



NEWSLETTER 89

Spring 2026

Eight years on the Walkway: What our River Patrol data is telling us



Cormorant by Tom Kelly.

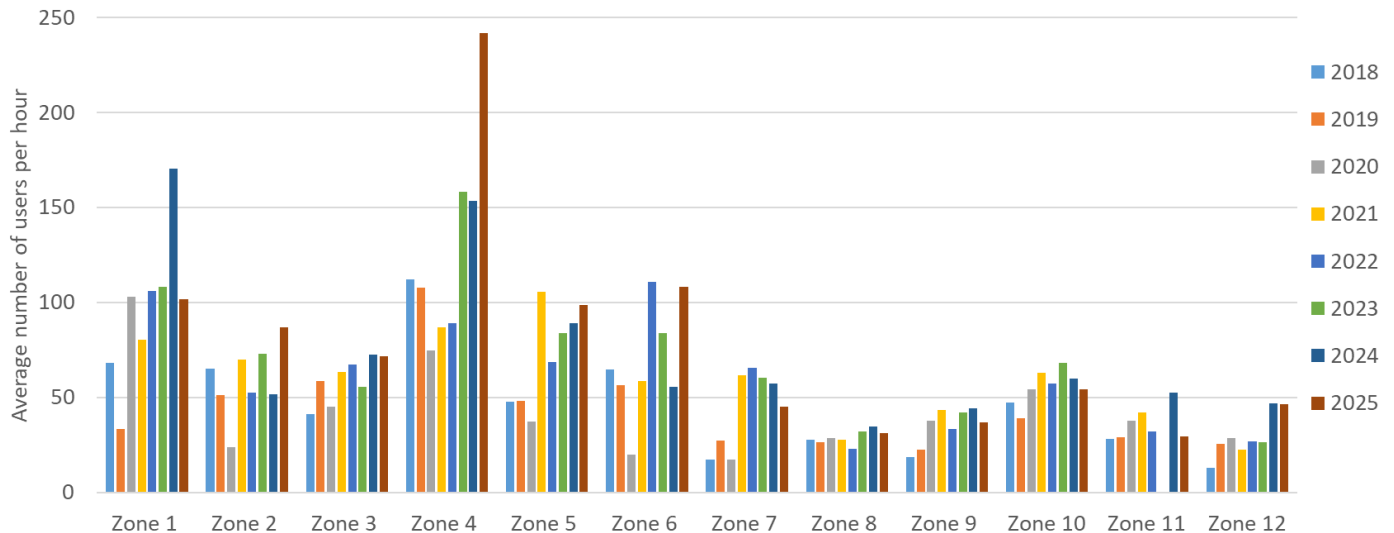
“Walking along, noting observations and contributing to our work, one walk at a time”.

Our main volunteering tasks involve an army of volunteers, tools (and tea breaks!) but there’s another volunteer role within the Trust that you probably wouldn’t notice unless you were paying close attention – and that’s the role of the River Patroller. Along the whole length (almost 13 miles) of the walkway we have regular volunteers that walk a mile section (or Zone) and report their observations back to us. Sometimes that’s the positives, like the numbers of users and wildlife they see; at other times it’s keeping an eye out for more negative aspects such of fly tipping, invasive species or pollution in the river.

These observations are vital to our work, as it allow us to us to plan our practical conservation sessions to maximise their impact. Tracking wildlife along the walkway gives us a picture of the health of the river valley and contributes towards national statistics. The observations also allow us to respond quickly to pollution doing damage, or the growth of invasive species such as giant hogweed. Recently one of our volunteers, Lucie Novoveska, turned all the data collected over the past eight years into a clear and fascinating snapshot of what’s changing, what’s working, and where we need to pay attention. Data from nearly 2500 patrols since 2018 was analysed.

Growing use of the Walkway: The data shows a clear increase in people using the walkway across several zones, with some areas seeing particularly strong growth. Zone 4 — running from St Bernard’s Bridge to Belford Bridge — has seen a 100% increase in users, making it one of the busiest sections. This is great news - more people are discovering and enjoying the river corridor and benefitting from the regular volunteering that helps keep the walkway accessible and welcoming. For context, Zone 1 covers Leith and Zone 12 covers Balerno, highlighting how usage is growing along the length of the river, not just in the city

Number of users per hour



A more inclusive path: There’s also been an increase in the number of mobility scooters, wheelchairs, and pushchairs recorded per hour. That’s a positive sign that the walkway is becoming more accessible and usable for a wider range of people. As ever, there is more work to be done to improve access points onto the walkway, but having this data it means we can share it with potential funders.

