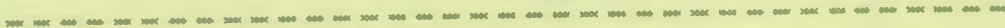
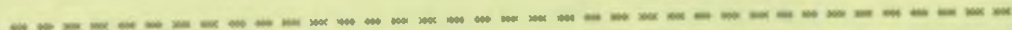
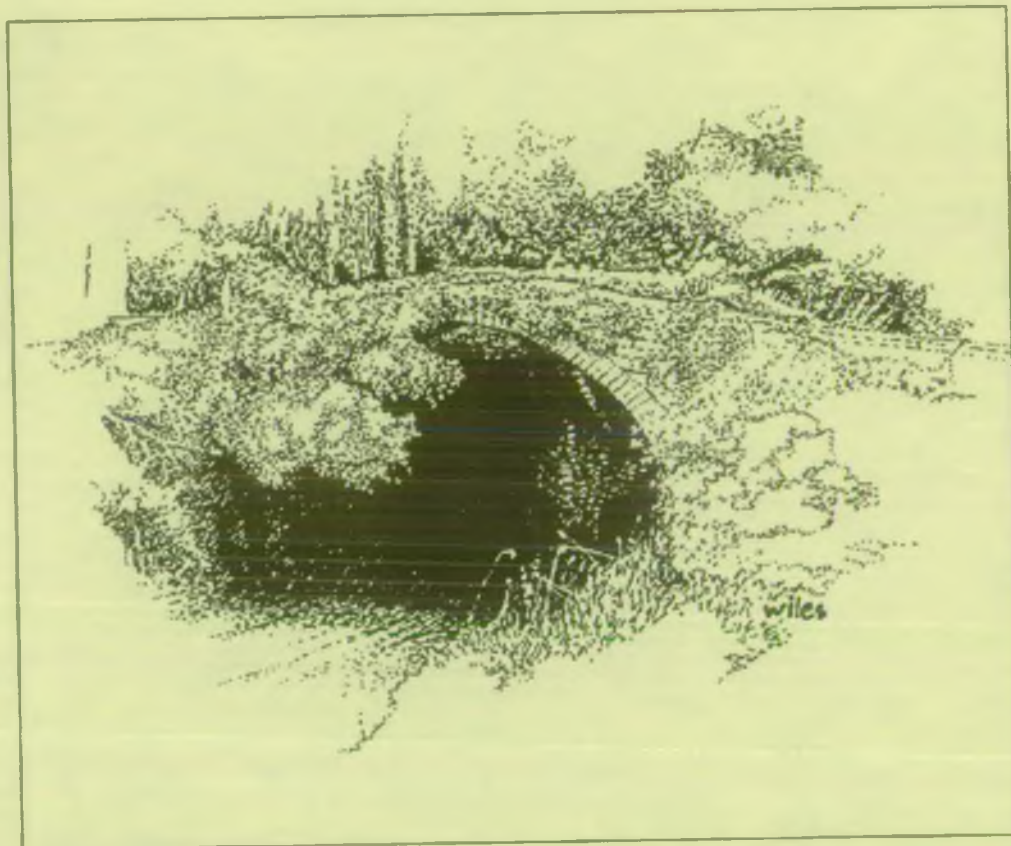





National Rivers Authority
Wessex Region



WILDLIFE ALONG RIVERS



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Rivers provide very special wildlife habitats in the country side. Different rivers will support different habitats, and the diverse ranges of plants, insects, fish and birds that are found can be seen by the observant person.

Slow moving and still waters offer plants and animals very different conditions to those found in fast flowing rivers. In fast water any insects or plants not firmly anchored to the bed will be swept along by the currents. Sand and mud will also be swept away, leaving only rocks and gravel. The constant splashing and turbulence will ensure there is plenty of oxygen in the water, which is vital to most under water animals. In slow moving water, the sand and silt will settle out on the bottom and over the years will build up into a thick layer of mud.

Water plants grow well in slow water as they are able to root easily in the mud deposits and are not battered by fast flowing currents. They also provide plenty of shelter for insects and fish. Slower rivers cannot quickly replace the oxygen used up by animals, so they are especially susceptible to effluents from factories and sewage works that cause pollution, and use up oxygen. Unfortunately, most towns and factories are situated in the flatter parts of the country, where rivers become slower as they reach the 'old' stage of their courses.

WATERSIDE BIRDS

One of the most noticeable birds on Britain's rivers is the Swan. These majestic, graceful birds are easily recognised, and when roused can be highly aggressive, particularly if they have young to protect.

