

The Hogsmill in February 2024

The wet and often dreary conditions along the Hogsmill this month have highlighted the darkest hour of winter: muddy water, bare banks and trees, and “unwelcoming” nature reserves. But there are already signs of the dawn of spring: plenty of blossom and early flowers, though also shoots of the dreaded balsam.



Bird song has become much more noticeable, with magnificent thrushes especially vocal. Notable visitors have been cormorants, seen all along the river as well as their usual haunt, and geese checking out the new wetlands. There have also been signs that water voles have survived another winter.

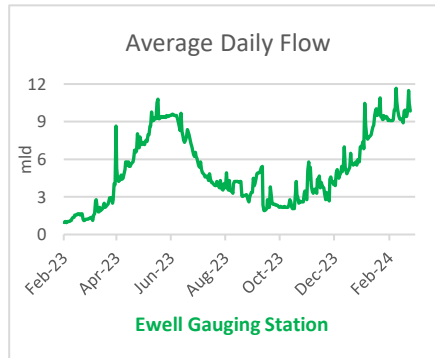
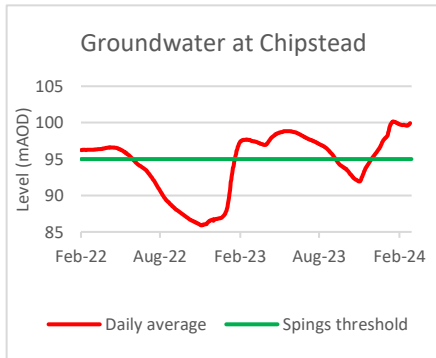


(Photo thanks to Phil)

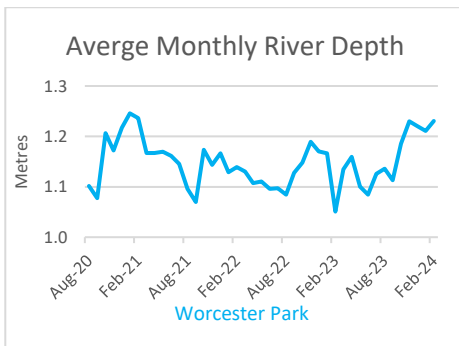
This newsletter looks at what is happening to the natural world along the Hogsmill, including the problems it faces and volunteer activities to monitor and restore its habitat, working with the South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and other local groups and alongside the Environment Agency (EA) and local water companies. This month it also reviews the variety of creatures seen along the river in 2023.

The Hogsmill in February

There's been more than twice the normal rainfall this month keeping groundwater high and the springs pumping strongly. Even though augmentation appears to have been reduced, the equivalent of 4 Olympic swimming pools of water has been flowing into the upper Hogsmill every day. Partly as a result, the Ewell stepping stones have become paddling stones!



There's also been plenty of water in the river downstream and in the meadows. On 4 days the level rose to almost ½ metre above the norm at Worcester Park and the average depth has been the highest since 2021. Not surprisingly, the water has mostly been dirty brown, especially that flowing down the Bonesgate.



Bonesgate confluence



Rose Walk



Tolworth Court Farm

The main work on the Chambermead wetlands has been completed, and a start made on planting with new elm trees. There's also been plenty of pre-spring tidying up work this month. The Moles have had 2 Hogsmill sessions, clearing scrub in Six Acre Meadow and repairing a hedge by the Bonesgate. Citizen Zoo has extended the dead hedge by the river at Rose Walk and planted wildflowers at Tolworth Court Farm.



(Photos thanks to Lower Mole Project)

Perhaps surprisingly with so much rain, neither the Epsom nor the Ewell Storm tanks has been recorded as overflowing this month. It is not known whether there have been any sewage discharges at the Hogsmill STW as the monitor there has been out-of-action since before the wet spell.

Elsewhere, the Surbiton Hill Park outfall that has recently been subject to a detailed investigation by Thames Water was still showing signs of significant pollution at the start of the month. But a quick “dry weather” survey of many of the upstream outfalls at about the same time found few indications of pollution; most notably, the large number of outfalls along the Green Lanes Stream, many of which have had pollution problems, all appeared fairly clear.



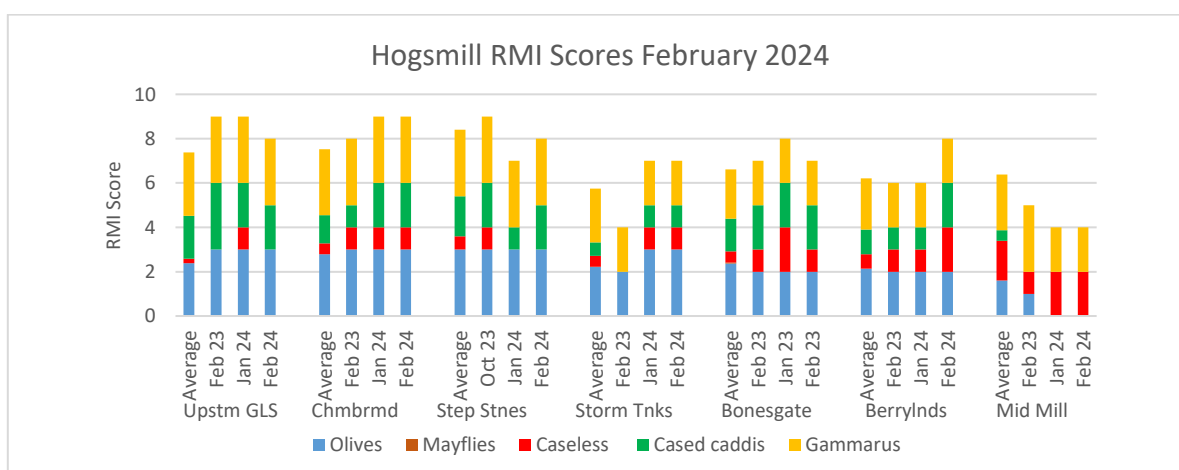
Surbiton Hill Park

If you see pollution in the river or indications of possible pollution, such as dying fish, please call the EA Hotline: 0800 80 70 60, and ideally take a photo. You can also contact Thames Water on: 0800 316 9800 (option 2); on: www.thameswater.co.uk/help/report-a-problem or on twitter: [@thameswater](https://twitter.com/thameswater).

