



MARLBOROUGH DOWNS

NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREA

YEAR 1 SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Since its launch on 1 April 2012 we, the farmers of the Marlborough Downs, our supporters and partners, have literally created something from nothing. We have formed a brand new organisation and charity whose members are the farmers. We have forged a new and ever-strengthening partnership between the farmers, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Local Authority, Wiltshire Council. And we've built from scratch, from the bottom up, a completely new project that has already begun to deliver significant benefits to wildlife and people in and around the Marlborough Downs NIA.

There follows a very brief summary of the activities we've undertaken in the first year of the project and how these have contributed to the delivery of our objectives. We are very proud of these achievements and of the new relationships we've developed with a whole host of individuals and groups who have become involved and supported us, either actively or simply by cheering us on.

We look forward to going from strength to strength.

OBJECTIVE 1 – To enable appropriate management of wildlife sites

1.1 To survey and assess existing and potential Wildlife Sites

There are 28 terrestrial Wildlife Sites (which are non-designated sites of local importance) in the Marlborough Downs NIA, five of which are woodland sites and 21 are sites supporting grassland priority habitat. In the first year the project has:

- Awarded a contract to Wiltshire & Swindon Wildlife Sites Project to survey and assess these sites to provide information on:
 - Site boundary and extent of priority habitat.
 - List of plant species and DAFOR abundance.
 - Condition assessment for each priority habitat.
 - Impact of surround land use, including threats and potential for expansion.
 - Current management and its effectiveness.
- Completed site surveys as above on 18 Wildlife Sites, the remainder to be completed in Year 2.
- Produced digital maps to show site boundaries and extent of priority habitat.
- Submitted 1245 Wildlife Sites species records to the Biological Records Centre.

1.2 Agree appropriate management with landowner/manager, offering support to enable this.

The first year of the project has focused on gathering the baseline data and preparing to implement active management in Year 2 and beyond. In the first year the project has:

- Identified those sites surveyed in 1.1 above that are assessed as being in unfavourable condition.
- Filtered out unfavourable sites where resources to address unfavourable condition should already be available, i.e. those sites that are
 - Owned/managed by an organisation (Wildlife Trust, Local Authority) with a responsibility to undertake positive action.
 - Managed under an appropriate Higher Level Stewardship option.
- Contracted local consultants to work with owners/managers of ten sites in unfavourable condition to prepare Site Management Statements that include information on:
 - Nature conservation importance
 - Nature Improvement Area (NIA) objectives and ideal management
 - Owner/occupier objectives, including the agricultural importance of the site and any agricultural objectives
 - Agreed objectives and management – 3 year plan
 - Action needed to facilitate agreed management.

OBJECTIVE 2 – To consolidate the chalk grassland resource

2.1 To compile an inventory of the chalk grassland resource in the NIA, survey and assess non-designated sites and agree appropriate management with the landowner/manager, offering support to enable this.

This element of the project is scheduled to start next year (existing (known) sites this year, new sites next year). However, in the first year the project has:

- Undertaken initial scoping surveys of fourteen sites in the NIA known to support grassland of uncertain quality and mapped areas of priority habitat on these sites. These surveys have been done by an experienced botanical surveyor who is working with the project as a volunteer.
- Submitted 1573 chalk grassland species records to the Biological Records Centre.
- Delivered a workshop to train farmers and volunteers to prepare simple habitat maps (June 2012).
- Used habitat maps provided by farmers and landowners as well as Environmental Stewardship FER¹ and FEP² maps to digitise a habitat map of the NIA. Because of the lack of existing data, this is a work in progress but thus far we have mapped approximately 75% of the area to this level of detail.
- Entered negotiations with a developer and the local planning authority to potentially secure additional funding for the project. This funding will enable re-introduction of appropriate management on a degraded chalk grassland Wildlife Site, and the restoration of a significant area of adjacent semi-improved grassland.

2.2 To create corridors of semi-natural habitat to link these sites.

We want to link grassland sites across the NIA to one another and to other habitats such as ponds and woodland. Even sites where priority habitat doesn't exist may be valuable for wildlife. Many provide foraging habitat for birds such as lapwing, owls, and raptors for example, and thus even species-poor areas are valuable elements of the grassland resource. In the first year the project has purchased native wildflower/grass seed to enable farmers to create 6.44 ha of semi-natural habitat. This will create a new 5.73 km wildlife corridor linking a number of existing grassland and woodland sites and ponds between Fyfield Down SSSI/NNR and Barbury Castle Wildlife Site/LNR.

¹ Farm Environment Record – required as part of Entry Level Stewardship applications

² Farm Environment Plan – required as part of Higher Level Stewardship applications

OBJECTIVE 3 – To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance

To provide food and habitat for target species/groups of species on the downs by way of:

3.1 Planted wildlife crops

3.2 Ponds

3.3 Feeding stations

3.4 Corridors of semi-natural grassland/scrub

In the first year the project has:

- Provided seed to enable a farmer to establish 3.6 ha wild bird seed plot to support tree sparrows and other farmland birds.
- Provided seed to enable two farmers to plant 1.5 ha nectar mix.
- Compiled an NIA-wide inventory of 2012/13 overwinter stubbles.
- Built one new dew pond and one spring-fed pond.
- Restored two derelict dew ponds, one of which is a Scheduled Monument.
- Worked with farmers and Wiltshire Ornithological Society members to scatter 2 tonnes of barley, 3 tonnes of white millet, 0.5 tonnes of rape seed and 2.5 tonnes of grain tailings into hedge bottoms, stubbles, bird seed plots and game covers to feed farmland birds through the hungry gap.
- Planted five new tree sparrow 'villages' and put up 70 tree sparrow nestboxes.
- Put up five new kestrel boxes and one new barn owl box.
- Awarded a contract to undertake professional farmland bird surveys (using Bird Atlas and Breeding Bird Survey methodologies) on three sites in the NIA. The first two Bird Atlas surveys have been completed and data submitted.
- Delivered a workshop on farmland bird recording (July 2012) to encourage farmers and volunteers to record and report the birds they see and hear in the NIA.
- Awarded a contract to the Wiltshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation to undertake UK Butterfly Monitoring Surveys on three sites in the NIA (survey sites identified, surveys to begin April 2013).
- Delivered a workshop on butterfly recording (September 2012) to encourage farmers and volunteers to record and report the butterflies they see in the NIA.

