

### **Introduction**

The Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster is located in the heart of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: one of the best preserved medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. It is a small-scale, structurally diverse landscape, rich in public goods: extensive woodland; numerous streams and rivers; a high proportion of semi-natural habitat; and an extensive footpath network. The Cluster's purpose is to achieve environmental benefits in the Upper Rother and Dudwell using a facilitator to enable networking and training and help secure financial and other support for Cluster activities.

### **Membership**

At its launch on 1 October 2016 the Cluster had 23 members. By 31 March 2017 this had grown to 30 and by 31 March 2018 there were 40 members. The Group has grown organically, with most new members making contact following recommendations from Natural England and local land agents. The area of land covered by the Cluster member is 3500 hectares.

### **The Facilitators**

The Cluster launched with two facilitators; Tamara Taylor and Matt Pitts. Tamara relocated in December 2016 and Matt moved to a new role in July 2017. New AONB Partnership Land Management Project Officers, Ross Wingfield and Christine Meadows, took on the Facilitator role in September 2017.

### **Member priorities**

Priorities for the Group were set through a meeting and a questionnaire sent to all members. Analysis of the discussion and questionnaire responses indicated that collating and sharing existing wildlife records to develop Group members' understanding and interest in the area's wildlife value was considered a high priority by members for year 1.

### **Meetings and events**

In the first 18 months Group members have built their knowledge of the area's natural assets - its soil, species-rich grassland, woodland, hedges and birds, through 13 events. All events have promoted best practice management, and simple techniques and actions that members can take to understand, maintain and improve natural assets on their holding.

Theme	Date	Location	Partners	Member attendees	Other attendees
Cluster launch	1.11.16	The Bear, Burwash	None	9	
Turtle Dove site visit	1.11.16	Various sites	Les Edwins, RSPB Turtle Dove Officer	3	
Healthy Soils workshop	29.11.2016	The Bear, Burwash	Matthew Shepard, Natural England; Paul Cobb of Farm Wildlife	10	14
A Farmland Bird ID Walk and Talk	26.1.17	Wadhurst Park	Peter Tompson, GWCT	8	13
Turtle Dove workshop	16.2.17	The Bear, Burwash	Bruce Fowkes, RSPB Conservation Adviser	9	
Managing Grassland for Wildflowers Walk and Talk	5.6.17	Stream Farm, Battle	Led by Group member Keith Datchler	6	6
Farmland Pollinators Walk and Talk	15.6.17	Wadhurst Park	Laurie Jackson, Buglife	4	5
Grassland Species Identification	20.7.17	St Dunstons Farm, Heathfield	Led by Group member Ralph Hobbs	3	3
Deer Management	21.9.17	The Bear, Burwash	Jamie Cordery of the Deer Initiative	10	11
Deer Impact Assessment	10.1.18	Darwell Forest	None	6	5
Dark Skies event	1.2.18	Village Hall, Five Ashes	Charles Winchester, South Downs National Park Authority	3	20
Hedge management walk and talk	8.3.18	Scotney Castle, Lamberhurst	Mark Musgrave, National Trust	5	24
Mid-tier Stewardship event	28.3.18	The Bear, Burwash	None	3	0

## Other communication

A web page for the farm cluster was created on [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org). Newsletters (electronic and hard copy versions) were produced quarterly and sent to all members and other interested parties with interim E-news as required. Videos of the Healthy Soils and Farmland Bird ID workshop presentations were created and published online.

## Joint working

### Non-native invasive species

A non-native invasive species survey for the Upper Rother and Dudwell sub-catchment was carried out in the summer of 2016 and sent to all relevant Group members with recommendations for future management. Subsequent discussions between the Facilitator and the Environment Agency led to £20,000 being secured to control Giant Hogweed in the area in 2018/2019.

### **Species-rich grasslands**

Working with the Natural England Field Unit a grassland survey project was developed; with the Facilitator leading on landowner communication including permissions, survey maps and logistical arrangements and the NE Field Unit organising surveyors and the processing of the results. The survey methodology used national and local expertise to develop an approach suitable for Weald grasslands.

In the weeks beginning 15 April and 19 June 2017, 45 fields (c86ha) were surveyed for their grassland interest. Reports with management recommendations were produced and sent by the Facilitator to the 15 landowners involved. The surveys have helped Group members understand the species present in their meadows and the value of the habitat. The surveys have led to tweaks in grassland management and been used as evidence for Countryside Stewardship applications.

### **Deer management**

The deer management events have been well attended by both Group members and their stalkers. There is now a better understanding of deer pressure across the area, current stalking activity and the need to increase activity.

### **Dark skies**

Three Group members undertook dark sky surveys on their land holdings and around a wider area. The data has been collated by the AONB Partnership and will be combined with data from other sources before sharing with Group members in Autumn 2018.

## **Securing Resources**

### **Countryside Stewardship**

The updated Countryside Stewardship options and packages for 2018 have been promoted to Group Members in conjunction with the Natural England information events. Initially there was limited interest in Group drop-in clinics to assist with applications. However more recently a drop-in clinic attracted potential Members and was found to be a useful follow up to the introductory Natural England events. The Facilitators helped members choose appropriate options and have endorsed 4 mid-tier stewardship applications by Group Members.

### **Other**

Other grant schemes were promoted by the Facilitator with telephone advice provided as required. One member submitted an application to Sussex Lund 2017 (a grant scheme established by a local philanthropist) and was successful in securing support for a hedge restoration project considered ineligible for Countryside Stewardship.

