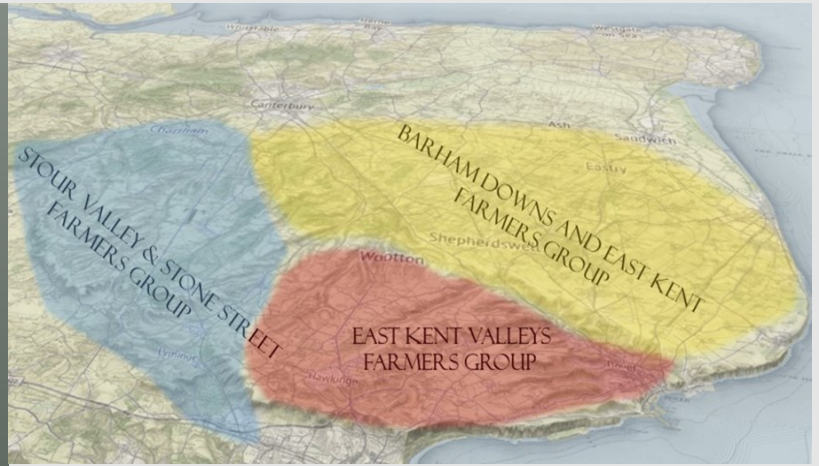




The East Kent Downs Landscape Recovery Project

Farmers delivering
wildlife-rich landscapes
hand in hand with food
production



www.eastkentdownsfarmers.co.uk

Winter Newsletter 2024/25

Spring and Summer 2024 Farmer group meetings

Dung Beetle and Soil Health workshop

Early April saw the first of our program of farm walks and workshops get underway with a dung beetle and soil health workshop kindly hosted by Rupert Phillips and team at Shelvin Farm. We were joined by Dr Kelly Jowett from Rothamsted Research Centre, Debbie Reynolds from FWAG South East (Farm Wildlife Advisory Group) and Brandon Mayuga from Affinity Water, with Rupert and research technician Melissa giving us a good run down of the farm's trials into soil health and composting. Kelly introduced her handy field ID guides as we toured some of the farm's grasslands hunting for dung beetles. A delicious 'local produce' lunch was provided courtesy of Chloe at Oink and Udder, all washed down with the delicious flavoured milk shakes from Susannah of Nightingale Dairy.



Spring and Summer 2024 Farmer group meetings



Carabid beetle and IPM Workshop

With welcoming hosts Sacha Davies at Denne Hill Farm and Emma Loder-Symonds at Nonington Farms, we were treated to another session from Dr Kelly Jowett, covering the topic of carabid beetles and their role in controlling crop pests. We toured four different areas of grassland and arable fields where Debbie from FWAG South East had set up pitfall traps to compare the number and type of beetles.. This included an area where some pig rootling trials, courtesy of Oink and Udder's Large Black pigs, had created some impressive bare ground habitat.



Barn Owl Farm walk and workshop

Thanks to a fantastic morning put on by Ben Palmer and his team at Godmersham Estate we were all treated to some expert knowledge on all things 'Barn Owl'. Joined by local ornithologist John Buckingham, we enjoyed great up close views of barn owl chicks as part of the barn owl monitoring and ringing project on the estate. We had perfect weather for the walk and a delicious lunch was laid on for lunch, thanks to the estate.



Evening orchid walk

Blessed with a beautiful summer's evening we were treated to a wander across the flower-filled slopes of the Alkham valley courtesy of Nigel Snape and family at Great Cauldham Farm. Pyramidal orchid, common spotted orchid and a host of wildflowers filled the view before we enjoyed a delicious BBQ put on by Nigel and Ange at Hockley Sole.



News from the Groups : **Barham Downs and East Kent arable group**

Bioblitz weekend with Rothamsted Research centre

A sunny august weekend saw a team of 6 entomologists from Rothamsted Research centre descend upon the Barham Downs area to collect, record and document the insect life in a selection of the newly created wildflower grasslands. Thanks to Denne Hill Farms, Oink and Udder, Nonington Farms and Hearts Delight Farm, the team netted, trapped and potted an amazing selection of insects including the scarce hornet robberfly, over 130 moth species, great green bush cricket and a host of beetles, grasshoppers, ants and flies.



