Farmer DAVID WHITE
County WILTSHIRE
Farming system MIXED
Farm size 554HA

What key conservation measures have been undertaken on the farm and what evidence is there of benefit for wildlife?

Birds

Areas of previously intensive arable rotation have been reverted to chalk and seasonally flooded wet grassland, with large areas of nectar and bird seed mixtures surpassing the Farmland Bird Package requirement. These mixes are strategically placed to buffer and link the grassland and are adjacent to tree sparrow colonies and nesting barn owl. Fallow plots are managed for lapwing among other birds. The other four species of the arable assemblage: corn bunting, grey partridge, turtle dove and yellow wagtail, also all breed and benefit from the wide range of arable habitats found across the holding.

The grassland is specifically managed to benefit birds of prey and harriers in particular. Nine raptor species were recorded in 2010. These areas also support large skylark and meadow pipit populations, with quail recorded in the summer and short-eared owl ever present throughout the winter.

Butterflies/Moths

The grassland supports a range of species with small heath, common blue and marbled white amongst those recorded as well as the day flying Mother Shipton and six-spot burnet moths. The planned grazing rotation and introduction of cattle should increase the number of flowering plants benefiting large numbers of butterflies and moths. The grassland here should provide a useful landscape scale link between existing populations of scarcer species and further monitoring is to be carried out. The hedgerows and margins on the farm are also managed sympathetically and support a wealth of invertebrates.

Plants

The extensive downland was, along with much of the Marlborough Downs, unfortunately improved in the past, but still supports many species typically of this habitat including round-headed rampion and clustered bellflower. These areas have been extended through arable reversion, which has been readily colonised by species such as pyramidal orchid. The introduction of cattle grazing on rotation will ensure improved conditions across the down.

Arable flora is similarly represented by chalk loving species such as the fluellens, small toadflax, dwarf spurge and a large population of Venus's-looking-glass. Narrow fruited cornsalad was also recently discovered on the farm. Management of fallow plots and arable margins will benefit these species and further surveys should lead to an increase in records – with broad-leaved spurge occurring on a neighbouring farm managed by David.

Other wildlife

Two new ponds and an area of reverted wet ground and scrapes adjacent to the River Bourne have added habitat diversity with well established aquatic life, including water vole. The farmhouse and surrounds also teem with life, with house martin, swallow and swift all nesting – an area of the front lawn was even dug up and flooded to provide wet mud for nests during the recent dry spell. The arable ground supports a large brown hare population and the grassland management benefits species such as dotted bee-fly and a healthy population of smaller mammals as identified by the number of predators hunting the downs.

Is the farm a well-run commercial operation and on what basis has this been assessed?

This is a large commercial arable farm with the conservation measures and the farm's stewardship scheme very much driven by David's interest and concern for the environment rather than a need for additional income or subsidy. This interest and conservation continues beyond the farm boundary as David manages and provides agronomic advice across another 870ha of the surrounding landscape. These farms have also followed him into Environmental Stewardship, all delivering the Farmland Bird package alongside a suite of grassland and other management options.

David uses his agronomy skills to ensure maximum productivity of the arable crops; however insecticides are used sparingly, if at all, and never during the spring or summer months.

The downland was previously occupied by a tenant grazier, but this is now shared with David's brother and the introduction of native breed cattle to graze the slopes will benefit both wildlife and the farms commercial productivity.

How has the farmer demonstrated they understand how the conservation action benefits the wildlife on the farm and shown enthusiasm for the conservation work undertaken?

David has been working with the local county bird group for many years on a successful tree sparrow project, putting out both regular tailings as well as installing nest boxes. This and his management and desire for raptors significantly pre-date his interest in stewardship schemes.

He was closely involved in the HLS application process, ensuring the correct location of the options, with large areas remaining fallow to encourage ground nesting birds. With the favoured nesting area known, the remaining fallow was planted up as seed mixes of low input cereals. To prevent ground predation on the fallow plots David has protected them with a state of the art electric fence.
Whilst the fallow plots are managed with herbicide mid-season to provide bare ground for repeat nesting attempts, this is used carefully to avoid areas of known arable plant interest.

David has a passion for wildlife and photography and the overwhelming impression is of a farmer who really cares for his farm, livestock and environment and is pro-active in their upkeep.

How has the farmer been successful in maintaining, restoring and creating habitats on the farm?

The downland has been previously improved but management has removed inputs and included lenient grazing to provide suitable habitat for birds of prey in particular. This management has allowed the flora to recover across the down and the new grazing rotation will provide further benefits. The area of downland has also been increased with arable reversion on the lower slopes, this area has been referenced and added to the grazing rotation. As a further buffer to the grassland, pollen and nectar mixes are grown along the arable boundary.

As well as creating wetland habitats on the farm, an arable field is to be reverted to grassland after harvest. This will increase the area of seasonally flooded grassland and reduce inputs at the head of a the tributary of one of Wiltshire's best chalk streams.

What future improvements does the farmer plan to make to further enhance the wildlife value of the farm?

The existing management has left little room for increasing the area for habitat creation except in areas key for the arable production, however David is now looking at these fields in a different light and is considering additional areas of management including beetle banks across the largest arable areas.

The farm has regular contact with various wildlife groups and monitoring will ensure the management undertaken is proving successful or whether it requires adaptation. This includes monitoring the target species and the increases in biodiversity brought about through the management. Should this management not appear to be working then advice will be actively sought.

Has the farmer demonstrated a willingness, and/or ability to successfully promote the conservation messages of their activities to others?

David manages and provides advice to several neighbouring farms; this has meant his ethos is replicated across a much wider area than his farm. The successful commercial nature of the farm coupled with the relative ease with which he has been able to step up for nature across the holding whilst not affecting yield or the farm business, has sent a good message to other farmers in the area.

Summary (100 words max)

Manor Farm is a conventionally managed commercial farm but with careful planning and, most importantly, a desire to work with nature, increasing areas of the holding are managed with wildlife as the primary concern. This process is supported by agri-environment but is largely down to a change of approach from the farmer.

The range of species targeted with specialist management include corn bunting, lapwing, small toadflax, Venus's-looking-glass, brown hare, water vole and a range of familiar butterflies.

This abundance of wildlife sits neatly alongside the business of food production as an integral part of a large well-run commercial farm.