



Cluster members complete with harvest mouse nests

Welcome to the third edition of the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster newsletter.

It has been another busy few months! We have been excited to support six members of the group in applying for Countryside Stewardship. This has provided the opportunity to make huge improvements to the Chalke Valley landscape, meeting the Cluster's priorities for habitat connectivity, farmland bird habitat and pollinators, protecting archaeology and managing chalk grassland. Highlights include:

- 26.50 hectares of wildlife seed mix
- 10 hectares of flower-rich margins
- 173 hectares of chalk grassland management including significant areas of scrub management and re-introduction of grazing on 7 hectares of abandoned chalk grassland.
- 45 hectares of sward enhancement to improve connectivity.

In June, we welcomed the very enthusiastic Marek Nowakowski to discuss managing habitats for pollinators which included a fascinating walk round some valuable habitats on Matthew Pickford's Stoke Farm. The highlight was seeing the rare small blue butterfly on the bank behind the shoot lodge! With rare butterflies in mind, Sue Clarke came back to the Cluster to survey a number of

sites for Marsh Fritillary, excitingly confirming breeding at two sites.

The Wiltshire Recorder's Forum held their annual summer site visit at Alex Sykes' Norrington Manor Farm. The group spent a day surveying for everything from plants to insects, birds and reptiles. The highlights were finding the Nationally Rare and endemic Early Gentian on Pincombe Down and the rare pot beetle *Cryptocephalus bipunctatus* at Manwood—it has only been recorded in Wiltshire on three other occasions!



Early Gentian, a Chalke Valley speciality and endemic to the UK

Just before harvest, we had a really enjoyable social at Liz Birkett's Rookhaye Farm. This included a walk across Liz's fantastic downland, looking at some of the wildflowers on show, followed by a delicious barbeque. We will definitely repeat this next summer so will be looking for a volunteer to host!

Following on from the sward enhancement, we carried out last Autumn we completed a combination of over-seeding and plug planting on grassland at Richard & Katie Jowett's. It is hoped that this will increase the number and diversity of wildflowers in the grassland and improve connectivity with the adjoining SSSI grassland.



Over-seeding Rat's Castle field with wildflowers

In September Mike Swan from the GWCT provided members of the group with training on safe rodenticide use.

It is important that we use rodenticides safely to reduce contamination in wildlife as it could be having an impact on species such as barn owls. Six members of the Cluster completed and passed the BASIS certified training. For more information visit www.thinkwildlife.org.uk.



In November, we had a very enjoyable morning at Andrew Reis' Manor Farm, Fifield Bavant, with Pete Thompson looking for harvest mice nests—we found 12! Looking for nests in November is the best way to find out if you have them or not. Harvest mice are another very under-recorded species in the Chalke Valley Cluster, so please have a look on your own farms and let Simon know if you find any or better still put them on Living Record!

The pros and cons of Gorse



The common name comes from the Old English 'gorst', meaning a wasteland or uncultivated area. In the past, Gorse was grown as a fuel: the woody stems burn with a lot of heat and produce little ash. The flowers also produce a beautiful yellow dye, can be preserved in vinegar and eaten like capers, or added as a flavouring to spirits. Gorse provides important habitat for a range of birds including Dartford warbler, linnets and yellowhammers with the dense vegetation providing important refuge in harsh weather. Gorse is also important for invertebrates - it is in flower for long periods, so is an important nectar source in early spring and early winter, when little else is in flower. However, it can encroach on other valuable habitats such as chalk grassland. Additionally, as a member of the pea family this plant can fix nitrogen which can acidify the soil and make it difficult for other plants to grow, such as our downland flowers.

How to manage gorse

Maintenance—Break up large stands into several patches and manage on rotation – gorse up to 10 years old has the most wildlife value.

Control—Cut to ground level and treat stumps. Repeated cutting but may take several years.

Supplementary feeding in the 'Hungry Gap'



Last winter, we ran a training session on supplementary feeding as a great way of providing food for the birds. This can be

really important for ensuring birds survive the winter and enter the breeding season in good condition. We are really keen to increase the amount of supplementary feeding being carried out within the Cluster, particularly during the 'Hungry Gap' between January and April when there is very little food available.

- * we have produced a guidance note for the Cluster on supplementary feeding
- * discount on our own bespoke seed mix from Bright Seeds.

* Discount for large hanging bird feeders
If you are interested in any of the above please get in touch with Simon.

The Windhover

Kestrels are a familiar sight with their pointed wings and long tail, hovering above areas of rough grassland, a behaviour that gave the kestrel its old name of 'windhover'.



About

- * Voles are by far the most important food for kestrels, although they regularly take other small mammals, small birds, insects and earthworms.
- * They nest on disused crow's nests, cliff ledges, holes in trees and buildings. The same nest site is often used in successive years with some sites used for decades. The female is only able to produce eggs if she can get enough food. In years when vole numbers are low, many kestrels fail to nest at all.
- * The male provides the female and the chicks with food throughout the nesting period. The female will only hunt if food is short, risking the loss of eggs or young chicks. Only as the young get bigger, can she safely start to hunt close to the nest.
- * Chicks fledge gradually at around four weeks old but the adults continue to feed the young for a month after fledging, during which time they will learn to catch their own food.

- * Unusually for birds of prey, there is no aggression between the chicks, which tend to fly, perch and roost together even for some time after fledging.

How are they doing?

Since the late 20th Century, the population of Kestrels as a whole across the UK has been in decline, with an increase in decline since 2005. This has led to the Kestrel being 'Amber-listed' as a species of conservation concern in the UK.

How can the Cluster help?

Provide a combination of foraging habitat and nest sites is an easy way of encouraging kestrels back onto our farms.

Foraging habitat—Tussocky grass, with a good litter layer, such as buffer strips and field corners and areas of rough pasture will provide perfect foraging habitat rich in prey.

Nest boxes—Kestrels will readily take to nest boxes which are a simple open fronted design.



Where to put them:

- * Site the kestrel nest box on a suitable isolated tree or edge of woodland, on a building or similar 'open aspect' high point with clear flight path.
 - * Entrance should face East/NE/SE - away from the prevailing wind.
 - * Fix at a minimum height of 5m (15 ft)
- You can either purchase a box - these are available at a significant discount to the Cluster for £40 (rrp £69.99) - or, if you'd rather make your own, contact Simon for a cutting plan and design specification.

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