Hogsmill RMI in February

The River Monitoring Initiative (RMI) is a national scheme that uses “scores” based on counts of a few “water quality sensitive” invertebrates collected in net samples to assess river health. Each site has a “trigger” below which scores could indicate problems and these are reported to EA for follow-up action.

7 main-river sites were surveyed between February 10th and 22nd, more spread out than normal but all fairly soon after rain and in deeper water than usual. Despite quite turbulent river conditions, the results were again very similar to the previous month: a few changes in score all from small shifts in caddis numbers, though there were some notable high counts:



- For a third month in a row there was a breach of the trigger at Middle Mill. This *could* be linked to sewage discharges at the Hogsmill STW, which even in the absence of data for February have been

very high this winter. But such strings of bad results are not new: there were breaches in 5 out of 6 months in the winter of 2018-19; and breaches tend to depend on fine margins, especially whether any of the typically small number of olives here happen to be found in the trays;

- The biggest change in score was the 2-point rise at Berrylands with improvements in all 4 species' counts, but this was largely a bounce-back from poor January results and was driven by small increases in cased and caseless caddis counts;
- The total number of individuals counted was up by a quarter from January, with higher olive numbers at all sites apart from Middle Mill and a record count at the Ewell Storm Tanks. Cased caddis numbers were also up at most sites, and much higher than usually found this early. The count at Bonesgate was also a record, including a variety of shapes and sizes again unusual for this time of year.



Bonesgate (photos thanks to Kim)

“Who’s been playing along my river?”

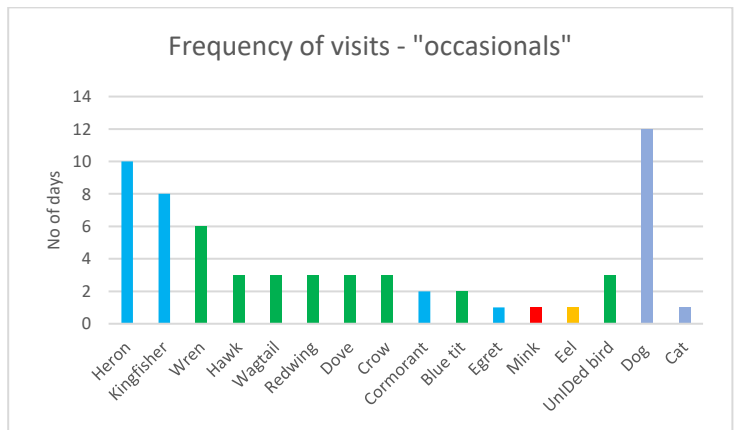
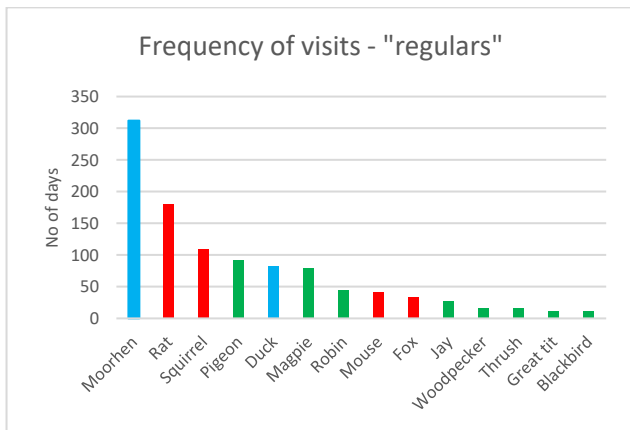
As part of the project to re-introduce water voles, trail cameras have been installed at various points along the Hogsmill. The main aim is to “catch” predators, notably mink, and hopefully to find voles, though so far they have proved elusive. But the cameras also pick up any other creatures that fall within their range on the water, bank or overhanging trees so they provide a picture of life along the Hogsmill.

One of the cameras, sited around the mid-section of the river, that was operational for 340 days in 2023 identified over 30 different species visiting that stretch of the river in 2023. Using the number of days a particular species was spotted as an indicator, top of the list by some way were moorhen, which were seen most days around the fringes of the water, mainly 1-2 adults though a juvenile appeared later in the year.

Perhaps surprisingly, the next most frequent visitors were rats, pictured on over half the days, mainly scabbling around the bank at night but also swimming. There was a range of sizes, so probably a family, and they were regularly joined by mice and a fox no doubt looking for a tasty meal. With squirrels also out regularly there was quite a nighttime community of mammals by the river, though so far no voles.

On the water, a duck family seems to have successfully brought up a good number of their brood, which seems quite rare along the river, while there were occasional visits from the “giants” of the river: heron, egret and cormorant; as well as flashes of blue from passing kingfishers; and possibly a passing eel.

There were plenty of visits from local birds, with not surprisingly pigeon, robin and magpie being prominent. But the camera also picked up some of the more spectacular birds that are usually quite elusive: jay, woodpecker and the occasional hawk. A mink was spotted though it didn't appear to stay long and there were frequent visits from local dogs and even one from a cat!



(Photos thanks to Citizen Zoo)