



## MDNIA Newsletter, Winter 2013/14

**Welcome** to this edition of the Marlborough Downs newsletter! In spite of the atrocious weather we've been busy on the Downs since the last update in September. The season kicked off with a very well attended **AGM** at the Ellendune Centre where Nick Upton showed a selection of his fantastic photographs and Jilly Carter gave us a very moving insight into what our Project means to a group of people who might not otherwise have had access to our wonderful landscape. Matt Prior updated us on how the MDNIA has enabled him to get even more intimate with tree sparrows (more of this later!) and we also got an idea of how we fit into the bigger picture of landscape-scale conservation from Henry Oliver. We have dates for our 2014 gatherings, so get them in your diary now and make sure you don't miss out!



The **Spring Celebration** will be held again at Marlborough Golf Club on 10 April at 7:30 pm. There will be a **Summer Farm Walk & Barbeque** on the Burderop Estate on 4 July at 6:00 pm. And our 2014 **AGM and Seasonal Supper** will be on 2 October, in the evening, venue to be confirmed.

### We've been busy out and about on the Downs!



The **Friends of the Railway Path** have held a number of workdays to lay hedges, clear back vegetation and generally tidy up.



A cold day planting **tree sparrow villages** at Rockley and Avebury, with the Carter family adding another, bringing the total now to eight.



**Pond number 5** was constructed in time for Christmas and (not surprisingly!) is already full to overflowing with water.

## Christmas Owl Prowl is a Christmas Cracker!

On a chilly day in December twenty people aged from six to 76 joined farmers in Rockley to try to spot the elusive short-eared owl. Several had been spotted a few days earlier as they made their way south from Scotland, the northern isles and Scandinavia for the winter, so we were all very hopeful.

The day was overcast with only a light breeze, and everyone climbed into the trailer clutching their binoculars, to be towed by tractor high up onto the Marlborough Downs. Marie Lennon from BBC Wiltshire came to record the event, and it featured in Wild About Wiltshire, broadcast on 15th December.

The Marlborough Downs were beautiful – even on an overcast day, and there was great excitement when a red kite was spotted soaring over trees in the distance. We also saw kestrels, and then a buzzard which, at distance and sitting in a tree, nearly fooled us by imitating a short-eared owl by its pose! We then saw several deer closer by, bounding up a slope to disappear over the top of the hill. No owls so far ....

We climbed back into the relative warmth of the trailer and were taken back off the Downs to some wonderful old farm buildings. This was a good move because there we were rewarded with the spectacular sight of two beautiful barn owls flying out of the hay loft, not making a sound. Their quiet flight makes them perfect for hunting field voles and mice that are plentiful in the surrounding fields. They were just magical!

So, that concluded our afternoon. No short-eared owls today, but three other raptors plus barn owls, which means that the wildlife in the Marlborough Downs NIA is doing pretty well thanks to the farming methods used.

Thanks must go to David White, Robin Nelson, Chris Musgrave and George Hood for kindly hosting us all.

*Ali Rasey, Countryside Officer, Wiltshire Council*



## Marlborough Downs Farm wins prestigious Purdey Awards

In November the prestigious Gold Purdey Award was presented to Count Konrad Goess-Saurau in recognition of his transformational conservation work at Temple Farm at Rockley. Count Goess (pictured, 3<sup>rd</sup> from left) and his estate manager Chris Musgrave (3<sup>rd</sup> from right) have over a period of almost 30 years focused on achieving the maximum habitat benefits for farmland bird species across the estate. Planting game cover, over-wintering stubbles, and the implementation of determined vermin control has paid off. To quote Temple Farm's head keeper Phil Holborrow "The RSPB nearly wet themselves when they counted 115 lapwings in addition to stone curlews, yellowhammers, turtle doves, tree sparrows and skylark". This led to Temple Farm being chosen as the launch site of Natural England's South-West Farmland Bird Initiative in 2009. The farm, along with others in the NIA, also featured on BBC One's Big Wildlife Revival series in September 2013.



