



The City Nature Challenge started in 2016 as a competition between Los Angeles and San Francisco, becoming an international event with almost 700 cities taking part this year.

Thanks to the enthusiasm and leadership of York University's Smriti Safaya and John Terenzini, York finished in the top 3 UK cities in the number of observations, species and

Meeting the Challenge

people involved. When you think of the size of York compared to London, Birmingham or Bristol, it's a real achievement, to which RFS members made a significant contribution.

Worldwide, the winner was La Paz in Bolivia with 166,000 observations, followed by Monterrey in Mexico with 82,000 observations. York was 46th out of 690 participating cities with 12,000 observations.

We set the RFS gazebo up in New Earswick and Huntington as a base, then, with the expert help of Margaret Atherden, Alastair Fitter and Yves Bouvet, members scoured the area looking for anything living that could be photographed as evidence via iNaturalist, which the Challenge used as proof of identity. For anyone who has not tried it, iNaturalist is an excellent way to identify what you see, and if neither you nor the app know what you have found, there is always an expert somewhere who will identify it for you!

Even the least competitive amongst us soon became involved and turned into an avid specimen hunter. One of the aims of the

Challenge is to get people out and about looking more closely at what wildlife there is in their immediate environment. It works! You might start with an everyday plant such as White Deadnettle, but then you look more closely and find a 7-Spot Ladybird and a White Lipped

Snail on its leaves, both easy to see. Look more closely still and there is a Common European Ambersnail. It goes on, but you get the point.....

I don't know how many RFS members took part: some used the gazebo as a base, whilst others went off on their own, but all the observations uploaded counted, so thank you. As a permanent record John Terenzini created a 'River Foss' community which collates all the results within ~100m of the river and its tributaries. This will stay live and record any observations in the area made via iNaturalist, allowing us to build a picture of the wildlife around the river, as well as compare 2024 results with 2025, should York enter again. If you're out and about and see something interesting, particularly if it's seasonal, then please add it to our database.

To date, 215 observers have identified 703 species within the Foss perimeter. The three most frequent sightings were:

1. Harlequin Ladybird - Originally from Asia, it arrived here in 2004, and has become one of our most common ladybirds.

2. Cow Parsley - growing widely in meadows, by hedgerows and woodland.

3. Canada Goose: adept at living near humans, they can be a pest in our parks (and golf courses!).

The Challenge made for a few fun and informative days, and hopefully will have laid the foundations of a species recording database for 'our' river.

Mike Gray



Above: Gathering at our gazebo in All Saints car park, Huntington

Below: Looking for river species at Huntington



Above: Canada Geese, seen frequently

Below: Harlequin ladybird, one of our most common sightings





Summer Scenario

JULY

During July Full 28 mile Foss Walk over two days. Details to follow. Would anyone be prepared to lead the walk, please? All necessary information will be provided. Contact: Derek Chivers.

Tues 23 July 6.00 pm Walk. Blue Bridge to Huntington (4.4 miles) Refreshments at Blacksmith's Arms afterwards. Meet at Blue Bridge. Contact: Derek Chivers. Please let Derek know if you are coming.

Thurs 25 July 7.00 pm Pint 'n a Chat. Meet at The Mason's Arms, Fishergate. All welcome, just turn up and look for us. Contact: Christine Gray.

AUGUST

Sat 17 August 9.00 am Litter Pick. Meet at footbridge on Foss Islands Road. Contact: Barry Thomas. Please let Barry know if you are coming.

Thurs 22 August 7.00 pm Pint 'n a Chat. Meet at a venue to be decided. All welcome, just turn up and look for us. Contact: Christine Gray.

SEPTEMBER

Thurs 26 September 7.00 pm Pint 'n a Chat. Meet at a venue to be decided. All welcome, just turn up and look for us. Contact: Christine Gray.

OCTOBER

Sat 5 October 9.00 am Litter Pick. Meet at footbridge on Foss Islands Road. Contact: Barry Thomas. Please let Barry know if you are coming.

Wed 18th Oct 7.00 pm October Open meeting. Strensall Village Hall. Contact: John Millett.

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Notice Board

Help Needed ...

The Balsam Bashing will soon be coming to an end for this year. Why not join us for a final satisfying session? All sessions will be listed in 'Balsam Bashing 2024' on the website, riverfossociety.co.uk.

Wanted!

