

Spring 2017 Newsletter

Welcome to the Spring Edition of Wildlife Matters at Lower Pertwood Farm!

In the field of human endeavour, one seldom comes across a situation where the best possible thing you can do to influence a situation in a positive way is to do absolutely nothing.

What we have found at Lower Pertwood Farm is that the presence of man, vehicles, model aircraft and many other distractions add no value to the wildlife on the farm, or anywhere for that matter. What we constantly do is upset the balance of nature. We disturb one layer in the food chain, for example, which impacts directly on other species who rely on that rather select food source for their survival. If one has the ability to take an old barn and a few acres of countryside and abandon it completely, there is a good chance that it will be recognised as a safe haven by birds and other creatures.

Obviously the bigger the area the greater the diversity and the better the balance which will be achieved. In this regard we feel that a lot more needs to be done between neighbours to cooperate in standing back from areas of their farms which have no commercial value to them but which would start to develop another type of value, i.e. rich in natural resources and even possibly have the potential of allowing endangered species to regroup and start to multiply again.

Our newsletter covers many of these issues from a specific standpoint, e.g. we now have 102 bird species on the farm and that increase has taken place steadily over a number of years because we have been recognising the deficiencies that exist and trying where we can to fill the void. In certain cases we would plant a crop and abandon it to birdlife because they would require the cover and the food source but we will never do as good a job as nature can do when left to its own devices.



SPRING HAS SPRUNG IN THE WILTSHIRE MEADOWS



A MALE LINNET, SHOWING PINK SUMMER FEATHERING ON HIS CHEST

JANUARY - MARCH 2017

This quarter tends to be mostly about farmland birds. We are very proud of numbers of them on Lower Pertwood, so no apologies here!

In January, the **linnet** flock using Glebe was around 600 strong and last year's black and white bird was still to be seen. In addition, another flock of 225 utilising Pig Down, next door in Windy Ridge, there was a flurry of linnet too with two more flocks totalling 550 birds, in Westcombe two flocks with 210 birds were present, in Sunrise there



ONE OF THE SKYLARKS SINGING JUST ABOVE MY HEAD.

were 100 birds feeding and finally another 50 or so dotted around in smaller groups. That is a total of 1,735 linnet – an excellent total for this time of the year! This is one of the 1,735 linnet (*above*), a male just starting to get his pink summer feathering on his chest.

I do not tend to mention **skylark** much in these summaries, as usually they are well spread across the stubbles in January and are hard to count. I would have to walk many miles, up and down the fields to flush them all to count them. I am not keen on that level of disturbance, so I check they are present and usually that is all. On this particular day there was a strong southwesterly wind blowing, which meant the skylark were sheltering in the dips in the fields, which is exactly what the **corn bunting** were also doing.

Pig Down has what looks like steps running down it to the north east – the perfect place to be sheltering from the wind. There were 86 **skylark** here, another 95 in Windy Ridge, 37 in Westcombe and another 10 dotted about. Near Cowdown has a ridge across it, run-

ning pretty much north to south. So again, there is a sheltered area, where I counted 125 skylark. That is a total of 353 skylark without walking the vast majority of the stubble. The true number will be considerably more!

As mentioned there were **corn bunting** too, which tend to take a while to build up in number, mostly again because they are spread far and wide as there is so much habitat for them on Lower Pertwood. Pig Down held 94, Starveall had 26, Windy Ridge had an impressive 181, Westcombe had 63, Little Down held 26, Lords Hill had 20 and another 23 dotted about gave a total of 433 birds! An excellent total so early in the winter.

An all too rare site on the farm these days are **lapwing**, so it was positive to see a flock of 63 tucked away in Sainfoin. Most likely here from The Continent for the winter.



HARVEST MICE CLEVERLY USING BLACKTHORN SUCKERS FOR SCAFFOLDING

Away from the farmland birds, the search for **harvest mouse** nests continued and reached an impressive 19 nests by the end of March.



OUR FAVOURITE THRIVING CORN BUNTING

With the habitat relatively stable before the ploughing for spring crops starting, the opportunity was taken to check around the other fields for **corn bunting**, **linnet** and **skylark** to try and get a feel for the numbers present. Once fields start to be ploughed, the habitat changes and the birds will move around more to take advantage of areas to feed.

The fields south of the main farmyard were full of birds: 206 **skylark**, 80 **corn bunting** and 135 **linnet**. Plough Down was similarly impressive with 45 **skylark**, 137 **corn bunting** and 46 **linnet**. Finally, the fields around Roger's Folly held 215 **skylark**, 88 **corn bunting** and 110 **linnet**.