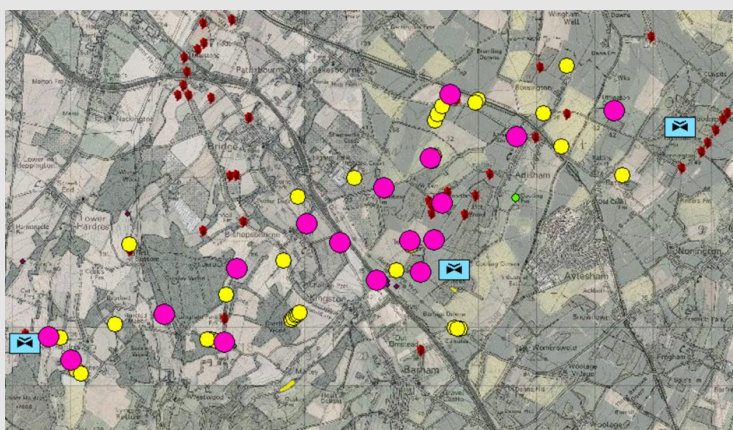
Kent Field Club and The Wingham Wheat Club

Wildlife surveys from the Kent Field Club, Butterfly Conservation and a farm walk with the Wingham Wheat Club topped off what turned out to be a busy season on the Barham Downs with special thanks to Judith and Connan at Hawarden Farms, Robert at Garrington Farm and Richard at Uffington Court. High numbers of the rare moths and small blue butterfly that the downs are now noted for, made for a good season again, rivalled only by the delicious strawberry and cream tea laid on by Judith and Connan at the end of the wheat club walk!



An elm and butterfly revival

The future looks bright for a little known butterfly and the elm trees of the east kent area following a project that has teamed us up with Kent County Council (Kent Plan Tree) and the Kent Branch of Butterfly Conservation. Kent Plan Tree have been involved in the research and trials of growing disease resistant elm trees at Lees Court near Faversham. Elm is also the sole caterpillar foodplant of the White Letter hairstreak butterfly, often overlooked in the butterfly world as it spends most of its time in the canopy of mature elm trees!. But we do know that 3 colonies of the butterfly exist in a stretch of country between Goodnestone and



- Sites for new elm standards and whips
- White letter hairstreak butterfly colony

Upper Hardres, so a plan has been hatched to try and connect these three colonies by planting disease resistant elms within a corridor encompassing a number of your farms. A big thank you to all the farms who have offered to get involved.. The young elm trees will soon be delivered and planting will take place by the farms this winter.

News from the Groups: **Stour Valley and Stone Street Farmer Group**

'Kentish milkwort' reintroduction

Our work with the Species Recovery Trust in 2023, involving the planting of seedling plants of the very rare Kentish Milkwort plant, has got off to a great start this summer with the confirmation that a good number of the planted seedlings have established and come through the first season. Thanks to Ben at Godmersham Estate who provided the donor site for the plants and Rob at Bilting Grange Farms who has provided the new planting site, the future for this very rare plant looks very promising. The new site is one of a suite of new grasslands that form a continuous corridor of chalk grasslands between Godmersham and White Hill at Bilting. The 'new' grassland site has the perfect conditions for Kentish milkwort which prefers a very open sward with a lot of chalky soil showing.



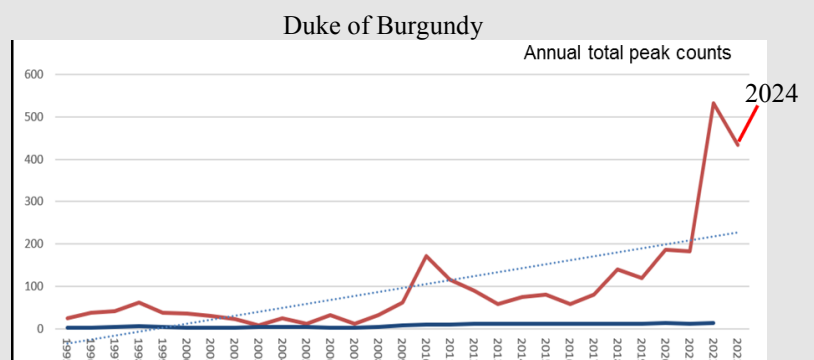
Rare insect discoveries

Thanks to some insect surveys organised by the Natural England Field Unit, a number of rare bugs and bees have been found in the Crundale area. The rare 'Large scabious mining bee' (the UK's largest mining bee) was found on two 'new' grasslands in the Crundale valley, along with a species of hoverfly (*Villa cingulate*) only known at one other site in Kent and after an 80 year gap in records. The rarities were amongst a whole host of insect species recorded over some of the new wild-flower grasslands, showing how quickly insect communities can return once the habitat is provided for them.



