

# Rother Valley Farmers Group (RVFG)

## 2nd Annual Report 2019/20



Photo Ref: Moor Farm, Petworth, M. Chandler (Farmer & RVFG Member) 2018

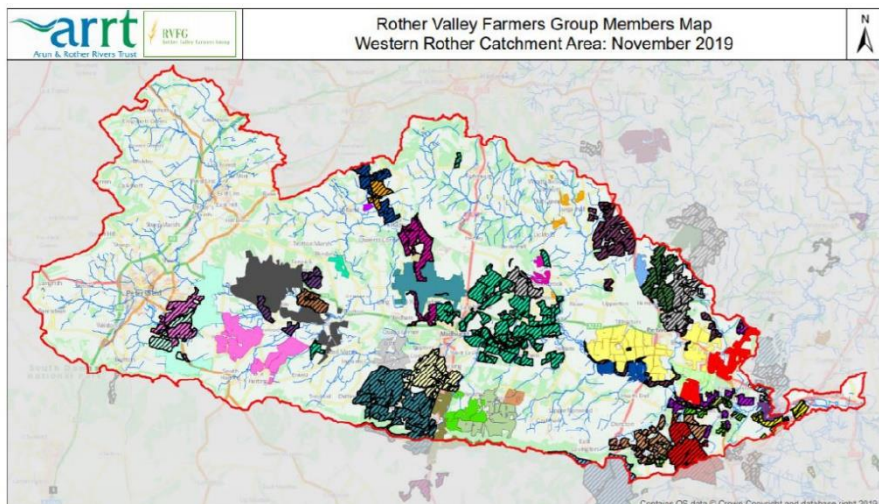
### 1 Purpose of report

This is the second annual report for the Rother Valley Farmers Group (RVFG) produced for group members, its project team and Natural England. It is a requirement of the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund<sup>1</sup> (CSFF) grant to produce an annual report, summarising the group's activities from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. The overall aim of the CSFF is to bring farmers, land managers and communities together to deliver sustainable food production and enhanced environmental outputs and services for all.

### 2 Growing the Team Behind the RVFG

The RVFG is a farmer-led group hosted by the Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT) and managed by two experienced facilitators, Ses Wright and Colin Hedley, together with the Trust's administrator, Tracy Thurlow. Behind the scenes is a committed and growing Steering Group comprised of local farmers: Richard Chandler (Moor Farm), Liz and Phil Andreozzi (Kilsham Farm), Andrew Bray (Nursted Farm), James Allen (Southgrounds Farm) and Lee Dallyn (Strood Farm). This is in addition to Fiona Pearce and Zoe Fothergill from Southern Water Limited and John Archer, an ARRT Trustee who worked for many years as a regional advisor for the National Farmers Union, as well as additional and much appreciated ARRT Trustee support. We are particularly indebted to Richard and Mark Chandler of Moor Farm, who make available their farm office and meeting barn for RVFG events in addition to their time, friendship and enthusiasm for the group. Government funding for the RVFG runs until the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 with the aspiration for the Group to continue well beyond this point.

The number of RVFG members has increased significantly since the launch of the group, from 31 in January



2018 to 49 as of March 2019, farming approximately 11,000 ha (~27,181 acres) and representing a strong growth rate of 60%. The aim is to capture in excess of 90% of the active farmers (including contractors) that manage land along the Rother Valley, with the 'notional' boundary for the group being the Western River Rother's watershed area<sup>2</sup>. A relatively small number of RVFG members have land that extends beyond this boundary, with the majority of all members' farmland located

within the South Downs National Park (SDNP). The RVFG is now one of 6 active farmer groups within the SDNP,

more than 70% of farmland in the Park within a formal farm group and two-thirds of all farms within the Park in some form of agri-environment scheme. Bruce Fowkes, Farming Officer for the Park, hosts ‘Southern Facilitator’ meetings to help co-ordinate ideas, learning and knowledge across farmer groups which is much valued and appreciated. National Parks play an important role in enabling the effective delivery of farmer groups and are seen as a key part of the Government’s new Environmental Land Management plans (ELMs), which will gradually take over from the Basic Payments Scheme and Countryside Stewardship from 2021 onwards. There is an aspiration for supported farmer-led groups to work with the SDNP Authority to help deliver ‘bigger, better and more joined up’ conservation that fits within crop rotations and farm-sector needs and builds in sustainability to help tackle the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

