



Biodiversity Monitoring and Action Group (BMAG)

NEWSLETTER TWO

May 2024

Welcome to our second newsletter!

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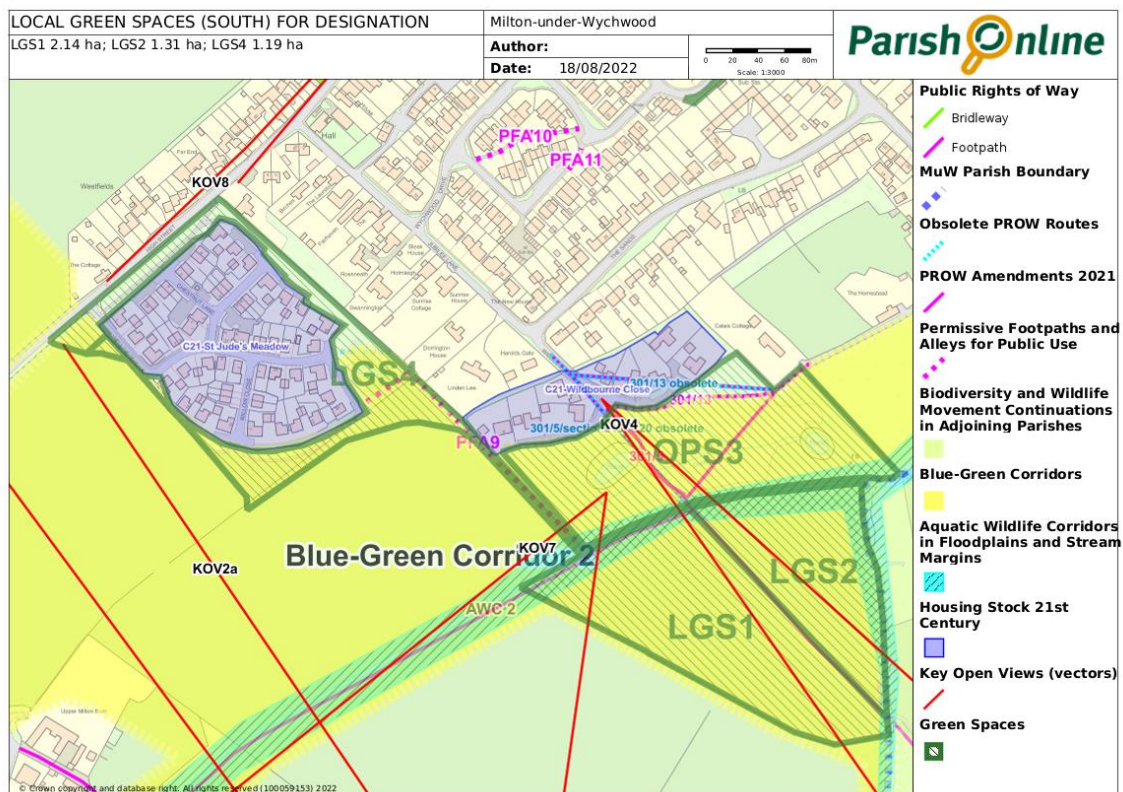
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1. It finally belongs to us – and the ‘Eco Area’ becomes ‘Sarah’s Meadow’...

It all started when a property developer called Sharba obtained an option to buy 37 acres of land from Richard Hartley of Manor Farm. Sharba also purchased an area described as the “Eco Area” theoretically as an offset against biodiversity loss but widely regarded as a sop to the village. The subsequent history is interesting; there is more detail in the box at the end of this article.

The area was designated a Local Green Space (**LGS 2**) in our Neighbourhood Plan (see map below), and now, after many years, it belongs to the Parish Council (PC).



While this was happening, Sarah Olney of Natural England initiated the idea to dig ponds on the Eco Area in order to drain the land better and encourage a greater variety of wildlife.

After Sarah's unexpected death in 2022, Ann Berkeley from Wild Oxfordshire obtained funding from Thames Water and three ponds were dug in 2023.

It's great to see that early in 2024, wildlife is already establishing itself – snipe, mallard, moorhen, reed warbler, frog and common lizard as of early April. The PC has asked a local birding enthusiast to monitor the increase in birdlife.



