

How one farming cluster is making a difference for nature



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IAN WALLER

A group of farmers in the Chilterns with a shared passion for wildlife are taking proactive measures to help boost nature recovery in their region. *CPM* finds out what's behind their success so far.

By Janine Adamson

For the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster, it all started with a shared desire – an urge to learn more about the wildlife on their farms, to become excited by it, and to understand how to help it to flourish. And now, seven years later, evidence suggests the proactive measures they're making are having a tangible impact.

Undoubtedly, the Chilterns National Landscape is a special place – a chalk escarpment covering 660m² of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Bedfordshire. However, with 60% of its area being farmland, this places the majority of its stewardship in the hands of farmers.

Recognising the significance of their role in nature recovery led 18 of

these individuals to form the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster, spanning 6500ha of the Buckinghamshire area of the Chilterns. Farmer-led, the group is chaired by passionate local farmer Ian Waller and facilitated by the Chilterns National Landscape.

The cluster has been successful in securing significant funding to support its work – starting with the National Lottery Heritage-funded Chalk Cherries and Chairs Landscape Partnership Scheme, and more latterly by the Rothschild Foundation, Farming in Protected Landscapes and other supporters.

Nature recovery manager for the Chilterns National Landscape, Nick Marriner, says the original goal of



Purposeful collaboration

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the cluster was to break down any perceived barriers to engaging with environmental measures such as providing supplementary winter bird food, coppicing hedges or installing owl boxes. “There was



Insect training

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an evident gap,” he continues.

“Farmers were interested and passionate about learning, but they required practical, responsive support and education. Equally, it had to be on their terms, when they were ready, and to fit in with their wider farm plans,” he explains.

According to Nick, at the point the cluster was formed in 2019, there was some support available, but it wasn’t necessarily joined-up or tailored to individual farming businesses. This made it difficult to implement and make solid plans, he suggests.

“If properly supported, farmers have the potential to make the huge difference we require for wildlife, environment and rural communities,” stresses Nick.

The cluster members range from a small 40ha beef farm to 900ha arable systems. However, there’s one characteristic they all share – a willingness to work together. “They’re bound together by the desire to make positive change for wildlife, while improving their farm businesses and producing high-quality food,” says Nick.

“Through the cluster, peer support and an element of competitiveness are married with expert advice, training and farmer-led initiatives. This is backed by a supportive community of more than 90 organisations, experts and contractors.”

Landowner Eleanor Cave from Old Callowdown Farm joined the cluster for help and advice on how best to manage the farm for wildlife, including its Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Working in partnership with Natural England and Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Environmental Records Centre (BMERC), a long-term chalk grassland

restoration project was instigated.

For this, the cluster offered a package of support including a full SSSI management plan; inviting tenders, awarding contracts and project management of an eight week scrub clearance project; and arranging installation of new stock fencing, a stock pen and water supply to site. It also helped to facilitate a Whole Farm Plan which was used as the basis for successful Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship and SFI agreements.

“The cluster has connected us to all sorts of people: the consultant who helped to pull together our CS application, a wildflower expert for our wildflower meadow (see box), and Nick himself is an expert on birds,” explains Eleanor. “All of this support has been a massive help as it would have taken me much longer on my own.”

For the cluster members, the benefits stretch far beyond the obvious too, highlights Nick. “As well as improving their understanding of nature and accessing appropriate support, it’s about connecting with others and sharing ideas. Equally, it’s helping to champion farmers in the Chilterns – tracking the difference they’re making and shouting about it,” he says.

And critically, the results are tangible, he raises. “The local volunteer-run Bucks Owl and Raptor Group (BORG) has partnered with the farmers for several years. Together they’ve increased available nesting sites by installing

more than 80 nest boxes made from recycled farm plastic. Annual checks have revealed around 35% of boxes are in active use, with barn owls and kestrels responding well,” says Nick.

Then, new Countryside Stewardship agreements should provide more than 60ha of habitat for small mammals to support the owls and raptors further.

Other highlights from the cluster include major projects to create new and rejuvenate more than 35km of hedgerows, and to establish and better manage over 75ha of species-rich grassland habitat.

