

Hi everyone,
Welcome to the September email update to all OVA members.

If you would like to help and volunteer for any of the items you see below, it would be lovely to speak with you. Do let us know.



This email update contains the following items:

Can you help?

- We are still looking for people to help us in a number of different areas – from secretary to events and a town representative for Budleigh Salterton. We cannot continue to run our programs without help and assistance from our members. Can you help?

Winter Talks schedule:

- Our first talk took place last week – read all about it below. Our next talk on the 15th October is from local farmer Sam Walker.

Walks Update – weekly walks:

- We have a great line-up of weekly walks scheduled through to October. Details below – everyone is welcome.

ORCA Campaign to #ReviveTheRiverOtter:

- Further testing has taken place. Plans are coming together for RiverFly testing. Communications' with SWW are continuing. Read all about it below.

Flora, Fauna & Fungi Group:

- Leaky dams, invasive species, FaceBook engagement, showcase on the OVA web and more. Summary of actions below. Can you help?

Pictures from the Lower Otter Nature Reserve

- Local photographers have been sharing amazing pictures of Ospreys, Glossy Ibis' and other wildlife from the Nature Reserve. We hope you like!

Voluntary Car Park Contributions for Heaths

- Clinton Devon Estates are introducing a new voluntary system for using their car parks. Please read a brief overview of why below.

Website & Social media update:

- We continue to update the OVA website with new sections and additions. Please do keep it bookmarked (www.ova.org.uk).
- We now have 1,356 supporters on our main Facebook group (up 80 people in the last week), and 302 supporters on our ORCA water quality campaign group.

1. Can you help?

Sadly, Jane Kewley has decided to stand down at the next AGM from her position as secretary. We are massively indebted to her for her leadership and continuing work in helping us operate efficiently in our programs. So, if you know of anyone who would be prepared to help in this role, please do get in touch. We are also looking for someone to help organise events as well as a representative to act as our interface with Budleigh Town Council.

If you can help, please do let us know. If you know someone who could help, please do let us know. You can do this by emailing <mailto:info@ova.org.uk>. Without people helping, it becomes impossible to achieve our goals and deliver for you, our members.

2. Winter Talk Recap: Birds and People. Resolving the conflicts of estuaries

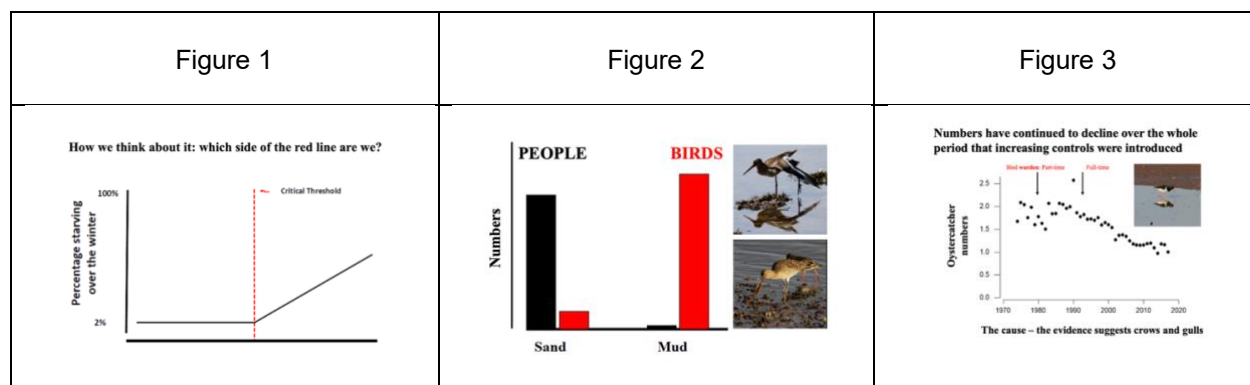
We were treated to a fabulous talk on Tuesday evening by John Goss Custard. He has spent a lifetime studying the behaviour of birdlife on estuaries, and modelling the impact of disturbances to that birdlife.

He started by explaining the importance of the UK on migrating birdlife and the role of the estuaries. I was taken aback by the volume of food eaten by such birds - who have to eat continually to build up their reserves before flying off. Did you know, for example, that:

- Redshanks need up to 30,000 small crustaceans per bird PER DAY, and up to 1,000 ragworms per bird PER DAY.
- Oystercatchers need a plate of mussels PER DAY in the autumn, and two plates in the winter.

Any disturbance (people, animals, drones, etc) to their continual eating causes them to both lose foraging time and use significant energy just to take off, fly elsewhere and start feeding again. He used a simple chart (figure 1 below) to highlight that too much disturbance can massively impact the number of birds that might starve over the winter.

John explained that humans have little impact on birdlife across estuaries (as shown in figure 2) because humans simply don't like walking across the mudflats where birds feed!



