encourage grant applications from local groups that are involved in citizen science projects and are undertaking management of the countryside so that we can 'drought-proof' our natural environment. Volunteers can play an important role in improving our understanding of and response to climate

Help Raise Funds for Lower Mole Countryside Trust - it costs you nothing!

You can make a real difference simply by signing up to support Lower Mole Countryside Trust through **easyfundraising**.
Every new supporter helps us grow our fundraising community, and once you're signed up, you can raise FREE donations for us whenever you shop online!
It only takes a minute to join, and every supporter makes a difference.

Join here: https://join.easyfundraising.org.uk/lower-mole-countryside-trust/pstnxx/c2s/J1YccjD6/CE942/textcopy/



Lower Mole Countryside Trust Fundraising Ideas

Help Lower Mole Countryside Trust raise free funds today by shopping online via easyfundraising.org.uk. Shop at no extra cost and raise free donations for Lower Mole Countryside Trust

easyfundraising

The Lower Mole Partnership

The Partnership was set up in 1983 and now covers an area of 264 square kilometres. The aim of the Partnership is to carry out countryside improvements for the benefit of people and wildlife, by:

- Improving public access to the countryside for informal recreation.
- Conserving landscape features and enhancing the natural beauty of the countryside.
- Increasing public knowledge and understanding of the countryside.
- Encouraging greater community involvement in the countryside

Partnership Staff

George Frater - Countryside Partnership Manager
Debbie Hescott - Partnership Development Officer
Rachel Benn - Senior Countryside Partnership Officer
Louise Wilford - Partnership Officer
John Armitage - Partnership Officer

Email
mole.project@surreycc.gov.uk
Web
www.lowermoleproject.org.uk

Trust Directors

Rod Shaw - Chairman
Sarah Clayton - Secretary
Martin Owen - Treasurer
Alan Sherren - Director
Dave Page - Director
Dawn Fielding - Director

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust

We're a local charity - providing grants to community groups undertaking projects that will protect and enhance the stunning landscapes, wildlife, and green spaces of North Surrey and Kingston.

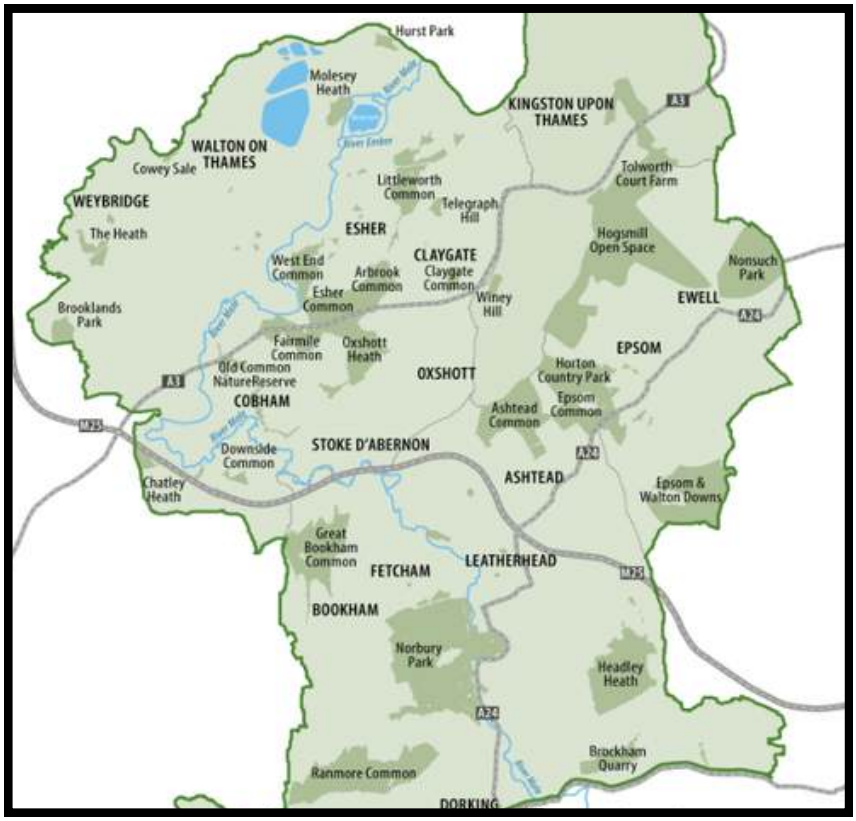
We provide funding for small environmental projects in the areas of Elmbridge, Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, and Kingston upon Thames, that align with our environmental goals.

We are passionate about the natural environment, supporting projects that benefit landscape, wildlife and people. We are supported by donations from individuals and organisations and welcome new sponsors.

What We Stand For

- Educate – help people discover the countryside on their doorstep.
- Conserve – work with communities to restore and care for wildlife habitats.
- Involve – encourage everyone to join in, no matter your age or background.
- Access – funding projects that make nature more accessible to all.

Email: LowerMoleTrust@outlook.com



Address: The Lower Mole Countryside Trust 2 West Park Farmhouse,

Horton Country Park, Horton Lane, Epsom, Surrey, KT19 8PL

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust is a limited company.
Registered Charity No. 1095771 Registered in Cardiff. Company No. 4454401.
The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Directors of the Trust.