

# NEWSLETTER

# Wildlife Matters



AUTUMN 2021

## Our Farm

All of us at Lower Pertwood Farm love our environment and are pleased to say many species of wildlife feel the same. We are keen to explore the relationship between Organic farming and the environment. While we are not necessarily able to measure the differences between our wildlife populations and those which might exist on a conventional commercial farm, from studies carried out the evidence seems to be overwhelming that the absence of chemical sprays and fertilisers and

**accompanying harsh farming practices are very highly beneficial to countless life forms.**

One thing that we tend to take for granted is our fauna and flora. It is in that area that we are seeing very significant differences in both the appearance of our farm and the inherent health of our plants. The weather conditions since June have stimulated plant life on an unprecedented scale. Plants we haven't seen before have suddenly appeared which is indicative of the fact that many seeds can remain dormant in the

soil for years. All of a sudden, the conditions are ideal for them to germinate and up they come. We would, for example, plant a dozen varieties of wild flowers in a special area and find that more than twice that number appear of their own accord.

The underlying issue here is to leave well alone, try not to interfere and to turn your back on what is happening because nature knows best and always brings itself in to balance given time. There will always be a surprise around every corner which is not likely in predicable controlled conventional Farming systems.







# Poppy Knapp

## *A wildflower meadow coming into bloom*

**Patrick Cashman, Site Manager, RSPB Chalk Country Reserves**

**Arriving at Poppy Knapp in early July I was met by the jangling song of a corn bunting and a view across a sea of white ox-eye daisies interspersed with yellow buttercups, trefoils and rattles and splashes of purple knapweed, pink clovers and blue vetches and a roe deer daintily slipping out of view. The flower heads were buoyed with nectaring bees and butterflies, marbled whites, meadow browns, common blues and small tortoiseshells prominently on the wing, whilst bugs, flies and weevils busied themselves around the foliage.**

Poppy Knapp was only sown as a wildflower meadow three years

ago and has matured quickly from the first-year unruly mix of open ground opportunists, grasses and wildflower pioneers to a young meadow ablaze with the colour of native wildflowers.

The seeds for the meadow were harvested locally from a flower-rich chalk grassland at RSPB's Winterbourne Downs nature reserve, near Salisbury. The RSPB was harvesting its own wildflower seed at the time and pleased to support the creation of a new wildflower meadow at Poppy Knapp. It has been a delight to be asked to pop by and see how this new meadow is already so successfully giving nature a new home. During the short visit I was able to encounter no less than 37 different plant species, with the

highlight being the presence of two pyramidal orchids. Orchids normally take much longer to establish in new grassland which suggests that the conditions provided by reverting the organic soils here were most suitable indeed.

### **How did we get here?**

In the same autumn as harvesting, the seeds were sown directly onto the surface of tilled soil at Poppy Knapp by volunteers Stuart Corbett and Nick Adams before being rolled in. Autumn sowing mimics nature's timing and ensures the greatest seed viability for the range of native wildflowers, which need to be near the surface to germinate and pressed in by a roll to provide good contact with



View of Lower Pertwood Farm from Poppy Knapp wildflower meadow  
by Patrick Cashman