Commenting on Temple Farm's success, Awards Organiser Richard Purdey said: "This is a most impressive entry by any standard. Count Goess wins our Gold Award not only for the leading role he has played with 41 other farms involved in this Nature Improvement Area, but also for actively encouraging visits from local schools and the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester to see, first hand, how this exemplary estate manages its farming, conservation and shoot."

## News from the Marlborough Downs NIA Arable Plants Project

The Marlborough Downs arable plants project aims to improve our understanding of the distribution of arable plants across the MDNIA, to inform and encourage appropriate management, and to raise awareness of these declining species.

Plants such as cornflower and corn marigold, which once added a splash of colour to our arable farmland, have largely disappeared from the very cereal fields that gave many of them their names. Arable farmland supports a unique collection of plants that are adapted to colonise disturbed land created by tillage with nearly 300 species of wild plant being found in this habitat.



Despite a third of Britain being under arable cultivation, once widespread and common cornfield flowers have suffered a serious decline due to changes in agricultural practices including faster-maturing crops, and the increased efficiency of modern herbicides. These plants may now be the rarest species on the farm. In fact eight out of the ten fastest declining plants in England are associated with arable land. For example, pheasant's eye (below)

was once cut in large quantities on the Sussex Downs and sold in Covent Garden as 'Red Morocco'. It is now only known from a handful of sites. But despite these declines there are still a number of areas in Britain where arable plants persist.

Arable land on chalk in southern England still has relic populations of some arable plants, which survive largely in field margins and corners where they have escaped the most serious effects of herbicide application and competition from heavily fertilised modern crops. Not only is a species rich arable flora important in its own right, it also provides a habitat for insects, small mammals, and a range of declining farmland birds including grey partridge and corn bunting.



This group of plants also tend to be very under-recorded due in part to the large scale of the habitat, most of it being under private ownership, and the plants not appearing every year, despite still being present in the seed bank. In order to protect and encourage arable plants it is important to know where they are so that we can target beneficial management. To this end, Peter Thompson of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and Simon Smart of Black Sheep Countryside Management carried out arable plant surveys last summer on ten farms within the MDNIA covering approximately 40% of the total area.



The surveys produced some great results with a number of threatened species being found within the MDNIA including shepherd's needle, spreading hedge-parsley (left) and few-flowered fumitory. The nationally scarce spreading hedge-parsley (first recorded by MDNIA volunteer Richard Aisbitt) is only known from two or three other sites in the whole of Wiltshire!

In July a training event gave people the opportunity to find out about the fascinating history, ecology, and management of arable plants. It is hoped that some of those who attended the workshop will get involved in surveying for these plants including monitoring the sites where we found the rare species to see how they respond to positive management.

To flourish, arable plants need annual ground disturbance in either spring or autumn, depending on germination timing; minimal competition from a crop, so either an unfertilised crop or no crop sown at all; and no/selective herbicide applications. Based on the results of these surveys a number of MDNIA farmers have agreed to undertake management to encourage the uncommon arable plants which have been found on their farms. A good example of this is New Barn Farm at Ogbourne St George where few-flowered fumitory was recorded. To encourage this nationally scarce species, farmer Godfrey Maundrell will leave a cultivated, unsprayed strip along the field edge where this plant was found.



*Simon Smart, Black Sheep Countryside Management*

## Tree sparrows on the up in 2013!

We've been very busy creating tree sparrow villages and feeding farmland birds, and last spring we were hopeful of birds taking to our new boxes thus expanding the Marlborough Downs population. That was before the disastrously cold, wet and late spring that held everything up, with most tree sparrows were finding it hard enough to survive, let alone breed. Sadly, none of the new villages supported breeding birds but with such a terrible spring even most of the regular sites had fewer breeding pairs. It was pretty depressing work counting clutches of eggs and then on the next visit seeing starving or dead young or deserted clutches. As a whole, the first brood fledging success rate was 2.1 young per pair (in an average year this would be over 3 and our lowest ever was previously 2.7).