Assuming that these birds are not moving around too much at this stage of the winter, this gives totals for Lower Pertwood in January of 719 **skylark**, 748 **corn bunting** and 2,026 **linnet**. The linnet number is largely the same as last winter, so seems a reasonable estimate. The skylark numbers are higher, but that could be due to the count period being windy and moving the birds together in cover.

The **corn bunting** similarly have been moved by the wind into areas

of cover, so are not that actively moving around the farm. The larger flocks tend to stay in the same areas unless the habitat changes. Last year the population was thought to be around 500 birds, so it is certainly fair to say there has again been a significant increase. This is perhaps 4% of the UK population – brilliant!

All these farmland birds attracted a number of birds of prey with **merlin** being regular visitors, as well as **peregrine** and **sparrowhawk**. This is a clear indication that we are getting the balance right.

February saw the arrival of a few **brambling** to the area at Test Piece, now being fed. Last winter we had well over 100 all winter, this year just a couple. The numbers crossing from the Continent were much lower than last year, presumably because there was a good food supply for them back there. A good sign for even more heading our way in the future winters!

Other species had turned their minds to nesting. Last year's turf war between the **raven** and the **buzzard** continued. As seemed likely, the raven have managed to push a couple of pairs of buzzard

out, whereas in others the buzzard are holding firm. They feed largely on similar things, taking carrion and spotting opportunities to feed on invertebrates and larger prey. The **buzzard** had already shown the size of territories needed, so I would expect the number of the birds not to change, just the mix.

The **marsh tit** are also busy reaffirming their territories, numbers seem stable at around seven territories, this is the best time to survey for this species as they are singing and the lack of leaves mean you can see them.

March saw the fieldwork in full swing when the weather allowed. Off the back of a wet few weeks, things started to dry up and the stubbles were slowly being ploughed, worked down and drilled with spring barley and oats.

Plough Down has a red clover / perennial rye grass mix in at the moment. This is used to increase the nitrogen levels as the clover will collect nitrogen from the air and store it in its roots. This is a favoured crop for **corn bunting** at this time of year. Numbers had reached about 230 birds, but again



BUZZARD KEEPING A WATCH AT FALCONER'S

they were well spread so this is a prudent estimate.

The other main area was the stubbles at Wet Field and Rookery. Having lived up to its name, it took a while to dry out here. The **corn bunting** however were finding it to their liking, with around with 250 there. With others dotted around in 20s and 30s, the January estimate looks not too far from the mark.

While trying to count the **corn bunting** in Wet Fields, I was delight to find 3 **tree sparrow**, one of which was a singing male acting territorially around a group of dead ash trees that were filled with holes – the perfect place if you are a tree sparrow! I've left them alone since, and fingers crossed for some positive news in the next newsletter.



TREE SPARROW LAST AUTUMN, ON A NEARBY FARM

Fast on the heels of this was the sound of a very upset **raven**. It is not often that you hear this sound and it usually means one thing – **goshawk!** And sure enough there was a male **goshawk** being chased

by a **raven** overhead. A true apex predator, **goshawk** will keep other species in check below them in the food chain.

Grassland Management

BY NICK ADAMS

One of our current projects at Lower Pertwood is trying to improve the floristic assemblage in the grassland. Our main tool for getting as many different plants as possible in these areas is to get the level of grass right. By level, I mean both density and height. We need to ensure other plants have the space and light they need to be able to grow.

As I am sure you have picked up by now, we use sheep and cattle to manage our grasslands. Over the last year they have been busily shortening and opening up the downs and one plant in particular is enjoying its new found freedom – **cowslips!**

Here is a close up of one with his friends (*top right*) in Hill Down. Last year there were a few clumps of this plant, but you had to search for them. This year you couldn't miss them.

This shows a small percentage of the actual number in Hill Down this year. This was repeated to a lesser degree in Two Gates and Penhill, which just shows what is hiding away waiting patiently for an opportunity to shine!



Bird Ringing Studies at Peewit's Gorse

BY RICHARD CREIGHTON

Tim Steer and myself have been bird ringing at Peewit's Gorse since Spring 2014. For those of you new to bird ringing, we set up very fine nets between bushes, so the birds are concentrating on the bush they are aiming for and do not notice the net, and fly into it. They are designed in sections of about 50cms, each with a pocket of the same fine net at the bottom. As the bird flies into the net, they drop into the pocket to be held securely so they cannot damage themselves until either Tim or I remove them.



