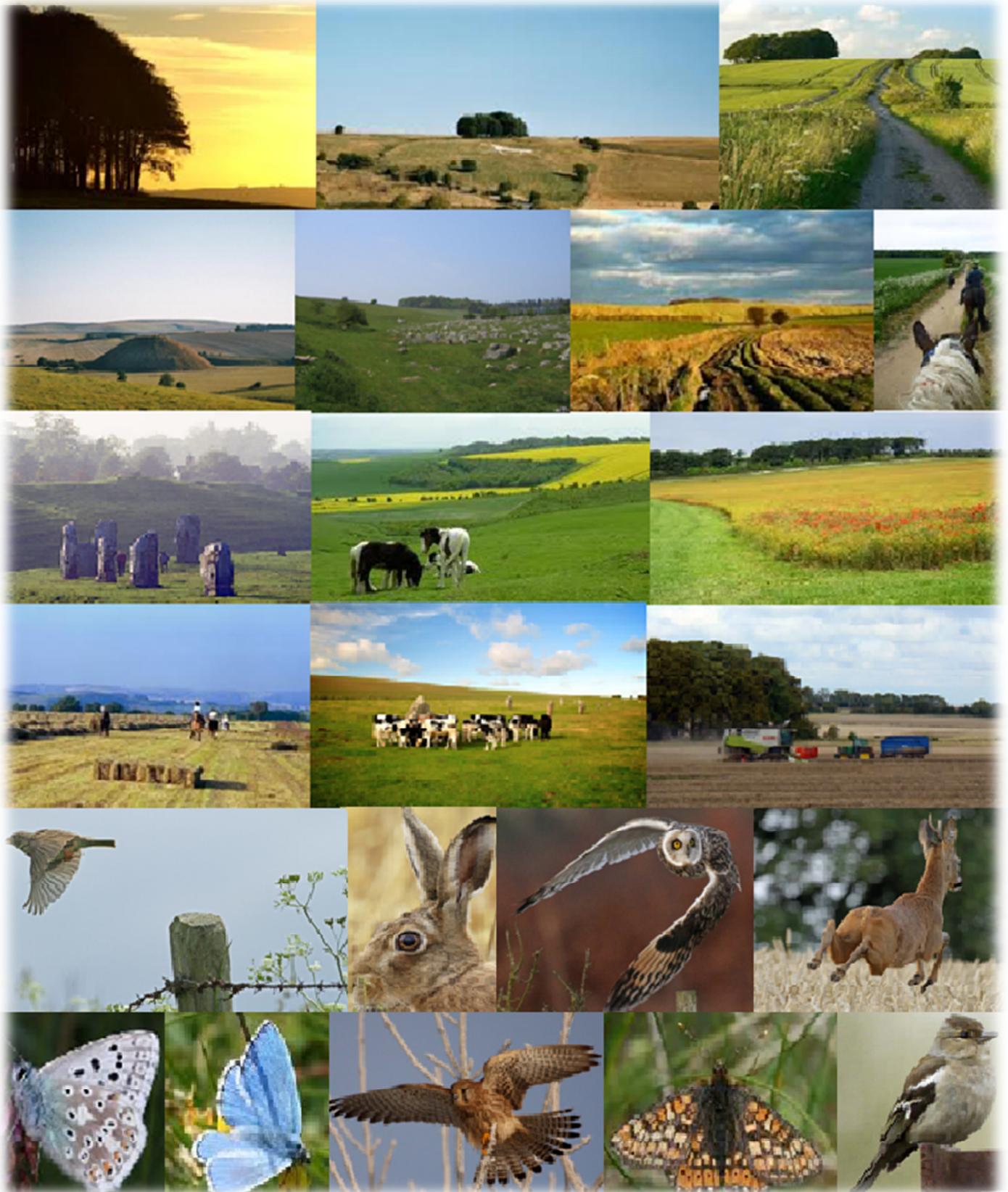


# Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area

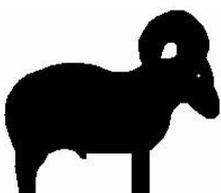


**Summary of achievements to date**

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# **Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area**

