



Chalke
Valley
Farmer
Cluster

Issue 13 Summer 23

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.



Gurston Down (S.Smart)

www.chalkevalleyfarmercluster.org.uk



It has certainly been a challenging harvest over the last few months but hopefully everyone has finished now. Indeed, no rest and straight back round to get next year's crops in the ground! The changeable, often unseasonable, weather, which we seem to be experience more and more, also has an impact on wildlife with some species struggling to cope with the extreme weather patterns we have had over the last few years.

Activity Update

Prior to harvest there were a number of events carried out in June and early July associated with the CVFC. In early June Matthew Pickford hosted the Wiltshire branch of the GWCT for a farm walk to look at some of the conservation projects being carried out at Stoke Farm including the wildflower margins, butterfly bank and spectacular downland. It was a great opportunity to see conservation, shooting and farming all playing their part in the Chalke Valley

landscape. A real highlight for everyone was to see the very rare burnt-tip orchid, which also happens to be the County Flower of Wiltshire!



Burnt-tip Orchid (S.Smart)

Also in June we visited Prescombe Down National Nature Reserve with farm manager Simon Hiscock to brush up on our wildflower and butterfly identification present at that time of year. It was an incredibly hot day and we weren't able to find the Early Gentian, for which the site is designated as of European Importance, but we did see an incredible array of other chalk downland wildflowers and butterflies.

We had our final event just before harvest with our annual farm walk and barbecue at Knowle Farm, courtesy of the Mann's. A tour of the farm gave us an opportunity to see a number of conservation and sustainable farming projects including ponds, hedgerow management, herbal leys and a very good crop of cereal which had been direct-drilled into a herbal ley. However, the highlight may have been stone Sun dial carved by Angus Mann!



The Mann's pond and Sun dial (S.Smart)

American Mink



The American mink (*Neovison vison* or *Mustela vison*) is a small, semi-aquatic mammal, belonging to the "Mustelid" family, so is related to the otter, stoat, pine marten and weasel. It has brown-black fur, a narrow snout, a small, white chin and a white throat. Mink can be distinguished from otters by their smaller size, darker fur, and smaller face.

The American mink, *Mustela vison*, is a well-known non-native and invasive species. It spread throughout the country following escapes, and intentional releases, from fur farms in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a very active and opportunistic predator which can have a devastating impact on our native wildlife, particularly ground nesting birds and water vole populations, whose population has declined drastically due to mink predation, including on the Ebbles.

Mink are good swimmers and females are small enough to enter the water-line burrows of water voles and take their young.

American mink droppings or 'spraints' are deposited in similar sites to those of otters - by prominent fallen trees, weirs and bridges - as 'scent messages' to passers-by. However, mink spraints have a particularly pungent, foul, fishy odour and are very distinct from otter droppings, which smell like jasmine tea.

A local resident has recorded mink on the lower reaches of the River Ebbles, near Homington as well as recent sightings near Broad Chalke. This coincides with water vole surveys carried out in 2021 and 2022 as part of the Crystal Clear Ebbles Project, by the Wessex Rivers Trust and volunteer groups, which found limited fresh field signs of water voles (feeding stations, active burrows, droppings etc). Habitat and water quality are good, suggesting predation by mink is the limiting factor for water vole population recovery in the River Ebbles.



As such we are keen to undertake mink monitoring and trapping along the River Ebbles to remove them from our River and see water vole return. This is done by using mink monitoring rafts to establish if mink are present in an area then once detected mink are trapped and humanely dispatched. We were recently successful with a grant bid from the Crystal Clear Ebbles Project to purchase a number of mink rafts. If you would like to assist with this project, or have seen mink recently on the Ebbles, please contact Simon. We will be running training later in the autumn to set this project up.

Harebell



The delicate flowers of harebells are one of the prettiest additions to our chalk grassland. As they flower from July to September, they are out long after many of our wildflowers so provide an important late source of nectar for bees. But it's not just bees and people that enjoy harebells. In folklore they are strongly associated with fairies and witches. A patch of harebells is a favourite home for fairies and if someone walks through the clump, the fairies might cast spells on them, giving this flower the names of Dead Man's Bells and Fairies' thimbles.

Some believed that witches used the sap from harebells to turn in to hares to escape or avoid detection!

Some also consider that harebells got their name from the folk belief that the

flowers actually rang like bells to warn hares against approaching predators.

However, The Oxford English Dictionary simply explains the name 'harebell' is derived from it growing in places frequented by hares, certainly true on the downland in the Chalke Valley!

Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) Update

Earlier in the summer Defra unveiled the full offer for SFI23, with farmers able to register their interest from 30 August 2023 with applications from 18th September.

There have been a few changes from the January proposals which Simon went through during the on-line training in February. These include:

Standalone soil actions, so that they can be stacked with other SFI actions

In addition to being paid for the SFI actions there is a **management payment**. This is £20/ha for the first 50ha entered into agreement (ie up to £1000 per SBI).

Support is available to carry out an **SFI Animal Health and Welfare Review**.

SFI Actions are available for:

- **Soils**
- **Hedgerows**
- **Integrated Pest Management**
- **Nutrient Management**
- **Arable Land (wildlife)**
- **Improved grassland**
- **Low input grassland.**

For more information visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sustainable-farming-incentive-guidance>

To do

- Top nectar mixes
- Cut or graze wildflower margins and plots (up to 90% in CS)

GET INVOLVED

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



The CVFC is supported by funding from Natural England



Cvfc.group