ONE OF THE RETURNING MALE WILLOW WARBLERS

We then place each bird in a small bag of its own, where they feel calmer as it's dark and they are alone. Once all the birds are taken from the net, we take them to have their wings measured and their weight taken. Additionally, every bird has a small metal ring placed on their leg. This ring has a unique combination of letters and numbers on it so that if that bird is found again in the future, a life history can be built up. As you will see shortly, those IDs come in very useful when discussing different birds.

Prior to using Peewit's Gorse

site, we had a few trial sessions in other areas before realizing the potential of this particular site. It has an oasis effect on passing migrants, being a 1 km square area of gorse and hawthorn scrub, largely surrounded by arable and grassland. It also provides a suitable nest site for approximately 6 pairs of **chiff chaff**, 4 pairs of **willow warbler**, 5 pairs of **blackcap** and 3 pairs of **whitethroat**. Peewit's Gorse has proven to be a valuable stopping off site for migrants both in the spring and autumn. Evidence of this is provided by the number of species that have been captured carrying fat reserves

laid down for onward migration whilst resting and feeding in this area. **Tree pipit** and **redstart** are species that are not breeding here but have been recorded both passing over and resting up in spring and autumn.

In October and November, **blackbird** and **song thrush** exhibiting the plumage characteristics of Scandinavian/Continental birds have been ringed here during influxes of other Scandinavian Thrushes, notably **redwing** and **fieldfare**. The differences between these and native birds only being discernible when examined in the

	2014		2015		2016		2017	
	Spring	Autumn	Spring	Autumn	Spring	Autumn	Spring	
WILLOW WARBLER	HBC602	HVR305	HBC602	HBC602	HVR404		HBC602	
			HVR323	HVR323				HVR323
								HVR305
								HVR404
CHIFFCHAFF	HBC637		HBC637	HVR348			HVR348	
						HVR747	HVR747	
			HBC700		HBC700			
BLACKCAP					Z535582	Z535582	Z535582	
					Z535570	Z535570	Z535570	
				Z158349	Z158349	Z158349		

hand. The flight feathers are often longer and the birds are slightly bigger.

Another interesting fact arising from our study has been the site faithfulness of the many **warblers** that breed here. The table (*previous page*) shows initial ringing dates and subsequent records. The coloured areas represent the winter period, when all these species undertake long migrations. The longest distance travelled is the **willow warbler** wintering south of the Sahara. The **chiff-chaff** travels to Southern Europe and North Africa. and the **black-cap** Southern Europe. The most travelled bird is HBC602 a male

willow warbler first captured on 30th July 2014, when already an adult, so having made at least one full migration already, it would have travelled at least 11,200 miles by spring 2017. Also of interest is the fact that a proportion of these returning birds are juveniles that have returned to their natal areas. Adults have more of a tendency to return to the place they bred the year before, returning juveniles are much less likely to return to their natal site.

We have also started a study of **yellowhammer**, with the financial support of The Wiltshire Ornithological Society, who funded the purchase of the necessary

rings. This winter we ringed 110 birds, and as the adults can be separated from juvenile birds by plumage differences, it is possible to assess the yearly breeding success by comparing the proportion of adults to juveniles. These comparisons could form a yearly estimate of breeding success at Lower Pertwood in future seasons, as well as show us if the **yellowhammer** winter here year after year, or move around.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr Mole and all the staff at Pertwood who have been a great help to us with their support for these projects.

Soup of the Day:

ORGANIC WORM-PRODUCED VEGETABLE MOULD WITH CRISPY CARABID BEETLE CROUTONS

BY STUART CORBETT

Charles Darwin's final work before his death was entitled "The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms" and was the result of 44 years studying earthworms. It is amazing to consider that, until people read this book, they considered earthworms to be soil pests.

Its final paragraph states that, when we see a turf-covered expanse we should remember that it has been levelled by worms and that the whole of this 'superficial mould' has passed, and will again pass, every few years through the bodies of worms. The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions but long before it existed the land was ploughed by earthworms.

Darwin's studies took place on the chalk, including at Stonehenge, so they are very relevant to Pert-

wood. His brilliance enables us to see that, over long timescales, the apparently unchanging downland (along with agricultural land that worms inhabit) is actually a very dynamic, ever changing, environment.

