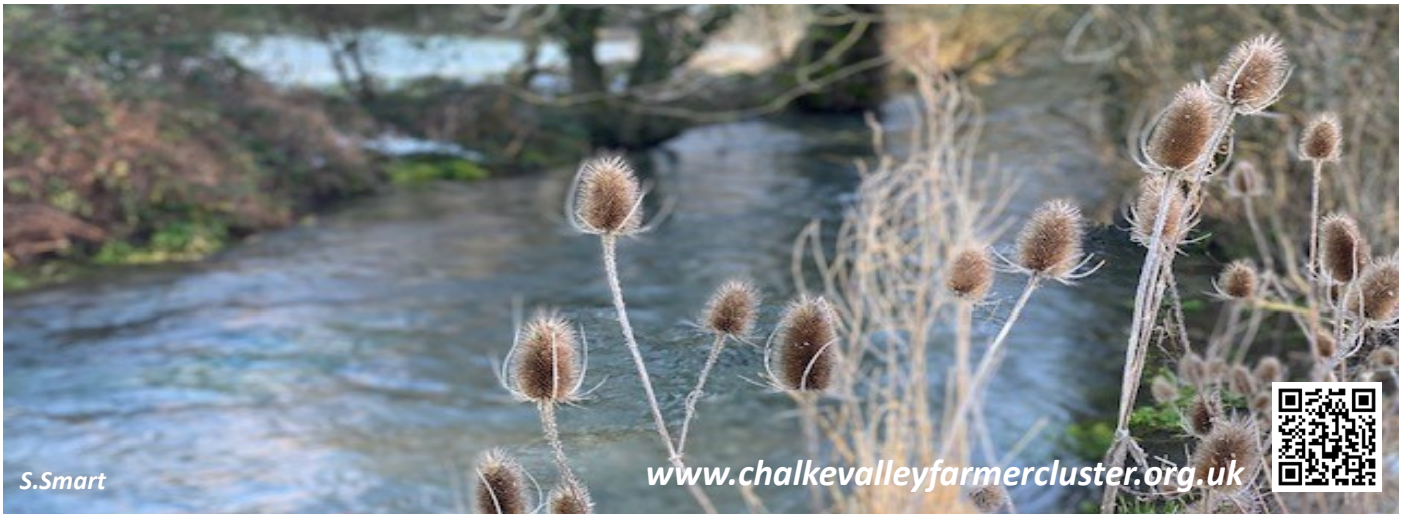
Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster

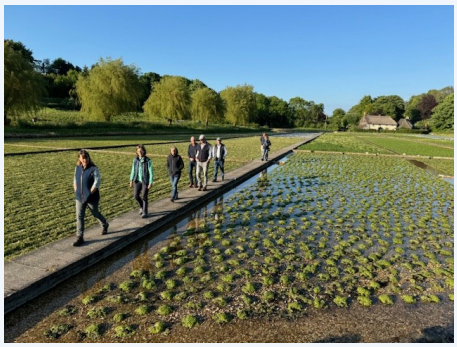
Issue 15 Winter 2024/5

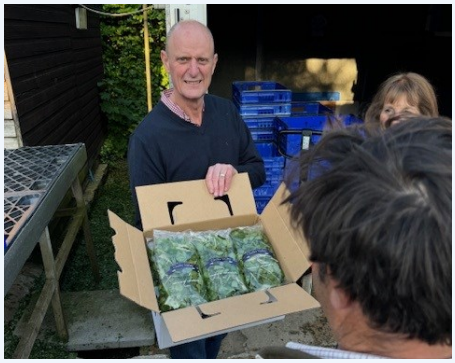
Newsletter

Farmers working together in the Chalke Valley landscape to benefit wildlife, soil, water and the historic environment. We have over 25 members covering over 9,000 hectares.



Since our last newsletter in the spring we have had a busy summer and autumn. In June we were given a fascinating tour of the Broad Chalke Cress Beds by Keith Hitchings and heard about their history and how they are managed.

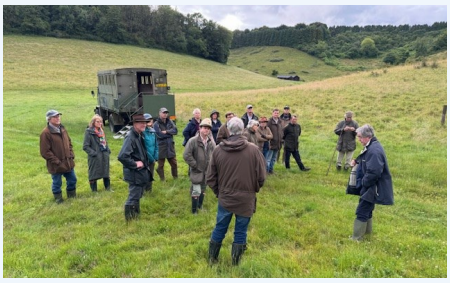




This was followed a week later by a chance to brush up on our wildflower identification skills on Andrew Reis's Searchlight Bank.

In July we hosted a meeting for the Chalke Valley's gamekeepers with Mike Swan who provided an update on new legislation covering best practice trapping and rodenticide use. Game shooting is a hugely important part of the Chalke Valley in terms of its contribution and influence on the economy, landscape and environment. As such gamekeepers have a really important and positive role to play benefiting the local area.

Just before harvest we visited Gurston Farm for our annual farm tour and barbecue.



Despite the drizzly weather, fairly typical of this summer, we had a great time and a fascinating look round Gurston to see some of the conservation projects Rob and Barney have undertaken on the farm including dew pond restoration, butterfly banks and managing chalk grassland with their Hebridean sheep. A really enjoyable evening.

In May volunteers from the Wiltshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation undertook surveys for Duke of Burgundy butterfly at a number of sites within the Cluster to provide a better understanding of the status of this rare butterfly in the area. The northern edge of the Cluster is nationally important for this species, which feeds on cowslips on chalk grassland as well as primroses in coppice woodland.