### 3 Highlights of 2019-2020

Farm member’s interests have changed considerably since the RVFG was launched 15 months ago, noting the uncertainty over Brexit, ramping up of the biodiversity and climate change agendas, and the potential role and opportunities for farmer-led landscape scale projects in the Government’s future planned ELMs scheme. It is important to energise and inform farmers on their critical role both to aid the sustainable future of their own farm enterprises and explain how the farm sector can deliver essential eco-system services for society. Technical innovation, precision farming, zero-till, cover cropping and companion/relay cropping, rotation-cultivation planning, digital mapping advances, priority plant/animal/habitat species knowledge, water management, livestock introductions and mob-grazing to improve soil organic matter and carbon/greenhouse-gas auditing and more are all items on the RVFG’s agenda both past, present and future, with the ethos that everyone has a positive role to play. The RVFG believes that future Government agricultural policy should financially reward farmers that provide eco-system services that are not readily paid for through the market, like cleaner air, improved water resources and helping to mitigate against climate change.




**RVFG rare arable plants training, July 2019**

The table (presented at the end of this report) itemises the key events and training sessions delivered to RVFG members over the past year. This report will summarise a few of these events and seek to highlight the extra work delivered in forging new partnerships with organisations, setting up related projects and engaging with local communities. An arable plant training event was delivered to a group of farmers on a beautiful summer’s evening in early July 2019, at Cumbers Farm, Rogate, led by Colin Hedley. Two of the RVFG’s target rare arable plants, Corn Marigold and Cornflower were identified in addition a wide variety of flowering plants and grasses, including Corn Spurrey, Wild Pansy and White Champion. Many of these plants produce seeds that provide important food for birds and ground insects such as beetles, in addition to supplying nectar (food) to winged pollinators that can increase crop yields. We walked over seeded herbal ley pastures that encourage a wide diversity of flora and fauna which critically also improve soil health, increasing yields for livestock/haylage. One of our farmers noted how commercial crops now suffer from insect pests that are increasingly resistant to (available) pesticides. Research into companion planting of wildflowers alongside commercial crops has been found to increase crop yields by supporting ‘beneficial’ crop-pest predators and is currently being trialled by a RVFG member on fields of Oil Seed Rape. Flowering seed mixes and naturally rich local seed banks fit well with the concept of Integrated Pest


management.

Species:	Family:	Common Name:
<i>Centaurea cyanus</i>	Asteraceae	Cornflower


Left images of Cornflower, *Centaurea cyanus*.  
An annual wild flower, closely related to Common Knapweed, grows upright between 20-50cm in height. Now very rare in the UK as a native population. Its rarity status is unclear due to frequent recordings of its occurrence originating from sown 'wildflower' seed.

Leaves:



- Basal leaves (left image), pinnatifid, 10-20cm long. These leaves are absent on non-flowering shoots and when the plant is flowering.
- Upper stem leaves are stalkless (Right image), and linear-lanceolate in shape.

Flowers: Late June until the first frosts of Autumn.



Germination: Mainly in Autumn but also in Spring. A hardy annual that can be sown either in Autumn for early summer flowering, or early spring. The image to the left is of a seedling at approximately 8 weeks after emergence.

Habitat:

**RVFG Wildflower Identification Sheets**

Management (IPM) when designed to promote biological pest control, and fit well with the RVFG's aim to be 'Metaldehyde-Free' in the near future. Plant identification sheets for farmers were circulated after the session.