What our river patrol data is telling us (continued)

Four legs on the path

Dog numbers have increased markedly since the pandemic but use is evenly spread across the different zones, suggesting that usage is balancing out rather than concentrating in just one or two hotspots. This can help reduce pressure on sensitive areas where we have meadows or wildlife living. Zone 8 — the Dells upstream of the Centre remains the area with the most consistently high use.

Pressure points to watch

With success comes responsibility. Zone 4 now combines the highest number of users (of all types) with some of the richest wildlife presence, which raises important questions about the pressure on the environment. Potential risks could include water quality degradation, noise disturbance, habitat loss, and longer-term impacts on biodiversity — especially if visitor numbers continue to grow due to tourism and increased awareness of the route.

Thank you to our volunteers

None of this valuable data would exist without the dedication of our River Patrol volunteers. Every patrol log — whether it records 5 walkers or 50, a kingfisher flash or a quiet stretch of river — adds to a long-term picture that helps us care better for this special place.

In short, more people are enjoying the walkway, accessibility is improving, wildlife remains present, and we now have clear evidence to guide where further investment or management is needed. We're delighted that City of Edinburgh Council has committed up to £1 million from the incoming Edinburgh Visitor Levy to invest in the walkway network and upgrade the Dean Valley — an outcome for which we've been actively advocating for. While the details are still being finalised, this funding is expected to unlock further path improvements from 2027 onwards.

River wildlife monitoring: Highlights from 2025

2025 was a standout year for wildlife, with 649 notable sightings across 58 different species recorded along the river. A huge thank you to our volunteers and members of the public for your enthusiasm and dedication in reporting these sightings — this data is invaluable in helping us understand how the river is changing.

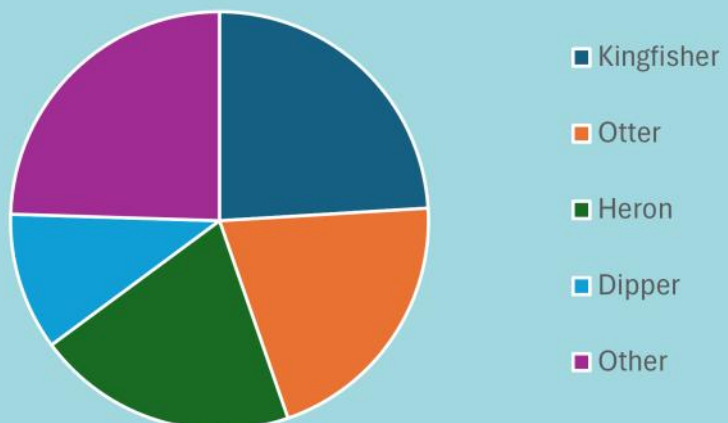
Some species were spotted repeatedly, including 156 brilliantly coloured kingfishers, 134 playful otters, 131 hunting herons, and 69 diving dippers. Sightings of otters, kingfishers and herons rose dramatically compared with 2024, with otter sightings up by an incredible five times more than last year's total.

Other notable records included an Atlantic salmon at Redbraes Weir, a rare albino squirrel at Fords Road Weir, and the return of the invasive American mink. While mink made brief reappearances in August and again in October, the low number of reports suggests that otters are still successfully out-competing them.

Our survey teams were also hard at work throughout the year. Volunteers completed 134 hours of Riverfly monitoring, with no pollution thresholds breached. 93 butterfly and bumblebee transects were fully surveyed and reported, providing valuable insight into pollinator activity along the river corridor. And our seven meadow sites were surveyed twice, totalling 186 volunteer hours. While overall coverage was strong, a reduction in species diversity was noted, likely linked to the prolonged dry weather. We're excited to think what wildlife might be spotted in 2026!



Mink spotted but thankfully an infrequent visitor
Photo by Tom Kelly.



Copse planting brings new habitat to the river corridor

This winter a new native copse has been planted beside the Water of Leith, turning previously bare mounds into a growing woodland habitat for wildlife and people to enjoy. The project began when local residents and Longstone Community Council approached us, highlighting the site as an opportunity to improve biodiversity, soften the landscape and create a more natural riverside setting.