OBJECTIVE 4 – To deliver best practice in wildlife management

As well as a contracted project management team, four delivery groups have been established, each comprising a combination of farmers, professionals and volunteers. These groups support the project management team in facilitating delivery of the project's objectives and promote best practice through the expertise and experience of group members.

4.1 To ensure that best practice is recognised and promoted.

In the first year the project has collaborated with others to deliver demonstration/training events to share best practice with farmers, volunteers and professionals:

- February 2013 – 'Birds, bees & wildflowers: how to get the best out of bird mixes, nectar plots and wildflower corridors' with Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative and Bumblebee Trust, supported by Bright Seeds (supplier of commercial and specially harvested seed).
- March 2013 – 'Supporting farmland birds: what bird mixes, stubbles and fallow areas should look like; how to supplementary feed farmland birds through the hungry gap; how to record and report the birds on the farm' with North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative, Black Sheep Countryside Management (local agri-environment consultants), Wiltshire Ornithological Society.

4.2 To allow everyone access to the best advice, services and funding to enable high quality wildlife management throughout the NIA.

In the first year the project has begun to collate a directory of recommended contacts, including relevant:

- Farm environment organisations and advisers
- Contractors
- Suppliers
- Local authority staff, including ecologists, archaeologists, education, parish clerks, etc.

OBJECTIVE 5 – To get the non-farming community involved with activities in and about the Marlborough Downs

The interest in the project has been overwhelming and far beyond anything anyone expected. The interest, both locally and more widely, has been such that the project will be featured in a major new BBC series on British wildlife to be aired in summer 2013. In the first year the project has actively engaged people by:

- Holding stakeholder events to inform people about the project, its objectives and how it's performing along the way, to encourage engagement and to provide a forum for networking between farmers, volunteers and other professionals:
 - A Launch event to introduce the project (April 2012).
 - A Summer Barbeque to update stakeholders (July 2012).
 - A Seasonal Supper to update stakeholders and highlight current topics: farmland birds and biodiversity offsetting (November 2012).
 - Planned a Spring Celebration to showcase Year 1 achievements and reward effort with the MDNIA Wildlife Champion award (4th April 2013).
- Hosting farm walks to showcase the project and demonstrate particular aspects of its delivery:
 - Natural England's Community of Practice visited to learn about how farmers are collaborating with others to deliver project objectives (June 2012).
 - An introduction to target species and how the project is supporting them (November 2012).
 - A demonstration on wild bird feeding techniques (December 2012).
- Presenting talks on the objectives and delivery of the project to:
 - Flora Locale summer meeting (June 2012).
 - Chiseldon Parish Council (October 2012).
 - Isle of Wight Recorders' Conference (February 2013).
- Publishing articles about the project in local parish magazines, *The Wroughton Monthly*, North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative newsletter, Wiltshire Ornithological Society newsletter, Local Nature Partnership website and other publications and websites.
- Circulating a quarterly newsletter, sent out to all farmers, partners and 'friends' of the project (around 200 people).
- Establishing and regularly updating a facebook page, and commissioning a website (to be launched early in Year 2).
- Preparing a leaflet on the project to give general information and also to be used to generate support and income via a sponsorship programme.
- Preparing a 2013 activities calendar, packed with events to promote the NIA, wildlife and good wildlife management to school parties, families and practitioners.
- Organising and leading practical work experience tasks for local agricultural college students and other volunteers.
- Commissioning a marketing strategy, prepared by BA students at a local college.

- Creating a Marlborough Downs NIA 2013 calendar to showcase the beauty of the landscape and its flora and fauna.
- Working with local groups on different aspects of the project, including:
 - University of the Third Age
 - Wiltshire Ornithological Society
 - North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative
 - Wiltshire Botanical Society
 - Bumblebee Conservation Trust
 - Pond Conservation
 - Wiltshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation
 - North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
 - Friends of the Railway Path

OBJECTIVE 6 – To provide better public access

6.1 To upgrade PRow routes and furniture

The project is working with local Rights of Way officers to identify a suite of high quality access routes (footpaths, bridleways and cyclepaths) where people can enjoy the Downs to the full and see some of the things the project is doing to support local wildlife. In the first year the project has:

- Identified a 4 mile long circular route on bridleways, taking in typical downland landscape and the project's first completed dew pond.
- Audited the route on foot and on horseback.
- Replaced three bridle gates.
- Designed and commissioned MDNIA waymarks with which to mark the circular routes.
- Cleared ground and overhanging vegetation from sections of the route where access had become difficult because of overhanging trees, dense ground cover, etc.

6.2 To provide interpretation materials in a variety of media to improve access to the downs with minimal impact on the landscape and wildlife.

To enable people to appreciate and understand the downland landscape, in the first year the project has:

- Designed an information panel for the dew pond which, in order to minimise the impact on the landscape and to discourage vandalism, is mounted on a local sarsen stone next to the pond (adjacent to the Ridgeway National Trail).
- Designed a leaflet showing the circular route and noting points of interest, including the dew pond, which will be available for download via the website.