

A Farmers Perspective

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Eleven years ago I entered an agreement – through the Country side Stewardship Scheme. I knew this would give me the opportunity to put something back into my farm, the environment and to encourage more wildlife.

My family has been at this farm since 1959 for many of those years growing crops rearing livestock all in a fairly intensive way in order to survive in the climate then. I knew that some of these practices were not conducive to the environment – wildlife, birds, insects and mammals alike which troubled me. From a very early age I have had a great interest in wildlife, especially birds and had noticed that numbers were decreasing. I had not seen a barn owl on the farm or in surrounding areas for many years. I have always felt that there is something about the barn owl that makes it special to many people even if they have never seen one in real life.

I made a commitment to myself to halt the decline in bird populations on the area in my charge and see an increase. To clean out ponds to provide shallow wet areas and replant some natural species including rare ones wherever possible – to this end we have re-introduced black poplar on the farm.

With our new regime we have 6 metre grass margins, wild flower headlands around every field and have sited many nest boxes for barn owls thereby doing as much as we can to provide an ideal habitat for them and encourage them back to the farm. This has proved to be a



successful strategy and they are back in very good numbers and we have seen young broods for the last three years. John Lightfoot ringed five owlets in 2011. How fantastic is that!!

Indeed with wild bird pollen and nectar crops on the farm maximizing those awkward corners, an 8 year programme to manage hedges 'gapping up' with 7 or 8 native species there has been a ten fold increase in wild birds and game birds alike especially wild grey partridge. Our involvement in an RSPB Farmer Alliance annual count over the last 3 years has confirmed this.

Crop yields have not suffered as a result of all the environmental work and have in fact increased in recent years. The resident bee hives situated in small wooded coppices established in 1994 have no doubt helped improve our yields. This only confirms my belief that we all – farmers, land managers and custodians of the country side have an obligation to look after it and make sure we leave it in better condition than when we took it on. I realise that not everyone can have the same passion for their environment and natural surroundings BUT that doesn't stop everyone doing a bit in their own way. At least that way the barn owls that have come back to our farm will have a greater chance of survival and will be around to bring pleasure to even more people.

The support of fantastic volunteers such as the 'Lightfoot family' has enabled me to progress my work for barn owls more rapidly. I know they are passionate about them which has been infective and their belief has shown that bird numbers can in fact be reversed from an annual decrease to an increase. All this while continuing to maintain a high level of arable output alongside their sterling work ensuring the provision of suitable feeding and nesting habitats and targeted control of predators.

Here's hoping to another successful barn owl breeding season in 2012!!