Two successful farmland bird training events were delivered, at Leggs Farm, Heyshott, in September 2019<sup>3</sup> and Moor Farm, Petworth in January 2020<sup>4</sup>. The latter was delivered in partnership with the Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board (AHDB) and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) and led by Ses Wright for the RVFG. Teaming up to deliver joint events reduces the risk of farmers being 'overloaded' with information and helps to synchronise and focus programmes of work. Both training events stressed the importance of farmland for the survival of a wide number of birds and the types of habitat and management needed to supply food, forage, protection and nesting for strong populations to survive and prosper. It was noted, for example, that Barn Owl numbers are often limited by available nest sites and can be challenged by local Tawny Owl populations. Professional advice was supplied by the RSBP for both events. This example of training also highlights



**Farmland Bird Training Event, January 2019**

the need to increase the stock of environmental skills, knowledge and data on a farm and multi-farm basis. There is a paucity of good quality data on flora and fauna biodiversity at the field/farm level which new research is helping to address. The relatively new digitised UK Habitat classification system (ukhab<sup>5</sup>) offers the potential to bridge this gap, providing an opportunity to plan and deliver more effective landscape scale conservation of the farmed environment.

The RVFG's facilitators have also been actively involved in discussions with a 'Business in the Community' (BITC) project locally co-ordinated by the Environment Agency (EA). This culminated in a workshop in mid-December 2020 at which Ses Wright delivered a talk on the potential to create a local framework to bring in public and private funding to help deliver 'public environmental goods' via farm enterprises. Key farming companies within the Rother Valley attended the meeting in addition to large retailers and food suppliers including Sainsbury's and G's Fresh Limited, alongside the Sustainable Food Trust, Southern Water Ltd., Natural England and local authorities. It is hoped that this new group will continue to meet as it represents a unique set of organisations and individuals that developed a good rapport with the potential to help deliver the Government's plan to make 'public money for public (environmental) goods' a key part of the forthcoming ELMs programme, which would require both private and public investment to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss.

The BITC work complements the two RVFG events delivered in February 2020 which focused on explaining what is meant by the term 'public money for public goods' which is the cornerstone of future English agricultural policy and underpins the Government's new ELMs system. The event included debate on the global climate crisis alongside biodiversity loss and what this means for the local farmers; adapting land management and a zero-carbon economy. We were delighted to have Professor Ian Bateman<sup>6</sup> (OBE) to provide an excellent talk with lots of farmer questions and discussion, ranging from the impact of a potential carbon tax on UK farmers, to soil management, livestock farming, tree planting and much more. Professor Bateman has a first degree in economics, a Master's in agricultural economics, a PhD in forestry economics and his professorship (and OBE) for internationally acclaimed research into environmental economics and services to environmental science. He is also a special advisor to successive Secretaries of State for the Environment, was Head of Economics for the UK National Ecosystem Assessment, and is involved in ELMs development and designing UK strategies to help mitigate the predicted effects of enhanced climate change. The afternoon event included a farm walk with Professor Bateman and farmers identifying public goods on the farm, discussing valuation and management options via for example the ELMs programme



**Professor Ian Bateman**

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and the problems with the 'Results Based' agri-environment schemes currently being tested. It was super to see so many enthused and interested farmers at the event which has generated a continued interest in subjects such as regenerative farming and farm carbon auditing which will be taken as a guide for future training during the final year of the Facilitation Fund.

## 4 Wider Work and Outputs of the RVFG

The RVFG operates through input and planning from its Steering Group and gathers advice from its Liaison Group, both of which work well. The RVFG's Operational Plan sets priority aims for landscape connections, soil and water, rivers, priority species/habitats and community engagement/partnerships, many aspects of which have been addressed in the various events delivered by and for the members of the RVFG, as summarised in Section 3. This section summarises plans that are in progress to further fulfil the aims and objectives of the RVFG's Operational Plan.

