



## 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](#).

### Return of the Barn Owl

*Have you been lucky enough to see a ghostly barn owl silently floating along a hedgerow or 'quartering' a field in search of prey? After huge losses, these beautiful farmland favourites seem to be making a welcome comeback.*

**The story so far:** The barn owl became one of our rarest breeding birds during a massive decline between the 30's and the 90's. This was likely due to increasing pesticide use and harsh winters affecting prey supply and hunting ability.



Barn owls feed mainly on voles, mice, shrews and small rats. Intensification of farming has reduced habitat for these mammals. They prefer tussocky grassland, undisturbed field edges, hedgerows, ditches, banks and woodland edges – so these are the best barn owl hunting grounds.

Barn owls have shown signs of recovery since a national conservation plan was actioned. Thousands of nest boxes were installed from the mid-90s, with many around the Upper Rother & Dudwell Farm Cluster area - and a few are still here! Farmers, including some Cluster members, also created areas of owl hunting habitat.

**Where to see them:** Flying low over rough grassland, lightly-grazed pastures and hedges at dusk and dawn. Rough grass riverbanks and strips alongside woods are often prime hunting areas. If a barn owl is hunting nearby, try making a squeaking noise by kissing the back of your hand, it may fly over to see what the noise is. If you see owls, you can share your sightings on [iRecord](#) to help wildlife research.

**What you can do to help them:** Barn owls face challenges to survival, including weather conditions, habitat loss, rodenticide and traffic. They still need our help. **PTO**

### 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](http://www.highweald.org)

### Contacts:

Ross Wingfield:

[ross.wingfield@highweald.org](mailto:ross.wingfield@highweald.org)

01424 725604

Christine Meadows:

[christine.meadows@highweald.org](mailto:christine.meadows@highweald.org)

01424 723009

## Return of the Barn Owl - continued...

- Erect a well-designed, well-positioned barn owl nest box, not too close to a road, see: [www.gardenature.co.uk](http://www.gardenature.co.uk)
- Switch to safer rodent control, see the Barn Owl Trust's [recommendations](#).
- Create owl hunting grounds - leave strips or patches of rough, tussocky grassland at least 4m wide, with a litter layer of dead grass, at least 7cm deep.
- Work with neighbours on managing land for barn owl hunting - in mixed farm landscapes, they need up to 26 hectares of rough grass within 2km of a suitable nest site. That's about 43km of rough grass field margin.

If you don't have a barn owl nest box on your land and would like one, please get in touch, as we may be able to supply one at reduced cost or for free.

For more on managing your land for barn owls, see: [www.barnowltrust.org.uk](http://www.barnowltrust.org.uk)

### Member news

Welcome to new members Neil & Lorraine of Bungehurst Farm & Alex of Moat Farm.

**Farm Cluster Summer BBQ bash, 24 July:** Ross would like as many members as possible to get together for our Farm Cluster BBQ social. It'd be fantastic for everyone to meet each other at the beautiful, historic Froghole Farm. We'll discuss what barn owls need to thrive here - we may even see one. *Booking details below...*

### Free Farm Cluster events

- **10 July, 6.30-8.30pm: Historic Farmsteads and Wealden Settlement**, The Bell at Ticehurst. An exploration of the history, archaeology, architecture and development of the Weald's historic farmsteads. Book on [Eventbrite](#)
- **16 July, 2-5pm: Green-haying your meadows**, Willingford Farm, Burwash Common. Walk and practical chat with Keith Datchler on using green hay to restore species-rich meadows. Limited spaces, email Ross if you're interested.
- **24 July, 6-8pm: Farm Cluster Summer BBQ**, Froghole Farm, Mayfield. A great opportunity to meet up with other Farm Cluster members and eat and drink some local produce on a lovely High Weald farm. Book on [Eventbrite](#).

To book for the above events, follow the Eventbrite link where available, or contact Sam on 01424 723011, or [samantha.nicholas@highweald.org](mailto:samantha.nicholas@highweald.org)

### Other events

- **18/19 July, 9.30am-3.30pm: Practical Scything for Managing Wildflower Meadows**, Wadhurst Park. £5 donation. To book, see Wadhurst Park [website](#).

### I-Spy this month

**Shrews:** You're more likely to hear a shrew defending its territory with high-pitched squeaks than to see one. With tiny eyes, small ears and long, pointed snout, they snuffle through leaf litter or long vegetation on a constant search for prey - insects, spiders, woodlice and worms. If they don't eat every few hours, they die.



The common shrew is some 6cm long and the tinier pygmy shrew is one of Britain's smallest mammals. The larger, less common water shrew is semi-aquatic and sensitive to pollutants and pesticides in water.

Common shrews live in thick, tussocky grass, woodland and hedgerows. A litter layer in the grass provides cover for them to make tunnels and nests, as well as for field voles and wood mice - which together make up the majority of barn owls' prey.