

# Newsletter

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Welcome to the fifth edition of the Pewsey Downs Farmers Group newsletter.

It has been a very busy summer for the Group.

At the beginning of the summer we had a talk by the enthusiastic Matt Prior, Wiltshire Ornithological Society (WOS), on the tree sparrow conservation work he has been doing on the Pewsey Downs for the last 20 years. Tree sparrow are one of our priority species, having declined hugely since the 1970's but for which the Pewsey Downs are a stronghold thanks to the work of Matt and local farmers.

In June we welcomed Peter Thompson back to the Downs to discuss conservation of grey partridge and look at some of the great habitat management which one of our members, Charlie Rudler, has been undertaking including unharvested conservation headlands and wildlife seed mixes. Peter also covered how we might monitor these birds and what else we could do to encourage them.

We had also planned to do some identification training on bumblebees but unfortunately the weather was not

very bee friendly so we had to postpone to next summer, fingers crossed for better weather!



*Grey partridge meeting with Peter Thompson at Townsend Farm*

In early July, just before harvest we held our annual farm walk and barbecue at Manor Farm, Alton Barnes by kind invitation of Tim and Josh Carson. It was a great evening and an opportunity to enjoy some great views from Woodborough Hill and see some of the conservation work Tim and Josh have undertaken.

Funding from Natural England allowed Sue Clarke, Dave Green and Simon Smart to continue their hunt for Marsh Fritillary with great success. This very rare butterfly was found at a number of new locations including along the Wansdyke where we have been trying to encourage them to link populations on Pewsey Downs National Nature Reserve with those on Morgan's Hill and Calstone and Cherhill Downs SSSI. This is

hugely exciting for the Group and testament to the work of the farmers to encourage this and other butterflies. This has included planting flower-rich strips alongside the Wansdyke, adding flowers to existing grassland, scrub management and reintroducing grazing, all to enhance the Wansdyke as a vital corridor for wildlife, including Marsh Fritillary. The amazing volunteers from Pewsey Downs NNR also planted over 5000 Devil's-bit scabious plug plants (the food plant of Marsh Fritillary caterpillars) along the Wansdyke where these were found, during previous surveys, to be missing. Whilst there is still lots more to do this is hopefully the beginning of a great conservation success story!



*Recently established wildflower strip alongside Wansdyke on Baltic Farm. Will be in full bloom next summer!*

We welcomed back Gareth Harris and Wiltshire Bat Group to undertake bat surveys in Tawsmead Copse, Alton Barnes, as part of habitat improvements in the wood funded by Network Rail and the Greater West Programme. Gareth

found a number of bat species using Tawsmead Copse including the rare Barbastelle bat. This information is to be used to inform management in the wood to encourage bats such as glades and standing deadwood.

Additional to this our very own Sam Read got involved in trialling a remote sensor for the Bat Conservation Trust as part of the national British Bat Survey. We look forward to the results from this too.



*Sam checking his AudioMoth bat recorder*

Following on from last years success of a pair of Stone-curlew rearing a chick we have gone one better this year with a pair rearing two chicks!

Having won the FWAG South-West Barn Owl Award in 2018 Richard, David, and Katherine Butler went on to be runners-up in the National Silver Lapwing Award, a great result for the Butler's and the Pewsey Downs Farmers Group!

We have been keen to engage with people living in the local area and explain what we are trying to do as a Group. This has included a talk in Stanton St Bernard to explain some of the conservation activity which local farmers such as the Bryan, James and Sam Read are doing in the surrounding area. This was followed by a talk in Alton Barnes by Sue Clarke and Simon on the Marsh Fritillary surveys carried out this summer and what the Group is doing to encourage them.

## Don't forget pollinators!

Whilst we may be at the end of summer that doesn't mean we can forget about pollinators! As with farmland birds its important to think about year round habitat and this includes what they need over-winter.

Dense vegetation such as tussocky grassland, scrub, mature trees, and piles of wood and stone can provide essential habitat for hibernating pollinators. Insect pollinators can spend the winter in a variety of life stages (egg, larva, pupa, or adult). For example, solitary bees spend the winter in their nest cells as pupae, emerging as adults the following spring or summer, so it is critical to protect nesting areas from disturbance all year long, not just during the nesting season. With bumblebees it is the new Queens which over-winter as adults digging into well-drained soil, usually on north-facing banks.



*A male red-tailed bumblebee feeding on knapweed on the Horton's section of the Wansdyke*

All need sheltered areas in which to spend the winter. Do not be too tidy and set aside undisturbed areas of habitat such as uncut field margins and 'rough' field corners.

## Celebrating Ivy



*Ivy provides important food and shelter for wildlife*

Ivy is one of our most important autumn flowers, attracting huge numbers of butterflies, bees and flies, some of which will overwinter as adults, making this final feast vital. It also provides shelter for insects, birds, bats and other small mammals. The high fat content of the berries is a nutritious food resource for birds and they are eaten by a range of species including thrushes and blackcaps.

Ivy uses trees for support, allowing it to

reach upwards to better levels of sunlight. It is not a parasitic plant and has a separate root system in the soil and so absorbs its own nutrients and water. In most cases the growth of ivy is controlled by the healthy crowns of trees which limit the amount of sunlight reaching ivy leaves. When ivy does grow on trees, it usually adopts its mature flowering form and ceases climbing before it reaches the crown of a tree.

It is only rarely that Ivy will cause significant direct damage to a supporting tree. As such avoid cutting ivy as a matter of course unless there is a specific reason such as tree safety.

## Autumn to-do list

**Cut nectar flower mixes** Cut the whole plot to roughly 10cm tall removing or shredding cuttings to avoid patches of dead material (HLS— EF1/HF4 by 31st Oct; CS— AB1 by 30 Mar).

**Cut wildflower strips and plots** (HLS—HE10, CS—AB8) Cut, and remove if dense, or graze 90% of the area by 31 October - leave 10% of the area uncut or ungrazed.


Removal is ideal for both the above options, but particularly wildflower strips, as cuttings left in situ can smother the flowers encouraging grass, nettles and docks in their place. If removal is not possible ensure that material is well shredded and avoid leaving large lumps of cuttings. For nectar mixes cutting twice a few days apart during dry weather could help. Flail toppers work best to break up cut material.

**Inspect barn owl & kestrel nest boxes** this autumn. Remove approximately 75% of old pellets and nest material, leaving some pellets in for a scrape for next years breeding.

## 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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