

# Newsletter

Issue 3

December 2018



## Welcome to the third edition of the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group 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 Pewsey Downs and Vale landscape, meeting the Group's priorities for habitat connectivity, farmland bird habitat and pollinators, protecting archaeology and managing chalk grassland. Highlights include:

- \* 7 hectares of wildlife seed mix & 4 hectares of nectar flower mix
- \* Management of 18 hectares of chalk grassland including one SSSI and four County Wildlife Sites.
- \* Creation of 9 hectares of flower-rich grassland extending and linking existing chalk grassland.
- \* Water capital grants on 6 farms to improve soil, water and nutrient management.

Just before harvest, we had a really enjoyable farm walk and hogroast at Charlie and Caroline Rudler's with almost 60 people attending. This included a look round a pill box recently

converted for bats and a walk across some of the flower-rich chalk grassland grazed by Jonny and Rachael Rider.

In September some of the group met to feedback on the phosphate measures included in the Farmscoper tool as part of the Hampshire Avon Judicial Review. The Group are working with Paula Sage, our local CSFO, to use Farmscoper to identify ways we can reduce phosphate losses into the Hampshire Avon.

In November we welcomed Charles Bentley, farm tracks specialist at ADAS to discuss management and construction of farm tracks (see following article).

## Habitat for bats

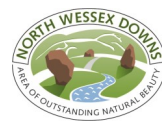
Following the surveys by Gareth Harris of the Wiltshire Bat Group, we have been implementing some of the habitat management which Gareth identified. Last winter this included hedge planting to link pill boxes to the canal at the Butler's Eastwick Farm and the Read's Church Farm. Fortunately, these seem to have survived the summer drought! We were also successful in securing funding from the Sustainable Development Fund at the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust (NWDLT) to convert two pill boxes into

hibernaculum, one of which we had a look at during the farm walk at Charlie Rudler's this summer.

The NWDLT's support and that from the Wiltshire Bat Group, who provided advice and funding towards the project, is greatly appreciated as part of our ongoing efforts to improve our landscape for bats.



One of the Pill Boxes near Stanton St Bernard which has been converted for bats



## 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 by the Group, particularly during the 'Hungry Gap' between January and April when there is very little food available.

- \* we have produced a guidance note for the Group 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

Kestrel 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.
- \* 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.
- \* The chicks fledge gradually when they are 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 Group help?

Provide a combination of foraging habitat and nest sites is an easy way of encouraging kestrels on 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 nestbox on a suitable isolated tree or woodland edge, on a building or similar 'open aspect' high point with clear flight path.
- \* Entrance should face away from the prevailing wind.
- \* Fix at a minimum height of 5m

You can either purchase a box - available at a significant discount to the Group for £40 (rrp £69.99) - or, if you'd rather make your own, contact Simon for a cutting plan & design.

## Farm track management

Many farm tracks are not suited to today's bigger, heavier kit and with changes in weather patterns many

tracks are struggling to cope. Fast flowing water on long lengths of track has the potential to cause significant damage. However some relatively simple things can be done to improve tracks without significant cost.



The key to maintaining tracks is to keep them dry and firm and to sort any problems as soon as they occur.

- \* Add a camber to the track allowing water to flow into a ditch
- \* If cambering is not possible add sleeping policeman or cross drains to divert water.
- \* Swales—channels cut into the verge into which water can be diverted.
- \* Consider relocating tracks or gateways with known problems.
- \* When constructing new tracks, check with planners and try to avoid discharging water to land that is prone to erosion.

Well managed tracks can:

- \* Reduce maintenance costs
- \* Reduce machinery wear
- \* Save time
- \* Reduce transfer of sediment, including phosphate into our river systems and other sensitive habitats

Grants are available under Countryside Stewardship including cross drains, sediment traps, and resurfacing.

## GET INVOLVED

For more information and to be kept up-to-date with the PDFG please contact Simon Smart

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