Snipe

The area is now developing successfully into a significant community asset, and since much of this was due to the energy and foresight of Sarah Olney, it is thought appropriate for the area to be renamed to recognise her contribution by calling it 'Sarah's Meadow'.



Common Lizard

Photo courtesy of Tom Iles

In Newsletter One, we included news of a visit from Wild Oxfordshire ecologists to advise on developments there. These are being implemented in Spring and early Summer this year.

Also as a tribute to Sarah, a memorial seat in the shape of an earthworm has been installed there – see photo below. It's a beautiful piece of art and craftsmanship made from a huge oak at Blenheim Palace. Furthermore, it's also useful - as a seat, of course!



Sarah's seat with two of the three new ponds just visible in the background

The land marked as **LGS1** in the map above, adjacent to LGS 2 [the “eco area”, now “Sarah’s Meadow”], belongs to Richard Hartley of Manor Farm who kindly allowed it to be designated as a Local Green Space (LGS 1) in our Neighbourhood Plan. Designation as a LGS affords it the highest possible protection from development.

A pond dug in LGS1 exposed the 17th century aqueduct put in by Shipton Manor (who once owned all the land around) to increase the water supply to the flour mill which was sited where Milton Service Station now stands.

In the development of the combined area of LGS1 and LGS2, another Parish Council success was in obtaining 460 trees from the Woodland Trust. These were all native trees such as oak, rowan, birch, hazel, beech, silver birch, wild cherry, crab apple, and dog rose. They were planted in April, 2022 on the higher ground, some of which had come from the ‘scrapings’ produced by the digging of the ponds. The planting was a great community event with all 460 trees having been planted in the space of less than 3 hours by local people, Cotswold Wardens, and youngsters from Scouts, Beavers, Cubs, Girl Guides (see photo below.)



Planting trees in April 2022

Pat Ward April 2024

Further note on the development of the “Eco Area”, now Sarah’s Meadow

It started when a property developer from Northampton called Sharba obtained an option to buy 37 acres from Richard Hartley of Manor Farm. Sharba submitted a plan to build 72 houses on 7 of those acres and to develop an area described as the “Eco Area” as an offset, theoretically, against biodiversity loss. There was widespread community disapproval of the plan to build the 72 houses and the “Eco Area” was seen as a sop to the village.

The planning application eventually went to a Planning Tribunal for an Inspector to make a decision. He decided to allow the building of 62 houses (10 less than the original application).

Sharba then sold the Planning Consent and land to McTaggart & Mickel of Glasgow whose vision for the Eco Area was for a pond, raised boardwalks and sign boards telling people what they could expect to see. The Parish Council informed M&M that they felt the plan was a bit like a ‘theme park’, and preferred the area to be left natural.

M&M then proposed a Deed of Variation on several important matters including doing away altogether with the Eco Area. Without consulting the Parish Council, this was agreed by WODC. The PC then negotiated with M&M for the Eco Area to be transferred to the PC so that it could remain in the spirit of the original Planning Consent. During this period, the area was designated a Local Green Space (**LGS 2**) in our Neighbourhood Plan. Designation as a Local Green Space affords the highest possible protection from development.

The Land Transfer is now, after many years, completed and the land now officially belongs to the MuW community under the aegis of the Parish Council.

In the meantime, Sarah Olney of Natural England obtained funding from Thames Water for the ‘Woody Dams’ and other works on Littlestock Brook and the Parish Field, and initiated the idea to dig ponds on the Eco Area in order to drain the land better and encourage a greater variety of wildlife.

With Sarah’s unexpected death in 2022, plans were put on hold until Ann Berkeley from Wild Oxfordshire revived the plans and obtained funds from Thames Water under their Evenlode Catchment Project. The ponds were dug by White Horse Contractors in 2023, and the wildlife is already establishing itself.

2. Sustainable and regenerative farming - BMAG visits FarmED

BMAG organised a visit to FarmED on Thursday 14 March. The rain held off (!) and the visit was a most interesting and encouraging experience. Our guide, Kate, very ably demonstrated in real life ways how farming could be different and beneficial to both our environment and our food quality.



Here is what four members of the group wrote about what had impressed them most;

"It was all so interesting. Our guide was so knowledgeable and enthusiastic. I was excited to hear about the doubling in the different species of birds since when they first started there. I myself was distracted by the kites, buzzard and kestrel overhead, the larks and the two chiffchaff I heard (the first of the Spring for me). It was interesting as a farmer's daughter to hear how the herbal lays and plants like chicory were natural wormers.

