



Newsletter

Issue 4

April 2019



Welcome to the fourth edition of the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group newsletter.

We have undertaken a number of training events to improve our knowledge and ability to manage different habitats. This included a visit to demonstration plots of different wildlife seed mixes at Manor Farm, Alton Barnes. It was a great opportunity to see some of the different mixes, discuss the merits of various crops, the importance and challenges of good establishment to ensure they deliver for our farmland birds by producing lots of seed! Laura Mulholland and Audrey O'Connor, from the Canal & Rivers Trust, gave a fascinating talk on the history and wildlife of the Kennet & Avon Canal, one of our main wildlife 'corridors' along with the Wansdyke.

Over 45 tree sparrow boxes have been put up this year in time for breeding season. We have opted for boxes made of Woodcrete (a mix of wood chip and concrete) which should ensure they last longer than a traditional wooden box. A further 45 are already planned to be put up ready for next breeding season.

10 members have been undertaking supplementary feeding across the



James Read putting up a tree sparrow box up at Church Farm

Pewsey Downs and Vale to ensure birds such as tree sparrow and corn bunting have enough food during the 'Hungry Gap' through out the winter and early spring.

The second of the two pill boxes to be converted for bats with funding support from the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust was completed in January. Members enthused by the project are converting a further 4 pill boxes.

Woodland restoration and hedgerow planting

We have been successful in securing funding from Network Rail's Greater West Programme to gradually remove conifers from Tawsmead Copse, a Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site or PAWS, starting this summer, gradually replacing them with a more diverse range of native broad-leaved trees. Other management to enhance the condition of the ancient woodland will include increasing deadwood, widening rides and providing bat roost opportunities. Additionally, funding also allowed Tim & Josh Carson to establish almost 2km of new hedgerow this winter along the Kennet & Avon Canal to enhance it as a corridor for bats.



Landscape Enterprise Network

The PDFG is working with Wessex Water and Natural England on a pilot project for the Hampshire Avon Landscape Enterprise Network. This is an exciting opportunity to develop and fund environmental projects outside of the

typical agri-environment funding streams. The aim is to secure funding from businesses who value the local landscape and are willing to invest in projects which would benefit the natural assets which they rely on. For example Wessex Water are interested in reducing phosphate in water by working with PDFG farmers. The PDFG is working to identify potential projects that Wessex Water and other potential funders could invest in, covering landscape functions such as water quality, landscape quality and recreation. Let Simon know if you have any project ideas!

Activities for the spring

- ◆ Keep supplementary feeding until the end of April
- ◆ Keep a look out for Stone Curlew. We successfully raised a chick last year so it would be great to build on this!
- ◆ Review the condition of your nectar mixes and wildlife seed mixes. Re-establish if necessary

PDFG Recording App



The PDFG has been working with Natural Aptitude, a Bristol based company who create environmental apps, to trial their data-collection platform, Coreo, by producing an App specifically for PDFG members to record wildlife when they are out on their farms. The App can be used when out in the field so you can record a wildlife sighting instantly. It is really easy to use and includes an identification guide for 40 of our priority species.

Please contact Simon if you would like details of how to set the App up on your phone.

Establishing seed mixes

This is a busy time of year for management of environmental areas. One such job is re-establishing wildlife seed mixes....

For more information contact Simon for copies of the PDFG guidance notes on Wildlife Seed Mix Management.

Wildlife Seed Mix best practice:

- ◆ Good establishment is key!
- ◆ Look after your soil, address any structural and nutrient issues
- ◆ To control weeds use stale seed beds or consider moving the plot to fresh ground. If really weedy consider a sprayable mix.
- ◆ Sow at correct time— when soil has warmed up but still retains moisture.
- ◆ Use a mixture of varieties as these will seed at different times and could ensure better survival in variable conditions.
- ◆ Apply manure and/or fertiliser where necessary.

Species Focus: CORN BUNTING

This dumpy brown bird is one of our most characteristic, even emblematic



birds of the open Pewsey Downs. It is often seen perching on a wire, fencepost or top of a hawthorn bush repeating its song which is likened to jangling keys (listen to the call on the new PDFG recording App!). It will fly off with a fluttering flight often with its legs characteristically dangling below its body. It has declined dramatically in the UK but fortunately can still be found in good numbers across the Pewsey

Downs—Wiltshire supports 50% of the national population.

What do corn bunting need?

Nesting habitat that remains available throughout the summer. They nest late on the ground in cereal fields and can often have flightless chicks late into August so early harvests have a significant effect on their success. One option is to grow large areas of cereal based wildlife seed mixes in open areas. This will ensure that late second broods can survive as the crop is not harvested. Wide conservation headlands can also be beneficial. This approach is already being carried out on a number of PDFG farms, including Roundway Hill Farm, Townsend Farm and Manor Farm, Alton Barnes. This year we are trialling sowing areas within these blocks at a higher seed rate. It is thought that corn bunting will select these areas which have a reduce threat of nest predation.

Lots of seed throughout the year. Adults feed on seeds, particularly cereal grains so providing areas of wildlife seed mix is again very important for this. During the late winter and early spring supplementary feeding, on the ground, is likely to be extremely important. Large number of corn bunting have been using feeding sites at Alton Barnes, Stanton St Bernard and Bishops Cannings.

Insects and spiders during the spring and summer. Corn bunting feed their chicks on insects and the availability of insects has a huge effect on breeding success. Flower-rich chalk downland, nectar flower mixes and flower-rich margins are all important foraging habitats and should be available near to nesting habitat.

GET INVOLVED

For more information and to be kept up-to-date with the PDFG please contact Simon Smart ☎ 07748155143 ✉ simon@blacksheepcm.co.uk

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