



Welcome to your Farm Cluster Newsletter

Here's what we've been up to in the last month - if you have any questions about the stories in this newsletter or suggestions for future articles, please contact: [Ross Wingfield](#) or [Christine Meadows](#).

High Weald grassland surveys - gems unearthed

With clay soils and steep slopes, many High Weald fields have traditionally been used for livestock, leaving them relatively undisturbed. Species-rich 'unimproved' grassland alive with wild flowers and insects is nationally a very rare habitat. We've lost 97%, so it's great news that the High Weald is still a refuge for it.



The story so far: In May and June of 2017 and 2018 we surveyed over 100 grassland sites for plants and insects. The survey team was made up of specialists from Natural England, Buglife, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Sussex Wildlife Trust and our own High Weald AONB team.

What we found: Our grassland surveys unearthed some gems. Nearly half the grasslands were rich in wildflower and grass varieties and nearly all the rest had a good number of wild flowers. Some brilliant stuff was found! Green winged orchids, adder's tongue fern, heaps of dyer's greenweed, loads of common spotted orchids, pepper saxifrage, southern marsh orchids, betony, heath and quaking grasses. A grassland with at least nine different grasses or wild flowers is valuable. So that could include a field with clover (red and white), birds-foot trefoil, meadow buttercup, perennial rye grass, Yorkshire fog, cocksfoot and Timothy grass, for example.

Some of these plants can benefit your livestock and increase drought resistance and soil structure. Studies show herbs seem to have higher mineral levels than grasses and legumes, and legumes are higher in protein. Some plants can help animal health, e.g. bird's-foot-trefoil contains tannins that can reduce intestinal parasites. There is evidence suggesting that livestock grazing a variety of appropriately-managed herbs, legumes and grasses put on more weight and are healthier, compared with 'improved' pasture.

Currently: 55 sites are being surveyed this summer, most of which are in the Farm Cluster area. Earlier this month our 'Surveying your meadows' event was well-attended. Our forthcoming 'Weald meadow managers' question time' event is fully booked.

About

The Upper Rother and Dudwell Farm Cluster helps farmers, foresters and other land managers work together to improve farm profitability and benefit soil, water, wildlife and historic features not just on their individual farms, but across the area. It has 58 members covering over 3,500ha. The Cluster is helped by the High Weald AONB Partnership with financial support from Natural England's Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, the Environment Agency (Giant Hogweed control), and the Woodland Trust (deer management). Visit the Upper Rother & Dudwell Farm Cluster page at www.highweald.org

High Weald Grassland Survey - continued...

Next steps: There are opportunities for the Cluster to work together to enhance grasslands. We'll send out the site survey reports to participating members when they are compiled, and hold further events about grassland management. If you want to survey your own grassland and you're not sure about plant identification, Ross recommends the 'Seek' app by [iNaturalist](#) which uses image recognition technology to help make it easy.

'Mob grazing and soil health' event feedback

There was a great turnout for the mob-grazing event earlier this month. 'Pasture for Life' farmers in the High Weald shared their knowledge and experience with interested livestock farmers in the Cluster. Our thanks go to Cluster member and beef farmer Sam Newington, who showed us how this grazing practice can benefit our soil, grassland and cattle health and make savings for farmers.

Speaker Tom Chapman, livestock farmer and mob-grazing pioneer, spoke about farmers being 'sunlight harvesters' and how longer roots are better for water retention, soil health and nutrient access. Healthy soils mean more resilient grassland which can extend the grazing season and increase profitability.

Dates for your diary

- **5 June, 2-5pm: Weald Meadow Managers' Question time** at Wakehurst Place, Haywards Heath. Now fully booked.
- **6 - 8 June, 9am-6.30pm: South of England Show**, Ardingly. See [website](#) for prices and advance tickets.
- **12 June, 10am-4pm: European Protected Species training for woodland managers**, Great Bookham, nr Dorking. See [Eventbrite](#) for price & tickets.
- **26 - 27 June: Groundswell Agriculture No-Till Show and Conference** at Lannock Manor Farm, Hertfordshire. See [website](#) for tickets.

Groundswell Agriculture, see you there! A few Farm Cluster members are going as well as the High Weald AONB staff. Let us know if you're thinking of going, we'll look out for you...

Coming up...

Prince's Farm Resilience Programme: Following our invite, we're delighted that this national programme will be offering free business skills workshops to the area's family farms. We're looking for more dairy or livestock farmers to participate. We'll be emailing Cluster members individually to let you know about this. So look out for further information...

Group news

Welcome to our new members from Castle Hill Farm in Rotherfield, Franchise Manor in Burwash, Parkfield and Cripps Farm in Dallington and Homestead Farm in Netherfield. We now have 61 members!

Heathfield show winner: Congratulations to Farm Cluster member Jane Howard who won several awards for her Sussex cattle: 1st place for her bulls and heifer, 2nd and 7th for her senior heifers and her matching group of three Sussex were also placed 2nd.

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