

The kidneys of the landscape

#mendipwater



Only 3% of the world's water is fresh water, and two-thirds of this is locked up and unavailable (World Wildlife Fund). Open water on top of Mendip is a very rare sight compared with the surrounding Levels. So where there is standing water – where streams begin their journeys or where old dew ponds nestle in the depressions of farmland – it's a haven for wildlife. They are watering holes for birds and mammals, and vital breeding and feeding sites for amphibians and reptiles, such as great crested newts and grass snakes.

The limestone geology and topography of the Mendip landscape means that water doesn't hang around too long – gravity and the acidic nature of rainwater helps it to seep through tiny cracks, swallets and larger cave systems. In fact, most of the landscape is beneath our feet. The Mendip Hills conceals the largest underground river system in Britain. This 'limestone aquifer' plays an important job helping to filter and clean the water, like our kidneys, until it re-emerges above ground. Much of this water then finds its way into one of the three reservoirs at the foot of the hills – Cheddar Reservoir, Blagdon Lake and Chew Valley Lake. They supply drinking water to 1.1million people in the Bristol Water area and this vital 'ecosystem service' for society is one of the AONB's special qualities. Mendip water even supplies the Roman baths in Bath!



In addition, these large bodies of fresh water and their surrounding reedbeds, wet grassland and wet woodland help to filter the water, and are internationally important for wildlife. We've lost 90% of our wetland habitats in the last 100 years, and over 10% of our fresh water and wetland species are threatened with extinction in the UK (The Wildlife Trusts). Chew Valley Lake is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area, and is an internationally important staging post for migratory birds, especially waders, terns, warblers and swallows. It's one of the most important inland waters in Britain for wintering wildfowl, and the catchment is home to endangered species such as white-clawed crayfish and water vole. Numbers of this charismatic wetland mammal have declined by 95% in the last few decades – for this reason it is one of our 'champion species' that we'll soon be promoting through our new [Nature Recovery Plan](#).

We must do more to recover nature and support the kidneys of the landscape. From a watery perspective this means improving land management both up at the source, on top of Mendip, and along our streams and rivers.

By enhancing habitat and creating new wetland systems, planting trees in the right places, reducing diffuse pollution and soil runoff, and working with natural processes, we can clean up our precious water and slow the flow to reduce flood risk downstream at the same time. With only 14% of rivers in England considered to be at 'Good Ecological Status' (Water Framework Directive) we have a long way to go; but with the support of landowners,

funding, and passionate organisations like Bristol Avon Rivers Trust delivering projects on the ground, we can start to turn things around.

Our [Farming in Protected Landscapes](#) programme that can support farmers with grants and the [Green Recovery Challenge Fund 'Levels Up'](#) project are two examples of what we're doing right now to improve the health of our landscape, and in turn, the health of all species, including our own.