Hope Farm provides important evidence of how agriculture policy can be put into practice.

The RSPB is constantly researching the impacts of farming on wildlife and testing solutions that allow farmers and land managers to help nature thrive on their land. This is to demonstrate to policy makers what works and ensure that they are supporting the best practice in environmentally-sustainable and nature-friendly farming.

Hope Farm has allowed us to take this to a new level, using our own land to test and develop new innovations that work for nature while allowing it to remain a profitable arable farm. Our farm allows us to undertake the valuable work of putting policy into practice and then ensuring that practice informs policy.

Influencing farming

1,739% increase in the Hope Farm winter bird index between 2000 and 2017

Hope Farm

Farming for a sustainable future – for people and wildlife

rspb.org.uk

For more information about the RSPB’s work on Hope Farm, visit:

rspb.org.uk/hopefarm
A six-point plan to help farm wildlife

At Hope Farm, we follow the six-point plan recommended by Farm wildlife, a partnership of leading wildlife organisations:

1. Look after established wildlife habitats such as woods, hedges and ponds, as these places are particularly valuable for wildlife.

2. Make the most of hedgerows, ditches and margins, as these areas are often where wildlife is found on farmland.

3. Wet features, such as ponds, provide important places for wildlife not only to drink, but to obtain food, live or in breed.

4. Provide flower-rich areas on at least 2% of farmland as this can support pollinators and other insects.

5. Provide seed-rich areas on 2% of farmland to support farmland birds throughout winter.

6. In farmed areas, grow spring-sown crops and use in-field measures, like fallow plots in the middle of fields, to give species that live there a good chance of surviving to breed.

Read more at farmwildlife.info

Farming more sustainably

Changing crop rotation

Since buying the farm, we’ve made our crop rotation more diverse. This has helped to improve crop resilience and weed control, and the switch to spring cropping has helped a lot of species including Skylarks and lapwings.

Direct drilling

With less disturbance to the soil, direct drilling is less destructive to the ecosystem underground – meaning that we’ll be helping our worms to thrive – and aids weed control.

More invertebrates in the soil will mean more food for the birds, but it is also better for us as well. Direct drilling can save on the number of cultivations required, which saves us money as well as helping the soil to build a better and stronger structure of its own.

Demonstrating a different way

We want to show that any farm can run a viable business and farm for wildlife at the same time.

We use the Countryside Stewardship scheme (CS) to the advantage of both ourselves and wildlife, showing that both farmers and nature can thrive in the same environment.

We do this by putting lower-yielding areas of land into CS, where we would make less or no profit if it was farmed conventionally. Farming 10% of our land for nature opens up premium markets under the Fair to Nature brand.

226% increase in the Hope Farm Breeding Bird Index between 2000 and 2017

Researching new methods

While we want to demonstrate that wildlife-friendly agriculture can be achieved profitably for every farmer, we also want to research new methods to improve current farming practices.

To date, we have investigated new methods to conserve Skylarks, corn buntings, turtle doves and other species on arable farms, and these have progressed to influence policy for the better.

Now, we are taking our research one step further and progressing to large-scale, long-term studies across a large portion of the farm. We are participating in a five-year AssIST project (see right) and our 10-year cover crop and compost trial has reached the largest that have been undertaken at Hope Farm so far.

Cover crops and compost

Farmers are working to innovate and improve agricultural methods, and as part of this evolution we are seeing an increased use of both compost and cover crops to fertilise and improve levels of organic matter in their soils.

Cover crops and compost are also thought to improve water drainage over winter and soil structure, and to provide weed control.

At Hope Farm, we are putting these techniques under the microscope to scrutinise the key claimed benefits, and also see how useful they are as breeding and overwintering habitats for birds and invertebrates.

We are running a field-scale trial across 70 hectares of the farm between 2015 and 2025, to analyse the soil’s microbial functional diversity, organic carbon and labile nitrogen, crop yield, amount of black grass, and the winter and summer vegetation structure.

In doing so, we hope to get a much clearer picture of the effect both compost fertilisers and cover crops have on farmland and wildlife. We hope that by demonstrating that cover crops and compost provide wider benefits to wildlife, we will strengthen the case for supporting farmers wishing to use these methods on their land.

ASSIST

AssIST is a five-year project, run by a collaboration between the Centre of Ecology and Hydrology and Rothamsted Research Centre, that aims to investigate potential upscaling of sustainable intensification in agriculture.

Research has found that pollinator strips around margins can enhance pollinator and pest control services in an otherwise farmed field, but so far this usefulness has only ever been explored using margins that frame fields. We are participating in the project to look at the integration of biodiversity with intensive farming by enhancing pollinators and pest control services across whole fields instead of around the edge alone.

At Hope Farm and other farms, researchers will be investigating the effects of pollinator strips on soil health, the promotion of crop pollinators and their impact on crop pest predators. This Natural Environment Research Council and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council-funded project hopes to provide vital evidence to shape and influence future policy and promote innovations in sustainable agriculture across a wider scale.