



*Spring Newsletter*

# **Wildlife Matters**

Welcome to the *Spring 2016* edition of Wildlife Matters!

In the last newsletter I commented on us having finally had some frosts. Well, those have continued until the start of this week, but I think things are finally starting to warm up. This is great news for the oats and barley planted by Malcolm and his team over the last few weeks. The soil will be warming up, and the brown fields will soon be green again.

I am sure you will all be wondering how this will affect the wildlife. A slow, cold Spring will mean plants are slower to grow and flower, which will impact early insects that need nectar and birds who are after fresh seed sources. We have at least been able to help with the latter by having food to put out in our wildbird food covers in the form of tailings (regular readers will know how great tailings are! They are the bits left over after we have cleaned our oats and barley after harvest). For

an organic farm like Lower Pertwood, this includes a lot of weed seeds - fantastic for birds to feed on.

In sheltered sun spots around the farm a number of flowers have managed to carry on, with the bluebells and primroses in Marriage's Gorse being a particularly pleasant injection of colour and nectar.

In this edition, we will have our quarterly summary of the wildlife sightings on Lower Pertwood. You will also get to read about the successful work being carried out by a dedicated group of volunteers for our barn owl and kestrel populations. There is also be an update on how we are getting on with our projects to get more people to hear what we are trying to do at Lower Pertwood.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and if you have any questions for us, please do get in touch!

*Nick Adams*



**A CORN BUNTING ENJOYING THE SPRING SUNSHINE - PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WHITE**

# Working with Other Organisations

As you will hopefully have remembered, I mentioned in the last newsletter how we are contacting a number of other groups and organisations about coming to the farm and discussing various aspects of wildlife conservation for which we may be able to collaborate.



We had a visit from **Neil Pullen** and **Ashley White** from the reserves team at **Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (WWT)**. Our main discussion area was around conservation grazing. WWT have conservation flocks and herds, and we have grassland, so it seemed a good idea to have a chat about this for the future. We had a

look around the different habitats on the farm and they were very pleased to see our brambling and yellowhammer in such good numbers, something perhaps we can offer WWT advice on. We found a lot of common ground, for instance on removing internal fencing and using electric fencing when grazing areas. Hopefully this will be the start of some great projects and continued partnership.



Another meeting was with **Jo Fuller** from the **Natural Beekeeping Trust**. It was a fascinating two hours learning much about wild honey bees, what they need, and where they nest. For example if you are looking for a suitable tree, always take a friend with you. The reason for this is that the

trees needs to be bigger than the reach of two people hugging the tree - if your hands touch they are a little too small! After much hugging, we found a couple of trees that are suitable for a cavity to be made in for the bees. This is how bees have been kept in eastern Europe for hundreds of years, and Jo's husband Jonathan has been at Pertwood recently to install the first ancient bee cavity of its type in the

UK, and gave Nic and I a crash course on how it's done. That is a skill I never knew I needed, until now! Please see the following page to see the outcome (pg 3: Tree Beekeeping)

Another organisation who have been keen to help us are **Butterfly Conservation**, and in particular the Wiltshire Branch. I was lucky enough to meet up with the Chairman of the Wiltshire Branch, **Hugo Brooke** and the county butterfly recorder, **Mike Fuller**. We had a look around the farm to see if its the kind of place they would like to help me with some advice on managing for butterflies and helping with surveys. The short answer is yes, and more!



We walked around most of the downland and discussed what we needed for the key species that we are lucky enough to still have in South Wiltshire, like the marsh fritillary, Duke of Burgandy, Adonis blue and small blue. We are looking into setting up a number of transect surveys. These are repeat surveys, following the same route recording all butterflies within 2.5 metres of you. This will help us to see if we are having a positive impact on a suite of species with our management.

Hugo is also a keen moth recorder and is very interested in doing some moth surveys. This is something you will have seen we are doing and I am very keen on, as it shows the health of the flora (moth foodplants) as well as the moths themselves. Fingers crossed, we will soon have a small group of us recording on the farm.

So all very positive! We have had a number of meetings in April, and more are in the pipeline for May and June. There will be further updates as and when I have news.