Other birds commonly found on rivers are moorhens, ducks and geese. One bird not so widespread, is the heron, which is not often seen. These stand motionless in the shadows waiting for their prey, small fish or frogs, to swim into range. At the slightest disturbance however, they take to the air, where they are easily recognised for their slow wingbeat, trailing legs and S-folded necks.

The riverside supports a range interesting smaller birds. One high point would be the brilliant flash of a kingfisher, or the white bib of the dipper. Wagtails can be observed searching for food along sandbanks continually wagging their tails up and down. In the summer, sand martins nest in these banks and can be seen darting in and out of their nest holes carrying titbits for their young. Many birds build their nests away from the shore out of reach from predators. In the nesting seasons of spring and early summer, rushes and reedbeds are the favourite nesting sites for many species. When young have hatched moorhen chicks or ducklings may be seen on the water.

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PLANT LIFE

Vegetation is important not only for providing nesting sites for birds, it also provides cover for many insects and fishes. Pike, the predator of the fish world, is frequently to be found hidden amongst weed beds, waiting to rush out and grab an unsuspecting roach as it swims by. Many species of coarse fish use weed beds to spawn in and insects use the stems of plants to help them emerge from the water.

Plants perform one vital function for all water life. They use sunlight to build up water and carbon dioxide into carbohydrates, which power the plant's life processes. As a by-product they release oxygen into the water which is available for insects and fish to breathe. The food reserves built up and stored within plants as in the form of starch are eaten by many insects, which in turn are food for fishes.

As well as being a vital components in the food chain water plants can also be very attractive. A bed of yellow irises or a white carpet of water buttercup can be a memorable part of a walk or outing along a river.

INSECTS

Most insects have two active stages in their lives. After hatching from their eggs they are called larvae, or in the case of many aquatic species, nymphs. These are equivalent to the caterpillar stage of butterflies. They then undergo a dramatic change at the pupal stage and emerge as adults.

Dragonflies are brilliantly coloured, and like the smaller damselflies they can be seen darting around the waters edge on any summer's day. Their nymphs which can grow up to 5cm long live up to their name and are vicious underwater hunters. They capture many insects and worms, and may even eat small fish and tadpoles. As protection against dragonfly nymphs and any other small animals that see them as a tasty meal, one family of insects build shelters around themselves. These are caddisflies, which can be found underneath submerged rocks or stones in tubes which they construct out of sand, sticks or gravel.

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ANIMALS ON THE RIVER BANK

Frogs and toads are usually found hiding in reed beds, or in the muddy margins of a river and are not often seen unless they are disturbed. Nooks and crannies hidden from view, overhanging banks and tree roots may often hide water voles, which are frequently mistaken for rats, and given the name 'water rat'. These are quite harmless and provide a comical sight as they feed, sitting up with their food between their paws. They are vegetarians and eat roots and shoots which they find along the river bank. They may occasionally be seen swimming along the surface until it dives with a distinctive 'plop'. Its underwater path can then be followed by the line of bubbles which rise to the surface. Otters may sometimes be seen on British rivers but are extremely shy creatures. They usually feed at night and by day hide amongst the riverside vegetation. Evidence of their presence ie paw prints, can sometimes be found along sandy banks.

FISH

There are two main groups of freshwater fish. 'Game fish' which include the trout and salmon; and 'coarse fish' which include most others ie the common roach, bream and carp.

The characteristics of a body of water determine the species of fish found. Game fish generally prefer cleaner, faster flowing water and need a sand or gravel bed on which to spawn. Eggs are laid in the late autumn and remain in the gravel until the following spring.

Fish that are feeding on insects and grubs on the surface tend to make circles of ripples across the water. This is known as a 'rise' and is used by fishermen to locate a fish presence. They then try to imitate the movements of insects by skillfully tying bits of fur and feather onto a hook, and casting it out to the feeding fish. This is known as flyfishing and is generally used to catch trout. Coarse fishing involves a different method. A baited hook is presented to the fish, suspended beneath a float or anchored to the bed with a lead weight.

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ACCESS INFORMATION

In following rivers keep to the footpaths provided. There is no automatic right of way along any watercourse. To develop an interest in riverside wildlife join a local natural history or conservation group. Details on these groups can be obtained from the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: see below for addresses.

Royal Society for Nature Conservation, The Green, Nettleham, Lincoln, LN2 2NR.

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire.