



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.



River Ebble near Bishopstone

www.chalkevalleyfarmercluster.org.uk



It has continued to be frustrating times with the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to reduce our activities and progress as a Cluster. However, we continue to do as much as we can and not let it stop us completely. We have managed to meet outside on a couple of occasions and even embraced online conferencing platforms such as Zoom!

In September we visited Wiltshire Wildlife Trusts Coombe Bissett Nature Reserve to have a look at chalk grassland creation. This ranged from well established grassland over 20 years old and an area only recently converted from arable. We also got to look at the butterfly bank which has been created and discussed opportunities to replicate it, maybe on a smaller scale (!), on our farms.

In November we got outside again, this time at Manor Farm, Broad Chalke, to look at worms, learn about their importance in healthy soils and how to encourage them. Having not seen each other for a while it was a great opportunity to catch up albeit socially distanced.

We were busy in December developing our newest project which is to undertake carbon auditing on our farms. We had a fascinating online talk from Becky Willson from the Farm Carbon Toolkit and are looking forward to her returning later this month to help us progress this project. We are working with Becky to develop a baseline from which we can measure improvements including emissions reduction and carbon sequestration.

Just before Christmas we met on a very brisk afternoon to discuss cover crops at Hut and Lodge Farm, with Ian Gould of Oakbank. Despite the inclement weather it was great to make use of Ian's expertise on cover crops whilst he was down in Wiltshire from his native Cambridgeshire.

During this period and on through the winter we have continued to deploy the static bat detector funded by BASC. Whilst bats are much less active at this time of year they do still venture out during suitable periods of weather to feed. We will feed this information into a nationwide study looking at bat

activity during the winter. So far 12 species of bat have been recorded including the rare Barbastelle, Lesser Horseshoe and Leisler's bat

In November we were finally able to create a bund in a field at Manor Farm, Fifield Bavant designed to hold runoff from the road above. Previously, the runoff from the road has flowed across the field and down to the Ebble. It is hoped that the sediment trap and bund, funded by Catchment Sensitive Farming, will intercept the sediment and pollutants before they reach the River Ebble, helping to improve the water quality of this nationally important chalk stream.



Constructing the earth bund at Fifield Bavant

Carbon-smart farming

Agriculture, along with Forestry, are the only industries that have the ability to transform from a net emitter of CO₂ to a net sequesterer of CO₂. Soils are a hugely important reservoir of carbon, standing at three times the size of the atmospheric carbon pool

The amount of carbon sequestered in our soils can be increased by adopting the right management practices. Reducing tillage, planting cover crops and sources of organic matter such as compost and livestock manures have been shown to increase the amount of carbon stored in the soil.

Soil carbon is also a resource in ensuring food security. Increasing carbon levels is associated with rising organic matter levels and improved soil health which in turn will aid future crops and their yields.

This is why we are working with the Farm Carbon Toolkit to set ourselves a baseline carbon footprint and identify where we can improve the efficiency of our businesses. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including carbon dioxide, but also nitrous oxide and methane, are associated with improving farm business efficiency so there is both a business and environmental argument for sequestering CO₂ and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Additional to those measures to sequester carbon in soils, as mentioned above, there are further measures to reduce GHG emissions and improve efficiency on farm—optimising livestock performance, efficient use of fertiliser and manures, reducing energy and fuel use, developing renewable energy. We will be covering this in more detail over the coming months

Look out for Brown hairstreak eggs

Brown hairstreak is locally distributed in southern Britain and have been recorded at the very eastern end of the Chalke Valley towards Odstock 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.



*Brown hairstreak egg on blackthorn
(Peter Thompson)*

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.

Greater Horseshoe Bat Project

South Wiltshire supports populations of greater horseshoe bat considered to be of international importance centred upon the Special Area of Conservation at Chilmark Mines and Fonthill Grottoes SSSIs. Despite this importance for hibernation, little is known of breeding sites for greater horseshoe bat in South Wiltshire and little coordinated landscape-scale conservation has been undertaken.

In October 2020, Simon and I launched the South Wiltshire Greater Horseshoe Bat Project, in conjunction with Margaret Feneley (Natural England) and Professor Fiona Mathews (University of Sussex, Brighton), in order to focus conservation action.

The aims of the project are simple; to locate more roosting sites of greater horseshoe bat (summer and winter

roosts), and to promote improved land management in proximity to these roosting sites.

Greater horseshoe bats are known to be especially reliant upon pastures and the dung beetles associated with them and so we are planning dung beetle surveys in the target areas too.



*Greater horseshoe bat in hibernation
(C) Daniel Hargreaves*

A key part of this work will be engaging with local communities too, so a number of guided walks and talks are proposed to spread the word and promote our work.

Watch this space as the project develops.

Gareth Harris & Simon Smart

<https://wiltshiremammals.wordpress.com/wiltshire-bat-group/projects/projects-south-wiltshire-greater-horseshoe-bat-project/>

To Do List

- Keep supplementary feeding birds until the end of April (end of June for Turtle Dove).
- Take part in the Big Farmland Bird Count 5-14th February.
- Do not be too tidy—leave areas of rough grass over winter for small mammals, over-wintering insects and hunting barn owl and kestrel.

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