Committed Citizen Scientists to help monitor the health of the River Foss by kick sampling

The River Foss Society is now part of a Citizen Science project, working in partnership with the Environment Agency, the University of York, St Nicks and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, to monitor the river for chemical and biological water quality, the presence of Water Vole, Otter and Mink, the improvement of bankside vegetation, etc.

An important part of this project will involve regular biannual sampling of the macroinvertebrates, those small, unnoticed creatures that are a food source for fish, birds and mammals, help maintain water quality and are incredibly useful as indicators of pollution.

This is where kick sampling comes in. We need teams of two or more people to sample a site or sites, twice a year in spring and autumn to provide information on the biological quality of the river. We are currently monitoring 13 sites on the main river and one on a tributary.

Kick sampling involves one of the team getting into the river, kicking the substrate for a set time and catching the dislodged creatures in a net. The animals caught are identified and counted and from what we find we can assess the biological health of the river at that site using biological indices.

Full training will be given in kick sampling, identification of the animals and how to use the biological indices.

If you would like more information or would like to get involved, please contact Barbara_Hilton@msn.com. This is a real opportunity for you to help monitor the health of your local river.

Don't forget our website:

www.riverfossociety.co.uk

Bivalve molluscs, related to slugs and snails, have evolved two hard shells (valves) to enclose their soft bodies, hinged at the top, opened and closed by muscles. They breathe and feed through two tubes (siphons), one with water flowing in, and one with water flowing out, feeding by filtering water as it passes in via the inflowing siphon. Most bivalves have a muscular foot which helps with locomotion, digging and anchoring themselves.

Bivalves existed 500 million years ago. Their evolution lagged behind all other animal groups with new species evolving only very slowly, but now they are one of the most diverse groups with around 10,000 species today. All are aquatic although mainly marine. In the UK we have 31 native freshwater species, found in environments ranging from muddy canals to gravel beds of fast flowing rivers. We have found two in our recent river monitoring although there were considerably more found in Foss surveys from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s.

The Swan Mussel (*Anodonta cygnea*) is the largest British mussel, up to 15cm long. It is common in the mud of slow flowing rivers

Marvellous Molluscs

Barbara Hilton introduces us to bivalve molluscs found in the Foss



Swan Mussel. Photo: Jan Van Uytoanck, Observation.org



Pea Mussel (Sphaerium corneum) with foot extended. Photo: Gilles San Martin <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

or mud lined lakes, where it buries itself, sometimes with only the tip exposed for respiration and feeding on particles of decaying vegetation and small live food. Reproduction in spring needs clean water and the presence of bottom-living fish to which the larvae (glochidia) attach, feed on the fishes' mucus, enclose in a protective capsule called a cyst and eventually drop off as small juvenile mussels. Mussels grow by adding rings to the outer edge of their shells, which can be seen in the photo. Their numbers have been declining due to agricultural drainage schemes, diffuse pollution, excess siltation and eutrophication.

Pea Mussels (*Pisidium* spp and *Sphaerium* spp), also called clams due to their rounder shells, are small, 1 to 2.5cm long depending on species, can tolerate a wide range of conditions and are quite active as they can climb rocks and plants. They feed by filtering small particles of algae, bacteria and organic matter, are hermaphrodite and brood up to 20 eggs internally, releasing their offspring as miniature adults which begin filter feeding soon after birth

Barbara Hutton

Lifting the Litter!

On 6 April, the first organized litter pick of the year, 11 RFS members turned up at the meeting point – the footbridge on Foss Islands road. Three people were allocated to work on the YCC boat, Foxy, and the others split into two groups to head downstream collecting litter along the bankside. A considerable amount of litter was collected at the well-known black spots – the Castle car park and Castle Mills bridge.

Just over 2 hours after setting off, we all met up at the



Castle Mills Lock, where all the litter that we had collected was loaded onto the YCC boat. It also enabled us to take the attached group photograph.

The boat then made its return journey to the start point - still collecting further litter from the surface of the water. The final action was to lift off the boat all the litter, which included two bicycles, and place it onto the back of a large flat-backed CYC lorry, for disposal.

Barry Thomas

The Foss & Upper Ouse Stakeholder Partnership is a group of organisations actively monitoring and managing the River Foss. It includes, among others, the local councils, research groups from York's Universities, Natural England, the Internal Drainage Board, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, St Nicks, the Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust, and the River Foss Society. The Partnership aims

Who cares about the Foss?

to raise awareness of projects happening

across the catchment area and supports strategic planning and collaboration to improve the habitat of the Foss and Ouse.