I was joined for the season by Niamh McHugh, a PhD student working with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust who is researching how tree sparrows use habitats; which insects tree sparrows feed to their young; and from which habitat that food is sourced. As ever, in the Marlborough Downs the farmers were very helpful in providing access, support and farm maps to help Niamh's work. All second brood nestlings were colour-ringed so that we can identify individuals this coming summer to watch how and where they forage for food. Fledging success of the second brood was 3.7 per pair which was slightly less than normal.

Tree sparrows generally have up to three broods per year providing opportunities for the population to recover after a poor brood. After the worst first brood in the 14 year history of the Wiltshire Tree Sparrow Recovery Project, the second brood wasn't much better. However, summer came late and we enjoyed some lovely weather in August and the sparrows thankfully kept on breeding! The late harvest lengthened the breeding season by a couple of weeks and we ringed the last broods nine days later than we have ever done before. The third brood saved the season from disaster with a fledging success rate of 3.3 which is the highest the project has ever recorded.

Site	No. Pairs	First Brood	Second Brood	Third Brood	Total Young fledged
1	24	31	57	60	148
2	10	13	26	27	66
3	8	18	27	18	63
4	5	13	17	8	38
5	9	14	11	5	30
6	4	7	4	9	20
7	4	3	9	7	19
8	3	5	4	3	12
9	3	4	3	0	7
10	2	4	0	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>407</b>

Across north Wiltshire our project identified 142 pairs of tree sparrows that raised 974 young to fledging at an average of 6.9 young per pair. The Marlborough Downs supported 72 pairs of tree sparrow that raised 397 young to fledging at an average of 5.5 per pair. As can be seen from these statistics the Marlborough Downs are very important for tree sparrows, supporting half of the population in the northern half of the county. This is even more significant than it might seem, as the only tree sparrows in south Wiltshire are a small isolated population in the extreme south west.

According to statistics by the British Trust for Ornithology, 2013 was the worst breeding season for birds on record and for Wiltshire tree sparrows it was the same because this was the lowest fledging success rate that we have recorded. Our normal fledging success rate is 7-8.5 young per pair.

The future is however optimistic for tree sparrows in our area because we are once again feeding many tonnes of seed throughout the winter to help farmland birds including tree sparrows to survive, we are putting up yet more nest boxes for tree sparrows and we have more research work to undertake but that is for the next article.....

## Snippets from the Marlborough Downs NIA Partnership's facebook page ....

You could say that the NIA feeding farmland birds is working. I ringed one of the feeding sites on this fabulous calm and sunny morning and we caught 102 Yellowhammers including this one that is 3 years old. We also caught 58 Chaffinches including two that are 4 years old. We have added 2 more Corn Buntings to our colour ringing project. There were a staggering 600 Yellowhammers at the site and 40 Corn Buntings and we also saw a lovely flock of 500 Golden Plovers. *Matt Prior*



Left: Male Corn Bunting - the most awesome of farmland birds. Remember the 'jangling keys' call.

Right: 3 year old female Yellowhammer

29 December 2013



Pretty pond!

*Catherine Burrell, Maizey Manor Farm*

One year on and our Maizey pond is looking fabulous! Who would believe that it hasn't been there forever?!

11 January 2014



Next week is the Big Farmland Bird Count and we'd like to help our partner the [Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust](#) get as many records as possible. Wouldn't it be marvellous if we could provide at least 10 returns for the Marlborough Downs, one for each 1,000 hectares! So please do your bit by downloading a count sheet and then spending half an hour one day between 1 and 7 February recording all the birds you see from your favourite spot on the Downs. Don't forget to send your records to us too - [info@mdnia.org.uk](mailto:info@mdnia.org.uk) or phone 01380 871012 for postal address. Thank you!

<http://www.gwct.org.uk/farming/big-farmland-bird-count/taking-part-in-the-count/>



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