So, why have we seen populations of Oystercatchers falling on the Exe since the 1970's (as shown in figure 3 below)? The evidence suggests that crows and gulls are the main culprit - stealing food from them. Crows generally have to drop a mussel from high up to break them open, whereas Oystercatchers are very good at prying open the shells. It seems that the crows have learnt to steal! The data shows that in the 1980's 0.5% of mussels opened by Oystercatchers were stolen from them. This increased to over 16% by 2014. But that's not all - dominant Oystercatchers also steal from sub-dominant Oystercatchers.

John shared research from the baie de Somme in France comparing mild winters with severe winters. This research showed that while a mere 0.8 disturbance per hour in daylight had minimal effect on the Oystercatcher population in a MILD winter, the effect was totally profound in a SEVERE winter where the same minimal disturbance resulted in up to 50% of Oystercatchers starving.

It makes you think about nature when you see dogs, humans, horses, drones or anything else disturbing the birdlife on an estuary - these birds are literally feeding for the lives.

Thankyou John for an incredibly thought-provoking talk.

3. Talks: Winter Schedule

Our next talk is on October 15th. A local farmer, Sam Walker, will be talking about the challenges of producing food through organic farming. Please do join us at Peter Hall – doors open at 7pm.

Here are the full set of talks - please do mark your diaries for the following talks:

2025	October 15 th	Organic Farming - Recovering the Landscape and Producing food by Sam Walker (local farmer)
	November 19 th	Devon Hedges by Tom Hynes
2026	January 21 st	Update on Otter restoration project by Rick Lockwood (Chief Ranger)
	February 18 th	Have you seen my little rubber Duck by Ken Atherton A story of the Plastic Pollution of our Oceans
	March 18 th	ORCA Campaign Update – by Felicity Christie & Peter Williams

Talks are open to all. Doors open at 7pm and the ticket cost is £4.00 for members and non-members. We are also looking forward to starting talks in Ottery St. Mary. We will be sharing details of these in future newsletters and via the OVA website. Please do keep an eye out for these.

4. Walks Update: Weekly walks

Why not come out and enjoy the scenery, meet friends and learn about our local surroundings? Everyone is welcome and there is no charge for these walks. We have four great walks planned in October:

- **The Templer Way, Part 2, from Pottery Pond - industrial archaeology and natural history ... and the House of Marbles** on Wednesday 8th October [Booking required]
- **Castle and Commons** on 14th October
- **From East Budleigh to the sea and back** on Wednesday 22nd October
- **Cranbrook Castle and the Teign Gorge** on Thursday 30th October [Booking required]

Full details of all walks are available on the OVA website [here](#). Please always check the OVA website for last minute updates, cancellations or changes – one can never be sure what weather awaits us next week, let alone next month!

We have been approached by a number of people asking if we do shorter walks, or more nature walks. To cater for this, we have been talking to the team at Seachange who offer regular shorter walks. You can find out more information about Seachange walks on their web [[here](#)].

We also work very closely with the team over at Pebblebed Heaths. They also do regular ranger walks. Again, you can find more information about their walks on their web [[here](#)].

Please also remember that full OVA members can get their copy of the new "Otter Valley Walking Companion". Others can get them from local community shops and information kiosks. They are a great Christmas present for your walking friend 😊

5. ORCA Campaign to #ReviveTheRiverOtter

Thankyou to everyone who has helped our program. Here is a brief summary:

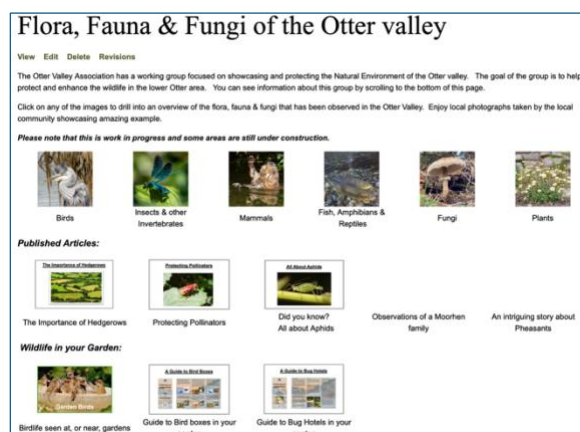
- **Testing** : 11 testing cycles are now complete and the main finding is of consistently high phosphate levels. They are still far higher than they should be (and above the Upper Safe Limit). We have had good press coverage for our testing campaign in the last few months. SWW whilst accepting our data, have no significant plans to address their contribution to the high phosphate levels in the Otter. We continue to liaise with all groups.
- **Riverfly**. Clinton Devon Estates (CDE) are starting Riverfly testing on the stretches of river within their territory. Some of our volunteers are joining in the CDE training for this. We have worked with the Riverfly Trust who have told us that the Ottery Fly fishing club are the last people to do Riverfly testing on the Otter (between 2016 and 2021). We are talking to this group about restarting the testing between Honiton and Newton Poppleford. Testing would be monthly from May to Sept.
- **Farming, in particular Maize growing**. We continue to publicise the issues with maize growing in Otterton in particular. Some has been harvested early this year, but there are no ground cover crops planted and the risk of run off and soil polluting the river is high.
- **Otter Source to Sea**. The West Country Rivers Trust is hosting a meeting about this initiative in early October, We plan to attend and participate.
- **CAG – community action groups , Devon**. ORCA have joined this group , which hold details on and publicises community groups in Devon. It can also provide training and funding opportunities.

