# Issue 9 2021



# 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.



The end of lockdown restrictions are hopefully in sight, and with spring well and truly in the air, things feel very positive. In March we were really pleased to hear that our application to extend our funding from DEFRA for another year had been approved.

In line with restrictions, most of our meetings have continued to be on-line. This has included an introduction to dung beetles by Max Anderson, a PhD student from the University of Sussex, who provided us with a background to the ecology of dung beetles in the UK, the services and benefits they provide, and their importance in wider ecosystems. This is due to be followed later this spring by a meeting looking at the importance of dung beetles in soil health, impacts of veterinary products, livestock management techniques and practices with Sally-Ann Spence, entomologist and Wiltshire farmer.

We had our final talk with Becky Wilson, from the Farm Carbon Toolkit, to discuss the results and outputs of the Carbon Calculator, how to interpret them and how to reduce our carbon footprint. We will be working over the next few months to complete carbon calculations on as many of the members' farms as possible to create a baseline for the Cluster. One thing that was raised, which is very relevant to the Chalke Valley, is the lack of data on carbon sequestration in chalk soils. We are going to sample a number of chalk grassland sites locally to help Becky provide a more accurate measure for chalk grassland carbon storage.



In April we launched our new recording App with a talk from Dave Kilbey, Natural Aptitude. Dave went through the improvements which have been made and how it makes recording our wildlife even easier. Recording species is important so we can target appropriate management for the species on our farms, show how wildlife-rich our area is and ensure we are a priority for existing and future environmental support, including ELMS. If you need any help setting up or using the App please get in touch with Simon.

As part of the same meeting, we were also joined by Jess Brooks and Roger Draycott from GWCT to discuss monitoring Lapwing as part of their ELMs trial in to farmer wildlife monitoring. Following feedback from Cluster members, it looks as though we have four farms with breeding Lapwing this year in the Chalke Valley.



Most recently we were finally able to meet outside, socially distanced of course, to learn about corn bunting, how to identify and survey them, again as part of GWCT's ELMs trial. This was a great opportunity to get out on farm and see corn bunting at Manor Farm, Fifield Bavant, as well as catch up with fellow Cluster members. The social aspect of the Cluster has been sorely missed so getting together was really appreciated.

A large number of members have continued to feed farmland birds during the hungry gap until the end of April. A couple of sites on the southern side of the Valley will continue to feed in to June for turtle dove.

# Know your Adder



The adder, *Vipera berus*, is one of our three native snake species; however, its secretive nature and camouflaged markings mean it often goes unnoticed. The adder is the UK's only venomous snake. Though potentially serious, adder bites to humans or dogs are very rarely fatal. Recent declines mean it is of major conservation concern.

#### Where to find them

Adders like open habitats including open woodland and chalk grassland. They like to bask on open, warm ground (areas with short vegetation and patches of bare ground warm up faster than taller grassland areas); however, they also need nearby cover such as scrub and tall grass for shelter from predators.

#### Identification

The adder is a greyish snake, with a dark and very distinct zig-zag pattern down its back, and a red eye. Males tend to be more silvery-grey in colour, while females are more light or reddish-brown. Completely black (melanistic) adders occur in some areas. Young adders are copper, light brown or reddish, with darker brown markings. Adders can grow to around 60cm in length and have rather a stocky appearance.

#### Lifecycle

Mating takes place in April/May and female adders incubate their eggs internally, rather than laying shelled eggs (which the grass snake does). Adders give birth to around 6 to 20 live young in August or September. Adders feed largely on small rodents and lizards. They hibernate from around October to February, depending on local conditions. Adders typically live to 5-10 years.

#### Conservation

A recent study suggested that adder could all but disappear from the UK countryside by 2032. The loss, fragmentation and degradation of its preferred habitats, as well as direct persecution, is leading to the decline of adders.

#### Adders in the Chalke Valley

Since the 1990's Adders have only been recorded (submitted to the WSBRC) at Chickengrove Bottom, Church Bottom and Middleton Down, south of Broad Chalke. They are likely to be a very underrecorded species due to their secretive behaviour so it would be great if Cluster members could keep an eye open for them in suitable habitat.

### **Butterfly banks**



A butterfly bank is a mound or ridge of chalk creating an open, sunny area supporting the early successional wildflowers that like bare, low-nutrient chalk such as rockrose, kidney and horseshoe vetch. A variety of aspects are created (suggest 'C', 'E' or 'S' shapes, for example), thus providing a range of conditions for some of our most threatened butterflies and moths. Many of the flowers chosen for the banks are the larval food plants of our chalk grassland butterflies. For example, the larvae of Adonis Blue will feed on Horseshoe vetch on the sunny, south facing slopes, whilst Small Blue larvae will feed on the fluffy seed heads of Kidney vetch.

In the mornings, butterflies, bees and other warmth-loving insects can warm up on the east-facing side, which catches the early morning sun. During the main part of the day, they can use the warm, sunny, south-facing side of the banks. If it gets too hot on these, then insects can retreat to the bank's north -facing side.

Increasing variation in local topography, and therefore in local microclimates, could also help increase the resilience of insect populations to climate change.

Butterfly banks could have an important role in both providing additional breeding sites and improving connectivity between areas of fragmented chalk grassland. Whilst maybe not as large as the one which has been created at WWTs Coombe Bissett Down, which we visited last autumn, we hope to create a number of butterfly banks across the Chalke Valley to act as stepping stones between areas of chalk grassland allowing butterflies to move more easily through the landscape.

The great thing is these don't have to take up a great deal of space, even small ones can provide valuable habitat. We also have abundant building material — chalk!

If you would like more information on the creation of butterfly banks please contact Simon.

## To Do List

- Take part in Turtle Dove Census on 9am 24th May: only takes 30 minutes!
- Complete your carbon calculations

#### **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

