



MDNIA Newsletter, Winter 2012/3

Welcome to the third Marlborough Downs NIA newsletter! Despite the appalling weather there's lots to report from the Marlborough Downs, where hardy souls have been out and about trying to help our wildlife through this difficult time of the year. Getting around on the downs has been difficult but that hasn't deterred us and we've lots to report and even more planned for the spring and early summer. Read on to find out more.....

Seasonal Supper – What a great night!

Around 60 of us gathered in Broad Hinton on a chilly evening in late November for a very convivial evening that included a gallop across the downs (to find out what the project had been up to), a brilliant presentation about farmland birds, lots of information about biodiversity offsetting, wonderful food and excellent musical entertainment. The event was organised and hosted by volunteers and we can't thank them enough for a wonderful evening! Community spirit was definitely in the air and we hope everyone went home having found out a bit more about the project and a feeling of being involved. Many left with an MDNIA calendar full of beautiful photographs of the downs and some even gained a kestrel box!



We are planning to hold a similar event on **4 April 2013**, so make sure you have the date in your diary. Any suggestions for speakers or a good venue would be welcome (Broad

Hinton village hall was perfect but it would be good to support other parishes too). As well as news on the project and interesting talks by people involved in the project, we'll be presenting an award for the **Marlborough Downs NIA Wildlife Champion** for 2012-13 and who knows, it could be YOU!!

Working Together – Supporting farmland birds with WOS

The MDNIA project has teamed up the Wiltshire Ornithological Society (WOS) to provide food and nest sites for our farmland birds. On a freezing cold day in January, WOS conservation adviser Matt Prior and a group of hardy students from the Royal Agricultural College braved the elements to help us plant Tree Sparrow Villages. These are specially designed clumps of scrub consisting mainly of elder and thorn to provide dense spiky cover. This mix is impenetrable to predatory birds such as sparrowhawk but also provides food for much of the year. We also include a smattering of nectar, fruit and berry bearing shrubs to attract insects and other birds. Into this haven we put a group of nestboxes – starter homes if you like – fairly low to the ground where the fast-growing scrub will soon hide them from predators.



We planted three brand new Villages and have another two ready to go in when the weather improves and we can get right up on the downs. We also have nestboxes to put up where good scrub already exists on the edge of the current range of our existing tree sparrow colonies.

Christmas Bird Walk (not a turkey in sight!)

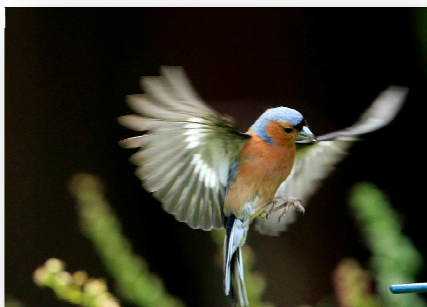
Thursday 27 December 2012 saw a select party of hardy enthusiasts gather at Rutlands Farm near Avebury. Robert Cooper, having very kindly offered to host this farm walk, was amongst the company. The weather was not the worst we had experienced over Christmas but it was still very cold and damp with a biting wind.

Matt Prior started by showing us his suggested bird-feed mix, which comprised of barley tailings, wheat tailings and oilseed rape with white millet added in. Other seeds have, in the past, been included but with experience Matt has concluded that this mix is the most efficient and economical for farmland birds in this NIA.

In the past farmland birds would flock to the farmyard during the winter months and glean the spilt corn from all round the barns. These days with security and efficiency high on a farmer's list, barns are tightly sealed against any form of intruder; be they welcome or not. This is where help with feeding during 'The Hungry Gap' is now required.



We walked out to an area, one hectare in size, which is situated between two parallel hedges. The area had been planted up with a game-strip mix two years ago and this is its final winter before it will be ploughed and replanted in the spring. The hedges were well-kept and dense, providing warm and safe nesting and "chatter" sites. Grass margins ran right out from the base of the hedge, which are suitable for nesting birds, especially yellowhammer. Here Matt explained how to broadcast the seed so that the smaller birds could forage for it over the days but not so densely that larger birds such as corvid or pheasant would move in to Hoover it all up. Also well-broadcast seed is less likely to attract vermin and deer (particularly fallow).



In a second area Matt has been feeding oilseed rape in order to attract linnets and with great success. On our arrival we watched about 70 or 80 linnets rise out of the game-strip and these birds, recognising the signs, rose and fell all around us until we were at enough of a distance for them to descend on the newly replaced seed. This feeding pattern of the black seed is like goldfinches on Niger seed: linnets being of the same family as goldfinches. We then watched about 40 or 50 tree sparrows, amongst other farmland birds, as they moved in a great mob up the hedge to a favourite "chatter" site.