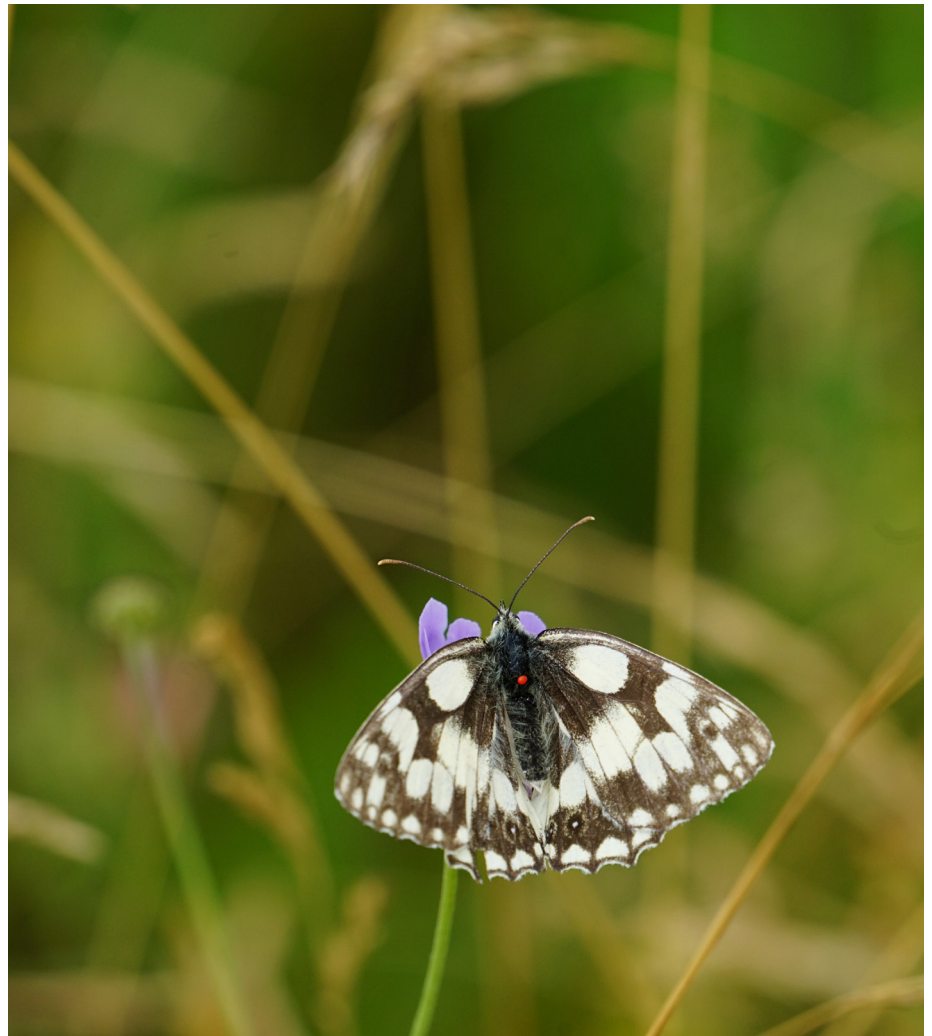
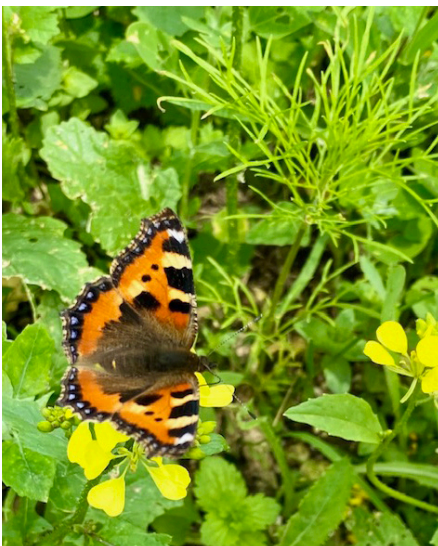
Yellow rattle at Poppy Knapp  
Lower Pertwood



the soil. To prevent the problem arable plants from persisting in the sward the new meadow sowings need to be topped regularly in the first summer. The meadow has then subsequently been allowed to flower and set seed in the summer, by resting from grazing or mowing through May, June and into July. When practical it is cut for hay in mid to late July and as the hay is turned to dry the flower seeds are scattered across the ground. This is then followed by sheep aftermath grazing with the aim of creating a short open sward by late winter. The sheep's feet then do a good job of pressing the seeds into the ground, and cows can even create fresh bare soil seeding areas in their hoof prints. Spring sheep grazing can be beneficial to prevent the build-up of undesirable opportunists such as ragwort and thistles.

An important ally in meadow creation worth a mention is a plant known as yellow rattle – the seeds rattle in the pod prior to dispersal. Not only does it have beautiful yellow and mauve flowers, it is semi-parasitic on grasses and clovers, and thus by suppressing grass growth can allow more light for other wildflowers to prosper. This is particularly important on richer soils where grasses will otherwise outcompete the wildflowers for light.

Taking a few moments to stop and absorb the sounds and colour of nature at work in a meadow such as Poppy Knapp for me forms an integral part of a good summer.



Marbled white butterfly landscape



Timothy grass and plantain flowers



Common vetch



# Bird Ringing Studies at Lower Pertwood Farm

**Carried out by Tim Ridgers-Steer**

Ringing studies were started at Pertwood in 2011, mainly operating in Peewits Gorse, a south facing area of Gorse and Hawthorn scrub. In the last three years we have been managing the area to improve its attractiveness to migrating and breeding birds, and insect and plant life, it is already noticeable that flowers, ferns and gorse have recolonised managed areas.

To date, over 1500 birds have been ringed, providing some interesting results. A Willow Warbler, that is

a sub Saharan migrant, was first ringed as a breeding adult in July 2014 returned to breed at Peewits Gorse for three consecutive years. This amazing little bird weighing less than 10gms has flown a staggering 40,000 miles.