***Landscape-Scale Connections and Digital Mapping:*** Improved digital mapping of the RVFG area is still needed in order to deliver landscape-scale conservation of the farmed environment; this was not part of the original NE FF programme. The ARRT has invested in GIS software and personnel training in part to help progress this need. Our partnership organisations (CSF, SDNP, Southern Water etc.) use different digital mapping systems that cannot be easily shared, not least because of the GDPR (general data protection) regulations, resulting in the RVFG needing its own digital farm mapping data in order to be able to fulfil its potential. The SDNP appears keen to assist in this digital mapping exercise and we hope to secure the necessary funds to delivery this critical work. The RVFG is also working with the SDNP on a Defra ELMs Test & Trial project, with 5 RVFG members volunteering to use a smartphone mapping App called 'The Land App' (TLA) to upload land-use and RPA (Rural Payments Agency) farming data to explore if this can improve landscape scale conservation planning and delivery.

***Soil and Water:*** The priority given to soil and water objectives reflects the natural highly erodible soils of the Rother Valley. The onus is on farming to increase the uptake of measures to improve soil health that help to mitigate the impacts of enhanced climate change as well as improving the bottom line of farm finances. The RVFG has successfully initiated a 5 Year Soil Health Project funded by Southern Water, which commenced in Autumn 2019 and will provide detailed soil analysis, recommendations and targets across a series of farms within the RVFG chosen to cover a wide range of soil type, cultivation methods, rotations and livestock presence. Within each farm, four fields are monitored for variables including Organic Matter levels, nutrient holding, soil health and earthworm numbers.

***Communication and Promotion of the RVFG:*** Promotion of the RVFG is steadily growing through its increasing network of working partnerships with, for example, the SDNP, Southern Water Ltd., CSF, AHDB, CFE, local/county planning authorities and the Arun & Western Streams Catchment Partnership, of which ARRT is the host organisation. The SDNP has recently launched a new website dedicated to the 6 farmer groups within its boundary (<http://southdownsfarming.com/rother-valley-farmers-group/>). This allows individual farmer groups, including the RVFG, to edit their own pages, highlight action for target species, promote and report back on events, and promote the other services offered by members, e.g., local food and drink producers and suppliers. The SDNP continues to roll out its Near Field Communication (NFC) project to farmer groups, which allows people walking along registered footpaths on farmland to use their smart phone to access short videos about who farms the land they are walking upon, what crops/animals are being managed and what environmental aspects are being championed. The video also links to the SDNP's new farmer group website.

***Southern Water Ltd, Metaldehyde-Free Project and Potential Option Payments:*** The RVFG has developed a positive working relationship with Southern Water. We are pleased that Southern Water helped fund the additional work involved in establishing the RVFG Metaldehyde-Free pledge and compensation payments to farmers which remains in operation and goes beyond that available to cover such work under the CSFF. Similarly, the RVFG (via the ARRT) has received funding from Southern Water to deliver the 5 Year Soil Health Project, led by agronomist Stephen Woodley who directs the soil analysis and project's aims and targets. We

are optimistic that options may become available for RVFG farmers paid for by Southern Water to deliver targeted land management that improves the water environment. Southern Water commenced catchment management payments in the neighbouring Arun to Adur farmer group last autumn 2019 focused on nutrient levels and has pesticide regulatory drivers to govern actions along the Rother valley.

## 5 Countryside Stewardship

There is varied uptake of Countryside Stewardship (CS) across RVFG members; we estimate approximately half of RVFG land is in some form of agri-environment scheme. Our records indicate all Entry Level (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements will gradually phase out by 2024, with an increasing number of RVFG farmers moving to Mid Tier agreements. An important index is the number of RVFG farmers coming forward and applying for new Countryside Stewardship schemes, and our ability to influence their choice or options and crop rotations such that we can insure we are aligning the environmental aspirations and priorities of the group. Five RVFG are applying for new CS schemes in 2020. We envisage that as our mapped GIS/TLA database of RVFG members improves the monitoring of CS agreements can be tracked more effectively and the scope for delivering CS Priorities (Species/Habitats) at a landscape scale progressed. We are looking into the merits of convening a meeting with RVFG members in the autumn/winter period to update potentially interested farmers on the prospects for applying for CS schemes in the next coming year.