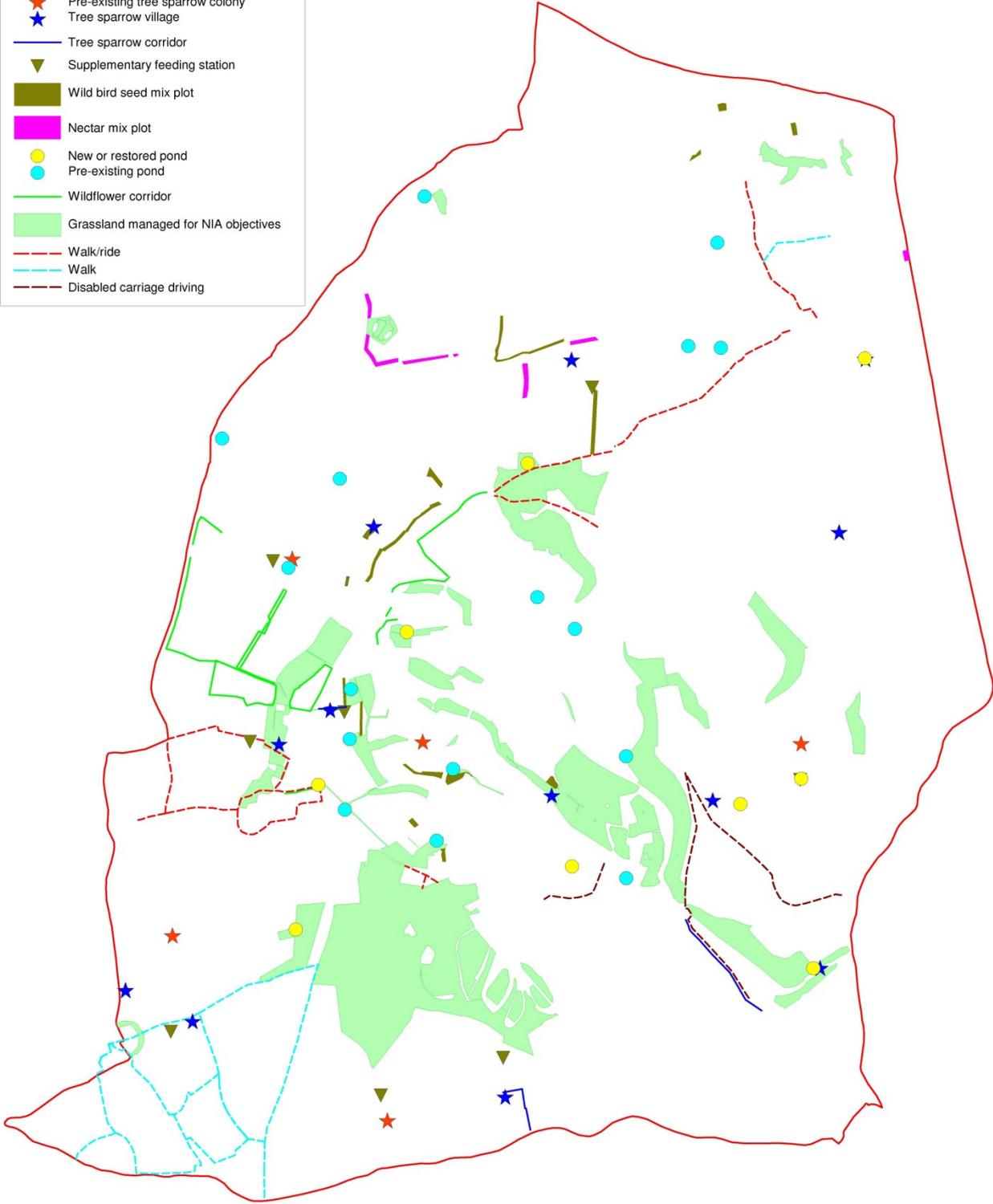
## **Summary of achievements April 2012 to March 2014**

### **Contents:**

INTRODUCTION	1
OBJECTIVE 1 – To enable appropriate management of wildlife sites	2
OBJECTIVE 2 – To consolidate the chalk grassland resource	5
OBJECTIVE 3 – To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance	7
OBJECTIVE 4 – To deliver best practice in wildlife management	11
OBJECTIVE 5 – To get the non-farming community involved with activities in and about the Marlborough Downs	12
OBJECTIVE 6 – To provide better public access	14

**Key to map**

-  MDNIA boundary
-  Pre-existing tree sparrow colony
-  Tree sparrow village
-  Tree sparrow corridor
-  Supplementary feeding station
-  Wild bird seed mix plot
-  Nectar mix plot
-  New or restored pond
-  Pre-existing pond
-  Wildflower corridor
-  Grassland managed for NIA objectives
-  Walk/ride
-  Walk
-  Disabled carriage driving



**Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area  
Farming for Tomorrow**



# **MARLBOROUGH DOWNS**

## **NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREA**

### **2012-14 SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

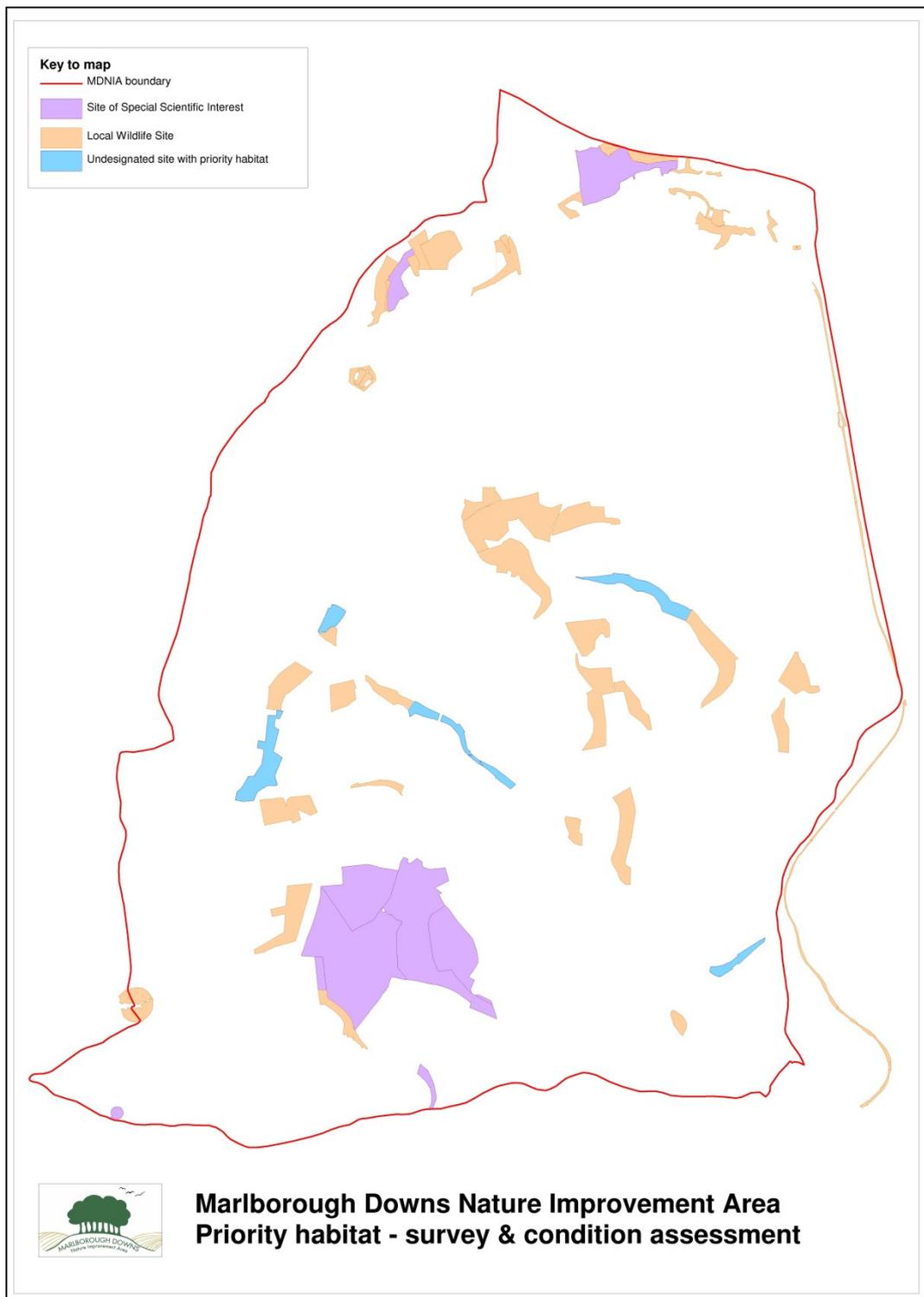
Since the project's launch on 1 April 2012 we, the farmers of the Marlborough Downs, our supporters and partners, have literally created something from nothing. We have formed a brand new organisation and charity whose members are the farmers. We have forged a new and ever-strengthening partnership between the farmers, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Local Authority, Wiltshire Council. And we've built from scratch, from the bottom up, a completely new project that has already begun to deliver significant benefits to wildlife and people in and around the Marlborough Downs NIA.

There follows a very brief summary of the activities we've undertaken in the first two years of the project and how these have contributed to the delivery of our objectives. We are very proud of these achievements and of the relationships we continue to develop with the growing list of individuals and groups who have become involved and supported us, either actively or simply by cheering us on.

Every single one of the achievements listed in this document is something that wouldn't have happened if this project hadn't existed. Although some work is being delivered via the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, we are claiming credit for only that which we believe is over and above what would have been included in ESS agreements anyway.

## OBJECTIVE 1 – To enable appropriate management of wildlife sites

At the beginning of the project there were 28 terrestrial Wildlife Sites (which are non-designated sites of local importance) in the Marlborough Downs NIA plus one which is a reservoir. Of the terrestrial sites, five are woodland and the rest are sites supporting grassland priority habitat. In 2013 Wiltshire Wildlife Trust purchased two sites which have since been added to the Wildlife Sites register, bringing the Marlborough Downs total to 31.



### 1.1 *Survey and assess existing Wildlife Sites*

In the first two years the project has:

- Awarded a contract to Wiltshire & Swindon Wildlife Sites Project to survey and assess existing and potential Wildlife Sites to provide information on:
  - Site boundary, extent of priority habitat, species list and DAFOR abundance.
  - Condition assessment for each priority habitat.
  - Impact of adjacent land use, including threats and potential for expansion.
  - Current management and its effectiveness.
- Completed site surveys as above on all 31 Wildlife Sites and produced reports for owners/managers.
- Produced digital maps to show site boundaries and extent of priority habitat.
- Submitted 3142 Wildlife Sites species records to the Biological Records Centre.
- Identified six new Wildlife Sites (see objective 2).

### 1.2 *Agree appropriate management with landowners/managers, offering support to enable this.*

The first year of the project focused on gathering baseline data with implementation of active management beginning in Year 2. To date the project has:

- Identified those sites assessed as being in unfavourable condition.
- Filtered out unfavourable sites where resources to address condition should already be available, i.e. those sites that are
  - Owned/managed by an organisation (Wildlife Trust, Local Authority) with a responsibility to undertake positive action.
  - Managed under an appropriate Higher Level Stewardship option.
- Contracted local consultants to work with owners/managers of seventeen Wildlife Sites<sup>1</sup> in unfavourable condition to prepare Site Management Statements that include information on:
  - Nature conservation importance, objectives and ideal management
  - Owner/occupier objectives
  - Agreed objectives and management – 3 year plan
  - Action needed to facilitate agreed management.
- Worked with owners/managers of six Wildlife Sites to address unfavourable condition and enable more appropriate grazing management by:
  - Weed wiping to control ragwort (1 site)
  - Renewing/repairing fencing (5 sites)
  - Installing water troughs (2 sites)
  - Clearing scrub from chalk grassland (3 sites)
- Worked with three landowners on HLS applications (now agreements) including proposals to deliver long term management on seven Wildlife Sites.