The presence and activity of earthworms indicates the health of a soil as they are one of the primary producers of the 'Vegetable Mould' which is such an important component of soil in both economic and ecological terms. It is also produced or consumed by soil-inhabiting fungi and a complex of detritivores such as mites, woodlice and springtails. These creatures occur in huge numbers and form the prey of animals farther up the food chain such as Carabid beetles and spiders. For instance, springtails may number 100,000 per square metre. The result of all of this activity is a functioning biological 'soup'.

We can imagine this soup as occurring in flavours according to the prey items it contains. Different flavours would be preferred by specific communities of predators including Carabid beetles and spiders. Perhaps a hot mulligatawny of south-facing downland would suit a rare heat-loving community or a cheap, watery tomato soup of thin chalky soils might attract a sparse, though sometimes unusual, group whereas a rich cream of chicken of alluvial arable soil would support a large population with a less discerning palate.

Agriculturalists and ecologists constantly strive for the most suitable soup for their needs or interests. However, to discover the ingredients that make up the particular soup they are interested in can involve a huge amount of time and resources. On occasion, they may require the constituents of a soup to be changed as this might attract



NOT QUITE A RUGGED OIL BEETLE, BUT A BLACK OIL BEETLE SEEN AT LOWER PERTWOOD IN 2015.

a different or altered community. At times the soup may be spoilt by the application of too much heat (e.g. drought), water (e.g. rain) or omitting a key part of its production (e.g. grazing). Such disasters may result in a community changing or even the total disappearance of a population.

In order to gain a good idea of soup availability, flavour and condition without having to undergo the difficulties of analysing the soup itself we can simply sample the communities (or customers) enjoying it.

The study I am undertaking does exactly this. I am obtaining a list of beetle and spider species (customers) and what soup (habitat) they are living on. In doing so I hope

to provide Pertwood with information about the many soups the farm contains via its six and eight-legged customers. In the future, we may be able to suggest tweaking constituents or flavours to suit different clientele. Maybe we can add a dash of grazing to improve downland mulligatawny or a great dollop of organic matter to enhance thin chalky tomato.

The customer samples I collect undergo a rigorous, literally microscopic, examination. From this I can ascertain their status (common, unusual, migrant, alien etc.). So far I have to admit that most of Pertwood's customers appear to be rather common. However, I have been lucky enough to meet a very unusual character that is a rarity in the UK, a chap named *Meloe*

rugosus aka **Rugged Oil Beetle**. The female of this species lays up to 1000 eggs in a burrow near a bee's nest. The larvae hatch and climb a flower stem and wait for bees to visit the flower. It then hitches a ride on the bee and is returned to its nest where it feeds on the bee's eggs and stored pollen and nectar. Here it develops into the adult beetle ready to begin the extraordinary cycle again. This insect needs flower-rich grasslands to survive and reductions in this habitat has meant severe declines in its populations. A programme of surveying has been undertaken in recent years for this and other Oil Beetles and it has been discovered that the Rugged Oil Beetle now occurs mainly in the Gloucestershire and Welsh borders area.

To have this beast as a customer is certainly a feather in the cap for Pertwood and indicates that there are wonderful soups available on the farm. I am also ensuring I also record the number of individuals present as this will provide valuable information regarding the type and condition of the soups present.

Currently 13 species of **Carabid beetle** and 33 species of **spider** have been identified. It is early days in the study but I can report that migrants have not been seen and that no aliens have been found (yet).

I hope that this introduction to the great soup opera we call Ecology will be followed by further episodes (unless the authorities pull the plug after this pilot). The data I am gathering will ensure that customers are named, their status is recorded, numbers involved determined and reasons for their behaviour explained.

In the meantime I will indulge in a bacon butty, as I fear that these soups may be habit(at)-forming.

You wait ages for a bus....

...then three come along! Well not buses, but new bird species at Lower Pertwood. Having been on 99 species for several months, we recorded the 100th species in the last newsletter – the **common crossbill**. Hot on the claws of this chap, Tim and Richard have managed to find the time while ringing to spot an **osprey** flying over the farm on its way to the northern breeding grounds. Apparently, our buzzards did not take kindly to this interloper and saw it off the farm. Quite rightly, they enjoyed the moment rather than rummaging for the camera.