VIEWS OVER THE DOWNS - PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WHITE

# Tree Beekeeping: the ancient craft comes to Pertwood

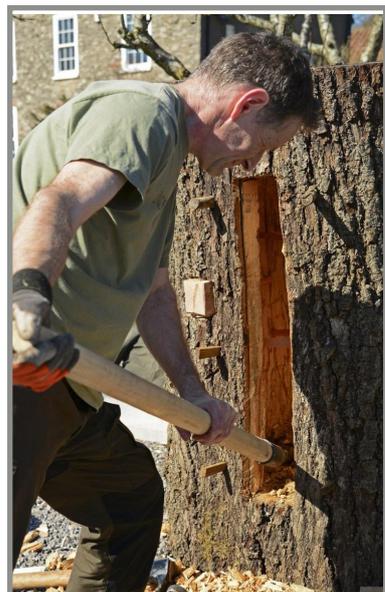


(PHOTO CREDIT:  
PIOTR PILASIEWICZ)

flowers, as opposed to garden flowers, provide a much higher concentration of nectar through the hundreds to thousands of buds on one tree, whilst hollow tree cavities provide a sheltered nesting site for the bee colony. With a small selection of the right tree varieties, the bees can have access to abundant pollen throughout the year following the different flowering seasons.

Beekeeping has been a human endeavor for hundreds of years, but the modern commonly-seen form of beekeeping using managed box hives is not the way things were always done. In eastern Europe, more traditional “tree hives” were used to mimic the natural establishment of bee colonies in hollow trees. This method has been scarcely used since the 1930’s, but the success of trees hives in Russia has led to a revival of the practice in numerous other countries.

Jonathan Powell, a member of the [Natural Beekeeping Trust](#) and one of the founding members of **Tree Beekeeping International**, visited Lower Pertwood Farm to identify possible sites to revive this ancient beekeeping craft for the first time in the UK. According to John, “these hives are left to manage themselves. Their



JONATHAN HARD AT WORK  
(PHOTO CREDIT: MARTIN  
MULCHINOK)

honey stores are left intact for winter feeding, and they are not treated for mites and diseases and yet remain healthy. The bees set the density of hives, and there is no intervention to stimulate the hive or save it from failure. Evolution is determined by the bees and nature.”

As hollow trees are hard to find, an alternative method involves the use of hollow logs which are placed on tall trees to provide a “natural”

Bees and trees. This is not the usual partnership that jumps to mind when we think of bees and pollination, but it is in fact one of the most important in the natural world. Tree

nesting, allowing bees to fight and adapt to the pressures of natural selection as they would have thousands of years ago and resulting in much healthier bee colonies. Although these tree hives are used in a conservation effort over that of farming honey, the resulting genetic resistance of these wild bees can be carried into managed



CARVING OUT THE TREE CAVITY REQUIRES THE RIGHT TOOLS AND SOME HEAVY LIFTING

colonies. Although many of these “log” hives have been established, there were no true Zeidler hives in existence in the UK, those being the hives built into hollow trees themselves. Through a fantastic collaborative effort, the first British living tree hive has been established in an ash tree at Pertwood, which proved to be an ideal site due to its organic status and the wildflower meadows that envelop it. Within hours the scout bees had been out to take a look, and the hive now swarms with a happily buzzing colony after only a few days. To see the bees in action in their new hive, please click [here!](#)

Thank you to Jonathan and his team for their great work and for choosing Pertwood to be a part of this incredible project.

To read more, please click on the image for the full article from *The Telegraph*, 23 April 2016.



# Wildlife notes for the quarter ended 31st March 2016

**January** saw the emphasis of wildlife recording to be around the farmland birds on the farm. Counts across some of the key sites on the farm where we had food for the birds, and also some of the more popular stubble fields, produced c300 [yellowhammer](#), c200 [corn bunting](#), c750 [linnet](#) and c200 [skylark](#) - all farmland bird species of **high conservation concern**. We expected the numbers to go up as the winter progressed and we entered the *Hungry Gap*, when food becomes in very short supply.

The highlight during these surveys was finding a single [woodlark](#) in Lord's Hill. I last saw this species last Autumn, so it is great to see that they are using the farm through the winter as well. Fingers crossed, they will continue to expand their range from South East England and reach this area to become a regular feature of our countryside.

It was also pleasing to note a number of [mistle thrush](#) pairs around the farm. They are an early-breeding species, so were already singing their wonderfully melancholy song from two areas of woodland around Peewit, near the main farmyard and by Field Barn. This species has recently been added to the **Red-List** - birds of high conservation concern.

