



### Welcome to your Farm Cluster Newsletter

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

#### Waxcap surveys - is there *mushroom* for them?

*Species-rich 'unimproved' grassland alive with wild flowers and insects is nationally a very rare habitat and 97% has been lost. 'Waxcap' fungi are rare treasures that can indicate the presence of these special grasslands.*

*The richest grasslands have been managed traditionally for decades without 'improvement'. If damaged e.g. by ploughing or fertilising, they're very hard to restore. We're lucky to still have a relatively high number of these in the High Weald, some of which are owned by Farm Cluster members. In October, we undertook a waxcap survey to find out more about them.*



**What are waxcaps?** Waxcaps are a group of waxy-looking, often brightly-coloured, fungi. They tend to be found in old, unfertilised, grazed fields and hay meadows; old lawns and grassy churchyards. As with many soil fungi, they can be very beneficial to the plants they grow with by helping them absorb otherwise inaccessible nutrients.

**So far:** We surveyed 8 farms for waxcaps, in and around the Farm Cluster with Natural England, as well as several churchyards. The dry weather and length of ungrazed sward meant finding them was hard at times. However national fungi expert, Andy McLay, was very impressed with the range of waxcaps discovered here, including the rare ballerina waxcap (see above photo).

**Currently:** Soil samples from each site are undergoing DNA analysis. The mycelium is the part of a fungus that exists underground in a network of fine threads. Along with the above-ground survey, analysis of soil mycelia is a new technique which will help us assess the species-richness of the grasslands. Members who have had surveys will receive reports with waxcap species lists, and information about managing their land to benefit these rarities.

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**How to get involved:** If you see waxcaps, please let us know - pictures would be great! Download the waxcap information sheet [here](#).  
Information on managing species-rich grassland: [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org)  
Grants are available to help with managing and restoring these grasslands.

## Member news

Welcome to new member Sam Newington of Burgham Farm, a beef farm near Etchingham.

## Events

**Date for the diary:** 31 January 2019, Annual Farm Cluster Get-Together (location & guest speaker tbc). Meet other members and find out what our Cluster and others in the South East region are doing.

**Deer management:** The first Neighbourhood Deer Liaison Group is underway, centred around Stonegate. Two more groups are potentially starting before the end of the year - one near Dallington, one near Mayfield.

### National events:

- The two **Farm Cluster Conferences** were attended by many Farm Cluster members from around the country this autumn. [www.farmerclusters.com](http://www.farmerclusters.com) was launched by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.
- **Oxford Real Farming Conference**, 3-4 January 2019, [www.agricology.co.uk](http://www.agricology.co.uk)
- **Oxford Farming Conference**, 2-4 January 2019, [www.ofc.org.uk](http://www.ofc.org.uk)

## I-Spy this month

**The fieldfare (right):** A large thrush which visits when the weather gets colder in Scandinavia. 'Fieldfare' means 'traveller over the field'. Watch out for flocks along hedges and in open farmland and orchards as they feed on insects, wild berries and windfalls. These birds benefit from hedge cutting on alternate sides each year, and areas of rough grass that will harbour insects over winter.



It's said that fieldfares sound like witches flying overhead because of their cackling, chuckling call as they roost at dusk! Have a listen here: [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)

## 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 42 members covering over 3,500ha. [View map](#)

The Cluster is helped by the High Weald AONB Partnership with financial support from the Natural England's Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund, the Environment Agency (Giant Hogweed control), and the Woodland Trust (deer management). For more information visit our website: [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org)