Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster

Issue 6 2020

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.

Its been an incredibly wet autumn and winter which has not only made drilling crops difficult but has also made it difficult to undertake some conservation activities including sowing new areas of wildflowers and buffer strips.

We have however, had a number of really interesting events which have been unaffected by the weather!

Looking at soils with Stephen Briggs

In November we welcomed Stephen Briggs, Head of Soil & Water at Innovation for Agriculture. In the morning Stephen talked to members in the comfort of Andrew and Ben Jean's shoot room on the topic of soil health. Following lunch and demonstration of a couple of simple techniques for measuring soil structure and organic matter we visited Richard and Katie Jowett's farm where we looked at soil under a range of land uses including permanent pasture, cover crops, maize and herbal leys. The variations in soil structure were marked and highlighted the impact different management has on soil health and structure.

In December Peter Shallcross, who farms nearby at Tisbury, imparted some of his enthusiasm for resistant elms and its importance in the conservation of the rare white-letter hairstreak butterfly. Cluster members were invited to get involved in this exciting project by purchasing and planting resistant elms to help encourage this rare butterfly. Over the last couple of years a number of members have planted resistant elms but an additional 90 trees are due to be planted this winter!

Ben Jeans checking one of his resistant elms

Just before Christmas NFU President Minette Batters came to talk to members of the Martin Down Super Cluster (of which the Chalke Valley is part of) in Martin Village. She gave a fascinating and informative talk and Q&A session on some of the pressing issues currently facing agriculture.

Rough Grassland: *an undervalued habitat?*

Whilst the provision of rough grass corners is no longer an option in Countryside Stewardship the provision of tussocky grass areas can provide really valuable wildlife 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 this option 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 (ie don't cut all of it in one year) to leave some areas undisturbed over the winter months.

Improve the health of your soil

Soil health can be defined as a soil's ability to function and sustain plants, animals and humans as part of the ecosystem. A healthy soil is vital to ensure both high yields and future high yields, as well as environmental protection. Soil health is a key solution to combating climate change as by building soil health, we achieve multiple objectives. These include improved water quality, natural flood management, increased water holding capacity, improved plant and animal health, reduced disease and pest pressures and improved income in a sustainable manner.

Did you know….

* Soil holds 3 times as much carbon as the atmosphere.
* A teaspoon of soil can contain more living organisms than there are people living on earth.

How can you improve soil health?

Improve soil health monitoring - Analysing soils is an essential first step to support effective decision making on soil health

Increase the amount of plant and animal matter going back onto fields - Soil organic matter is an essential element to healthy soils – achieving high levels is the key to soil health. Levels are low or declining on many UK farms so urgent work is needed to reverse this trend by ensuring farms are recycling more plant and animal matter back into soils.

Encourage soil organisms – both those that build up soil and those that release nutrients

Cover up bare soil with continuous plant cover - Plant roots hold soils together, reducing erosion and allowing air to penetrate in spaces around roots. They also encourage healthier soil communities through plant-fungal interactions.

Design crop rotations to improve soil health - More diverse, long-term crop rotations that help soils are needed

Reduce intensity of cultivation – reduces disruption to soil structure, depletion of organic matter through oxidation.

To Do's

Supplementary feeding - you should be well in to supplementary feeding the birds now. It provides vital food for farmland birds in late winter and early spring when other food sources have been depleted. If you need seed or further advice please contact Simon.

GWCT BIG FARMLAND BIRD COUNT

7-16th February - This important initiative offers a simple means of recording the effect of conservation activities on our farms so the more members who can get involved the better. We will organise some bird identification training in early February.

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