



Ripple News

Rivers Involving People, Places & Leading by Example

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Batty about the Ballinderry

A team of volunteers have participated in an all-Ireland survey to help improve our understanding of the Daubenton's 'river' bat.

Although seemingly quite common throughout Ireland, little is known about the actual distribution of the Daubenton's bat (*Myotis daubentonii*). This short-eared bat with a small body is about 5cm in length with a wingspan of 25cm and lives in wooded areas near rivers or open water. It is often referred to as the 'river' or 'water' bat.

Stealthy and agile in flight, the Daubenton's bat patrols the surface of the river, flying about 30cm above the water to catch small flying insects rising from the river. It is a common misconception that bats are blind, rather their sight is limited and so they use a special technique called echo-location to find their food. By making a fast-clicking noise and waiting for the echo to bounce back, the bats locate insects in flight and snatch them from the air with their remarkably large feet.

Mark Horton, RIPPLE Project Coordinator said, "A group of 12 volunteers on the Ballinderry River have been trained by Bats Conservation Ireland to identify and count Daubenton's bats. Armed with bat detectors to pick up on the bats fast-clicking noises and a torch to see them zipping up and down the river, volunteers each chose a one kilometre long stretch of the river, which was surveyed on two nights during the month of August. A five minute count was made every 100 metres along the one km stretch. All involved were staggered by the numbers seen, for at one site alone, at Lower Kildress, 64 bats were counted in five minutes. It is safe to say that Daubenton's bat is common along large stretches of the river, at least from Wellbrook down to the Lough shore."



Dr Tina Aughney, Bat Conservation Ireland said, "The data is now being collated from across the whole of the island of Ireland to build a map of distribution and associated habitat features. The survey will be repeated again next August, right across Ireland, and more sites will be surveyed on the Ballinderry to determine how much of the Ballinderry is home to this secretive and fascinating bat."

The all-Ireland survey, managed by Bat Conservation Ireland, is funded by the Republic of Ireland's National Parks and Wildlife Service and by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. For more information about the survey or the ecology and conservation of bats visit www.batconservationireland.org or contact Dr Tina Aughney on 00 353 86 4049468



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ON THE RIVER THIS SEASON

Confusion reigns over the countryside. As earlier unseasonably warm spells were interrupted by cold snaps autumn struggled to get underway and the leaves on the trees, denying us their usual dazzling display of golden, browns and reds, were stripped from the branches by gusty winds. In the river, fish drawn by the floods make their way from the lower river up through Kildress and Wellbrook to the spawning grounds of the upper reaches. In preparation for their arrival, the river has had a bit of a clean-out with high flows washing the silt from the gravel in readiness for the spawning and egg laying to begin. We wait with baited breath to see if this winter will spare our watery river-dwellers the fight for survival which they endured last year.



RIVER-FLIES TELL NO LIES

Twenty-two volunteers are monitoring the river-fly life at 28 sites in the Ballinderry River system – enabling them to detect pollution at the earliest opportunity. So, how are the river-flies able to tell us about the quality of our river?

It's fair to say that the riverfly monitoring team never know what they are going to find when they go out to check the river. One thing they have learnt is that you can't tell how clean the water is just by looking at it; visual clues are useful but even the murkiest water can be free from pollution. Smell is often the first sign that something might be amiss; a whiff of slurry, detergent or sewage can all be clues. The real test is when they look at the aquatic insects at the site – the bugs don't lie! If there has been a pollution incident since the last time a sample was taken the most sensitive bugs will be missing. The more severe the pollution the less bugs there will be.

So far most of the sites monitored are good and have stayed that way. However, there are parts of the river system where pollution has been detected, ranging in severity from bad to ugly.

The impacts of failing wastewater treatment works, agricultural pollution, industrial discharges and poor land management have all been detected and as a result of the project, dealt with swiftly and in a proportionate manner.

On visiting a monitoring point for the first time, one volunteer was confronted with a river running red with silt. Discharge from a settling pond at a quarry was the cause. On another occasion, the first visit to a site found

no river-flies present, even though the water was clear. NIEA Water Quality Inspectors traced the source of the problem back to a farm where slurry was escaping to the river, something which had been going on unnoticed for years. Immediate action was taken to stop the pollution with further work being done to clean up the site.

At another monitoring point on the river things seemed fine for a couple of months when all of a sudden, the bugs just disappeared. Several inspections have been carried out to identify the source, turning up lots of little problems but nothing that would account for the massive loss of fly-life. Further detailed investigations are now being carried out by NIEA to determine the source of the problem.