One fact that stood out for me was the water retention test. 100 millilitres is poured on the ground and the time to it being absorbed is recorded. The 'control' plot, farmed as it was... took over three minutes to absorb but the herbal leys plot took just 23 seconds. This has huge implications for runoff from farmland causing flooding, loss of topsoil and washing of nutrients into watercourses." Jess W.

The second one;

"...very inspiring, interesting and informative. All the staff were so enthusiastic and engaging and committed to finding a better way to farm.

It was enlightening to find out about the worm middens. I shall look at little piles of straw in a field in a completely new light! Clever worms!

Another thing that sticks in my mind was the difference in nitrate concentrations between water at the top of the slope - high - compared with that in the lowest of three ponds after the water had flowed through connecting meandering channels - a great example of natural filtration." Anne H.

The third;

"Very interesting and informative. The mix of grasses, clover, herbs, legumes and wild flowers was very surprising in the results shown...and that the cows and sheep would get a big benefit from this mix also surprised me.

The production of food in the poly tunnels all year round without heat for supply to local consumers is very welcome. The variety surprised me as did the quality." Pat W

In summary, the fourth person wrote;

"I would thoroughly recommend the guided tour of FarmEd....If you do not have the time - the tour took two hours - or the inclination for a guided tour, you can always get yourself a map, do your own thing, and walk around the farm with your i-phone and pick up the relevant information on the QR codes as you go. Treat yourself!" Marjorie C.



Elaine Brittan, March 2024

3. MuW Parish Council – we have a biodiversity plan!

Wonderful news, friends and supporters of BMAG - MuW Parish Council has adopted a Biodiversity Policy and Action Plan.

Follow this link to see the whole plan...

[Adopted-biodiversity-policy-for-MUW-170424.pdf \(miltonunderwychwood-pc.gov.uk\)](https://www.miltonunderwychwood-pc.gov.uk/Adopted-biodiversity-policy-for-MUW-170424.pdf)

It gives us a structured approach to engaging with the wider community and taking action across many fronts.

PC chair, Graham Smith, writes;

“The task of conserving and enhancing biodiversity is challenging. And on the face of it, a policy can be just another bit of bureaucracy - but our plan has five pages of specific actions! By the time you read this, some may well have been completed, some will be in hand, and some not yet begun.

Much of the work of the PC is hidden to many parishioners but, although the council has produced this plan, anyone can get involved in the actions whether this is helping to protect our rapidly dwindling population of hedgehogs, keeping some areas of the parish as havens for wildlife, putting up boxes for swifts or owls to nest in, or supporting our farmers in their efforts to farm more sustainably and produce better food...

Of course, wildlife and plants do not respect parish boundaries so the PC is working hand in hand with adjacent parishes and with other organisations such as Wild Oxfordshire and the Wychwood Forest Trust which are at the forefront of promoting biodiversity in the Cotswolds.

There is an enormous amount we as a community can do to enhance biodiversity in our parish and the PC warmly welcomes volunteers to get involved in all kinds of practical activities. It doesn't matter if you can only spare the odd hour here or there; all contributions are welcome.

*The **Annual Parish Meeting** is a time when anyone can come along to share views about matters of local concern. This year the meeting will be on...*

Wednesday, 12th June at 7.00 pm **in the Village Hall**, but come at **6.30 pm** and share some refreshments as well as your views.

The main theme will be **Biodiversity**.

All are welcome including children accompanied by an adult.

If you would like to attend please email clerk@miltonunderwychwood-pc.gov.uk so that we have an idea of numbers for catering.”

4. Great Big Green Week - June, 2024

THE GREAT BIG GREEN WEEK

Join in the activities planned for 2nd – 18th June for 'The Great Big Green Week' in the Wychwoods.

For further information, look out for the poster and/or follow this link...

<https://www.sustainablewychwoods.org.uk/great-big-green-week>

5. Calling all gardeners... No Mow May?

Why not mow in May (apart from saving yourself work) ?

The organisation “Plantlife” informs us that 97 per cent of British wildflower meadows have disappeared since the 1930s. A study published in the journal Nature Communications shows that many British *pollinating insects* are in decline, with rarer species really struggling. Research by Imperial College, London, is supportive; “Providing food for pollinators is critical to their survival... insects are in worrying decline with butterfly numbers down by about 50% since 1976, and 13 species of bee now extinct.”

The reasons behind this are the use of *insecticides*, *habitat loss* and an *overall reduction in biodiversity*. Plantlife believes that people’s gardens can play a vital part in reversing this trend - there are 20 million gardens in the UK.

Of course, the amount of land being farmed is far, far greater than that which exists in our gardens, and we know some of our local farmers are making real efforts to address this issue; Matty Izod, of the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster, wrote in Newsletter One and we include more from him in this Newsletter.

Are you a gardener?

What happens if you don’t mow in May?

Plantlife’s research showed that if you mow less, the pollen count on your lawn can skyrocket. They...asked people to leave their mowers in the shed for May and count the flower species that subsequently popped up in a one-square-metre patch of their lawn. Some... saw a tenfold increase in the amount of nectar available to bees and other pollinators. There was an increase in the growth of daisies, germander, speedwell and creeping buttercup.

After stopping mowing for another month there was a resurgence of white clover, selfheal and bird’s foot trefoil. The average square-metre patch ...after the experiment produced enough nectar to support almost four honey bees per day.

Plantlife’s mowing tips for encouraging wildlife

Cut once every four weeks Cutting just once a month encourages the maximum number of flowers to grow... Ideally, leave around three to five centimetres of grass length.

Leave areas of long grass The experiment also resulted in greater diversity of flowers in areas of grass that were left completely unmown, with oxeye daisy, field scabious and knapweed offering up important nectar sources.

Butterfly Conservation point out that grass left till seeds have set is the most beneficial of all. Not mowing till August or September, say, in churchyards or garden orchards has most effect – mow in time to pick orchard fruits!

You don't have to stop mowing completely Some species, such as daisy and bird's foot trefoil, are adapted to growing in shorter swards. Cutting flowers from these plants once a month stimulates them to produce more blooms.



OK, well intentioned - but not convinced?

Lawn mower companies are amongst those putting forward counter arguments.... In general, these arguments mostly concern the “unkempt” appearance of lawns especially where these are the pride and joy of homeowners, and the way “weeds” can take over.

So, where do YOU come out on “No Mow May”?

Is the option to continue as we have been, a viable one?

If not, can we re-think the way we control our gardens?

For more information, try these websites;

www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/nomowmay/

<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/244691/no-mow-may/>

<https://www.gardensillustrated.com/features/lawn-mowing-when-flowers-may>

Elaine Brittan March 2024

6. Save our Swifts



Swift boxes in the Wychwoods – 3 plus 10 and still counting?

On behalf of members of Sustainable Wychwoods Action Group (SWAG) and following the article by Brian Watson in the first BMAG Newsletter, Sophie Banks writes

“SWAG members have now found 10 sites in the Wychwoods villages for installing nesting boxes for swifts. These boxes have been sourced and are being installed in the coming weeks before the swifts return from their winter migration. They will, hopefully, be very grateful to find new, purpose-built homes and, over the years, will breed successfully as a result. This will help a little to slow their very rapid decline in numbers due to demolition of old buildings; replacement buildings lacking suitable provision; and the widespread use of insecticides and other farming practices that limit food sources for the insects that swifts eat.

If you don't understand why swifts catch people's imagination, read this by local resident, Paul Wren;

“Screaming parties of Swifts, the sound of long warm summer evenings as they fly with great agility and speed around our buildings and roof tops. And speed is the right description. They've been recorded at just under 70mph. Impressive. They feed, drink, mate and sleep on the wing and only really land to breed.

Young Swifts can spend two or three years in flight before they think about nesting.

Our Swifts spend the winter in Equatorial and Southern Africa where they can range vast distances.

They return to the UK in late April, early May.

This first wave of birds are mature breeders and are incredibly site faithful and go back to nest sites (if they are still there!) that may be many years old.

They generally lay 2 to 3 eggs; incubation is about 21 days and they fledge after around 42 days depending on food availability and weather.

Young Swifts can go into a state of semi-torpor which helps them survive when the adults are experiencing difficult feeding conditions.

Prospecting Swifts start to arrive from late May onwards.

These are the birds that people wanting to attract Swifts are after as they actively look for sites to breed the following year .