A Whitethroat, another sub Saharan migrant has also returned for a third consecutive year.

Peewits Gorse, being an isolated area of Gorse and scrub, provides an excellent stop over site for passing migrants, as is evident

from some of the recaptures of birds ringed here, and of our birds captured elsewhere.



Goldcrest

Blackcap	juv 30 <sup>th</sup> July 2018 Earl Stonham, Suffolk	30 <sup>th</sup> Sept 2018 Peewits Gorse
Willow Warbler	juv 7 <sup>th</sup> July 2019 RAF Wyton. Cambs	8 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2019 Peewits Gorse
Garden Warbler	juv 1 <sup>st</sup> Aug 2019 Peewits Gorse	18 <sup>th</sup> July 2019 Stanford res Northants

After six years of ringing studies, we have developed a clear picture of the number of breeding species, with the evidence provided by brood patches on captured birds. Stonechat, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Dunnock, Wren, Tree Creeper, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Long

tailed Tit, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Goldcrest, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Linnet, Yellowhammer, Bullfinch.

Another one of our forthcoming undertakings will be the collection of bird parasites to assist the Avian Disease Project. This is of current

interest due to the danger of the crossover of animal / human diseases.

May we take this opportunity to offer our thanks to the owner and staff at Lower Pertwood who have made all our work possible.



Willow Warbler,  
a sub Saharan migrant



Tree Creeper, a resident breeding bird.  
Both species breed in Peewits Gorse



# The Zeidler hive principle

**For more than 10-years Lower Pertwood Farm in Wiltshire has been providing accommodation for wild bees on the basis that they expect no return for their efforts, nor will they contemplate harvesting honey even for a moment.**

Throughout the world nature has been exploited pretty relentlessly for what it can offer in terms of crop production, harvesting our fruits and berries, raising animals in order to slaughter them, and in the case of insects and in bees in particular removing a considerable amount of the magnificent food substance they produce, namely honey.

When bees evolved over millions of years they needed to feed themselves. Certainly the hives were raided by wild animals from time to time in order that they could also benefit from this nutritious food source that was probably fairly inconsequential because the bees obviously can build their hives in inaccessible

places. In the case of humans however they have easy access to bee hives and they have the labour technology with which to remove it.

The net result of the above is global depletion in wild bee populations. Wild bee populations are genetically much more robust than domestic bee colonies, therefore their presence on an undisturbed basis is the key to maintaining the health of the bee population overall. An important aspect here is the spacing of the hives and at Lower Pertwood Farm, which covers some 2600 acres, there is ample space for us to store log hives high up in the trees but at distances that provides each colony with ample space.

This year we erected 4 extra hives within reasonable proximity of Poppy Knapp, our natural wild flower meadow, and all filled naturally which indicates that there is not only the demand for accommodation but that the food source is adequate to support the different colonies.



# Flowery pollinator strips

**Jane Hall-McLean**



Flowery pollinator strips wave a wildlife friendly hello to all who pass Pertwood Organic Farm. 2600 acres of land, adjacent to the busy A350 between Shaftesbury and Warminster. Over the years folks, such as my husband Neil and I have found this delightful invitation impossible to resist. Beckoned in by its beauty we have become frequent visitors, so much so that I now know my way there in my dreams. As an artist and daydreamer, it is one of my

favourite places on earth and very good earth it is indeed.

Though for us Lower Pertwood is nearby, being there always feels 'over the hills and far away', somehow distanced from life's worries. We often find ourselves drawn there when seeking perspective. Perhaps it is the far reaching views, on a clear day you can see forever; well, if not forever, far, faraway. You can look back in time too, ancient history



unmistakably visible in the chalky landscape, defined by tumuli and etched into the fields by farming practice dating back to medieval times. But, as an artist inspired by Nature, it is the countless, often small, natural wonders I discover there which make the world of difference to me. A world of difference bought about by wildlife friendly farming practice and land management. From the song of Skylarks to the scurrying of humble dung beetles, there is so much in which to delight at Lower Pertwood Farm.