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<sup>1</sup> Eleven pre-existing and six newly designated sites



*Scrub removal on chalk grassland on Cow Hill Bank Wildlife Site*

### *1.3 Identify opportunities to link and buffer Wildlife Sites*

By working with two landowners the project has agreed a corridor of semi-natural habitat (wildflower corridors, rough grassland, grass/scrub mosaic) linking Fyfield Down SSSI with Barbury Castle Wildlife Site, a distance of some 4.5 km as the crow flies. Long term retention and appropriate management of this corridor has been secured through HLS agreements.

## **OBJECTIVE 2 – To consolidate the chalk grassland resource**

Aerial photographs show that many of the known chalk sites within the NIA are linked by almost continuous grassland. Although nothing can be assumed about the quality of this grassland in terms of diversity, there appears to be an opportunity to consolidate known Wildlife Sites by the strategic creation and/or restoration of species-rich sites and corridors.

### *2.1 Compile an inventory of the chalk grassland resource in the NIA by survey and assessment of non-designated sites.*

In order to better understand the distribution and quality of the grassland resource In the NIA the project has

- Delivered a workshop to train farmers and volunteers to prepare simple habitat maps.



*Habitat mapping workshop*

- Used habitat maps provided by farmers and landowners as well as Environmental Stewardship FER<sup>2</sup> and FEP<sup>3</sup> maps, data provided by Wiltshire & Swindon Biological Records Centre, and Land Cover maps to prepare a digital habitat map of the NIA.
- Shared these maps with a University of Southampton Masters student who has written a dissertation entitled "Evaluation of the Nature Improvement Area methods in the design of conservation actions and the corresponding associated ecosystem services values."
- Undertaken scoping surveys of twenty-six sites in the NIA known to support grassland of uncertain quality and mapped areas of priority habitat on these sites. These surveys have been done by an experienced botanical surveyor (Chair of Wiltshire Botanical Society and County Recorder) who is working with the project as a volunteer.

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<sup>2</sup> Farm Environment Record – required as part of Entry Level Stewardship applications

<sup>3</sup> Farm Environment Plan – required as part of Higher Level Stewardship applications

- Completed detailed surveys and condition assessments<sup>4</sup> of nine sites, six of which have now been added to the Wildlife Sites register.
- Submitted 5159 grassland species records to the Biological Records Centre.

## 2.2 *Create corridors and stepping stones of semi-natural habitat.*

We want to link grassland sites across the NIA to one another and to other habitats such as ponds and woodland. Even sites where priority habitat doesn't exist may be valuable for wildlife. Many provide foraging habitat for birds such as lapwing, owls, and raptors for example, and thus even species-poor areas are valuable elements of the grassland resource. Our surveys have shown that there is a very limited amount of chalk grassland in the NIA so we have worked with landowners to:

- Create 22.51 ha of new grassland<sup>5</sup> on arable land using specially harvested seed from a species-rich site (RSPB reserve).
- Restore 18.61 ha species-poor grassland by sowing<sup>6</sup> a species-rich wildflower mix into the existing sward.
- Create 2.92 ha of wildflower corridor linking Wildlife Sites, ponds, woodland and other semi-natural habitat.
- Secure Higher Level Stewardship Agreements on over 35 ha of existing species-rich chalk grassland.



*Common spotted orchids in chalk grassland alongside a track across the Marlborough Downs*

<sup>4</sup> Methodology as per Objective 1 Wildlife Sites

<sup>5</sup> To be sown spring and autumn 2014 as rain stopped play in autumn 2013; seed purchased

<sup>6</sup> 12 ha sown autumn 2013, remainder to be sown autumn 2014; seed purchased

### OBJECTIVE 3 – To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance

To provide food and habitat for target species/groups of species on the downs by way of:

3.1 Planted wildlife crops

3.2 Ponds

3.3 Feeding stations

3.4 Corridors of semi-natural grassland/scrub

In the first two years the project has:

- Provided seed to enable farmers to establish 11 ha wild bird seed plots to support tree sparrows and other farmland birds.
- Secured an additional 8.7 ha of wild bird seed plots via a new HLS agreement<sup>7</sup>.
- Provided seed to enable three farmers to plant 5.5 ha nectar mix plots.
- Compiled an NIA-wide inventory of 2012/13 and 2013/14 overwinter stubbles.
- Worked with farmers and Wiltshire Ornithological Society members to scatter grain into hedge bottoms, stubbles, bird seed plots and game covers to feed farmland birds through the hungry gap.
  - 2 tonnes of barley, 3 tonnes of white millet, 0.5 tonnes of rape seed and 2.5 tonnes of grain tailings on five farms in winter 2012/spring 2013.
  - 6 tonnes of barley, 6 tonnes of white millet, 100 kg rapeseed and 3 tonnes of mixed grain on eight farms in winter 2013/spring 2014.

*Matt Prior, Wiltshire Ornithological Society volunteer conservation officer via Marlborough Downs NIA facebook page:* You could say that the NIA feeding farmland birds is working. I ringed one of the feeding sites on this fabulous calm and sunny morning and we caught 102 Yellowhammers including this one that is 3 years old. We also caught 58 Chaffinches including two that are 4 years old. We have added 2 more Corn Buntings to our colour ringing project. There were a staggering 600 Yellowhammers at the site and 40 Corn Buntings and we also saw a lovely flock of 500 Golden Plovers.