## **Engaging others**

The Facilitators have helped the Group build relationships with 10 organisations, in particular: national and local agencies - Natural England including its National Field Unit, the Environment Agency, South Downs National Park and Forestry Commission; NGOs - RSPB, GWCT, Buglife, the National Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Deer Initiative; as well as local groups like the High Weald Deer Network. It has also involved land agents: CLM, Batcheller Monkhouse, Cluttons, and Strutt and Parker; and the landlords for the Group's tenant farmers, the National Trust and Glynde Estate.

## Priorities for 2018/19

### Meetings and events

- 12 events around the following topics are planned: deer management, grassland management, non-native species control, CS applications, integrated farm management, rhododendron management, small-scale natural flood management.

### Other communication

- Quarterly newsletter to Members and website updates.
- Development of Group case studies to show use of Countryside Stewardship options.

### Non-native invasive species

- Survey and control of Giant Hogweed in involving 17 landowners including 6 group members.
- Investigation of non-chemical means of hogweed control to address proliferation around organic farms.

### Species-rich grasslands

- Species survey of 63 species-rich and possible species-rich grasslands, including fields due to exit HLS and ELS in 2019 working with Natural England.
- A range of meadow establishment and management events, assisted by the Conservation Manager for Wakehurst (Kew) currently on a part-time secondment to the High Weald AONB.

### Deer management

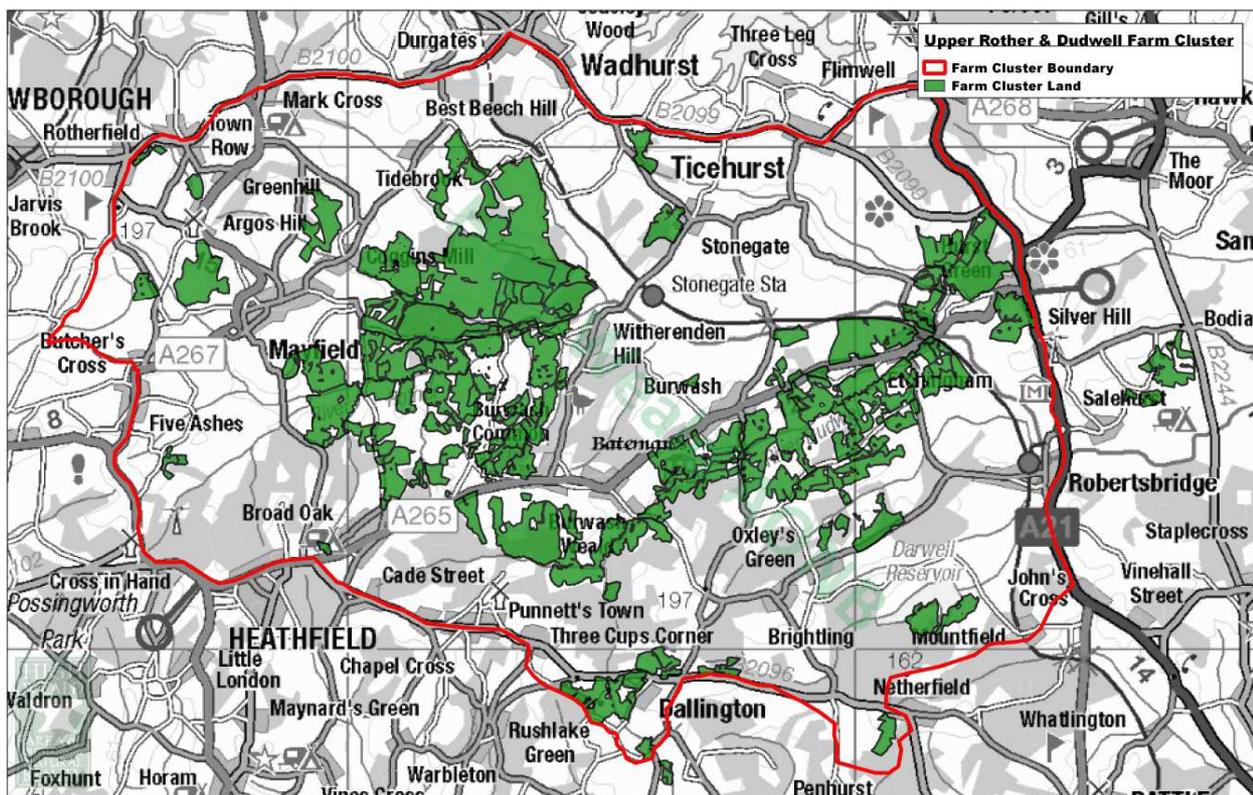
- Support development of a deer management strategy around the Dallington Forest SSSI and Group member landholdings.
- Develop and maintain a deer management stalker coverage map for the Facilitation Fund area.
- Provide sample contracts and stalker management advice as requested by Group members.

### Securing resources

- Help Group Members source information required to enter into the next round of Countryside Stewardship.
- Work with other advisors to increase the focus on Group member landholdings and the achievement of Stewardship aims.
- Facilitate access to other funds for environmental projects.

### Other

- Convene a landowner-led steering group to guide future priorities.
- Recruit new members to fill in gaps in the Cluster coverage.



**In Images**

Species-rich Grassland walk and talk (left) and follow-up Grassland Survey workshop (right)



Deer Impact Assessment walk and talk (left) and Farm Bird Identification workshop (right)



Hedge Management walk and talk (left) and Soil Health workshop (right)



The Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster brings farmers, foresters and other land managers together to improve the natural environment of the Upper Rother and Dudwell at a landscape scale. The Cluster is assisted by the High Weald AONB Partnership with financial support from the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund which is administered by Natural England.



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