

MOLE MATTERS



Volunteers making Dormouse Boxes

SPRING 2026



LOWER MOLE
COUNTRYSIDE
TRUST

*Promoting
Countryside
Management*



Hedge laying at Rye Meadows



**Hedge planting at
Tolworth Court Farm**



From the Chairman, Rod Shaw

If you are a regular volunteer with one of the many countryside conservation teams the chances are that you have worked on the network of hedges that are such an important landscape feature in Surrey.

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust has supported this work with its grants to, for example - the Lower Mole Partnership and the Friends of the Rye Meadows Wetlands in Ashted. The Partnership has planted a new hedge at Tolworth Court Farm, whilst the Rye Meadows Friends have begun a programme of hedge laying under the guidance of the Surrey Wildlife Trust. Grants from the Trust have provided hedgerow plants and equipment for the management of establishes hedges. Hedges are just one landscape feature that we often take for granted but which, when properly managed and maintained, can have multiple benefits for wildlife.

On the Rye Meadows in Ashted, the hedge laying skills acquired by one volunteer have been passed on to several others so that there are now two teams able to undertake this work and speed up the task of regenerating the network of hedges along the Rye Brook. Small grants, such as the Trust has been able to provide, can make a huge difference.

Grants covering the cost of equipment and training can release the potential of enthusiastic volunteers making possible the conservation and regeneration of features that have been part of the landscape for generations. At the same time the rich diversity of habitats is maintained for a whole range of species. The Trust is keen to extend and increase its grant giving potential. We are interested in developing relationships with corporate sponsors and individuals. If this would be of interest, please get in touch.





Online Recording Apps and Submitting Records Online

By Dave Page, Trustee

This short article attempts to summarise the main apps now being used to identify species in the field and address concerns that accuracy could potentially be compromised.

Recording species correctly and submitting those records to the correct institutions has been the accepted bed rock of natural history for several centuries. Wildlife records provide vital evidence that can be used to study changes in species distributions and abundance. Some Lower Mole volunteers and Trust members have been submitting species records for many years. Until recently these were written records of species that had been identified using field guides with keys for identification to species level. Difficult groups would often have to be verified and many, for example invertebrates and fungi, require collection of specimens and microscopic analysis of features to be correctly identified to species level.

In recent years numerous seemingly competing online identification applications have become available, and are now widely used by enthusiasts to identify species in the field. These apps have certainly made identifying wildlife more accessible to the general public and it is highly likely that there will be an increase in records submitted as a result. On our own study walks, phone apps such as **PlantNet** and **Merlin ID** have been used by members with some success in identifying species in the last 2 years.

So where should we submit records and who oversees the verification in the UK? The answer appears to be iRecord.

So what is iRecord, and why should we be using it? The iRecord family of apps is a suite of mobile tools designed by the Biological Records Centre (BRC) and the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) to enable citizen scientists and nature enthusiasts to submit wildlife sightings in the UK. These apps, available for both Android and iOS, allow users to capture, map, and submit biodiversity data (photographs, location, species, and habitat details) directly from the field. This data feeds into the main iRecord platform, where it is verified by volunteer experts and made available for research and conservation.

Key funding and support partners of the iRecord project include the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC): UKCEH is strategically funded by NERC, which is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). In addition, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee provides support to the BRC, and further funding comes from National Lottery Heritage Fund, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DeFRA and the National Biodiversity Network Trust.

The key apps in the iRecord family include:

- **iRecord App (Main App):** A general-purpose app designed to record any species.
- **iRecord Butterflies:** Developed with Butterfly Conservation, this app specializes in identifying and recording UK butterfly species.
- **iRecord Grasshoppers:** A guide and recording tool for grasshoppers, crickets, and related insects, which features high-quality images and sound files for identification.
- **Other Related Apps:** The ecosystem includes specialized apps like Asian Hornet Watch, and tools that link with the iRecord data warehouse such as the FIT Count (flower-insect timed count) app (for pollinator monitoring) and Mammal Mapper.

Some highly experienced recorders made important points to consider regarding use of ID apps, regarding accuracy. While apps are on the whole very good and easy to use, they are not entirely foolproof. In light of this they should be used with plenty of discretion and identifications should be checked and not just accepted. And it is difficult to see how some of the very critical species identifications - which need difficult microcharacters to be examined to separate similar species - can be done from a photograph. Especially as there are more cryptic species being recognised, and also new arrivals and hybrids turning up and these complicate matters further.