Left: Male Corn Bunting - the most awesome of farmland birds. Remember the 'jangling keys' call.

Right: 3 year old female Yellowhammer



29 December 2013

<sup>7</sup> This is over and above the 7% arable options requirement that would normally be delivered by HLS

- Built three new dew ponds, one scrape and one spring-fed pond.
- Restored four derelict dew ponds, one of which is a Scheduled Monument.

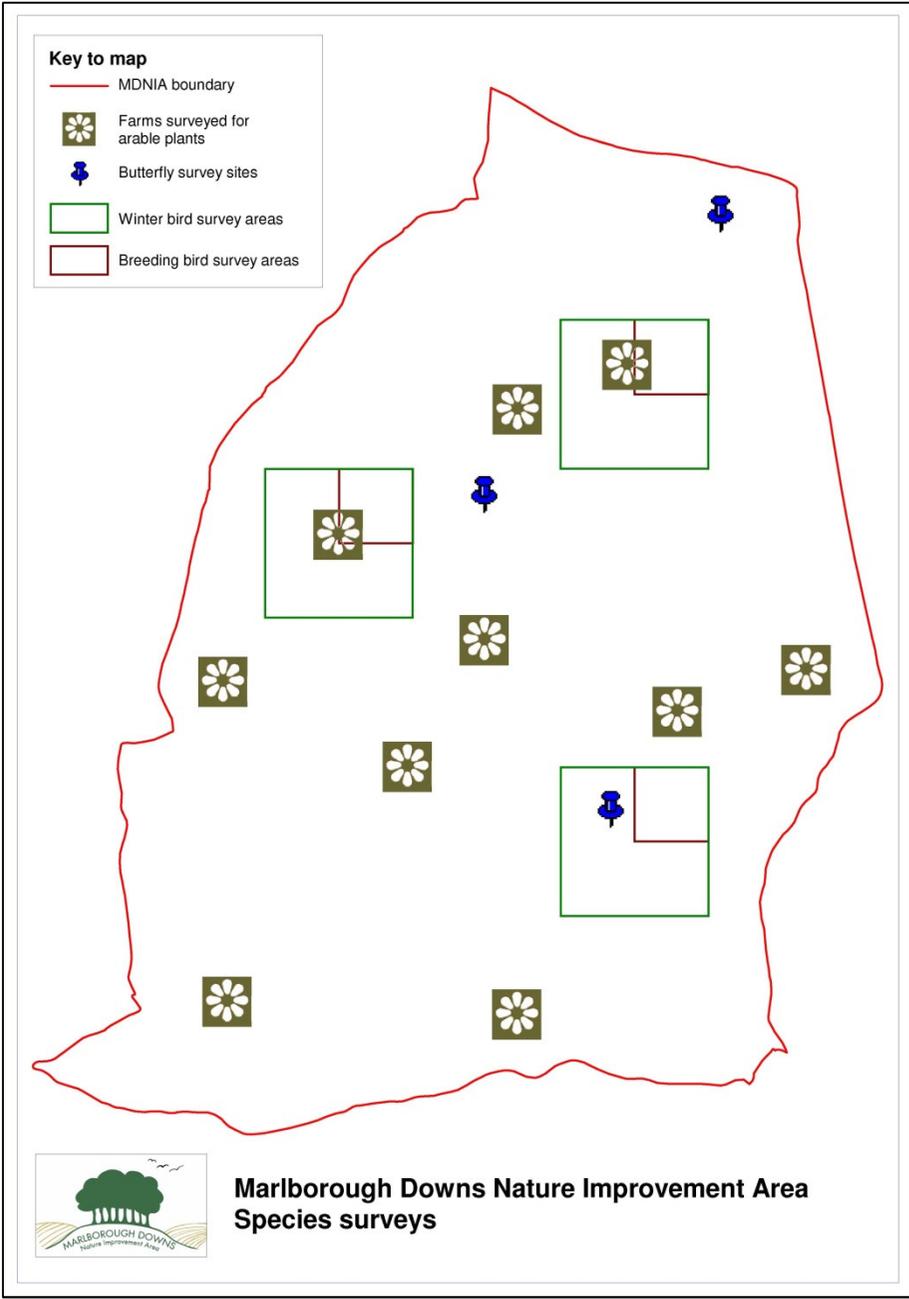
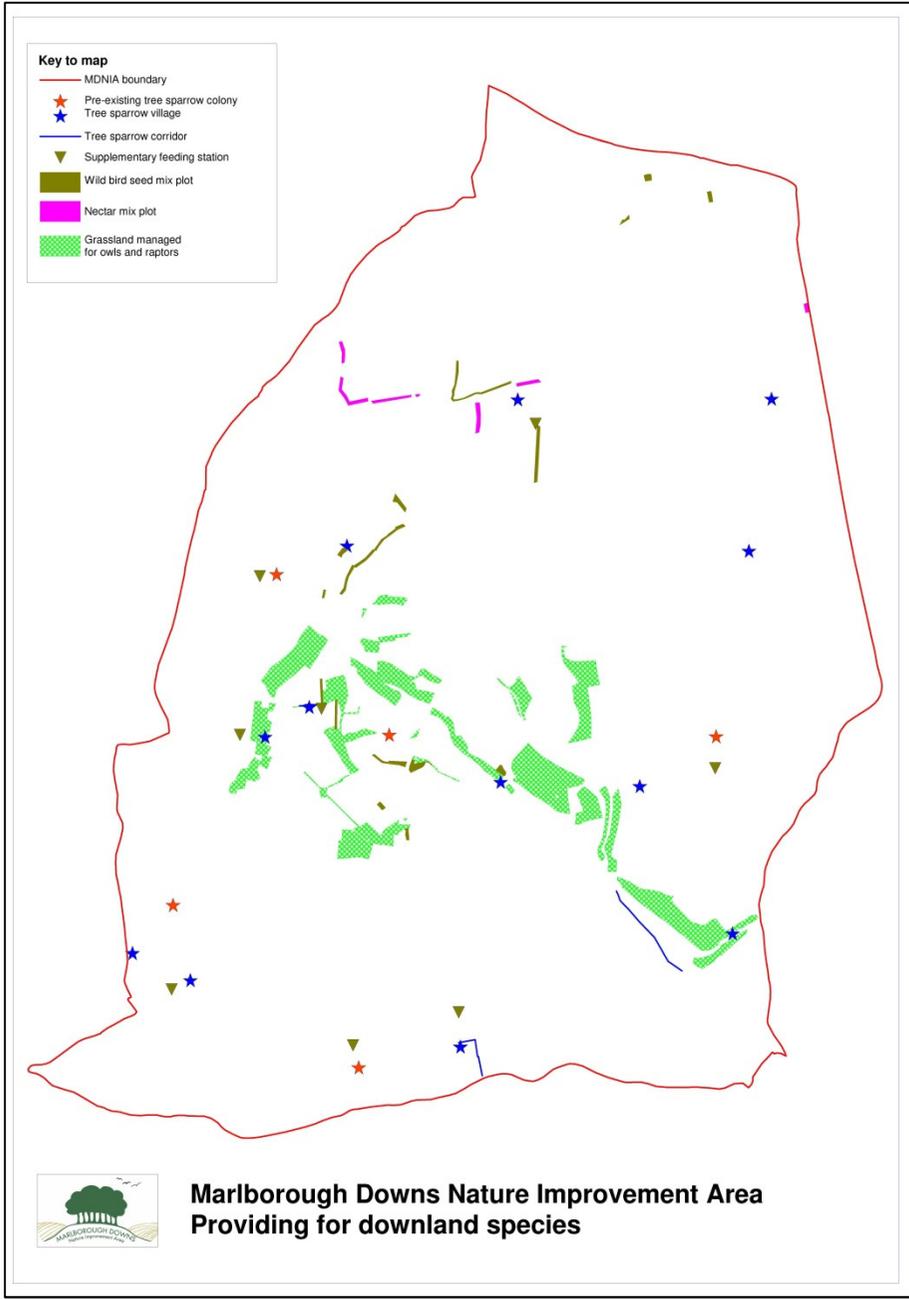