Once everything was approved our volunteers planted a mix of native trees and shrubs including rowan, hazel, hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose and wild cherry. These species will provide year-round food and shelter for birds, pollinators and small mammals, while creating a more natural woodland edge along the river corridor.

The new trees themselves were funded thanks to support from CMS Law, allowing the project to go ahead at no cost to the local community. Volunteer time, tools and ongoing care will of course be provided by the Trust.



Goodbye gas – hello clean heat at the Water of Leith Visitor Centre

We've got some good news to share: The Water of Leith Visitor Centre has officially switched from gas heating to renewable heat – our new heat pumps are now up and running. With support from the Scottish Government's Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES), we've installed a new air source heat pump system, alongside major radiator upgrades. Together, these now provide all the building's space heating and hot water. The Centre, Community Café, learning spaces and offices are all heated using low-carbon energy from the air – even in our beautiful but challenging Victorian building.

This work is part of our wider Zero Waste and Low Carbon Action Plan. Over the past few years this has included solar panels, insulation upgrades, secondary glazing, electric vehicles and energy-saving fans. Taken together, these changes are helping us to:

- cut carbon emissions
- reduce our reliance on fossil fuels
- lower long-term energy costs
- show what's possible in older community buildings

Around 25,000 people use the Centre each year – visitors, school groups, volunteers and community organisations. So this change isn't just about improving our own building. We hope it also offers a visible, practical example of how community spaces can take real steps towards tackling climate change.



Over the coming months we'll be sharing more about how the system works and what we've learned from installing it. The project cost around £40,000 in total, with 80% funded by CARES. This represents a significant investment in the building, on top of the energy-efficiency work we've already carried out. With our gas boiler nearing the end of its life and an old, inefficient radiator system, we expect these upgrades to make the Centre a warmer, more comfortable and more welcoming place for everyone.

Thank you to CARES and our project partners, IMS Heat Pumps, for making this possible.

Local votes bring funding for Coalie Coalition

We're thrilled to share that our Coalie Coalition group received funding through Leith Chooses — thanks to people like you who voted in the Leith Chooses community awards.

The Coalie Coalition is a community and conservation co-op focused on maintaining and enhancing the newly completed Coalie Park area.

Ranger Dan started the group last summer and they have completed 6 sessions so far, undertaking tasks such as maintaining the skatepark area, new planters and benches, planting bulbs and sowing grass seed, graffiti removal, ensuring safe access via paths and steps, weeding out setts and clearing drains and verges, and ongoing litter picking. Come the spring weather, we'll also be grouting and painting the new mosaic around the skatepark, and repainting the community mural as required.

With the grant now secured, we'll be able to resource the group with more tools and safe storage for them; cleaning, painting and grouting products; PPE; binbags and, of course, plenty of biscuits and tea-break resources.



Members and Public Events

For details and information on how to book visit www.waterofleith.org.uk/whats-on/

Children's School Holiday Events

1:30pm – 3:30pm | £7 per child | Accompanying adult free | ages 5–10
Booking essential. Events begin at the Centre.

Tuesday 7th April – River Dipping. Join us to explore the river and find out what lives in the water.

Thursday 9th April — Survive and Scavenge. What is edible? How could you survive?

Tuesday 14th April — Spring Fling. Enjoy an afternoon of seasonal activities in the Dells

Thursday 16th April – Sandies Saunter. Take on our orienteering challenge through the woods

Guided walks

1:30pm – 3:30pm | £7 per adult — WOLCT members FREE (use your code) Booking essential

Sunday 12th April Spring Slateford Saunter

Join Kat on this spring themed walk around Slateford.

Sunday 17th May Dan's Donder

Join Ranger Dan on this guided walk from Roseburn to Saughton

Sunday 21st June Johnny's Guided Wade

From Bonnington to Redbraes Weir in the Water

Sunday 19th July Helen's History and Herbalism Walk

The Coltbridge to Dean Village section is steeped in history and has a wonderful diverse flora

Sat 4th April MESMERISING MECHANISMS (Visitor Centre) 10am to 4pm

Sun 26th April SAUGHTON PARK BIOBLITZ (Saughton Park) 10am to 2pm

Sat 9th May PLANT SALE (Visitor Centre) 11am to 2pm

Sunday 7th June COALIE CELEBRATION (Coalie Park) 12pm to 3pm

More details coming to the What's On Pages of our website soon.

For more information or to subscribe to our blog visit www.waterofleith.org.uk

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