One Surrey Botanical Society recorder commented that they found PlantNet useful if they came across a plant they didn't recognise even to genus, in particular non-natives, as it might at least give a clue to what it is, but in most cases they would not rely on it for serious recording. For that I would still go to a **proper field guide** such as Stace or the Poland Vegetative Key. It was reported to be very useful when travelling abroad as it enables one to find the correct genus for completely new plants and in general its identifications have been impressive. It is especially useful to have a percentage probability given as higher percentage IDs are very reliable.

BirdNET allows you to record snippets of birdsong and then it suggests a species. Some found it quite useful sometimes for casual interest, but the song needs to be quite loud and not masked by other species singing at the same time. **Merlin ID** is user-friendly and lists the species it recognises as you record on the app. For those that have hearing problems it is a very useful tool for indicating what is about, and you can then look for the bird to verify it. Two problems with all of these apps of course are that if you don't have a mobile signal they won't work, and then they ask you to confirm the ID suggested - but if you knew that you wouldn't be asking the app!

Surrey Bat Group recorders reported that there are bat detector apps that work with plug in ultrasonic microphones, like the Wildlife Acoustics EMT range. Unfortunately they are very often wrong and yet people, often consultants who should know better, take the results at face value and submit plainly wrong records e.g. for bats in Surrey that don't occur here! This then causes a problem with iRecord, where often the records submitted are as a result of these auto ID programmes and as verifiers they struggle to sift the wheat from the chaff, and there is quite a lot of chaff, as the programme allows people to enter meaningless records e.g. I saw a bat in this 10km square. As a result Surrey verifiers for bat records submitted to iRecord can only really confirm the records are valid if they happen to know the recorder and they are experienced enough to be able to identify calls from a detector correctly, or the recorder submits a sonogram showing the call.

Other comments were to be wary of misidentification as AI is used on some of the well known apps and can therefore learn by previously wrongly identified subjects. This can lead to a large database of a misidentified subject due to users accepting the suggested ID without double checking the authenticity. It is worth spending the time to find other images on trusted websites for confirmation.

I admit to being very late to engage with the new available technology, only recently downloading my first apps. As requested by the Surrey Moths Group I registered with iRecord in order to submit my 2025 moth trapping records from my garden in Claygate. I found this to be straightforward, and some questions and feedback were received from the volunteer record verifiers such as asking for a photo to confirm a record of rarer species, or confirming that some species can only be verified via microscopy and should be recorded as Aggregate. I aim to continue using iRecord including records of other groups. I will also be using ID apps in the field as needed. I can see how they could save time both in field identification (thumbing through field guides) and in the act of submitting records. However, if you are reasonably confident in species identification, you may only need to go to an app once or twice in a session, and some may feel it is still best to go straight to a field guide with a key. I think it is important to be aware of the certain species groups that cannot be separated in the field and make sure you are not in danger of submitting an erroneous record!

As a final thought, a good example to illustrate the limitations of identification apps are the familiar Cladonia 'pixie cup' lichens. They are a complex family of similar species. To accurately confirm separation of the Cladonia species requires not only investigation of their chemistry via spot testing, but study of UV light reaction, and ultimately microcrystal tests for definitive identification of the six species within the Cladonia chlorophea morphological complex. Your identification apps can't do that!

They do make recording more accessible and I hope this article helps you to make valued records of your observations in the future.

DAVE PAGE



Task Update

by Freya Newman-Prince, Senior Countryside Partnership Officer, Lower Mole Partnership

The Moles have had a great Winter, they have been incredibly busy clearing hectares of scrub, hedge laying, coppicing and planting trees. As we have firmly started the spring and are heading towards summer, we would like to say thank you and look forward to a busy summer.

Winter - started off with a visit to Kingston to restore a meadow in Southwood that had become overgrown. The volunteers spent a great 2 weeks here where we cleared 2000m² of bramble and scrub. We then moved to Oxshott heath where we carried out some heathland management cutting gorse and scrub to let heather flourish. The last 2 weeks of October were spent at Ashted common carrying out the first year of the new grant project, to coppice hazel for the benefit of dormouse.



**pre-Xmas coppicing sessions at Horton Country Park
With Public Health Team**

November - we spent 2 weeks coppicing for the SCC estate team, 1 week at Norbury, continuing last year's compartment and the second week out at Sheepheas coppicing an area that John Sinclair used to look after. The team then visited Ashted Gap for Mole Valley, which was a new site, here we had been asked to clear understory around large veteran trees. We finished November with our annual trip out to Leith hill to help the National Trust team carry out heathland management.