### RVFG Events: 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020

Date	Event Description
4th April 2019	ARRT/CSF/RVFG: Soil Loss Event at Moor Farm (talk) and later practical demonstration of field ditch sediment filter-sock traps at Strood Farm
30th April 2019	RVFG Update Evening Event at the Royal Oak, Midhurst: talk by Ses and Colin with input from Southern Water and farmer discussion, including CSS interest by RVFG members
17th May 2019	Introduction to the RVFG; a talk by Ses for Sutton & Barlavington Parish Council (AGM)
3rd July 2019	Rare arable planting training event at Cumbers Farm, Rogate (mid-Rother) led by Colin
18th Sept' 2019	Farmland bird training event at Leggs Farm, Heyshott with RSPB
24th Sept' 2019	Land Management 2.0 event hosted by TLA and Ordnance Survey attended by Ses
2nd Dec' 2019	Second RVFG e-Newsletter prepared and circulated to members
13th Dec' 2019	BITC Workshop event organised by the Environment Agency and attended by AHDB, CSF, Southern Water Ltd., Natural England, Sainsbury's Ltd., G's Fresh Ltd., Langmead Farms Ltd., SDNP etc. Talk by Ses on the RVFG & SCP
23rd Jan' 2020	Joint RVFG/AHDB/CFE Farmland bird training event at Moor Farm in partnership with a AHDB Monitor Farm meeting and a CFE farmland bird initiative
26th Feb' 2020	Full morning event including working lunch: RVFG update given by Colin & Ses, then 'Public Money for Public Goods' presentation by Professor Ian Bateman (OBE) and farmer discussion. Led by Ses
26th Feb' 2020	Afternoon event: Practical farm walk to identify and discuss applying 'public goods for public money' funding to inspected aspects of farm operation with Prof. Ian Bateman. Led by Ses
22nd Mar' 2019	NB: Meeting and farm walk with local MP Gillian Keegan, visit to Strood Farm with RVFG farmer Lee Dallyn

NB: the above list excludes going out to meet farmers, Metaldehyde-Free pledge work, RVFG Steering Group meetings, RVFG Liaison Group meetings, CSS update meetings, RVFG internal planning and research work etc.

Annual RVFG Report Drafted by Ses Wright with support and advice from Tracy Thurlow and Colin Hedley, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

**Thank you and Acknowledgements:** The RVFG is a farmer-led group and would not be possible without the input and participation of group's members. Particular thanks to Richard Chandler (ARRT Trustee and RVFG Member) at Moor Farm for providing his time, enthusiasm and support. A big thank you also to our farming Steering Group members for their time and valued insights; we could not do this without you! Thank you to our wider partners in Southern Water; Bruce Fowkes and Chris Fairbrother at the SDNP; and CSF Officers. Our thanks and best wishes to John Archer (ARRT Trustee) and the many ARRT Trustees that work behind the scenes to help support the Group. Credit and thanks are due to each and all of these, as well of course to my colleagues Tracy Thurlow and Colin Hedley; it is a pleasure working for the local farming community.

**Footnotes:** <sup>1</sup> The CSFF receives funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; <sup>2</sup> The size of the Western Rother Catchment, which includes all its tributaries and surrounding land that drains into the main river is 36020 hectares (Environment Agency, Catchment Data Explorer, Ref: <https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning/WaterBody/GB107041012810> (2019)); <sup>3</sup> With thanks to host farmer and RVFG member Mr. Andrew Leggs and colleagues at Leggs Farm; <sup>4</sup> With thanks to host farmers and RVFG members Richard and Mark Chandler and colleagues at Moor Farm; <sup>5</sup> ukhab classification documents link:- <https://ecountability.co.uk/ukhabworkinggroup-ukhab/>; <sup>6</sup> University of Exeter link to Professor Bateman: <https://sweep.ac.uk/natural-capital/>