



## The Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area

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### MDNIA Newsletter, Autumn 2012

**Welcome** to the second Marlborough Downs NIA newsletter! Six months into the project we're already having an impact not only on the landscape and people of the Marlborough Downs but also on the national wildlife conservation scene, attracting the attention of no less than Richard Beynon, the Government Minister for the Natural Environment, and Poul Christenson, the chairman of Natural England. But this project isn't about politicians or civil servants, it's about **YOU!** There are lots of events and activities planned for the coming months so come along and find out more about how to get involved.

You can contact the project by emailing [mdnia@btinternet.com](mailto:mdnia@btinternet.com) or calling Jemma on 01380 871012. Keep an eye on our facebook page too – [www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA](http://www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA) - for the latest reports, events diary and photos. And watch this space for news of our website which is now in development – if you have any ideas about content or design, please do get in touch.

### Delivery Groups – getting things done on the ground

To make sure that the way this project develops reflects the interests and aspirations of the Marlborough Downs farmers and others involved in wildlife management, community activities and access in the area, four Delivery Groups have been established. Each is made up of four or five people who are working to support the project management team in a specific area of the project:

- Community and Outreach
- Access
- Wildlife Sites
- Downland Species

We'll keep you up to date on what the groups have been getting up to and we'll make a start with the **Community and Outreach Group** (COG) which met for the first time in mid July, with this report from Laura Cooper of East Farm, Winterbourne Monkton, a member of the COG group:

*We were full of ideas on how we can encourage the general public to enjoy the Marlborough Downs. We start the challenge by deciding where to begin! First things first, the group feel it is important to get a stronger perspective from the farmers and landowners themselves, to ensure our objectives are met utilising local contacts and knowing what is achievable on the ground. If a member of your farming family or team might be interested, please encourage them to get in touch.*



*Secondly, we need to identify sites and activities that you believe will attract visiting educational groups, volunteers, business sponsorship and so on. Again we would like to call on all NIA members to put forward ideas for their individual farms and estates, whether it be bird watching, ragwort pulling, specific restoration work, and so on, to ensure we have a full directory of what to promote.*

If you'd like to offer an idea, host a volunteer group or help out with an event, please contact Cathy Williams for a chat on 0117 924 6344.

## Events and workshops: getting people together to celebrate the Downs

Despite hideous weather, the **'Summer' Barbeque** was a great success so thanks to all those who turned out on that somewhat stormy night! Special thanks to the Purton Roaster team for braving the elements to cook a delicious meal, and to Nigel Bunter for once again allowing us to use the Members' Bar at Barbury, the venue that seems to be fast becoming our unofficial HQ.

Back in July, on another rather miserable day, the **Farmland Bird Survey workshop** was also well attended by farmers, volunteers and other interested parties, and in September Peter Thompson from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust led a workshop on **Butterfly Recording**.

*Peter reports: The group was made up of a range of different folk including farmers, smallholders and locals who all wanted to learn a little more about these fascinating and beautiful insects. The array of knowledge present at the meeting also covered a wide spectrum, with people from the Wiltshire branch of Butterfly Conservation through to those who admitted they knew next to nothing about butterflies – and that was why they were attending! I love it when you get this mix of understanding within an audience, as those who know plenty about the subject can help to add lots to the day, with interesting behavioural observations and captivating little snippets of interest, whereas the most thought-provoking questions will inevitably come from the complete novice!*

*The workshop covered the different species that can be found within the MDNIA, showing examples of each butterfly and making note of the distinguishing aspects that will help you identify an individual in the field. One of the major surprises to the group arose when we covered how butterflies spend the winter months. When asked to vote on what stage of their life cycle butterflies are at on New Year's Day (i.e. egg, caterpillar, chrysalis or adult), nobody (other than those from Butterfly Conservation) voted for the caterpillar stage when in fact more species pass through the winter months as a caterpillar than any other stage.*



*It is of course important to know exactly where butterflies are during these winter months, as so often it is this time of the year that we move in to manage these areas, with grazing, mowing and scrub control. So, something as simple as mowing the whole width of a grass margin, rather than just half of it, could indeed have a major impact on some local butterfly populations.*

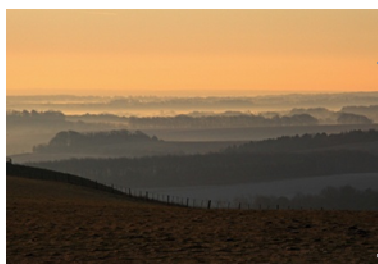


*Finally, we all went for an enjoyable walk to see if we could spot any late butterfly species. However, the clouds had by now covered the whole sky and a brisk breeze had got going, resulting in any self-respecting butterfly keeping well tucked up out of the cold. We did manage though to find a spindle ermine moth – a little white moth covered in tiny black spots, the caterpillars of which spin huge silken webs that can sometimes be seen covering long stretches of hedgerow (right).*

*Part of the reason for holding this event was to encourage people to get out and about to record butterflies within the MDNIA, everywhere from your own garden on a casual basis through to walking the same selected transect throughout the year, so that we can build up a better picture of butterfly populations locally. So if you'd like to get involved in the Marlborough Downs Great Butterfly Hunt, please contact Jemma and find out more. Even if you didn't attend the workshop you can contribute so please get in touch!*

## Upcoming events – book your place now!

The final event on the 2012 calendar will be at Broad Hinton Village Hall on the evening of Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> November. It will be an opportunity to catch up on what's been happening on the Downs and



what plans we have for the winter and spring. As well as refreshments and a chance to mingle with the farmers and friends of the MDNIA, **Marlborough Downs 2013 calendars** will be available to order, and we'll also welcome Tom Tew, the CEO of the Environment Bank. He'll be telling us all about **Biodiversity Offsetting**, a scheme that encourages developers to pay for conservation projects to offset the negative impact their industry has on wildlife. So if you're interested in securing funding to, for example, restore a dewpond or manage chalk grassland for the next fifty years, come along and find out more!