6. Flora & Fauna Group Update

The Flora & Fauna group are looking at a number of projects including:

- **Leaky Dams**: A group called Climate Resilient Otter Catchment (CROC) has produced catchment plans for most communities along the Otter – but with the exception of Otterton. We are looking at how to work with them to produce a plan for the Otter as a whole, similar to those of the Sid, Axe etc. Leaky dams could be the key to restoring the fauna and flora along the river, as a result of slowing the flow (eg Himalayan balsam is able to thrive at the expense of other plants due to the fast flow of the river).
- **Invasive Species**: We plan to produce material on our web and through FaceBook to showcase different species as a way of raising awareness to the general public – together with who they should be reported to if seen. We also want to highlight “good news” stories – such as the river Tale near the top of the Otter where Himalayan Balsam has been largely eradicated.
- **Web & FaceBook**: We will continue to encourage updates from all supporters on our FaceBook group. We have seen a massive increase in postings about birdlife, plant life and recently Fungi. We will also continue to update the OVA website to be a showcase of the variety of Flora, Fauna and Fungi that can be seen across the parishes and countryside of our valley.

If you are interested in helping, please do get in touch. We meet regularly and have an active group of volunteers.



7. Famous People of the Valley

We have been working with local historian Michael Downes on famous people in the valley. In our next printed newsletter, we will be publishing an article on 10 very famous people who lived in the area. As a teaser for the article, we posted a collage of the 10 people on our Facebook group – resulting in significant engagement as our supporters investigated and guessed their names! Here is that same collage – how many do you recognise? Full details will be provided in our next printed newsletter !

10 Famous People from the Otter Valley – how many can you recognise?



8. Pictures from the Lower Otter Nature Reserve

A few visitors have been proving a big hit for locals – including a Juvenile Osprey, Glossy Ibis and a very rare Bairds Sandpiper. The Osprey was identified from its tag as having originated from the Tweed Valley where it was tagged on the 6th July. It has been feeding up on the Otter nature reserve prior to starting its migration south. Meanwhile, a number of Glossy Ibis have been seen on the reserve, as well as a rare Bairds Sandpiper that usually winters in South America. For those of you who enjoy watching the local birdlife, we have seen an enormous variety of birds on the Nature Reserve in the last few weeks. Here are species that have been shared recently on our Facebook group: Kingfishers, Herons, Egrets, Curlews, Common Sandpipers, Redshanks, Spotted Redshanks, Knots, Buzzards, Kestrels, Grebes, Flycatchers, Dunlins, Gulls (numerous types), Black Tailed Godwits, Wrens, Chaffinches, Cormorants, Plovers, Ducks (numerous types), Stonechats, Canada Geese, Teal, Swans, Pheasants, Spoonbills, Little Stints, Marsh Harriers,

Osprey pictures



Bairds Sandpiper



Photo credit: David R. White

Glossy Ibis



Photo credit: David R. White



Photo credit: Chris Townend



Photo credit: Chris Boorman

9. Voluntary Car Park Contributions for Heaths

From Claire Jones, Fundraising Manager at Clinton Devon Estates

The Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust will be introducing **voluntary car park contributions** across their heathland car parks from October. These contributions will support the conservation of rare and threatened wildlife, the upkeep of paths and parking areas, ongoing work to manage increasing visitor numbers, and more – keeping the heaths safe, accessible, and nature-rich now and for future generations.

Importantly, **access to the heaths remains free and open to all**: this scheme simply provides an optional way to help care for this much-loved landscape.

More info: <https://www.pebblebedheaths.org.uk/voluntary-car-park-contributions/>

10. Website & Social Media

We are continuing to update the OVA website. Please do check it out and bookmark it for quick access.

We now have TWO FaceBook groups:

- The main group continues to grow – now reaching 1,356 supporters.
- Our ORCA water quality group has now grown to 302 supporters.

If you have not seen them, please do check them out. Please also add your own articles, comments and like anything ... we'd love to hear from you!

We now have an OVA Instagram account – please do post pictures to it.

We have a number of active WhatsApp groups that we wanted you to be aware of:

- ORCA leadership team.
- ORCA Water testers.
- OVA Flora & Fauna group.
- OVA Walkers.
- OVA Town and Village Reps.
- OVA Leadership team

==== End of Email Update (September 2025) ====