

Newsletter

Issue 2

June 2018

The Group learning about pollinators with Marek Nowakowski on Tim and Josh Carson's Woodborough Hill



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

Despite the incredibly variable weather of the last few months with rain, snow and bright sunshine, we've been busy on the Downs and in the Vale.

We've had a number of really useful training events, including a talk from RSPB's Rob Blackler on managing **fallow plots** to provide ideal nesting habitat for **stone-curlew** and **lapwing**, followed by a look at one of the Read's supplementary feeding sites to brush up on our bird identification skills ahead of the **Big Farmland Bird Count**. Later in March, we had a very well attended evening talk from GWCT's Peter Thompson on managing the Pewsey Downs for **Grey Partridge**, followed by a delicious dinner provided by our very own Sue Horton.

More recently, we had a fascinating talk and farm walk with Marek Marakowski on encouraging **pollinators** on our farms.

We discussed the vital roles of pollinators in farming and how to create and manage habitat for them. We also heard about the role of pollinators and the wider farmed environment in future policy. This was really positive for the Group and showed that we are well placed to make the most of future policy changes, rewarding us for the environmental work we are doing. A real highlight was walking through the flower-rich grassland which Tim and Josh Carson established at Manor Farm, Alton Barnes, to link Woodborough Hill and Picked Hill.

Enhancing the Wansdyke corridor

Despite the less than ideal weather

conditions over the winter, we managed to undertake **sward enhancement**, introducing wildflowers into existing grassland, on 4 locations to improve connectivity between existing areas of chalk grassland. Over 4000 Devil's-bit scabious plug plants have been planted along the Wansdyke by the fantastic volunteers from Natural England's Pewsey Down National Nature Reserve, working under the guidance of the NNR's manager Ben Cooke. It is hoped that the plug planting and over-seeding will improve the corridor between the NNR and Calstone and Cherhill Downs SSSI, providing nectaring and breeding habitat for insects such as Marsh Fritillary.



Volunteers from the Pewsey Downs NNR planting scrub near the Wansdyke on Horton Down

We also planted scrub in strategic areas parallel to the Wansdyke. Scrub on the Wansdyke can cause damage to the Nationally important archaeology, however, it is also known to provide a valu-

able habitat for insects and birds. To balance these two potentially conflicting issues, we have identified suitable areas to plant scrub, adjacent to the Wansdyke but avoiding the archaeology. This will provide valuable habitat for birds such as tree sparrow and will eventually allow for removal of some of the scrub which is damaging the Wansdyke archaeology. Again, the NE volunteers did a huge amount of this planting up on the Downs in all weathers!

Natural England visit on the Downs



In April we welcomed James Diamond, Natural England's Operations Director, and the NE Farmland Conservation Delivery Group, to the Pewsey Downs. We walked a length of the Wansdyke from Horton to the National Nature Reserve at Stanton St Bernard. It was a great opportunity to demonstrate what we are implementing on the ground and the benefits of working together as a group to enhance the Pewsey Downs and Vale. They were particularly keen to ask the group's view on how best Natural England can support collaborative working across landscapes. They were really impressed with what we have achieved so far. In an email following our meeting James Diamond said: *'We all left with a real tangible sense of the engagement and enthusi-*

GET INVOLVED

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

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asm the farmer group has for the environment and what they are achieving. It was wonderful. Farmer-led approaches across landscapes are where we want to go and the visit reinforced that for me. It really does deliver more and better. Please do pass on our thanks to the whole group, both for the visit and for what they are achieving.'

Black Poplar

Black Poplar is an incredibly rare tree, probably our rarest timber tree. Black poplar seeds have very exacting germination requirements and the drainage of winter flooded meadows has resulted in the loss of suitable land for seedling germination and establishment. Consequently, most of the remaining trees in Britain have probably been artificially propagated from cuttings; there is currently no natural regeneration from seed.



A pickup full of black poplar ready to be delivered to Group members

It is estimated that only about 8,000 now exist in the UK with only 400 being female. Additionally, the trees that survive are aging without new generations to replace them. This project has proved extremely popular with members purchasing 100 native black poplar saplings, including 35 females, kindly provided by the Cotswold Water Park Society. These have been planted in wet areas, such as ditch sides, in the Pewsey Vale.



The PDFG is supported by funding from Natural England

Stone Curlew success on the Downs

Following on from our training workshop on fallow plot management in February, we have continued to work closely with Rob Blackler of the RSPB's stone-curlew project. Members have been working hard to provide ideal nesting conditions for these extremely rare birds. This has paid off with the exciting discovery of a pair with chick at Charlie Rudler's Townsend Farm. Ollie Goodfield from CTC Arable Ltd was lucky enough to see the chick up close whilst carrying out plot management. The chick has now fledged but not before Rob and Simon were able to put colour rings on the chick to help with monitoring its movements. Hopefully it will return to the Downs next year!

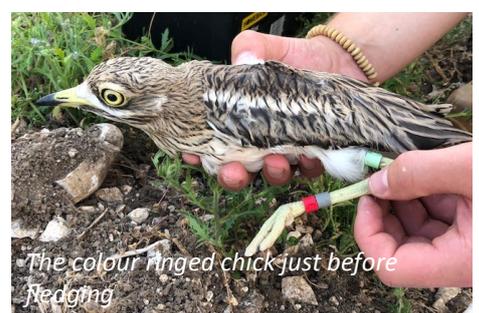
This is a really exciting development which we can hopefully build on in the coming years to see an expansion in the population of this strange summer visitor.



Ollie with Rob taking measurements of the chick



The young stone-curlew chick



The colour ringed chick just before fledging