This year it seems the days have warmed as tentatively as the Nations progress out of lockdown. As I write, in the 'very merry month of May', I cannot say I have roamed far without my coat, I even wore gloves yesterday, as Neil and I stepped out along the grassy tracks and chalky farm lanes. Skylarks chimed spectacularly bright notes of alarm as we passed through their favourite fields. Pertwood's farming practice favours them nesting and overwintering there; reciprocally they sing its praises throughout the year. Even in the midst of winter, they sing blue sky chords on which the human spirit soars. By now they're busy nesting, intent on raising up to three broods before Autumn falls. Sadly, on general farmland throughout Britain Skylark numbers are plummeting; yet joyfully not here! Corn buntings, Stonechats and Yellowhammers also thrive at Pertwood, as do raptors. If you love birds, a visit to Pertwood will give your heart wings!

Soon, we found ourselves passing 'Barn owls barn' - as we know it. Of course, Pertwood farmers are also welcome to come and go from there, but there's no mistaking who the barn belongs to. Two owl nesting boxes rest 'on high' in the metal rafters. One evening earlier this year, when we were passing by at dusk, a majestic owl graced us with a royal flypast! I always 'look in' politely... and curiously. Once I found a beautiful downy feather and often I come across owl pellets (tight pellets of indigestible material regurgitated by owls), leaving gastronomical

reviews like no other - tiny bones, shiny insect shells, feathers and fur. Apparently fine dining options are available across the entire organic estate. Acres and acres of tussocky grasses and uncultivated earth provide prime real estate for the small mammals on the owls menu, field voles in particular. The dining is excellent for them too; leaves, stems of grasses and perchance, spoils from the crops: 'Mouse muesli', equivalent to Pertwood's luxury 'humankind' muesli amongst mouse-kind! Discerning Kites, Sparrow hawks and Kestrels often circle overhead too. Anyhoo, No sign of his or her grace 'Owl' on this occasion, instead I delighted in the flowery fringe of Ground ivy and Silver weed set about the barns edges and discovered a beautiful broken Song thrush egg resting inside on the hay.

On from here, sauntering to a stop, we leant against a field gate, enjoying juicy apples and watching the sheep chew and gurn in unison with our munching. Their funny long faces made us laugh, and watching their baby lambs gambol about made us feel quite giddy! As one would expect, they moved sheepishly away as we passed through their pasture, wagging

their tails behind them. Crossing over a stile, we suddenly found ourselves on the verdant green shore of land drenched in wildflowers! Little lakes of Cowslips filled all the dips and hollows, washing upland as far as we could see. Our eyes swam across the landscape, the sight gave our spirits such buoyancy! The glowering grey sky, made the sunshine yellow flowers seem all the more luminous; radiantly beautiful. Germander speedwell, Thyme-leaved speedwell and Silverweed, ushered through the scene as if carried there on Nature's gentle breath.

Then, at once the wind picked up and reluctantly we hastened on. That glowering grey sky seemed set to throw a stropky shower any given minute! Also hurrying along, caught on the wind, something curious caught my eye, it appeared to be a miniature hot air balloon. Breaking into a hapless run, I soon caught up with it. In reality, it was a Pestle puffball, but fantastically, who's to say it hadn't been previously used by Fairies as hot air balloon! Light as air, I held it between my fingers and gently tapped its top a couple of times, watching its spores drift up like a puff of smoke.





I've recently become fascinated by fungi, the fruiting bodies of mycelium, and more specifically, with the mycelial network itself, understood to connect plants and trees across the living world, the 'wood wide web' as it is often called. Stepping on, I wondered at the miracles beneath my feet, still gazing down, deep in thought, I happened upon several other species of fungi: dainty golden parasols and altogether meatier looking species, their identification unknown to me; we're yet to find ourselves on first name terms. Then, who should scurry by but a farmers friend, one of the busiest soil improvers of the land, the Dung beetle. Perhaps he knows more of this good earths natural wonders, than I will ever understand. Fundamentally however, I do understand that such things as beetles, fungi and wildflowers only thrive in and on healthy earth and, most importantly I know that loving Nature and Pertwood as I do helps me thrive too.





# Buckwheat versus Charlock

## *A fascinating contest.*



**Charlock is one of the most significant plants at Lower Pertwood Farm. It appears unexpectedly and the inventory of seeds is obviously well established in our soils probably over a considerable period of time.**

We are addressing the challenge by being more effective with our cultivation techniques but occasionally it catches us by surprise.

This year we planted a field of buckwheat for a client who ordered organic buckwheat for a new food product that was being introduced in the organic sector. Although we planted the buckwheat very late, i.e. well into June and although the field had been cultivated twice before the charlock decided now was the opportune time to appear. From the picture below that was all we could see for a while.

