

# LINKING THE LEVELS

Spring Newsletter 2025 by Maisie Taylor – UWE student with Bristol Zoological Society

## SPECIES HIGHLIGHTS

Water vole DNA has been detected in waterways throughout the project area. They are much more widespread than previously thought.

Bird surveys have been taking place at Aust Reserve. 14 previously unrecorded species have been discovered.

20km<sup>2</sup> of the project area has so far been confirmed to be mink free, protecting the estuarine birds and water vole.



2024 was a great year for the Linking the Levels (LtL) project, which is an exciting new project, starting with ecological survey work, which aims to facilitate nature recovery in a 50miles<sup>2</sup> area of South Gloucestershire's Lower Severn Vale, Levels and Shore. The project is being delivered in partnership by South Gloucestershire Council, Bristol Zoo Society, Bristol Avon Rivers Trust and has funded support from the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority.

LtL contributes to local, regional and national goals for nature including the Bristol Zoo Society's (BZS) mission, to improve habitat connectivity for UK native species in the local area. With 1 in 6 species in the United Kingdom at risk of extinction (state of Nature Report, 2023), there has never been a more important time to prioritize our precious native species and ecosystems! The current phase of LtL is designed to pave the way for nature recovery in the Severnside, by assessing its current state, and its future potential for restoration implementation.

The South Gloucestershire levels have the potential to provide a crucial habitat for some of the UK's most threatened wildlife.



*Bristol Zoological Society staff out in the community gaining support for white clawed crayfish conservation.*

## Species successes

### Glow worms

In total 67 females, two males and one larva were spotted in 14 different locations. Four of these were new locations and two had not had glow-worms recorded since the 90s!

### Estuarine birds

The team has been surveying birds using audio recorders at Aust Reserve. 60 birds were recorded on site with 11 of those being on the UK Birds of Conservation Concern Red List, including curlew, lapwing and skylark.

### Water vole

30km of waterways have been surveyed to map connectivity between the Bristol populations and the newly discovered South Glos population.

## Invasive species

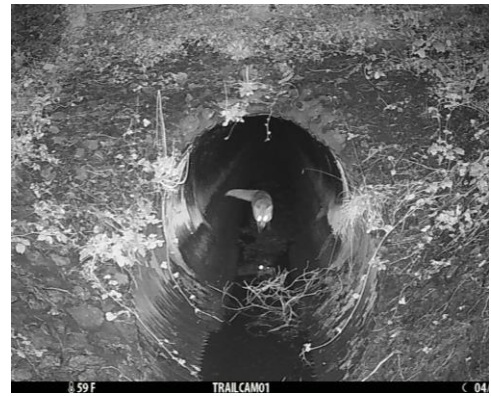
### Signal Crayfish

A population of American signal crayfish have been discovered in Thornbury. Work is being done to determine the extent of this population.

**Invasive plants** 55 kilometres surveyed for invasive plants. Approximately 3.2 km of Himalayan balsam surveyed and 90% managed with 40 volunteers involved.



*BZS staff install a mink monitoring station.*



*The team have been monitoring pathways in a fragmented landscape to ensure populations connect*

## Thanks to our Volunteers

Projects like LtL rely on the fantastic support granted by volunteers and partners in the community. This year has had an encouraging turn out, even in the primary stages of the project, with some of the highlights (below).



20 volunteers surveyed for Glow worms, for a total of 26 hours, late into the night! Community Action events to remove Himalayan Balsam has had more than 40 volunteers and five community outreach events this Winter alone. Friends of Aust nature reserve has begun meetings, with attendance set to increase in 2025.

Great engagement with local landowners and existing community who have allowed us to survey and create management plans on their land.

## What's next this spring/summer?

We have lots planned for throughout the year, particularly as the weather warms! Spring/Summer is

the best time for survey efforts, as species are often easier to identify. More activity by animals increases their likelihood of detection, and plants begin to flower and leaf out. We therefore anticipate uncovering lots more about wildlife distribution in the region and are keen to welcome nature enthusiasts of all abilities to assist us with this!



*The Severn Estuary at Thornbury Sailing Club.*

## **Birds**

We will continue to survey birds in the area surrounding Bristol Zoo project, and ground truth the audio recording collected at Aust Nature Reserve- mapping priority bird species and breeding pairs. We also aim to compare the quality of the hardware used in audio detection, creating a more robust data set.

## **Glow Worms and other Invertebrates**

Glow Worm surveys will be held once again during this 'glowing season' (late June – August). Due to great engagement last year, we intend to widen participation, perhaps with local school children.

Future management ideas at Aust Nature reserve include the creation of native wildflower meadows. The 'friends of group has already scattered some seeds which we hope will germinate. This has been done with the intention of boosting invertebrate numbers, including bees, butterflies and moths. Transect surveys will occur to monitor these populations.

## **Water vole, Bats and other mammals**

All mink rafts have been council approved and are currently deployed to survey for the presence of mink in the study area. Additionally artificial latrines, to detect Water Vole, are soon to be set up in time for the optimal surveying months, March/April. Volunteers at Hallen Marsh have even offered to assist in surveys.

Static bat detectors will be moved around the project area, and continued use of camera traps will build understanding of the route's a range of mammals take to overcome transport severance.

## **Get in touch if you would like to get involved:**

Sign up to our mailing list

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We are happy to hear from you about what details would be of best interest regarding the LtL project. Thank you!