December - with a visit to Rushett Farm in Kingston to plant a new hedgerow with help from CPRE London and their London Tree Ring Project. We finished the run up to the end of the year with our annual 2-week coppicing task at Horton Country Park and finished everything off with our Christmas meal in the Cricketers.



January - started just like the last 40 with the annual joint mega task on Ashted Common and Epsom common, we continued the work that's been happening the last couple of years at Ashted Common and in Epsom Common we cleared some scrub from great pasture, unfortunately this year the BBQ was rained off. The team closed in January with a 2-week task at Ashted Park where we are continuing to push the woodland edge back to help increase the meadow and restore more of the site to wood pasture.

February - saw a move away from coppicing towards more scrub clearance work at both West End Common and Fairmile Common. At West End we cleared scrub to create an enclosed area for the grassland to recover without the disturbance from visitors and dogs. At Fairmile, we cleared gorse and then created dead hedges using the material. Next up was a visit to Castle Hill where we coppiced hazel on the Horton side of the ancient monument. February was finished off with the yearly visit to Stones Road Pond where we cleared the bramble bank that surrounds the pond and cleared back some of the willow from the pond edge.



Scrub clearance at West End Common

March - saw our tasks being dominated by Chalk grassland management, our first week was a visit to Headly Warren where we continued the chalk grassland management that the landowners had started with large machinery, we followed up with brushcutters, rakes and tree poppers. Second up was Brockham Limeworks here we cleared the area where Kidney Vetch flourishes and then continued to remove scrub with tree poppers in the main area. The 3rd and final chalk grassland site of the month was Juniper Hill on Epsom Downs where we were clearing the route of the proposed new fenceline which will enable the site to be grazed. The Winter was finished with a visit to Southwood LNR the site we started the autumn at, this time we were clearing the next meadow over to the one we started at, we were asked to clear grass and scrub from around the anthills.

Overall, we had a massively busy Autumn and Winter with over 3000 volunteer hours so I just wanted to say another thank you for all the volunteers hard work over the last 6 months and I hope we can have a just as good spring and summer.

Key challenges facing the charity sector

By Mantin Owen, Trustee

The Lower Mole Countryside Trust is a small charity. We are fortunate that we have no significant overheads like rent or wages. But the UK charity sector is currently facing several key challenges and opportunities. Here are some of the main issues:

- **Financial Resilience:** Charities are under pressure to maintain financial resilience amidst falling donations.
- **Donor Engagement:** With limited funds and competing causes, charities must work harder to retain existing donors and attract new supporters.
- **Economic Impact:** The economy, especially with the Iran war, is in tremendous difficulty. Grants and income are likely to reduce.
- **Digital Strategy:** Many charities are struggling with digital strategy, highlighting a growing digital gap between the charity and commercial sectors. We need trustees with greater ability here.



**Tree Popping at Headley -
with tools funded by the Trust!**

If you feel you can help us with any of these challenges, please let us know. Or maybe you have a child or grandchild, who wants to make a difference in their local community and can help us with our website, generating ideas for getting people interested in our natural environment or reaching out to corporate sponsors?

GRANTS

SINCE THE LAST NEWSLETTER THE LOWER MOLE COUNTRYSIDE TRUST HAS AGREED THE FOLLOWING GRANTS -

Epsom Common Association requested a grant for 50% of the cost of replacing their brush-cutter, after theirs was stolen. However the ECA received an unexpected grant from SCC for the brush-cutter so has withdrawn its application. Instead, it has applied for a Stihl electric chainsaw which was approved.

The Friends of Ashted Rye Meadows requested funding for 2 hedge trimmers, which was approved.

The Lower Mole Partnership requested funding to buy two tree poppers, which was agreed. Also agreed was funding for an additional belt sander with sanding belts, to help make signs and benches in the workshop season. Having another sander allows the Partnership to have another volunteer contribute to making infrastructure projects.

The Lower Mole Partnership have also been busy carrying out the work for the Coppicing for Dormice Project for which the Lower Mole Countryside Trust successfully applied for a grant from the City of London Corporation's Enjoying Green Spaces and Natural Environment Fund. This grant funded the work carried out by the volunteers on site coppicing in the autumn but also funded a new plan for coppicing on Ashted Common, written by Lower Mole Partnership team member Louise and for constructing 50 dormice boxes to put up on Ashted Common National Nature Reserve (frontcover photo). There's more work to do, including putting up the new boxes and further coppicing.



Coppicing at Ashted Common

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

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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.



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The Lower Mole Countryside Trust is a limited company.

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