Simple call systems can help hugely in attracting them to new nest sites.

There is a final arrival of year old birds but they don't stay long. They suss out colonies but are not mature enough to enter sites and nest build.

Swift numbers have decreased dramatically and we've lost over half of our population.

There are various reasons for this but certainly one is loss or lack of nest sites.

Fortunately this can be helped by creating new sites.

It can be as simple as putting up a Swift nest box or retro fitting an S Brick .

The Swift is a remarkable bird.

A bird worth helping?

I certainly think so."

Paul Wren, Swift Conservation Volunteer, April 2024

Sophie Banks, April 2024

More information from <https://www.swift-conservation.org/>

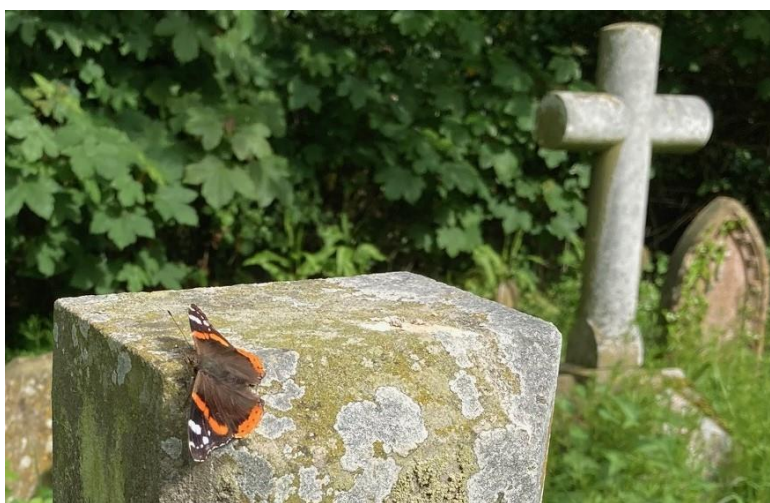
And, also of relevance, please see these articles; No Mow May, Butterfly Count, and Visit to FarmED.

7. Fiona Bates writes about her experience of counting butterflies

“2022 – our first count of butterflies

Reading the Church News in 2022, I saw a couple of sentences asking for volunteers to count the butterflies in the churchyards of the Wychwoods. This had not been done before so there was no baseline data and the Wychwood Forest Trust was trying to get something going.

Butterflies are amongst the most threatened wildlife species in the UK. According to Butterfly Conservation, 80 % of our butterflies and moths have been lost since the 1970s. These insects are very important – see note at the end.



Red Admiral

What we did

I felt that this was something I could do so I signed myself and my children up to count butterflies in St Simon and St Jude's churchyard. We were given some helpful advice e.g. if you wouldn't take your cup of tea outside to drink it, then you are not going to see any butterflies. Butterflies like it to be above 14 degrees and sunny. We were asked to go out once a month for half hour between the months of May to August and, like the Big Garden Bird Watch, count the most amount of butterflies seen at one time, rather than counting the same butterfly lots of times.

We were also given a colour identification guide for butterflies in the Wychwood Forest and a month by month guide of what it is possible to see. An amazing aide for someone like me who, since childhood, has been able to name peacock, red admiral, cabbage white, brimstone... but can be foxed by a broader selection!

We were also asked to say what habitat the butterfly was seen in (as described below). Most of the butterflies were seen around the trees and hedge behind the church. With it being quite a large churchyard it can be difficult to decide where to sit and whether to walk around. I took my children so we could divide and conquer!



Orange Tip

We counted again in 2023

We went on to record results in 2023, this time coordinated by Butterfly Conservation.

Our 2023 results...

14 th May	25 th June	21 st July	30 th August
Large White 1 A Orange Tip 1 C Holly Blue 1 A Red Admiral 1 A Speckled Wood 2 A	Small White 1 D Holly Blue 1 A Peacock 1 A Ringlet 2 A	Large White 2 C Red Admiral 2 D Gatekeeper 2 D	Large White 1 A Red Admiral 1 A Ringlet 2 A

A = Old hedge or bushes

B = Regular close mown area

C = Area not mown

D = Mown once or twice.

From these results, it can be seen that butterflies do not favour closely mown areas, much preferring old hedges and bushes, and areas mown only once or twice. This supports the argument for No Mow May – see the article in this Newsletter.