NO. 102: SEDGE WARBLER

They came up trumps soon afterwards with a **sedge warbler** (above) who was again passing through in its way to its breeding grounds, but this one was found in one of their nets and so they were able to get us a picture. A lovely little bird, with a smart plumage, and a pale eyestripe which is striking in the field if you are lucky enough to see one. They tend to breed around the edges of damp areas, in between the water edge where reeds grow and the drier areas where the scrub begins. Their song is a joyous mix of buzzes and scratchy notes delivered at a fast tempo.

That leaves us on 102 species, wondering what will be next? With 16 species of bird of prey and owl already recorded, its not likely to be one of those... Now where's that white-tailed eagle?



Over the Winter I have been setting trail cameras to try and get pictures of the different mammals and birds using Lower Pertwood. If the weather had been colder, I would have set one by a feeding area, but because the weather was relatively mild the wildlife did not need to accumulate as much as last winter, which is great news.

This male **pheasant** seems to be taking an interest in the camera. It is interesting to see if the wildlife reacts to the cameras, as the sites I put them vary greatly, some more concealed than others. This one was right by an animal trail which turned out to be a **roe deer** track, as the next picture shows.



Some animals are just on a mission; a good example would be this **brown hare**, who I think was following the scent of a female.



Tree Planting

Planting trees is an ongoing activity at Lower Pertwood, and our recent count revealed that we have planted **6229 trees** to date. The long-term benefits to both the farm and the planet make this a worthwhile investment for the farm, over and above the pure natural beauty that they bring to the landscape.

Here's an idea of the types of trees we have planted recently:

Major tree species:

Beech
Lime
Oak
Sycamore
Common Walnut
Wild Cherry

Minor tree species:

Field Maple
Birch
Crab Apple
Whitebeam
Wild Service Tree

Evergreen species:

Common Holly
Scots Pine
Evergreen Oak

Coppice species:

Hazel
Hornbeam

Native shrubs:

Wayfaring Tree
Guelder Rose
Common Dogwood
Spindle

Additions for autumn colour:

Sweet Gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*)
Red Oak
Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*)



THE LOVELY HAWTHORN IN FLOWER



A YELLOWHAMMER ENJOYING THE VIEW FROM AN OAK TREE

A special sighting ...



A FEMALE GREAT BUSTARD SPOTTED AT PERTWOOD

Nic had a surprise when checking the sheep, when he noticed a bird nearly as big as them wandering around the field. He soon realised it was a female **great bustard** - what a sight! She is most likely from the re-introduction scheme on Salisbury Plain.

In the Spring the male birds have a lek where they display and posture to see who is dominant. The females will also come along and watch from the fringes, and then mate with the dominant birds. After this the females move away to nest on their own and we think this female is doing just that - looking for a safe site to nest. Well, she has come to the right place, so fingers crossed she stays!

Every year a group of conservation organisations produce a report called **The State of the UK's Birds**. The one covering 2016 has recently been published, and is the first one to cover the latest review of the main bird species' population trends in the UK. We covered this in the Winter 2015 newsletter, called the **Birds of Conservation Concern**.

This is crucially important and as such we would like to take this opportunity to mention it again, so we make no apologies to long-standing followers of our newsletter for covering old ground.

A total of 247 bird species are considered, which are the ones that breed in the UK or have key passage and wintering habitat here. It does not cover species that appear here through the fortunes of the weather, as they have to be heading to the UK of their own choice. The species are split into three lists: **red, amber and green**. Species on the red list are of high conservation concern, those on the amber list are of conservation concern and the green listed birds are of low conservation concern. Of the 247 species covered, 67 are on the red list – amounting to 27%.

This means that 27% of the bird species that use the UK as a key part of their survival strategy, are at risk of extinction here.

Of those 67 species, eight are considered to be at risk of global extinction. Most of these are species associated with the coast and sea, but two breed in Wiltshire (the **common pochard and turtle dove**), and the latter used to breed at Lower Pertwood with the last male being recorded as recently at 2011. Lower Pertwood is a great habitat for this species, we really cannot do anything more to attract them, and they just do not make it here anymore.

Of the 102 species that we have recently recorded on the farm, 29 are on the red list (28%), so we have our



fair share. It might come as a surprise to hear that the species we often mention as being here in large numbers are on that red list - species like **corn bunting, yellowhammer, linnet, skylark and marsh tit**. Others like **tree sparrow, grey partridge, house sparrow and starling** breed here in smaller numbers.

We will endeavour to produce habitat for these important species while carrying on with our farming strategy, and if we get **turtle dove** back again, you will be the first to know!

To read The Guardian article on UK birds facing extinction, please click [here](#). To read the full Report, please click on the image above.

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