- Planted nine new tree sparrow 'villages', almost 2 km of tree sparrow corridor and put up 170 tree sparrow nestboxes.



*Students from the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester helping Matt Prior (Wiltshire Ornithological Society), Phil Holborow and Kathryn Hutchinson (Temple Farm gamekeepers) to plant a tree sparrow village and 300 m of corridor linking it to nearby downland.*

- Put up 15 new kestrel boxes and two new barn owl boxes.
- Worked with farmers to manage over 300 ha grassland and scrub/grassland mosaic to provide habitat for short-eared and barn owls; raptors such as hen and Montagu's harriers, kestrels and red kites; and other farmland birds.
- Awarded a contract to undertake arable plant surveys of 10 farms and prepare reports including management advice for farmers.
- Delivered a workshop on arable plant management for farmers.
- Awarded a contract to undertake professional farmland bird surveys (using Bird Atlas and Breeding Bird Survey methodologies) on three sites in the NIA. The first year surveys have been completed and data submitted.
- Delivered a workshop on farmland bird recording (July 2012) to encourage farmers and volunteers to record and report the birds they see and hear in the NIA.
- Awarded a contract to the Wiltshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation to undertake UK Butterfly Monitoring Surveys on three sites in the NIA. The first year surveys have been completed and report submitted.
- Delivered a workshop on butterfly recording (September 2012) to encourage farmers and volunteers to record and report the butterflies they see in the NIA.



## OBJECTIVE 4 – To deliver best practice in wildlife management

As well as a contracted project management team, four delivery groups have been established, each comprising a combination of farmers, professionals and volunteers. These groups support the project management team in facilitating delivery of the project's objectives and promote best practice through the expertise and experience of group members.

In 2014 one of the estates in the Marlborough Downs NIA won the prestigious Gold Purdey Award for Shooting and Conservation. Commenting on Temple Farm's success, awards organiser Richard Purdey said: "This is a most impressive entry by any standard .... [and] wins our gold award not only for the leading role it has played .... in this Nature Improvement Area, .... actively encouraging visits from local schools, and the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester, to see at first-hand how this exemplary estate manages its farming, conservation and shoot."