The group has been engaging with the wider community too, notes Nick. Around 250 people have been helping to support the farmers’ work through a citizen science project that covers everything from bird, butterfly, plant and reptile recording, to bird ringing, botanical surveys and hedge laying.

The results can then be used to compare with regional and national trends, he adds. “This insight is a vital piece in the puzzle – enabling examination of the impact of farmers’ individual and collective efforts ‘on the ground’.”

In terms of bird surveys, the community volunteers have undertaken annual winter studies at a number of cluster farm feeding sites. Already, data suggests an increase in the abundance

of yellowhammers during the past six years, contrasting the long-term national population decline, highlights Nick.

Now, it’s a case of getting other clusters in the region to adopt a similar model, believes Professor Kate Heppell, head of landscape for Chilterns

National Landscape. “The great work of the farmers in the cluster has provided a blueprint and catalyst for our wider work with farmers.

“We’re excited by the opportunities this brings, not only for farmers, but for our wider nature recovery and climate adaptation plans. The opportunities to work at landscape scale are significant, and we’re working to secure resources to scale support packages for all farmer clusters.”

This is something that chair of the Chilterns cluster and member, Ian Waller, hopes will become a reality. ►

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Farming insects project

Monitoring six sites across the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster helps to understand insect behaviour on-farm

Having expressed an interest in increasing farmland insects to support populations of grey partridges, the Central Chilterns Farmer Cluster began a two-year project funded by the Rothschild Foundation, working alongside Marek Nowakowski from the Wildlife Farming Company.

Supported by the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH) and independent invertebrate consultant Steve Falk, data was gathered from six of the cluster farms across a range of habitats. This was achieved by using pitfall traps to assess populations of ground beetles, as well as replicated transect walks to count bees, butterflies, hoverflies and daytime-flying moths.

The habitats monitored were the following: 30-year-old areas of wildflower natural regeneration on chalk soils; high quality seven-year-old native sown grass and flower mixtures; medium-quality sown grass and flower mixtures; low-diversity sown grass and flower mixtures; tussocky grass; and crop-to-field edges.

Explaining the results, Marek says not only did they compare favourably with national datasets, but the older habitats contained greater species diversity as well as larger populations. In fact, the pitfall traps that were out for seven days in June caught 13,449 invertebrates – carabid beetles and spiders totalled 6602 with the rest being species such as spring tails.

“Interesting to farmers was the black clock beetle (*Pterostichus madidus*), which is a beneficial predator and scavenger that feeds on aphids, slugs, and snails. This represented 63% of the total beetles caught,” he explains.

“However, it was the 30-year-old areas of wildflower chalkland natural regeneration that caught most of the nationally scarce invertebrates, which demonstrates the value of habitat quality and age.”

During the transect walks – where consultant Steve walked the same areas that had pitfall traps and recorded observations – 1349 pollinators were counted from 72 different species. “This shows that the margins provide suitable habitat for a diverse



Quality wins

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population of pollinators and other beneficial insects,” notes Marek.

He adds that although the project was a mere snapshot in time, the overall results indicate that habitat quality, not quantity, is key. “The greater the habitat diversity and age, the greater the variety of invertebrates supported.

“Ultimately, quality habitats and species richness generally go together, but do take time to develop. So when it comes to delivery, perhaps SFI could note the value of habitat age and quality?

“Regardless, it was great to see the interest and enthusiasm farmers showed when they received the results; the insects became their insects, rather than farmland insects. It also seems to have created a competitive fun element to wildlife delivery within the cluster.”

Marek believes many farmers lack the time, help and money to improve habitat quality and delivery, however, the Central Chilterns Farm Cluster addresses that gap. “Seeing is believing. There’s no substitute for visiting demonstration plots as well as other farms,” he concludes.



► “The cluster has helped us to better understand the wildlife on our farms and how we can support it to thrive; we have a support team we trust and the resources on offer are invaluable, getting expert advice, help designing

projects, accessing funding and ongoing monitoring,” he says.

“The power of the cluster really comes through opportunities to work together on projects at scale. We each form a small part of the wider

Chilterns jigsaw and by working together, are making an impact. I hope that in the future every farmer in the Chilterns has access to a similar support package – what a difference that would make,” he concludes. ●