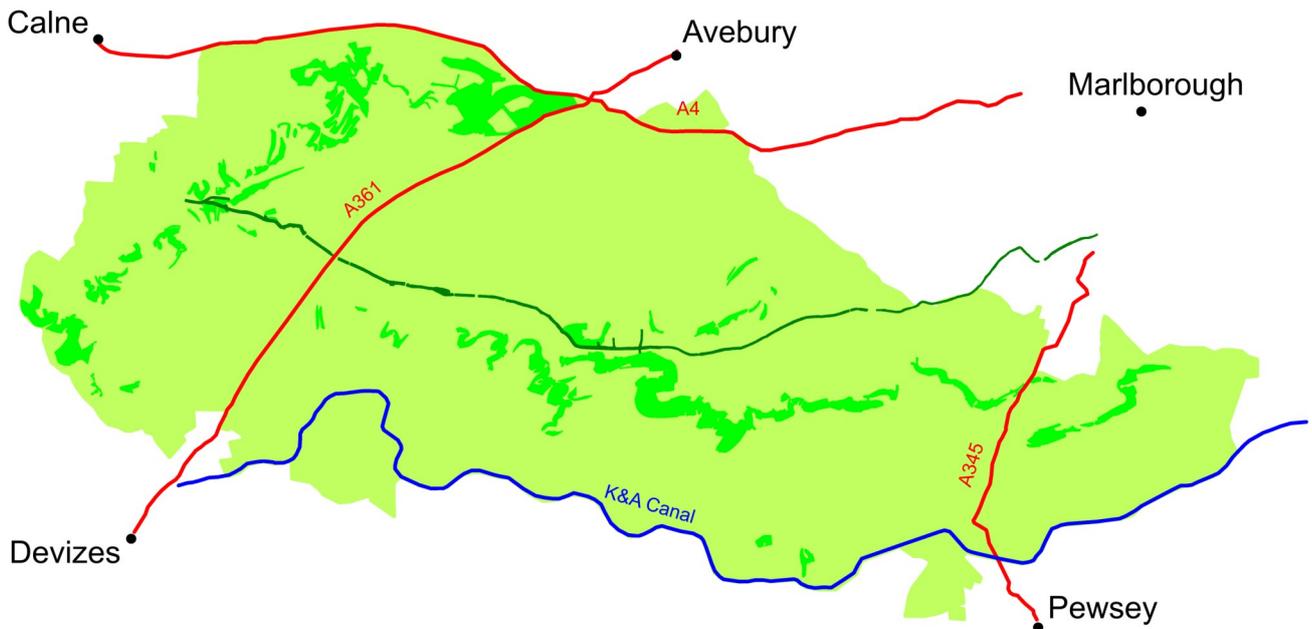


Newsletter

Issue 1
November 2017



INTRODUCING THE PEWSEY DOWNS FARMERS GROUP

The Pewsey Downs Farmers Group (PDFG) was formed in 2016 and now involves over 20 farmers, covering over 8000ha on the chalk downland and Vale north of Devizes and Pewsey. The group was set up following the desire of a number of farmers to work collaboratively to enhance the local landscape for wildlife. In the past, much of the conservation activities carried out on the Pewsey Downs, as elsewhere, have focussed on individual farms with very little consideration of what neighbouring farmers are doing. By working together and looking beyond farm boundaries, we hope that our collective achievements will be greater than the sum of our parts. The group gives us a platform to share knowledge, experience and ideas. We have access to our own, locally specific, environmental advice, and greater economies of scale, with easier access to environmental funding and buying power. The basis for the group is that our objectives and activities have been developed by the farmers themselves, a bottom up approach, which we believe is a more effective, sustainable approach to deliver greater benefits for the Pewsey Downs landscape.

So far, the Group has identified a number of priorities:

- Improve our knowledge of the species we have on our farms by working with local experts and volunteers and by providing identification training for members and volunteers.
- Enhance farmland for birds, such as tree sparrow, corn bunting and lapwing and pollinators, such as bumblebees and butterflies.
- Enhance the quality of existing chalk grassland by identifying issues affecting their condition and providing training and other activities to address them.
- Work across farm boundaries to link up areas of chalk grassland, creating corridors and 'stepping stones' to allow wildlife associated with this rare habitat to move more easily within the Pewsey Downs. Linking the chalk grassland around Pewsey Downs NNR to Morgan's Hill, and Calstone and Cherhill Downs SSSI by enhancing the Wansdyke 'corridor' is a particular priority.
- Work collaboratively to manage land alongside the Kennet and Avon Canal to enhance its value as a corridor for bats, including feeding and roosting opportunities.
- Ensure the long-term survival of historic features on the Pewsey Downs which include burial mounds from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, and the Wansdyke.

ACTIVITIES SO FAR

The PDFG is an opportunity to socialise with neighbours and fellow members. Just before harvest, we had a fantastic farm walk and bbq, kindly hosted by the Sheppard family, at Baltic Farm. We had the opportunity to look at some of the flower-rich chalk grassland on the farm, enjoy the view along the Wansdyke discussing its importance as an archaeological feature and as a corridor between areas of chalk grassland, listen to corn bunting, and discuss opportunities available under Countryside Stewardship at Baltic Farm.



The group secured funding from Natural England to remove scrub and erect fencing along two stretches of the Wansdyke on Manor Farm, Allington, and Newtown Farm. This will have multiple benefits by enabling the re-introduction of grazing to improve the condition of the archaeological feature and restore the flower-rich chalk grassland.

We have been working with Wiltshire Bat Group to survey our section of the Kennet & Avon Canal for bats. This has identified the canal as a really important corridor for a number of bat species, including nationally rare Barbastelle and Lesser Horseshoe bats.

This work also identified where connectivity along the canal could be improved by hedgerow and tree planting. Additionally, we are currently trying to secure funding to convert a number of pill boxes along the canal to provide roost and hibernaculum sites.



We have helped members complete 5 Countryside Stewardship applications which, if successful, will deliver a large number of group priorities including providing habitat for farmland birds and improving connectivity along the Wansdyke. For example, the Sheppard's are putting a flower-rich margin along the whole of their length of the Wansdyke to improve it as a corridor for butterflies and other insects, whilst both the Hue's and the Sheppard's have included supplementary feeding in their applications.



Last winter, we ran a workshop on supplementary feeding for farmland birds. This included a site visit to Church Farm to see what great work the Reads are doing feeding corn bunting and tree sparrow. We are really keen to increase the amount of supplementary feeding on the Downs, particularly during the 'Hungry Gap' between January and April when there is very little food available. If you are interested in supplementary feeding on your farm please get in touch with Simon.

Logo—you will have noticed on the front of the newsletter our new logo. The group would like to thank James Cameron's Son, Olly, for producing this for us.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

We are busy developing a series of training sessions and workshops.

This currently includes:

- * Cover crops and soil management
- * Fallow plot management for lapwing and stone curlew
- * Habitat management for pollinators

If you have any other topics you would like covered, please let us know!

GET INVOLVED

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

☎ 07748155143,

✉ simonsmartblacksheep@gmail.com

The PDFG is supported by funding from Natural England

