

Colin's story with Chiltern Rangers 2019

I joined Chiltern Rangers in October 2018 with the original intention of simply helping restore the watercress beds in the River Wye. Almost a year later, I've learnt that being a volunteer has been much more varied and rewarding than I could have imagined.

I, together with other regular 'Fab Friday' volunteers, have turned up to help each Friday and have also lent a hand on the occasional weekday or weekend if required. As the weeks and the months passed, the seasons and the nature of the work have changed, and this is what I have found to be most satisfying.

I've met many new people, accomplished new tasks and learnt new skills, all the while feeling that I've been making a real difference.

The extent and diversity of Chiltern Rangers' 'catchment area' has amazed me. I've worked in woodlands on a Ministry of Defence site near Bicester to chalk streams near Berkhamsted, as well as, of course, in and around High Wycombe. Every day has been different.

Autumn and Winter work comprised mainly woodland management. Rangers with chainsaw skills felled trees that presented a danger to the public, cleared areas to open the tree canopy and removed invasive rhododendron. Working together as a team with the Rangers, the volunteers stacked the logs to create refuge for hedgehogs, woodmice and other small mammals and insects. Used the brushwood to form dead-hedging that will eventually provide nesting sites for birds, or turned it into woodchips to line the pathways.

What has impressed me is the 'behind the scenes' planning that the Rangers put into each project. Any tree felled is only after careful consideration of a long term plan for the health of the woodland. Removing diseased trees and thinning out those that are growing too closely together to allow stronger trees to grow and mature properly. The Blackthorn, Hawthorn and Wych elm that we planted around the woodland margin will help protect the trees from damaging gales while simultaneously providing food and shelter for birds and animals.

When Spring and Summer arrived focus of the work turned from tree felling and planting to maintenance and restoration. In the woods, I've learnt new skills such as repairing and installing steps on some of the steep slopes, using unfamiliar tools such as mauls and even finding out a new vocabulary, for example 'stobs', long stakes wedged in place behind timber boards that shore up the vertical face of each step.

It's been good to return to the woodlands and other sites too, to see that the work done in the Autumn and Winter has already had an impact. New plants are growing in the woodland clearings, birds are using the nest boxes, nightingales have returned to their nesting sites and rare butterflies are making a come-back.

I've helped remove invasive plants such as New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*) from the River Wye and Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) from the River Gade near

Berkhamsted, thereby helping to restore these rare chalk streams and all the benefits they provide to aquatic and riparian species.

It's not just being outside in the country and the physical work that I've enjoyed, it's the people I've met too; such an interesting mix. The Rangers, bird experts, butterfly experts, the other volunteers, teams from companies, students on work experience, school children – all with varying levels of experience and all willing to share their knowledge and skills. It was particularly rewarding to see the enthusiasm with which a group of children from Ash Hill school did their nature study in Gomm's wood. They keenly photographed and recorded all the wild flowers, trees and insects that they could find, excitedly bringing back the specimens they collected for identification. Apprehensive at first about handling some of the insects, they soon all happily held them and allowed them to crawl over them; budding naturalists of the future.

Chiltern Rangers looks after its volunteers. They really appreciate the work that the volunteers do, and they regularly tell us that too. It's not all one sided, the Rangers invest in its volunteers. They have provided instruction to me and to others in brushcutting, I've learnt how to service and maintain tools, will attend a fungus identification course in October, and will shortly return to the MoD site near Bicester to observe the ornithologist ring the nightingales and warblers that are benefiting from our winter labours.

I've always loved the outdoors and been interested in bird and plant life, but being a volunteer with the Chiltern Rangers has added an extra dimension; I've learnt and gained a tremendous amount.

Colin Duncan
Volunteer Ranger