**Tickets for this event are available now** – please send a cheque for £10 per person, made payable to the Marlborough Downs NIA, to MDNIA, c/o Wayside Lodge, Etchilhampton, Devizes, Wiltshire SN10 3JU. There will be also be a limited number of tickets (£12) available on the door but please do book in advance as it makes it easier to organise catering.

We're already planning the 2013 event programme, with an evening on best practice for **chalk grassland management** in January with a follow-up field trip in the summer to find out how different people have tackled grazing, weed control and scrub management amongst other things, packed with top tips on how (and how not!) to do it.

In the spring we'll be inviting you to focus on **Water for Wildlife**, visiting a number of ponds old and new to learn about creating, restoring and looking after this all-important aquatic habitat.

We need venues for these events so if you have any suggestions, please contact Jemma!

## Sharing best practice – the MDNIA directory

As well as holding events to share ideas and knowledge the project has funding to produce a directory of best practice. The **demonstration sites** section of this will give brief details of local examples where good habitat creation, restoration or management can be seen, and where those responsible are willing to share their experiences. So if you have a site that fits these criteria, please let us know as your experience is one of the most valuable assets the project has!

There will also be a list of **recommended specialists** covering the whole range of volunteer groups, contactors, suppliers and consultants who might be called on to support the sort of activities promoted by the MDNIA project – from fencing suppliers to field surveyors; from scrub contractors to sparrow counters; and from pond creators to people co-ordinators! This will be a fairly exclusive group as we're only going to include those who are personally recommended by someone who lives or works in or near the NIA. Which means we need **YOU** to tell us who you'd call in to hang a gate, write a habitat plan, repair a track, survey your birdlife or organise a farm event – anything that might be related to wildlife, wildlife management, community, or managed access.



The directory will be published online so that it can be constantly added to and improved and won't go out of date. There will also be a few printed copies available in places like local libraries, pubs, village shops, etc. though as usual, we're trying to keep printing costs down so we afford to do more on the ground.

## The first MDNIA dewpond – a lesson in expecting the unexpected!

You may remember that the last newsletter included a picture of the dewpond being restored by David and Edward White. At first everything went smoothly as the scrub was pulled away to reveal the footprint of a good-sized pond. We had hoped it would hold water naturally but even in the wettest summer most



of us can remember this wasn't to be the case so we investigated the options. Traditionally, dewponds were lined with blue clay 'puddled' over layers of insulating straw laid on the chalk bedrock and, nothing if not traditional, we'd expected to use the same technique. And so arose our first hurdle. As this would involve importing materials (clay) onto the site, would we need planning permission? And if so, how long would it take? Could we get 'blanket' permission for dewponds in the whole of the NIA or would we need to present each individual case to the planners? Our hearts sank.

Luckily though, Wiltshire Council is a partner in the project (we just *knew* that would be a good idea!) and so Richard Broadhead, the Rights of Way and Countryside Manager who sits on the MDNIA board, was tasked with finding the answers to these questions.....

In the meantime, we looked into alternatives – enter to centre stage Trevor Tippetts, our local dewpond guru (definitely one for the best practice directory!). Trevor and David White thought long and hard and finally agreed that it would be acceptable to break with tradition and use a modern butyl liner rather than sticking to clay (no pun intended). A number of factors influenced this decision. Firstly butyl liners are strong and reliable and, unlike clay, not prone to springing leaks if the pond dries out completely. And even if there were a problem, a butyl liner comes with a guarantee, something that we certainly wouldn't get with clay. We also know for sure that butyl isn't the sort of 'material' that causes alarm in the planning office, and the final clincher was the bottom line: butyl would be significantly less expensive.

So, ready to move on, David went to check on the hole in the ground only to find it was full.....of 4x4!! An intrepid off-roader had clearly assumed that we'd created this wonderful obstacle just for his enjoyment and gaily trundled up to his axles into the sticky mud of our precious (and thankfully as yet unlined) pond. To add insult to injury, he then had the audacity to ask David for a tow out when he found himself stuck fast! I believe, however, he was politely declined and left to find his own way out. But wheel marks on another occasion bore evidence that he wasn't our only intruder and so our next dilemma was how to prevent this happening again, becoming a regular event or even an attraction?

The obvious answer was a good solid fence which was put in place before any further work done on the pond itself. The post and rail has been clad in chestnut paling to provide a partial screen between the wildlife using the pond and anyone wishing to sit and contemplate it or the view. We hope not to need fencing on other dewponds where their use as 4WD challenges won't be a problem as it certainly puts the price up (thank goodness we went for the cheaper liner!), not to mention having more of an impact in the landscape.



The pond is now complete, fully functioning and slowly filling with water. We hope you'll take the opportunity to go and see it at some point and that this, our first MDNIA dewpond, will be a haven for wildlife and give pleasure to many people for years to come.

If, like David and Edward, you'd like to restore an old dewpond or even create a brand new one on your farm, please do get in touch as we'd love to hear from you. Our goal is to create a whole string of ponds across the NIA, stepping stones for wildlife across the landscape.

(And, in case you were wondering, you don't need planning permission even for a clay-lined dewpond!)