Well instructed in how to help our precious farmland birds through the coming months of naturally lean pickings, we beat a hasty retreat before the weather got the better of us. It was though good to have got some fresh air and to have learnt so much in the "armpit of the year" as I heard it called that morning.

We saw a lot of birds on the Rutlands Farm walk including:

Chaffinch
Collared Dove
Carrion Crow
Dunnock
Pheasant
Tree Sparrow

Fieldfare
Kestrel
Linnet
Peregrine
Red Legged Partridge
Yellowhammer

Woodpigeon
Redwing
Robin
Skylark
Starling
Blackbird....one with white tail feathers

Vicki Lowes, Fiddlers Hill (Downland Species Group member)

MNDIA 2013 Events Calendar

The **Community and Outreach Group** (COG) has been busy! The 2013 NIA Events Calendar is quickly filling with some exciting Educational Days for the general public to enjoy. We have schools wishing to Pond Dip in late spring and count frogspawn, and families who want to appreciate the dawn chorus and a walk in the woods. During the week commencing 1 June we plan to hold **NIA Volunteering events**, and require tasks for them to complete. Our big event of the year will be on Sunday 9th June as part of **Open Farm Sunday**, which is sure to attract a great crowd. At the latter end of the year, we have proposed a Moth Night, a Bat Evening, an Owl Prowl and Chalk land walks, the list is endless!



However, in order for any of these events to take place and importantly be a great success WE NEED YOU! We are calling on



everyone who lives, works and appreciates the Marlborough Downs for their help, goodwill, time and suggestions to get these NIA events off the ground. We are urgently on the search for host sites, enthusiasts and volunteers. For Open Farm Sunday in particular we are seeking animals to pet, vintage machinery, a demonstration of forgotten crafts, beaters trailers, a working hive...anything that families might enjoy! Plus for National Volunteer week we are looking to you, to put forward any "tasks" you might have, that volunteers can get stuck into.

So we urge you to talk with your neighbours, friends, colleagues and your families, to encourage them to join you and take part in promoting the Marlborough Downs NIA. Please call Laura on 07980 881414 or email mdnia@btinternet.com with your ideas, suggestions and offerings! Time is of the essence!

Laura Cooper, East Farm (COG member)

The **Friends of the Railway Path (FoRP)** are a group that has recently been established to conserve and enhance a valuable recreational route in the MDNIA. The Path runs from the Coate Water Country Park to Marlborough, mostly along to line of the former Swindon, Marlborough & Andover Railway. The railway closed in 1967, and the cycle path was created in 1988.



Since then it has been maintained by Sustrans. FoRP have carried out an ecological assessment and identified a number of key projects along the route. There are regular work days, the next one being on 23 February where the railway path enters the MDNIA just south of the M4. A number of tasks including ecological maintenance, simple maintenance and tidying will be undertaken on the day and all are welcome.

For further information visit the FoRP website: <http://www.friendsofthepath.org.uk>

Oliver Cripps, NWD AONB (COG Chair)

Upcoming events – get in touch to get involved!

We will soon be circulating a full timetable of events for 2013 but to whet your appetite, here is a taste of what's on the menu for the next couple of months:



Tuesday 26 February, Chiseldon

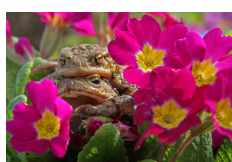
Workshop: Establishing and managing wild bird mixes, nectar plots and wildflower corridors – essential habitat for farmland birds and insects

Speakers:

Peter Thompson, GWCT

Diane White, Farmland Bird Initiative

Jo Chesworth, Butterfly Conservation Trust



March/April, various venues

Schools event: Big Spawn Count. We need farm ponds with access so that local school children can come and check out your spawn.

Promoted by Pond Conservation Trust



Thursday 4 April, venue to be confirmed

Spring Celebration: Evening of updates, interesting talks, food, drink and music, and the presentation of the Marlborough Downs NIA Wildlife Champion Award 2012/13 ... who will it be?!



May, venue to be confirmed

Open event: Take part in the big pond dip and learn about what makes a pond good for wildlife.

Promoted by Pond Conservation Trust

As always, if you'd like to host or attend an event, get in touch with Jemma Batten or any member of the project management team or farmer board. You can contact us by emailing mdnia@btinternet.com or calling 01380 871012.

Keep an eye on our facebook page too – www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA - for the latest reports, events diary and photos. You don't have to have a facebook account yourself, you are welcome to browse, though if you want to comment or contribute you'll have to sign up. We'd really like to see your comments and photographs posted though so if you'd rather, you can send them to Jemma and she'll share them on the facebook page.

Otherwise, express yourself through the MDNIA newsletter - articles about what's happening in the NIA are always welcome! Submit your offerings to Jemma via email or call for the postal address. We'd love to hear from you!