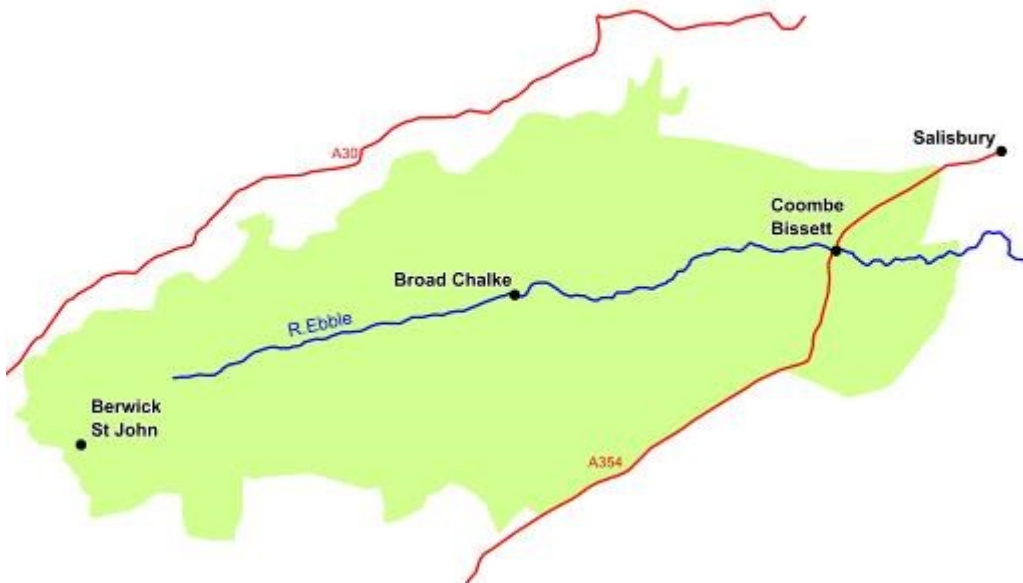




Newsletter



INTRODUCING THE CHALKE VALLEY FARMER CLUSTER

The Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster (CVFC) was formed in 2016 and now involves over 20 farmers covering over 8000ha within the Chalke Valley, south-west of Salisbury. The Cluster was set up following the desire of a number of farmers to work collaboratively to enhance the local landscape for wildlife. In the past much of the conservation activities carried out in the Chalke Valley, as elsewhere, have focussed on individual farms with very little consideration of what neighbouring farmers are doing. By working together and looking beyond farm boundaries we hope that our collective achievements will be greater than the sum of our parts. The Cluster gives us a platform to share knowledge, experience and ideas. We have access to our own, locally specific, environmental advice,

and greater economies of scale, with easier access to environmental funding and buying power. The basis for the group is that our objectives and activities have been developed by the farmers themselves, a bottom up approach, which we believe is a more effective, sustainable approach to deliver greater benefits for the Chalke Valley landscape.

So far the Cluster has identified a number of priorities:

- * Improve our knowledge of the species we have on our farms by working with local experts and volunteers and by providing identification training for members and volunteers.
- * Look after the River Ebbles
 - Manage invasive weeds, such as Himalayan balsam, in the upper catchment of the River Ebbles.
 - Work co-operatively within the River Ebbles catchment to identify and implement land management that pro-

protects the river and groundwater from sediment runoff, nitrate and phosphates.

- * Enhance farmland for birds, such as Corn Bunting and Lapwing and pollinators, such as bumblebees and butterflies.
- * Encourage best practice management of game shoots by working with GWCT to reduce negative impacts and enhance mutual benefits.
- * Enhance the quality of existing habitats namely chalk grassland, but also woodland, by identifying issues affecting their condition and providing training and other activities to address them.
- * Work across farm boundaries to link up areas of chalk grassland, creating corridors and 'stepping stones' to allow wildlife associated with this rare habitat to move more easily within the Chalke Valley.
- * Ensure the long-term survival of historic features within the Chalke Valley which include burial mounds from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, Iron Age settlements, and more recent features such as dew ponds and water meadow systems.



Duke of Burgundy butterfly. One of the rarest butterflies to be found within the Cluster area

ACTIVITIES SO FAR

We have been keen to develop a base line from which we can measure our success. To this end we have been busy recording species such as farmland birds, bumblebees, arable plants, hedgehogs and harvest mice, among others. To aid this we have undertaken training to improve our identification skills and understanding of habitat requirements for a range of species including farmland birds and butterflies and flowers of chalk grassland. We have also worked closely with organisations such as Butterfly Conservation, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and Wiltshire Mammal Group.

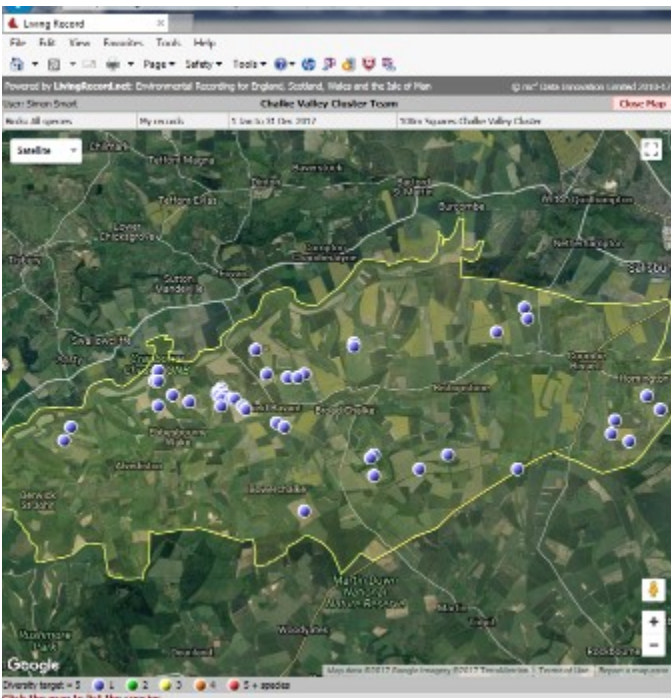


For example, following a fascinating talk by Dr Sue Clarke, a butterfly expert, on Marsh Fritillary and Duke of Burgundy, we secured funding to employ Sue to survey and assess chalk grassland for these two very rare

butterfly species which occur within the Cluster area.



Members of the CVFC attended a training event at Stoke Farm on the identification of farmland birds. Members were then encouraged to get involved with the GWCT's Big Farmland Bird Count.



To help us record all these species we are using Living Record. This is a great online programme based on Google Earth so you can actually look at your farm and plot where you've seen wildlife. We now also have the boundary of the Cluster area displayed too!

Left is a screen shot of Living Record showing the boundary of the CVFC and the locations of singing male corn bunting recorded over the summer by Simon Smart and local volunteer Geoff Lambert.



Corn bunting have experienced a dramatic decline across much of the UK but can still be found breeding within the Chalke Valley where they can often be seen perching on a wire or post. Their 'jangling keys' song can be heard across much of the open landscape.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

We are busy developing a series of training sessions and workshops. This currently includes:

- * Living Record refresher training
- * Cover crops and soil management
- * Supplementary feeding for farmland birds
- * Fallow plot management for lapwing and stone curlew
- * Habitat management for pollinators

If you have any other topics you would like covered please let us know!

As farms reach the end of their Environmental Stewardship agreements we will be busy supporting members with reviewing opportunities under Countryside Stewardship and delivering Cluster priorities.

GET INVOLVED

For more information and to be kept up-to-date with the CVFC please contact Simon Smart, tel 07748155143, email simonsmartblacksheep@gmail.com