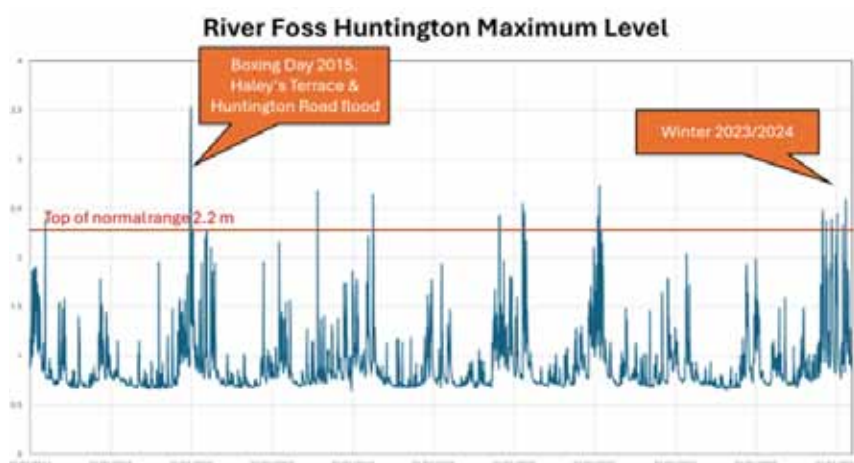
Members at the field trip

In April about 20 members of the Partnership met for a field trip on the Foss to discuss green corridors, pollution studies, surveys and citizen science. The event was hosted on the riverbank by Alistair Gray (RFS) and Maria Gill (Senior Green Corridor Officer at St Nicks) and was organised by Monika Smejja from the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

We started the morning with a brief overview of the habitat and birdlife of the Foss near Yearsley Pool and then discussed the flooding in 2015 and the impact of our wettest winter ever in 2023/24. Historically, flood management has included dredging



Alistair explains how water vole sampling works



Water level and flood events on the Foss

and re-profiling of the Foss riverbanks, and the Partnership is working towards more wildlife-friendly solutions.

Representatives from University of York demonstrated their ECOMIX water sampler, which takes daily samples on the Foss as part of a Yorkshire-wide rivers study. The four-year project looks at the impact on water quality and ecosystems of chemicals from farming,

road runoff, cosmetics, vet medicines and sewage. The aim is to identify toxic chemical combinations, model pollution impacts and to provide a predictive model for future pollution and its mitigation.

RFS members then explained ongoing water vole surveys and mink management methods, and a "kick-sample" was taken from the Foss as part of the RFS study of aquatic invertebrates. It scored 63 points on the BMWP scale, ranking as "fair", with the invertebrate assemblage moderately impacted by pollution.

St Nicks run the York Green Corridors initiative, which covers the Ouse, the Foss, Tang Hall Beck and

Osbalwick Beck, and our field trip continued with a walk along the Foss upstream from Yearsley Pool, where the Internal Drainage Board is now allowing St Nicks to manage vegetation on the riverbank. On the lower bank of the two-stage channel, vegetation is left to grow longer in spring and summer to provide cover for wildlife, including water voles. Tansy plants have been introduced to provide habitat for the threatened Tansy Beetle. Nettle strimming is now selectively undertaken to allow other plants to establish, and balsam pulling is a collaborative effort. St Nicks work closely with the RFS and York St John University, who own land along this stretch of the Foss.

The field meeting was successful in its aim of showcasing the issues facing the River Foss. It highlighted the work that RFS members and others do in collaborating to improve the habitat of the Foss and the wider catchment area, and enabled members of the Partnership to discuss future projects, and to better understand the interconnectedness of their work.

Alistair Gray

We were all ready to put up the gazebo on Foss Island Road over the May bank holiday for another festival, when we were told that it would not be taking place this year. After a brief discussion we decided to go ahead anyway, albeit for only one day. It's a pleasurable occasion with a chance to show the public what we do, and kids of all ages are fascinated by Barbara Hilton and Andy Mulholland's pre-

Our own little festival!



Meeting the public



sentation of the macroinvertebrates to be found on and in the riverbed.

Barry Thomas arranged for York City Council's pontoon 'Foxy' to do a litterpick up and down the lower reaches of the river as part of our display. The result was another pile of supermarket trolleys and other assorted detritus to the shame of all the thoughtless and uncaring individuals who use the river instead of the tip.

We spent an enjoyable day talking to members of the public from far and wide, and although it was less busy than it might have been if the festival had taken place, we were still fully occupied for most of the day. We gained a few new members and were able to hear about the concerns of many residents, as well as a few plaudits – always appreciated!