Mink rafts have been out on the River Ebble and monitored over the summer and autumn. After a surprisingly slow start we have had significant success with a number of non-native mink captured. Hopefully we will begin to see a positive response from the water vole populations on the River Ebble with continued trapping effort.

Before Christmas a 400m long section of fencing was completed along the River Ebble at Homington on Croucheston Farms. Cattle were accessing the unfenced river, causing excessive river bank erosion, sedimentation of the natural gravel bed, and over-widening

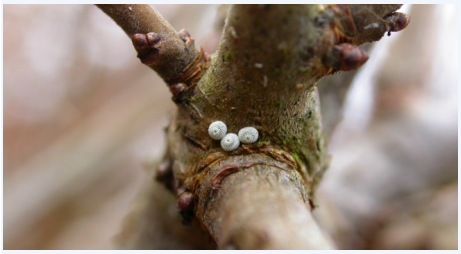
of the channel. As a result, the chalk stream habitat was being damaged. With funding form the National Landscapes Crystal Clear Ebble Project, the fencing was combined with some in-channel works to help naturalise the flow and improve the gravel beds, whilst a solar powered water supply provides a drinking source for the cattle without access to the river. Thank you to Lady Cobham and farm manager James Marshall for facilitating this work.

Continuing with the theme of the River Ebble, Liz Birkett, Laura Loncar and Heather Royle have been working hard throughout the last few months to monitor the Ebble water quality, in particular nitrates and phosphate levels so we have a better understanding of the issues on the river and in turn how we can improve water quality. We will share results soon.

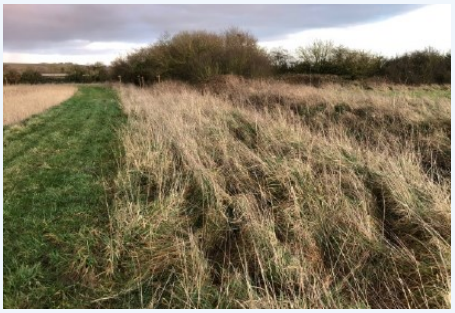
In November Peter Thompson led a successful search for brown hairstreak eggs at Bake Farm, courtesy of members Richard and Katie Jowett. This was a great opportunity (in some rare sunny weather!) to learn how to survey for the eggs and what to look for.

Brown hairstreak have been recorded at the eastern end of the Chalke Valley towards Odstock and around Bishopstone but could be much more widespread as they are easily missed. They have undergone a substantial decline due to annual flailing of hedgerows, which removes eggs. The adults fly in the late summer, from the end of July until almost October, but spend much of their lives in the treetops along woodland edges and hedgerows.

Their eggs can be found by searching young Blackthorn shoots in winter. The white, pinhead sized eggs can be quite conspicuous. They are usually laid singly, at the base of thorns, on protruding shoots in sunny (generally south facing), sheltered positions where blackthorn is prevalent and not cut every year.



Rough Grassland: an undervalued habitat?



Rough grassland provides shelter for insects in turn providing food supply for birds and bats, as well as being important habitat for many other species including small mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Tall herb and rough grassland provide key pollen and nectar sources from spring until late summer and support numerous plant-feeding and predatory invertebrates. Coarse tussocky grassland provides summer nesting habitat for carder bumblebees and shelter for many other insects throughout the year, including for overwintering, in the base of tussocks, hollow stems, such as hogweed and teasel, and seed heads. Strategic placement of rough grass can help to reduce the movement of sediment, nutrients and pesticides by wind and water erosion within fields and from field to field. It can also help to buffer sensitive habitats from the direct impact of agricultural activities. Areas don't have to be large – consider using areas which are awkward to reach with machinery and are less productive (avoid taking these areas out of arable if they support rare arable plants). Tall herb and rough grassland are most valuable where it supports good quantities of flowers and a good flowering sequence from spring until late summer. Key flowers include cow parsley, hogweed, thistles, teasel, knapweeds and scabious. Cutting tall herb and rough grassland is best done on a rotation (i.e. don't cut all of it in one year) to leave some areas undisturbed over the winter months.

Starling

Unassuming yet full of character, starlings, with their dark, iridescent plumage and lively walk make them a easily identified bird of British farmland. Starlings flock together, sometimes in their thousands.

Murmuration is the collective noun for a large group of starlings, but it's also the name for the shapes they make while wheeling overhead – often in their thousands.

Starlings are extremely social birds. UK residents live in flocks all year round, but every autumn their numbers are boosted by migrants flying in from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, who come to escape the harsh weather. It's these visitors who help make each murmuration a breathtaking spectacle.

Thousands of starlings all swirling and swooping together means one thing: safety. The sheer volume of birds confuses predators like peregrine falcons and makes it much harder for them to pick off individual birds.

The characteristic shapes of a murmuration come from the rapid changes in direction. Starlings have extremely fast reactions, so when one bird changes speed or direction, the birds around it do too. It also allows the birds to move within the murmuration itself, meaning that no one bird spends too much time at the edge of the group, where they're vulnerable to predation.

But safety isn't the only reason they flock together. Lots of birds huddled up together makes for a much warmer roost, increasing an individual's chances of surviving the cold winter nights. And it's the perfect place to communicate and socialise.

Look to the skies from sunset and into the early evening from November to February and early March to catch the spectacular display.

GET INVOLVED

For more information on the CVFC and to be kept up-to-date please contact Simon Smart - 07748155143 -simon@slme.co.uk