### 4.1 *To ensure that best practice is recognised and promoted.*

In the first two years the project has collaborated with others to deliver six demonstration/training events to share best practice with farmers, volunteers and professionals:

- February 2013 – Birds, bees & wildflowers: how to get the best out of bird mixes, nectar plots and wildflower corridors. Delivered with Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative and Bumblebee Trust, supported by Bright Seeds (supplier of commercial and specially harvested seed).
- March 2013 – Supporting farmland birds: what bird mixes, stubbles and fallow areas should look like; how to supplementary feed farmland birds through the hungry gap; how to record and report the birds on the farm. Delivered with North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative, Black Sheep Countryside Management (local agri-environment consultants), and Wiltshire Ornithological Society.
- June 2013 – Chalk grassland management delivered with Flora Locale.
- September 2013 – Pond creation, restoration and management.
- November 2013 – Joint delivery group meeting to share experience and knowledge between groups.
- January 2014 – Partnership working seminar to capture what has worked well in the delivery of the project and what lessons can be learnt.



### 4.2 *To allow everyone access to the best advice, services and funding to enable high quality wildlife management throughout the NIA.*

The project team continues to collate a directory of recommended contacts, including relevant:

- Farm environment organisations and advisers
- Contractors
- Suppliers
- Local authority staff, including ecologists, archaeologists, education, parish clerks, etc.

## **OBJECTIVE 5 – To get the non-farming community involved with activities in and about the Marlborough Downs**

The buzz that the project has generated has been overwhelming and far beyond anything anyone expected. The interest, both locally and more widely, has been such that the project featured in a major BBC series on British wildlife aired in summer 2013. In addition, the project has actively engaged people in a variety of ways including:

### *5.1 Events*

- Stakeholder events to inform people about the project, its objectives and how it's performing along the way, to encourage engagement and to provide a forum for networking between farmers, volunteers and other professionals:
  - A Launch event to introduce the project (April 2012).
  - A Summer Barbeque to update stakeholders (July 2012).
  - A Seasonal Supper to update stakeholders and highlight current topics: farmland birds and biodiversity offsetting (November 2012).
  - Spring Celebration to showcase Year 1 achievements and reward effort with the MDNIA Wildlife Champion award (April 2013).
  - Our first AGM, combined with the annual Seasonal Supper, with presentations from people involved in the project as volunteers on how the NIA has impacted upon their lives and work (October 2013).
  - Planning a second Spring Celebration (April 2014).
- Open Farm Sunday, hosted by one of our farmer members and organised by the Community & Outreach delivery group, attracted almost 1,000 people, including stall holders, volunteers and members of the public. Plans for the 2014 event are already underway.



- 11 farm walks to showcase the project and demonstrate particular aspects of its delivery including a Dawn Chorus walk, a Walk in the Woods, a Butterfly Walk, a Bat Walk and an Owl Prowl.
- Various groups, including Natural England's Community of Practice, Chairs and CEOs of national conservation and landscape organisations, and others, have visited to learn about how farmers are collaborating with others to deliver project objectives.
- 31 talks on the objectives and delivery of the project have been given to a range of audiences, including Flora Locale, Parish Councils, WI groups, local interest groups, the Oxford Farming Conference and the Isle of Wight Recorders' Conference.
- 14 practical workshops have been delivered on subjects as wide ranging as species identification, tree planting, maintenance of rights of way, installation of access furniture and nestbox making.
- Altogether in the first two years of the project we have delivered over 60 walks, talks and events that have involved almost 2,500 people. The 2014 events calendar is due to be launched at the Spring Celebration in April.

## 5.2 *Multi-media*

- Articles about the project have been published in local parish magazines, *The Wroughton Monthly*, North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative newsletter, Wiltshire Ornithological Society newsletter, Local Nature Partnership website, various newspapers and journals, other publications and websites.
- Printed leaflets give a general introduction to the project and contact details.
- A Marlborough Downs NIA 2013 calendar showcased the beauty of the landscape and its wildlife
- A newsletter is sent out to all farmers, partners and 'friends' of the project three or four times a year (almost 300 people).
- A Marlborough Downs NIA facebook page with 200 followers is regularly updated with photographs and news: [www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA](http://www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA)
- A website and mobile Smartphone application give lots of information about the project: [www.mdnia.org.uk](http://www.mdnia.org.uk)
- As well as the BBC programme mentioned above, the project has been featured on various radio programmes including a two hour broadcast on Open Farm Sunday by BBC Radio Wiltshire and a whole BBC Farming Today programme on farming and conservation.
- The partnership is lucky to have among its members a number of extremely talented amateur photographers and also to have attracted the attention of a professional wildlife film maker and photographer, all of whom give their work freely to promote project objectives.
- Information panels have been installed at various points to inform visitors about the work of the project. In order to minimise the impact on the landscape and to discourage vandalism, some of these are mounted on local sarsen stones.

## 5.3 *Partnership working*

The project has engaged with a wide range of local groups, including:

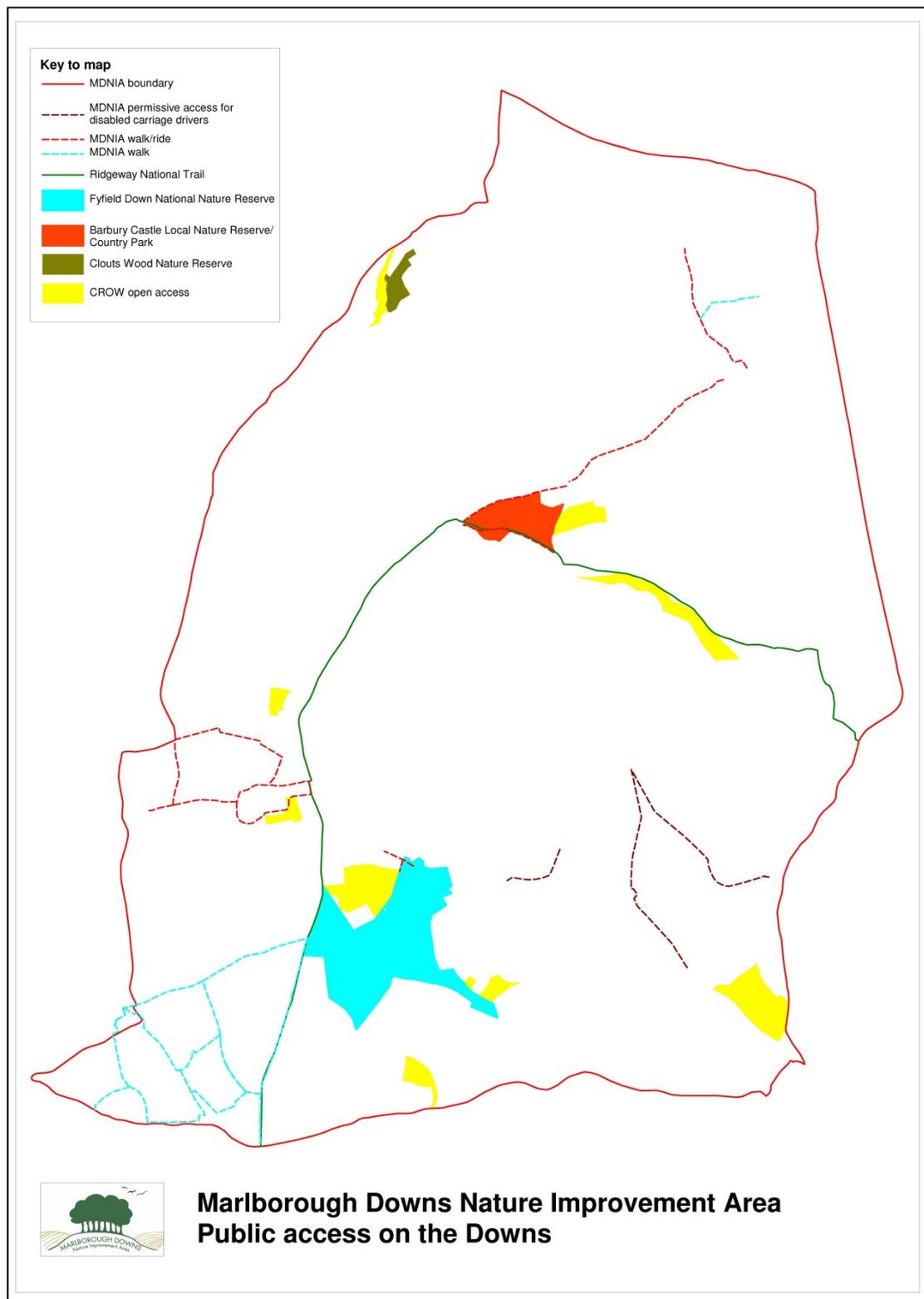
- Action for the River Kennet
- Bumblebee Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation Wiltshire Branch
- Friends of the Railway Path
- Kennet Valley Driving Group (a branch of Riding for the Disabled – see objective 6)
- National Farmers Union
- North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Initiative
- Pond Conservation
- Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester
- St John's Academy, Marlborough
- Swindon College
- University of the Third Age
- Wiltshire & Swindon Biological Records Centre and County Recorders
- Wiltshire Botanical Society
- Wiltshire Ornithological Society
- Wiltshire Wildlife Sites Project
- Wiltshire Wildlife Trust

## OBJECTIVE 6 – To provide better public access

### 6.1 To upgrade PRow routes and furniture

The project is working with local Rights of Way officers to identify a suite of high quality access routes (footpaths, bridleways and cyclepaths) where people can enjoy the Downs to the full and see some of the things the project is doing to support local wildlife. In the first two years the project has:

- Identified routes including 10.7 miles of footpath and 9.1 miles of bridleway across the downland landscape which showcase some of the project's achievements including our first dew pond.



- Audited the routes on foot and on horseback where appropriate.
- Designed and commissioned MDNIA waymarks with which to mark these routes.
- Undertaken a range of improvement works including:
  - Replacing stiles and old bridle gates with new ones.
  - Installing finger posts.
  - Clearing ground and overhead vegetation where access had become difficult because of overhanging trees, dense ground cover, etc.



*Students from Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester, working on access projects in the Marlborough Downs NIA*

*6.2 To promote access for all to the downland landscape.*

One of the farms in the NIA hosts the local carriage driving for the disabled group and the project has been working with them to:

- Approach neighbouring landowners to agree permissive access for the group across private roads and tracks.
- Created new access points between adjacent holdings to allow passage from one to the next without the need to go on busy roads.
- Secured a Landfill Community Fund grant for over £13,000 to undertake improvement works on a 3.5 mile stretch of track which will allow the group year-round access to the Downs.



*6.3 To provide interpretation materials in a variety of media to improve access to the downs with minimal impact on the landscape and wildlife.*

To enable people to appreciate and understand the downland landscape the project has:

- Designed information panels for a dew pond adjacent to the Ridgeway and a nectar plot next to a popular farm shop.
- Designed leaflets showing the MDNIA routes and points of interest for download from the website or via the app.

