Farmers working to keep ‘globally rare’ chalk stream crystal clear

Thursday 12 January, 2023

GWCT Video: Farmer-led conservation of the River Ebble **www.gwct.org.uk/riverebblefilm**

Described as a ‘globally rare’ habitat, the River Ebble flows for 12 miles through the farmland, villages and downland of the beautiful Chalke Valley before joining the River Avon near Salisbury. It is a precious habitat that the members of the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster have put right at the heart of their conservation efforts. Now, a new short film from the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) celebrates their efforts to protect this vital artery.

Farmers Andrew Reis, Matthew Pickford and Ben Jeans talk to GWCT Biodiversity Advisor Jess Brooks. Matthew calls the Ebble “the life of this valley” and his passion for the crystal-clear chalk stream is clearly shared by fellow farmer cluster members Andrew and Ben.

“Apart from its own ecology, it supports a myriad of other wildlife species which we wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for the river,” says Andrew, who is Lead Farmer for the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster. The farmer cluster is part of the pioneering Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) which, supported by the GWCT, facilitates access to environmental schemes and aims, through natural capital trading, to deliver better water quality and wildlife habitat across the Hampshire Avon catchment.

The Chalke Valley farmers’ conservation projects have included the installation of cross-drains to combat the sediment-rich run-off caused by farm tracks, and planting Italian Ryegrass after the maize crop to keep the soil in the fields. The farmers hope that their efforts will inspire others in the catchment and beyond.

“If we lead, by keeping it clean and looking after it,” said Matthew, “others who have use of the river will see what we’re doing and hopefully follow.”

The farmers are working with a range of partners including the Wessex Rivers Trust, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, FWAG SW and Cranborne Chase AONB on a project called the *Crystal Clear Ebble*. Alex Deacon, Catchment Partnerships Manager for the Wessex Rivers Trust, said:

“The farmers are in a fortunate position in that they can work together and deliver things at scale, which is a real benefit to biodiversity. We are working with the farmer cluster to plan and look at the opportunities to enhance things on a joined-up basis.”

Alex believes that the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster’s actions are replicable along the course of the river, and that “the EFG has real potential to bring a lot of benefits for the health of our rivers in the Avon catchment”.

Watch *Farmer-led conservation of the River Ebble* here **www.gwct.org.uk/riverebblefilm**

Ends

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust gwct.org.uk – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain’s game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies.

Farmer Clusters: farmerclusters.com

chalkevalleyfarmercluster.org

The Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster is one of more than 200 farmer clusters across the UK. Farmers and land managers do a lot for Britain’s rural environment, but there is only so much that an individual, acting in isolation, can achieve on their own. By working together, helped by an advisor or ‘facilitator’, farmers and land managers can work together to collectively deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife at

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a landscape scale.

The GWCT helped develop the concept and establish the ground-breaking farmer-led Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area project in 2012, and then the first pilots of ‘farmer clusters’ in partnership with Natural England in 2014.

Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) environmentalfarmersgroup.co.uk

The pioneering Environmental Farmers Group (EFG). The EFG is an exciting new farmer co-operative based in the South of England that facilitates access to environmental schemes and aims to deliver better water quality and wildlife habitat through natural capital trading. GWCT plays a key role in supporting and convening the EFG.

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