



Chalke
Valley
Farmer
Cluster

Issue 14 Spring 2024

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.



Primrose (S.Smart)

www.chalkevalleyfarmercluster.org.uk



It has certainly been some incredibly challenging weather for farming over the last few months. It has also had an impact on our soils, River and wildlife.

Despite the wet weather we have been very busy over the last few months.

With funding from Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) we have completed the restoration of four dew ponds and creation of another. These will provide really valuable wetland habitat in an otherwise very dry landscape on the Down attracting a range of wildlife including amphibians, birds and insects. In fact newts have already been seen in one of the ponds!



Restored dew pond on Gurston Farm (S.Smart)

Additionally, we have also create four butterfly banks and scrapes. These are designed to provide important 'stepping-stones' between areas of flower-rich chalk grassland by providing nutrient-poor bare chalk which we have then planted with larval food plants of a range of butterflies and moths. For example, we have planted horse-shoe vetch to attract Adonis blue butterfly and kidney vetch to encourage Small blue butterfly. The banks are designed

to have the added benefit of varied aspects so the butterflies can select areas with suitable conditions and shelter depending on the weather conditions and time of day.

In February members of the CVFC were busy planting another 100 resistant elm trees to supplement those planted over the last five years. These are planted to replace elms which were lost to dutch elm disease since the 1970's and provide habitat for White-letter hairstreak butterfly whose caterpillars feed on elm.

At the end of last year we were successful in securing funding from the Cranbourne Chase National Landscape's, Crystal Clear Ebble Project, for 14 mink rafts. Over the last few months these have been deployed along the Ebble in an attempt to remove mink, a non-native member of the mustelid family, which can have a devastating impact on our native wildlife, particularly ground nesting birds and water vole, including on the Ebble.



Butterfly bank at Stoke Farm. Volunteers from the Chase & Chalke Landscape Partnership busy planting wild flower plugs



One of the mink rafts deployed on the River Ebble (S.Smart)

Oil beetles

The strange looking Oil beetles have a very extraordinary lifecycle. Female oil beetles dig their nest burrows in the ground near to where solitary bees are nesting, in to which they can lay up to a thousand eggs. Once hatched, the active larvae, known as triungulins, climb up on to flowers where they wait to catch a lift on a suitable bee visiting the flower. They have hooked feet which gives them a secure hold on the bee so that they can hitch a ride back to the bee's nest. Once in the bee's nest the larva dismount and begin eating the bee's eggs and store of pollen and nectar. The larva develops in the bee burrow until it emerges as an oil beetle ready to mate and start the whole cycle again.

Healthy oil beetle populations are therefore dependent on the health and diversity of wild bees. Sadly three of the



Black oil beetle near Bowerchalke (S.Smart)

UK's native oil beetles are thought to be extinct with the five remaining species in decline.

The loss of wildflower-rich habitats, habitat fragmentation, changes to land management and a decline in host bee species have all contributed to the decrease in oil beetle numbers.

The ideal habitat for oil beetles species is wildflower-rich grassland such as our chalk grassland.

As such the long-term maintenance of wildflower-rich, chalk grassland is important for oil beetles. Some disturbance is also important to maintain areas of bare ground to encourage the host solitary bees.

Management practices such as creating and enhancing flower-rich grassland, providing buffer strips around fields will be beneficial to the solitary bee hosts of oil beetles, as well as other pollinators. Extending and linking areas of wildflower-rich grassland may also allow oil beetle populations to expand and could help to reconnect fragmented populations.

Early Gentian

Early gentian, *Gentianella anglica*, is a small, rare annual or biennial wildflower.

It is endemic to the UK, meaning it is only found here and nowhere else in the world. Early gentian has purple, four - or five-petalled, trumpet-shaped flowers that have fine white stamens inside them. It has long, narrow, green leaves that are unstalked, growing directly from the stem.

It grows on chalk grassland, favouring south-facing slopes with thin soil that are grazed to keep the vegetation cover low. Its purple, trumpet-shaped flowers appear in branching clusters from May to June, much earlier than its relative, the autumn gentian. Its seeds can remain in the ground for several years before growing, so colonies may only appear every few years.

The Chalke Valley is a bit of a hotspot for it so keep an eye out for it during May – June. In fact, Prescombe Down is

designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), for its grassland but also for its populations of European Protected Species, including Early gentian.



Early gentian (S.Smart)

To Do list

Re-establish wildlife seed mixes. If you sowed a two-year mix with kale make sure the kale has established well enough to provide a second year of seed for next winter.

Fallow plots—monitor green growth on your fallow plots to make sure they continue to provide suitable nesting habitat for lapwing and stone-curlew.

If you see or hear lapwing or stone-curlew on your farm over the next few months let Simon know.

Keep recording what wildlife you have on your farm using the Group's App. If you are having any problems with it, let Simon know.

GET INVOLVED

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