In **February** I had a busy day at Lower Pertwood which started with a bird survey, included a check of some nestboxes that had squatters, and finished with a visit from the **Wiltshire Wildlife Trust**.

The bird survey was part of **The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust's (GWCT) Big Farmland Bird Count**, similar to the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch,

in that you sit and record all the birds you see for a set period, except as you might have guessed, it's on farmland. The 2016 count included 970 farmers, and 130 bird species across 900,000 acres (**click on the image to view the results**).

For my count, I chose to sit by one of our wild-bird covers that I had not managed to check for a while. It proved to be a good move! In an hour I saw 325 birds of 23 species; the most numerous bird was [yellowhammer](#) with 83, followed by [corn bunting](#) with 73 and [chaffinch](#) on

48. It is great to find more yellowhammer and corn bunting here, as the stubbles are ploughed and we put out supplementary feed here they will be able to attract their brethren from across the farm and further afield.

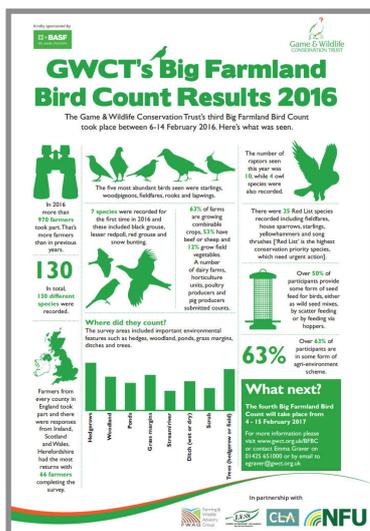


**FEMALE KESTREL KEEPING AN EYE ON THINGS**

Following the survey, I went to check some nest boxes in Mole End. These were put up for tree sparrow, but we often seem to get tits breeding in the summer and mice moving in during the autumn and winter. This year proved to be no different, as of the five boxes I checked, four had old tit nests in them, and all five had signs of having been used by mice. The most interesting was the last one, on a pine tree, which was not actually resting on the tree, so was swinging around. I thought to myself 'it would be impossible for mice to get into this one'. Wrong! I took the front off and two little faces looked back at me - two yellow-necked mice! I quickly put the front back on and left them alone. They are restricted to Southern England and are not seen that much, mostly due to under-recording it is thought, so a great record. While in the wood I noticed some owl droppings on some branches showing its a roost site so the mice had better keep their wits about them.



**FOUR OF THE SIXTEEN LINNET SEEN DURING THE COUNT**



**GWCT's Big Farmland Bird Count Results 2016**  
The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's third Big Farmland Bird Count took place between 6-14 February 2016. Here's what was seen.

- The five most abundant birds seen were starlings, woodpigeons, fieldfares, rooks and hawking.
- 7 species were recorded for the first time in 2016 and these included black grouse, lesser redpoll, red grouse and snow bunting.
- 43% of farms are growing cereals (crop, 15% team land or sheep and 12% green feed) vegetables.
- A number of dairy farms, horticulture units, poultry producers and pig producers indicated interest.
- Over 50% of participants provide some form of seed feed for birds, either as wild seed mixes, by winter feeding or by feeding to hoppers.
- Over 63% of participants are in some form of ag-environment scheme.

**130** In total, 130 different species were recorded.

**Where did they count?**  
The survey areas included important environmental features such as hedges, woodlands, ponds, grass verges, ditches and trees.

**What next?**  
The fourth Big Farmland Bird Count will take place from 4 - 13 February 2017.

For more information about the count contact the GWCT or contact Emma Crisler on 01453 62100 or by email at [emma@game-wildlife.org.uk](mailto:emma@game-wildlife.org.uk)

In partnership with: 



**A BROWN HARE ON THE LOOKOUT**

As the month progressed, the expected increase in farmland birds started. We switched into top gear with our feeding, getting two tonnes a week of tailings put out to supplement the various areas of grown wildbird food we have. [Corn bunting](#) had shot up to c380 birds, which was more than last winter already. [Yellowhammer](#) had followed suit and were now at about 500 birds. Perhaps the most impressive increase was with [linnet](#), as numbers had soared to around 2,200 birds dotted around the farm in several flocks, the largest of which was the 700 in the Windy Ridge area. The linnets were clearly liking the weedy stubbles and additional weed seeds that were put out on the wildbird covers.