For me, as a summer activity it ticks all the boxes for a bit of mindfulness - being present in the moment, in fresh air and not worrying about all the other things that have to be done. I can highly recommend it. I'm still not a butterfly expert, but I have definitely enjoyed it."

Fiona Bates, March, 2024



Holly Blue

A note on why butterflies and moths are important

Butterflies and moths have, of course, their own intrinsic and also aesthetic value. People like seeing them; they are often beautiful and seen as the essence of nature. They are important elements in the food chain for birds, bats and other insectivorous animals. And, being a part of pollination and pest control, they are good indicators of a healthy environment and healthy ecosystems.

Many thousands of people garden for wildlife, and especially for butterflies and moths – could you do more in your tubs or gardens? The following flowers are especially attractive to butterflies; buddleia, marjoram, thymes, lavender, bugle, hawkweeds, and buttercups.



Ringlet

Will you take part in counting butterflies in 2024?

It's such a worthwhile activity and so relaxing and delightful; please join in the count!

There are several ways of being involved;

- a. **any time** you see a butterfly (or day-flying moth) you can record it on the **iRecord app** which uses the GPS on your phone to record where you have seen it and the time when you do the recording. It takes only seconds. A paper recording system is available if you are put off by an app – contact Chris Woodrow for details on lepidoptera45@btinternet.com.
- b. as Fiona did, at **any churchyard** - please contact Chris Woodrow at churchyard-coordinator@upperthames-butterflies.org.uk.
You will visit for 30 minutes **once a month in May, June, July and August**.
A useful guide is available from Chris Woodrow to help you to identify the butterflies and complete the form. Take the children with you – we need them to help protect our wildlife in future
- c. join the **Big Butterly Count (BBC)** between **July 12th and Sunday August 4th, 2024**. An app will be available nearer the time to download to your mobile phone or tablet from butterfly-conservation.org

For more information on butterflies and news of activities at branch level in the Upper Thames Region (which includes Oxfordshire) go to www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk.

Elaine Brittan, April 2024

8. Plans for nature friendly farming in 2024

Matty Izod, Director of the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster writes;

“A long, wet and tough winter on farm feels like it is finally coming to an end, plans for our spring crops have changed weekly over the last few months. Soil, wildlife and crops have struggled through after autumn, with some unfortunately not surviving in water logged fields. The government and DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) have been giving farmers and land managers plenty of information about the Environmental Land Management Scheme, ELMS for short, over the last 12 months; the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) is just one part of this broader farming scheme.

On Priory Farm, we have looked at the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme to replace our normal spring crops and those autumn crops of wheat which we have lost to the weather. Instead of growing crops that will be combined and sent off farm to various mills and beer factories, the government launched the SFI scheme so farmers could be rewarded for creating different habitats and pollen rich crops. DEFRA have been keen to encourage farms to look at the farmed landscape and how it can help increase biodiversity and offerings to wildlife. On our farm, we are replacing many of our crops this year with legume rich plants that will offer flowers for pollinators and insects, and increase soil health by means of the plants themselves increasing the nutrients in the soil naturally, rather than using man made fertiliser.



Planning of some waterway works for the reed bed that we will dig this summer ready for winter

Another option we are introducing on our meadows by the river which have become unviable to farm due to the continuous flooding we have seen in the past few years - this spring we will plant a herb rich sward, full of different grasses, herbs and legume plants. The mix will include more than 17 different species, increasing the resilience of the soils on the flood plain, reducing soil erosion, and nutrient leaching. The 2 river meadows are currently being looked at for a longer term option of introducing a more wetland habitat and working to allow the river to move within the field more often than just the extreme weather events. Lots of work is going on within the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster helping farmers improve water quality, flooding issues and biodiversity within the river catchment.

In the last newsletter, the Cluster's Farmland Birds efforts were explained. This last year farmland birds have also suffered in this wet weather; for this coming year we have committed to growing 50 acres, the equivalent of 25 football pitches, of a mixed crop for farmland birds to scavenge in over winter. The months of January through to May are what is known as the 'hunger gap'; to help with this we will be spreading 10 tonnes of bird feed which is milled on our farm for the Farmer Cluster with grains from around the Cotswolds.

Work continues on farm now spring is upon us. I will share the results of our planting in the next update."



Hebridean cross Shropshire lamb less than one hour into life