



Game & Wildlife  
CONSERVATION TRUST

# Farmer Clusters

## *How they work and how to form one*

### Background

Farmers do a lot for Britain's rural environment, but there is only so much that an individual, acting in isolation, can do on his or her own farm. The Farmer Cluster concept, developed by the GWCT in association with Natural England, is a plan to help a number of farmers work more cohesively together in their locality, enabling them to collectively deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife at a landscape scale.

A Farmer Cluster is designed to start life at a bottom-up, farmer level, under the guidance of a lead farmer. They devise their own conservation plans, helped by their own chosen conservation advisors, whom they already know and trust. Although the work is often supplemented by existing agri-environment schemes, several Clusters have set up with no funding.

The GWCT had seen success in involving farmers nationwide in conservation through the Partridge Count Scheme and by helping to start up the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area (NIA), the only farmer-led NIA in the country, so were aware of the potential of bringing farmers together to deliver conservation on a landscape scale.

### How Farmer Clusters work

The GWCT approaches any prospective Farmer Cluster project with a single open question: "What wildlife do you want on your farm?" This is the first step in generating a farmer-led and outcome-oriented approach, in which farmers appoint a lead farmer, choose their own advisor, set their own targets, and record their own progress.

This approach has driven the popularity of the programme with farmers, and as a result the five Clusters established across southern England as part of the pilot scheme (2013-15) have grown to 100, aided by Natural England's Facilitation Fund.

Farmer Clusters form the bedrock of major GWCT research projects including Waders For Real, where local farmers responded voluntarily to GWCT concerns about the conservation status of breeding waders, forming the Avon Valley Breeding Wader Project and securing EU LIFE+ funding. There are also Farmer Clusters centred on our demonstration farms at Loddington, Leicestershire, and the Howe of Cromar, Aberdeenshire, the latter being the first of its kind in Scotland.

Our team of experienced advisors can provide advice on setting up Clusters and can offer training courses for facilitators and farmers. For further details, please contact Lynda Ferguson on 01425 651013 or [lferguson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:lferguson@gwct.org.uk).

## Forming a Farmer Cluster

The establishment of a new Farmer Cluster begins with the identification of a lead farmer – a good farmer, respected in the community and prepared to lead, with strong green credentials. Farmer Clusters are designed to be farmer-led from the ground up, so the right choice of lead farmer is important.

The first job of the lead farmer is to invite prospective members to an informal meeting, where they can discuss the area they manage – whether that's centred on a geographical feature such as a river or valley, or simply some friends who farm a contiguous area of land – and what they hope to achieve. At this point the nascent cluster is entirely farmer-led, with no involvement from Natural England or other authorities.

An important early step in the process is to map out the proposed Cluster as is. Does it encompass any SSSIs? Does your county's Biodiversity Information Centre carry records of any Section 41 priority species in the area? If any of the farms have taken part in our projects like the Partridge Count Scheme, the GWCT's GIS department may have useful map data too.

Collecting this information creates an important historical record and will allow farmers to see and quantify the effect of their future hard work on the local environment – surely the point of the whole endeavour!

Once the members have agreed on what areas to target, the final step is to choose a facilitator – a local professional conservationist who can advise on improvements; offer training in monitoring techniques, law and other practicalities; liaise with Natural England; bring in experts for assistance and training; and otherwise support the project. There is funding available for this through Natural England's facilitation fund, which has already provided financial support to 19 Clusters, with many more set to apply this year.

If you have any questions or require support for your proposed or existing Cluster, please contact GWCT Biodiversity Officer and Advisor Peter Thompson on [pthompson@gwct.org.uk](mailto:pthompson@gwct.org.uk).

A harvest mouse on hand



## Case Study: The Selborne Landscape Partnership

The Selborne Landscape Partnership was founded in November 2014 by local farmer William Wolmer and now involves 11 farmers who manage a total of 4,000 hectares around the village of Selborne, Hampshire. The farmers have a wide range of plans going forward, which include linking important habitats together across the landscape and also targeting their efforts at specific species such as barn owl; two particular rare butterfly species, the Duke of Burgundy and brown hairstreak; and, perhaps most notably considering the area, the harvest mouse.

The 18th Century naturalist Gilbert White lived in Selborne for much of his life and wrote about the area in his famous 1789 book, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. It was White who, in 1767, first identified the harvest mouse as a separate species. Because of this strong local interest, the farmers were keen to select the harvest mouse as a target species.

The Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre had only one record of a harvest mouse, within a 5 km radius of Selborne since 1990, leading to fears that the species was locally extinct. However, after gathering a group of volunteers together, including many of the farmers themselves, and a short briefing from GWCT advisor Peter Thompson, 54 harvest mouse nests were found on two farms, with every volunteer locating a nest! Later surveys across 28 separate 1 km<sup>2</sup> sampling sites found 472 nests, showing that, far from being extinct in the area, harvest mice seem to still be relatively commonplace in the Selborne area. Analysis of the data collected on each of these nests will allow the farmers to work together to improve the habitat further, ensuring that these small mammals continue to thrive into the future.

Importantly, the farmers have brought in some key local knowledge to help them achieve their goals, with representatives from the South Downs National Park, National Trust and Butterfly Conservation. The group is now putting together an application to Natural England's Facilitation fund, so that they can employ local conservation advisor Debbie Miller to co-ordinate their efforts.

The success of the Selborne cluster led to a visit by the Environment Secretary Elizabeth Truss, who recognised how the approach has both engaged farmers and delivered greater environmental benefits than would be possible when working individually.