Mike Gray

Macroinvertebrates are always popular

I've never seen so much balsam, nor such thick and healthy stems! We've been trying to control the 'stuff' for seven or more years now, and this is the most prolific year I can remember.

Bashing the Balsam

Last year was an outlier with fewer plants than before appearing later than usual due to poor growing conditions in the spring. But, having just had a very wet winter it was likely we'd see more this year. Looking along the roadsides and in farm ditches over previous summers it was clear that balsam is very widespread indeed all the way down from Oulston Reservoir. As the seeds remain viable on the ground for several years, it was inevitable that if we had high water levels they would be spread downstream – and that's exactly what's happened. During the winters of 2021/22 and 2022/23 the river at Huntington flow gauge didn't reach 2m above base, indeed it was at around 0.7m for much of the time. Last winter it exceeded the 2m

level eight times, covering the upper banks and the floodplain where the balsam grows, and bringing seeds down with it.



We cannot eliminate it: most of the land upstream is farmland where access is limited or impossible, so all we can do is remove it in accessible areas where it could expose the banks to erosion



Note the thick stems

when it dies back each winter.

By the time you read this, depending on the weather, it will be starting to go to seed, at which point we would do more harm than good by pulling it and spreading the seeds even more widely. However, if you could help, please look at the website for the latest news.

Mike Gray

Exploring

On Saturday 6 April, a small group of Foss walkers gathered on a surprisingly warm morning, hoping to avoid

both the frequent downpours of the season and the resulting mud! Our aim was to follow the Foss Walk from Huntington All Saints Church to the John Carr Bridge at Strensall.

Walking along the west bank of the Foss as far as Earswick Bridge, we noted recent work on both the path and the trees. Having crossed the bridge we walked past the tennis courts and park area near Earswick Village Hall, before crossing the river once again at a footbridge near Haxby Lock Cottage. Once on Landing Lane, we detoured through the water meadow area that is part of a current conservation project to rejoin the Foss Walk on the road from Haxby to Towthorpe.

On the way we looked at the site of the planned new Haxby railway station and also at an area of land to be used as an educational facility for disaffected teenagers. Leaving the road with relief we crossed a rather muddy field to rejoin the Foss just before Towthorpe Bridge.



Conquering Old Humpy just outside Strensall

From here, our route meandered pleasantly along the west bank of the river with a brief rural feeling soon replaced by the beginnings of Strensall on the opposite bank.

Recent rain had raised the level of the river by the railway bridge, but luckily our side of the river was passable, although muddy. Our next bridge was 'Old Humpy', the oldest remaining bridge on the Foss, from 1796, although labelled 'New Bridge' on the map! The muddiest section of the walk followed, with care taken lest anyone should take an unwanted dip in the river.

The final section of the walk took us past the estate built on the site of the old Tannery before we reached the John Carr Bridge. A short walk took us to the welcoming Ship Inn, before a bus ride back to Huntington for some and a re-tracing of steps along the path for others.

Derek Chivers

On 20 May six RFS volunteers undertook training at Westfield Beck on how to spot evidence of water vole. The aim was to then apply this training to looking for water vole from canoes on the River Foss. On the beck we waded for about an hour, seeing water vole feeding stations, with vegetation remnants cut at a distinctive 45 degree angle, their latrines with distinctive green tic-tac shaped droppings, and burrows on the bank.

Seen any water voles lately?



Evidence of water vole feeding

Canoe investigation on the Foss has begun above Yearsley Pool, but unlike last year, no water vole evidence was found. A wet winter, and many floods, may have removed the small populations or it may be that further canoe trips later in the season or at different locations will be more successful. Lack of evidence of water voles is not proof of absence and it may be that they are present in areas not yet investigated or stretches where banks are not easily accessed by canoe.

Alistair Gray

On 4 May, whilst the River Foss Society had an information gazebo in Foss Islands Road, 12 members turned up at the footbridge at 9.00 am. Four were allocated to litter picking on the CYC boat, and the rest split into two groups, litter picking along the bankside downstream towards Castle Mills lock.

On the day, the water level was above normal due to recent rainfall, and this resulted in us not collecting any larger items such as shopping trolleys and bicycles, usually on the river bed.

We did, however, recover a significant amount from the surface of the river and the bank-sides. This could be seen from the rubbish that we transferred from the boat onto the CYC vehicle, which was waiting at the start/finish point.

Bags of Litter



The team working on Foxy

Barry Thomas

On the Foss

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