The project has also helped avoid potential pollution problems on the river. When large earth moving works had been carried out, bare soil spoil heaps had been left on the riverbank. The volunteer recognised that the next downpour of rain would have resulted in huge amounts of silt entering the river. This would have clogged up the precious gravel beds which fish rely on for spawning. Calls made to an apologetic landowner resulted in diggers returning to the site within hours to move all the soil back a safe distance.

What is clear to see is that the quality of river water is constantly changing, responding to everything from shifting weather conditions and one-off serious pollution incidents to on-going persistent pollution problems. Even the most pristine parts of river can be blighted by a serious pollution incident.

Some of the pollution problems detected on the river have been going on for a long time and would still be occurring if not for the dedication of the Ballinderry Riverfly Monitoring Team keeping an eye of our rivers and streams. Several prosecution cases are pending, with NIEA preparing case files for the Public Prosecution Service on persistent offenders.

The volunteers know that they must not be complacent. The information they are gathering is critical to improving the health and wellbeing of the river. A cleaner river can help us deliver our visions for the river making it a safer and more enjoyable place for its people and its wildlife.



WWF SAYS THANK YOU TO RIPPLE CHAMPIONS

Over the last two years a team of dedicated volunteers made sure that the community's plan for the river was put into action. This dedication has been recognised at a special awards ceremony on the river.



Following the creation of the community's River Action Plan in 2009, 115 actions were identified under four key visions for the Ballinderry River. The community wanted to have a cleaner river, more wildlife in and along the river, better access to the river and a better understanding of the river environment.

The actions behind these visions were adopted by volunteers who we have called RIPPLE Champions. Chosen by the Champions, the actions they adopted reflect their particular interests in the river and their enthusiasm in affecting improvements for its people and its wildlife.

The projects which the Champions have undertaken are wide ranging and have touched everyone from local people to policy makers in the Northern Ireland Government. River clean-ups, invasive plant control, creating new walks along the river, recording wildlife, restoring habitat, improving water quality and providing local expertise and knowledge to teach others about the river and its rare and threatened species are just some of the activities which have been led by the Champions.

The RIPPLE Champion awards took place at the Otter Lodge and WWF Northern Ireland presented plaques to each champion. The awards were followed by a buffet and plenty of catching up as volunteers talked to each other about what they had been doing and what they still plan to do.

Mark Horton RIPPLE Project Coordinator explained 'The whole idea of the RIPPLE project was for the community to create and take ownership of their plan for the river. The Champions have bought skills and knowledge to their respective actions and taken them far beyond what anyone might have expected. Much of what has been achieved has been done by persuading others to volunteer and get things done through people power. However, it should not be overlooked that the Champions actions also attracted in excess of £80,000 worth of funding for the river over the last two years, helping turn the community's visions for the Ballinderry into reality. The time and enthusiasm they have invested in the project is testament to the will of local people to see the Ballinderry restored and protected.'

Claire Cockerill WWF-NI Freshwater Policy Officer said 'the RIPPLE Project has occurred at an important time for our rivers coinciding with the implementation of new legislation which aims to improve the quality of rivers and lakes throughout Europe. This legislation encouraged the involvement of the public. The RIPPLE project has demonstrated just what can be achieved when a group, such as those involved in RIPPLE, combines their skills, knowledge, interests and enthusiasm for their community and their river and work alongside other stakeholders, such as government departments, the Local Council, businesses and NGOs. It is WWF's view that this project demonstrates best practice in river basin management and we will continue to share this achievement and encourage application of this approach with others across Europe.'

The Heritage Lottery funding for RIPPLE has now come to an end and WWF have handed the RIPPLE project over to the Ballinderry River Enhancement Association and the community of the river. BREA and the Champions will continue to implement the action plan, developing new projects and attracting new funding for the river. Leo Cassidy, BREA Chairperson, said 'WWF's RIPPLE project has left a legacy for the Ballinderry. There is still much to be done on the river and BREA is committed to supporting the Champions, further developing the plan for the river and restoring the Ballinderry to its former greatness.'

GETTING INVOLVED COULDN'T BE EASIER

If you would like to get involved in the RIPPLE project or find out what is happening on the river in your area then please contact us.

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NEW WALKING CARD PACKS

We are delighted to announce the production of 'Ballinderry River Walks', a guide to river-side and lough-side walks in the Ballinderry River system, near Cookstown. Through the RIPPLE project, this series of walking cards has been produced in association with Cookstown District Council.

Packs of 10 user-friendly cards detail where to start, features of interest, level of difficulty, existence of facilities and the presence of any restrictions (e.g. dog access). To pick up a copy of these free guides, please contact:

Cookstown Information Tourist Centre

Burn Road

Cookstown

Tel: 028 867 69949

Email: tic@cookstown.gov.uk

or

Ballinderry River Enhancement Association

Ballinderry Fish Hatchery

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