Charlock is a wild mustard with yellow flowers held on branched stems. An erect and rather bristly plant with four-petalled yellow flowers borne in domed clusters. Charlock is similar in appearance to White Mustard, which has more deeply lobed leaves and curved tips to its seed heads.

We did however monitor the field closely and we realised that the buckwheat had also germinated but was biding its time under the shade and in the protection of the charlock. Good rains ensured that there was no particular moisture problem. However, this particular field of charlock excelled itself in terms of size, plant populations and height. We became somewhat demoralised for a while and felt that perhaps the buckwheat would be completely usurped. However, this was a titanic struggle and as often happens in any contest one minute you can be on top and the next minute you are flat on the deck. Eventually the charlock went to seed which of course leaves us with a residual problem to deal

with in the future. The buckwheat now inspired raced through the canopy.

In conventional farming anything that is regarded as a pest is dealt with immediately. Obviously there is a cost to that both environmentally and financially. One of the great attributes of organic farming is that we have to be patient and we have to let nature deal with threats in its own way.

Buckwheat is a highly nutritious whole grain that many people consider to be a superfood. Among its health benefits Buckwheat may improve heart

health, promote weight loss, and help manage diabetes and is a good source of protein, fibre and energy. It is a fast-growing annual. The white flowers are produced in terminal clusters and are pollinated by bees and other insects. The kernels of the triangular-shaped seeds are enclosed by a tough dark brown rind.

Although we are a few days away from harvesting the buckwheat due to the fact that it was held back, we are keen to see what results we achieve.

As farmers often say "The combine never lies."





# Owls

## Alison Rymel, Deverill Raptor and Owl Group

**Weather plays such an important part in the success or otherwise of our breeding birds and although as I write we are only at the beginning of June, the impact of our weather during April and May is already showing in the breeding owls and raptors of the Deverill Valley.**

The Deverill Raptor and Owl Group is a nest box project focusing mainly on Tawny, Barn & Little Owls and Kestrels.

Tawnies nest earlier than the other species and we began checking their boxes in March and barn owl and kestrel boxes later in April. Tawnies will use barn owl or kestrel boxes, so if we know that a tawny has previously used a box designed for a different species we will check those earlier as well.

During our first checks for tawny towards the end of March, we found one box with an adult brooding 4 eggs in Monkton, two kestrel boxes each with tawnies on eggs in Kingston and one barn owl box with a tawny on three eggs at Hill Deverill.

April was cold, often with freezing temperatures at night and very dry; grass did not grow. Voles are the preferred food source for owls and kestrels; voles like to eat the new shoots of grass so the lack of their favourite food had a negative impact on vole breeding, reducing numbers meaning owls and kestrels had to work harder to find food. The month of May was colder than usual, wet and windy, not ideal conditions for hunting owls.

It was therefore with some trepidation that we went out to do our second checks of tawny boxes and first checks on breeding barn owls. Of the four boxes mentioned in the fourth paragraph, three raised one chick each and one box

failed. We would normally expect tawnies to raise at least two chicks and as all breeding pairs had had at least two eggs and some three, the weather was the main factor leading to very small broods. On a positive note we had more breeding pairs of tawnies than usual ie five pairs as we later found a barn owl box with two healthy tawny chicks.

The fact that tawnies used two of the kestrel boxes which normally have breeding kestrels means that we only have one pair of kestrels being monitored this year and they are on Lower Pertwood Farm. This is a very reliable site and will be the seventh year of a pair using a box, prior to this they used the dryer outlet, not ideal! This year they are nesting later than usual but have laid six eggs, the outcome of which we are eagerly awaiting.

As with the kestrel pair, barn owls are laying slightly later than usual but initial checks show that we do have pairs in most of the boxes which usually have breeding owls, so adult owls have survived the winter and spring; some pairs are on eggs and one or two have very small young. It is too soon to tell how successful the barn owl season will be but with the better weather we have been having, I am optimistic.

The owls and kestrels on Lower Pertwood Farm have the best possible chance of survival in our uncertain climate; wildlife is always kept in mind on this organic working farm. While barn & tawny owls eat only vertebrate species, kestrels, while preferring vertebrates, and little owls will eat invertebrates like beetles and dragonflies. Invertebrates do so much better on organic farms and particularly on Lower Pertwood Farm where so much attention is given to nectar/pollinator strips.

Barn owls are a Schedule 1 species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and boxes should not be checked during the breeding season except by a person holding a permit to do so.



Young kestrel which has just been ringed



Two young kestrels which were ringed on 19 June 2021



Two very young barn owlets with an egg due to hatch



# Pertwood Organic Porridge Oats



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