With all these potential prey items present, it was perhaps not a great shock to see both [merlin](#) and [hen harrier](#) on the [South Wilts RSPB](#) visit to the farm. I particularly liked this trip, as the reactions of awe and wonder from Wiltshire residents, who watch birds across the county, show us that the results at Lower Pertwood are particularly special.

As we moved into **March**, the weather was still pretty cold and wet and some farmland birds, like the linnets had started to move away. We have a



**ROE BUCK IN THE AFTERNOON SUN**

decent breeding population on Lower Pertwood, but we also have a significant number come here from the uplands of Salisbury Plain and further afield in Northern England and Scotland. Other species like corn bunting and yellowhammer, who are largely from the adjacent area, continue to stay and indeed increase in number. By this time [corn bunting](#) had reached c500 birds! This is an amazing total, about **3% of the UK population** and about 50% up on last year. Just over half of these birds will stay to breed going on last year's population, it is great to know we are making a difference for the wider corn bunting population as well!

Yellowhammer also continued to increase, reaching c600 birds. This was also a 50% increase on last winter, similar to corn bunting. The new feeding areas on Manor Farm plus the sustained feeding of tailings has really paid dividends.

A final mention of the [brambling](#) we were graced by this winter. The males have now reached full summer plumage, and in total we have well over 100 - great stuff!



**MALE BRAMBLING**

Away from the excitement of the farmland, the woodland birds were also doing well. Nick Stephens confirmed a new marsh tit territory in Marriage's Gorse, taking us to six on the farm and the four mistle thrush territories noted in February were still active.

Finally, back to the farmland, to say that we are lucky enough to have some grey partridge paired up on the farm this year. We are doing a fair bit to help them with extra feed in the best nesting places near to where they are. to hopefully encourage them to stay in these areas. Fingers crossed they will have a brood of their nidifugous young this year on Lower Pertwood!

# Species Spotlight: Barn Owl

One of the species we help on Lower Pertwood is the barn owl. We are incredibly fortunate to be in the area covered by the **Deverills Raptor and Owl Group (DROG)**. The group look around the farm for suitable natural nesting sites and if there are not enough (as there rarely are on the downs) they will place nestboxes in suitable spots. This is really important to stop the owls and kestrels trying to nest in the bales in our barns where they might meet an accident.

The team then monitor the boxes at the appropriate time of the year and if we are successful in having barn owls nest they will ring the chicks – brilliant!

Over the last two years alone we have had 20 barn owl chicks fledge and we are hopeful of an increase in the number of breeding pairs once these birds start to breed. Here is a picture of the 2015 brood of four chicks, and I am pleased to report that the little chap on the right had a full belly when ringed, suggesting there was more than enough food around to rear all four.



**BARN OWL (TYTO ABLA)**

Barn owl are a **crepuscular** (active primarily during twilight hours) and **nocturnal** species, and so we see them in half-light and at night. They hunt by hearing movement in the grass below them and dive in to grab the vole or mouse below. Sometimes you might see them in the day in late summer, this is probably a sign of a big brood of chicks to feed. If they were not breeding, they would not need to be out so long.

The issues barn owl have faced are around a lack of safe breeding habitat mentioned above, as well as a lack of suitable hunting habitat. The latter has been addressed to a degree through Environmental Stewardship, leading to more grass margins being left along hedgerows which are great for barn owls to hunt safely. The improvement in the management of hedgerows has also helped along roadsides. The taller hedges push barn owl higher if they are crossing the roads which reduces the chances of them being hit by a vehicle. We are hoping for a bumper vole year this year which will in turn help the barn owl successfully raise their young, and with the help of DROG we will soon be hearing how our barn owls are doing in 2016!



**THE 2015 PERTWOOD BARN OWL BROOD**

**NICK ADAMS**  
WILDLIFE SPECIALIST  
Email: [nick.adams@talk21.com](mailto:nick.adams@talk21.com)



**LOUSE NORTON**  
LOWER PERTWOOD FARM OFFICE  
Email: [louise.norton@pertwood.co.uk](mailto:louise.norton@pertwood.co.uk)  
Tel: 01747 820499

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