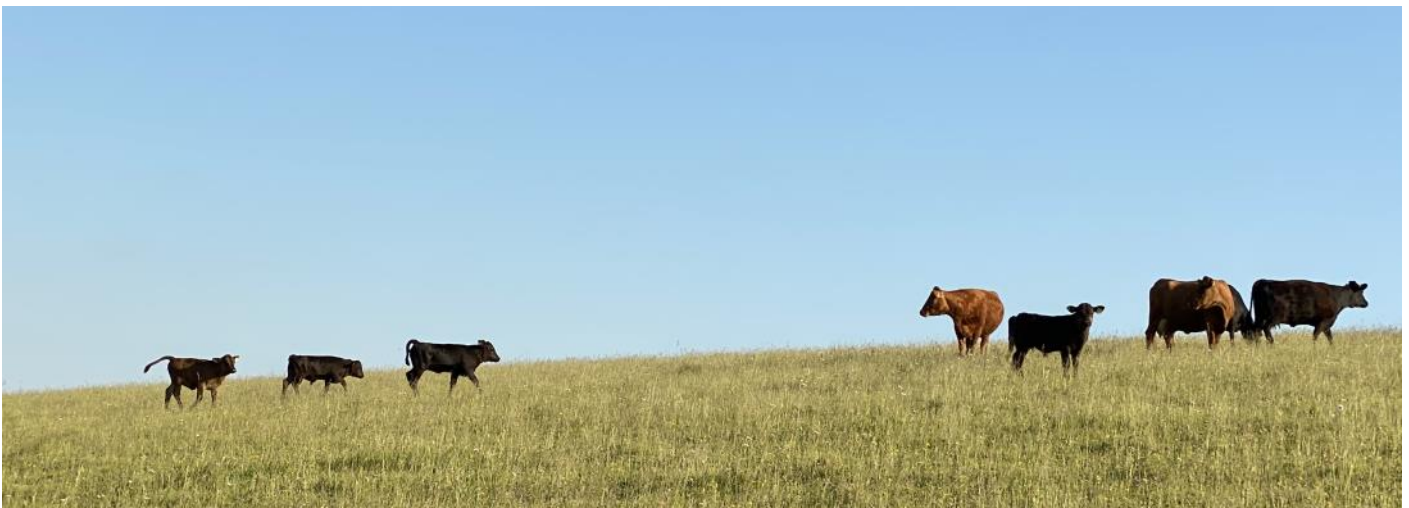




Issue 7 2020

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.



Following an incredibly wet autumn and winter, the spring and early summer has been the opposite with almost no rain until recently. This has been a continued challenge to farming. A challenge for everyone has been Covid-19 and the associated lockdown, which has meant that we haven't been able to do some of the events and activities we had planned for this spring and summer. Farming and wildlife, of course, don't stop!

Our last event before shutdown was a visit to Chalk Pyt Farm with Peter Thompson to brush up on our bird identification skills, in readiness for the Big Farmland Bird Count.

Later in February, we had hoped to run a scrub management demonstration at



Stoke Farm but weather and equipment failure meant this had to be postponed to next year.

In May we embraced new technology with a webinar by Gareth Harris, Wiltshire Bat Group, on the results of the surveys which were completed last summer and autumn. The surveys included transects, static detectors and trapping sessions. The results were fascinating, with a number of rare bats recorded including both Lesser and Greater Horseshoe, and Barbastelle. In total, almost 20,000 bat passes were recorded on the static detectors. Gareth also discussed what management we could do to encourage bats in the Cluster area now we have a better idea of the species we have. One result of species recording is that sometimes it raises more questions than it answers, this is particularly the case with bats; where are they coming from; where do they roost? To help us answer this we have purchased three bat detectors thanks to very generous funding from BASC's Wiltshire Social Committee. These are easy to use and available for Cluster members to borrow. Do make

use of them as they are a great way to unlock the secret lives of bats. Two of them plug into your phone and convert bat calls to an audible frequency, as well as showing the call on the screen and automatically identifying some of the bats too!

We have recently launched a website for the Cluster to promote what we are doing and provide an online presence. This includes a members' section, past newsletters and Peter Thompson's very popular Species of the Month!



<https://www.chalkevalleyfarmercluster.org/>



Reptiles in the Chalke Valley



There are six native reptile species in England. Four of them, the viviparous lizard, slow-worm, grass snake and adder occur within the Chalke Valley.

Reptiles are ectothermic, meaning that they need external warmth to raise their body temperature to levels sufficient for optimal activity. Reptiles need a combination of open, sunny habitats, with vegetation cover nearby (for example mosaics of scrub and grassland), and continuity of habitat. Habitats can be created within buffer strips, and woodland edge and rides. These linear features can provide habitat in themselves and corridors to link other patches of reptile habitat. In the Chalke Valley areas of lightly grazed south, facing chalk grassland with areas of scrub are likely to be particularly rich in reptiles. It is also likely that 'poor patches', a number of which are found throughout the Chalke Valley, can provide ideal conditions – vegetation management may help create and maintain such areas.

Reptiles hibernate over winter and are active from February/March to October, so it is best to extend the 'non-cutting season' to coincide with this time.

Surveying for reptiles

Searches using artificial refugia (such as corrugated tin and roofing felt) increase the likelihood of discovering reptiles because they absorb and trap heat offering reptiles an excellent means to gain warmth. The Cluster has some onduline sheets for reptile surveys so if you are interested please contact Simon.



Create a hibernaculum

A hibernaculum is a place in which species, such as lizards and snakes seek refuge, to overwinter to avoid harsh weather conditions and times when food sources are severely limited.

Artificial hibernacula can be created for reptiles preferably situated on a south-facing site with well-drained soil. Excavate a hole from around 2.0-4.0m in diameter, and 0.5m deep. Then loosely back fill the void with stones, rocks and logs, and pile branches and brush over the top, creating nooks and crannies for reptiles to hibernate. Finally, place soil and turfs from the excavation over the top of the pile to form an insulating layer and to protect it from frost. Ensure small gaps are left for access.

This could be a good way of using up waste rubble and building materials if you have them lying around the yard!

A snail loving bee



Osmia bicolor, the two-coloured mason bee, is one of the first bees of spring, emerging as early as February in their

native range of South England and Wales. As solitary bees, there are no queens and workers; females build their nests alone. Males emerge, mate, and then die. This uncommon species is of conservation concern due to habitat loss and is classified as Nationally Notable (Nb). Fortunately, the chalk grassland managed by members of the Cluster seems to be very good for them. Last summers bee surveys found them at a number of locations and Simon found them at two more sites this spring.

These are a fascinating bee as they create their nest by repurposing empty snail shells, belonging to a small group of bees known as "helicophiles" (snail-lovers). They are very particular about the positioning of the shell and often disguise it with bits of grass. In the shell she creates a small ball of nectar and pollen on which she lays an egg and then seals it with chewed up plant material. She'll repeat this up to five times in each shell and then seal the shell with grains of sand and bits of snail shell to protect the eggs from predators – amazing!

To Do List

- Nectar mixes in Environmental Stewardship Schemes—top half area 15th Jun-15th Jul to encourage later flowering.
- Maintain wet, muddy puddles in and around yards for swallows and house martins. These need only be a metre in diameter and are really important in periods of dry weather.
- Contact Simon if you see Stone Curlew or hear Turtle Dove!

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