Butterfly news :

Duke of Burgundy and Black veined moth both had good seasons in the project area with individuals also spotted at some new sites. Several farms hosted visits for butterfly and moth spotters to see these species, a testament to the great work you are all doing for wildlife across the east Kent area.



News from the Groups: **East Kent Valleys Farmer Group**

Ghost Ponds

Ponds aren't as common a feature of the downland landscape as perhaps elsewhere in the county, but a Kent Downs National Landscape Project is looking to change that with the launch of their Kent Downs Heritage Ponds Project. The first part of this is to look at old maps to identify where ponds used to be in the landscape, and then ground truth the sites to see if there is potential to restore them. Researching the old maps for ponds is now underway and a number of potential sites have been identified in the east Kent valleys area including several on land owned by Defence Estates and farmed by their tenant farmers. Watch this space to see the next phase get underway.



Hay and Spray

Another season of green hay spreading got underway again this summer with a bountiful harvest and transfer of wildflower seed rich hay to new grassland creation sites, including these areas below farmed by St Johns Farm near Swingfield. A slick operation of flail collecting and transfer into a dung spreader to blitz out the seed seems to be the most effective way of spreading large volumes of seed-rich hay....

Hedgerow Workshop

February 2024 saw a great turn out for a morning of hedgerow learning with thanks to Andrew and Harriet who kindly hosted the event at Elmfield Farm Cottages. With a great range of hedgerow types and different aged examples of hedgerow laying, the farm was a great spot to discuss the practice of laying as a way of rejuvenating hedgerows. Dodging the rain, we toured the hedges and hay meadows to return to a welcome lunch and cakes kindly laid on by the farm.



Stewardship Update

Temporary pause on new capital grant applications : Defra/RPA have put a temporary pause on new applications for the capital grant scheme although its hoped it will re-open for applications in April 2025. The RPA will give an update in early January 2025 to those who had applied for the capital grant scheme before the pause was put in place (week ending 30th November), but had yet to hear back/or had yet to be offered a capital scheme. Everyone who already has a capital grant scheme (either as part of a Higher Tier scheme or as a separate stand-alone capital scheme), can continue to undertake work and make claims , as this is work is already programmed/committed to the budget, so isn't affected by the temporary pause.

New Higher Tier scheme : Defra have said that this is now likely to open for applications in July 2025. Most of you will already be in Higher or Mid tier schemes so will only need to apply for a new Higher Tier scheme when your existing scheme comes to an end. I'll be in touch with everyone who's schemes are coming to an end (or are reaching the 5 year break point) well in advance to plan how we take you into a new scheme.

Higher Level Stewardship : Defra/RPA are still working on the process/mechanism to allow people in existing HLS schemes to transfer across in to Higher Tier and/or SFI. Hopefully we'll hear something in the new year.

SFI scheme : The SFI scheme is still open for applications (some of you will have set up SFI schemes to run along side your Higher and Mid Tier schemes.) SFI isn't designed to replace Higher Tier but there are a number of options that you can do under both schemes so its possible that in the future when you come to renew your Higher Tier schemes we may place some of the scheme options into an SFI scheme and keep the Higher Tier scheme for the more 'long term' options.

Any queries on any of the schemes , don't hesitate to get in touch.

Canterbury Festival 2024

....And finally, as part of the drive to showcase all of the work you are doing for wildlife, carbon capture, improving soils and water quality in east kent, we were pleased to take part in the Canterbury Festival this year. A farmers panel of Emma Loder Symonds, Chloe Wilcock, Rupert Phillips and Roland Brown joined me in giving an overview of all of your environmental work to an audience of around 100 members of the public. It was very well received and we hope to do it again next year, as well as take the talk to Groundswell in 2025!



Spring 2024 Farmer Group meetings - We are currently organising meetings/farm walks for the coming season.....details to follow...