

**Farmer ROBERT LAW
County HERTFORDSHIRE
Farming system MIXED
Farm size 1,497HA**

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

Birds

Arable land has been managed to utilise short-workings in particular to provide insect rich habitats and winter seed food enhancing habitats for common farmland butterflies and arable bird species such as; corn bunting, grey partridge and yellow wagtail. Lapwing, skylark and yellow wagtail were observed using summer fallows. Skylark plots are used within winter sown cereals to benefit in field foraging birds, in particular skylarks. A combination of grass and floristic margins are used to provide habitats and resources for many species of wildlife as well as safeguarding hedgerow ecosystems from otherwise unavoidable agricultural impacts.

Butterflies/Moths

In addition to the careful maintenance of grazing levels to benefit rare chalkhill blue butterflies on the heath, many familiar species have benefitted from the careful siting of nectar flower mixtures in warm sheltered areas and wide margins on the arable part of the farm, and the creation of rides and coppices in the woodland.

Plants

Cultivated plots and margins are used to provide conditions for arable flora. The chalk grassland SSSI is managed specifically for the rare pasque flower, by employing scrub clearance and a careful grazing regime.

Other wildlife

Conservation grade are currently carrying out barn owl surveys to assess the effectiveness of the grass margins and exceptional areas of field corner management. Barn owls nest successfully on the farm indicating a healthy population of small mammals. All of the above is newly created from a very low baseline, and research and monitoring is ongoing.

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

As the farm business has grown, the area farmed, and size of machinery has also grown, so Robert has utilised awkward corners and areas that pose problems for modern agricultural machinery as well as less high yielding areas of the farm for key wildlife habitats, including a network of nectar rich areas for insects or seed rich habitats for farmland birds. These areas provide a secured income through agri-environment schemes (CSS, ELS and HLS) to maximise the stability of income on these areas and provide sufficient resources for the farm's wildlife.

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?

All the measures on the farm are driven by an enthusiasm and enjoyment of wildlife. As a very self motivated person, Robert actively chose to pursue a career in wildlife-friendly farming, and embraces opportunities to create new habitats on the farm, focussing on what works for the species he has on the farm.

He constantly advocates to his peers the need to engage conservation action on all farms and is striving to engage with others on the subject. His credibility is key to this and he strives to understand as much as possible how each habitat delivers and come up with new ideas to encourage more wildlife-friendly farming.

Robert is also keen to trial and research new land management that could be developed to be included within agri-environment schemes in the future. Current research on the farm includes working with the RSPB, trialling corn bunting plots, and a bee study.

Robert is also keen to understand the baseline of the species and taxa on an area before embarking upon positive land management. Doing this enables Robert to keep evaluating the effectiveness of specific land management.

Robert constantly examines ongoing practices to modify techniques to enable them to be even more effective on the farm but also examine ways in which agri-environment prescriptions could be changed to be more effective across all or a range of farms.



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

Extremely successful!

Arable options are extremely well maintained and if options are under performing they are modified or removed to optimise the wildlife return from the management investment. Nectar flower and wild bird mixes compositions have been carefully selected to meet the soil and agronomic conditions of a given area as well as the species that occur in this area of the farm.

As one of the very first farmers to adopt these measures and the first conservation grade farmer, Robert has been able to modify his agri-environment schemes in the past to ensure continued optimal provision of the ecological needs of a wide range of farmland species.

From a purely arable farm, a conscious decision was made to add grassland to diversify the habitats available on the farm, and chalk grassland is now managed to meet the specific requirements of both pasque flower and chalkhill blue. This labour of love started in the early 1990's with scrub clearance, and is now supported through HLS.

As a conservation grade farm, Thrift Farm has taken part in at least 17 projects and stewardship schemes. At least 10% of the farm is managed specifically for wildlife, which exceeds the requirements of both conservation grade and the RSPB farmland bird package. Robert also manages a large area of woodland, and has created new woodland blocks, which currently provide nectar rich habitat whilst trees establish. A significant problem that Robert faces is managing the paperwork for all the above schemes, although he says time is not an excuse not to enter them.

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

With a real will to maintain the mixed nature of the farm, it is clear that due to the mixed farming system this provides wildlife management benefits (e.g. grazing of chalk grass land) but also adds significant heterogeneity to the farm's wildlife.

Robert's aim is to utilise more grass and clover leys to build fertility but also provide more heterogeneity and direct wildlife habitat in the future. This would help if the price of inorganic fertilisers continues to rise, as well as reduce the carbon output from the farm.

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

Quite simply put, it is our opinion he is among the best advocates for wildlife friendly farming!

To date, Robert:

- Is a champion of public and educational access
- Regularly hosts a vast number of farming and non-farming groups
- Hosted Cereals
- Writes a regular column in Farmers Weekly
- Gives talks to many audiences whether at Cereals or advocating the wildlife-friendly management approach to more local audiences
- Is Conservation Grade Director, NFU Sugar Board Vice Chairman, Oxford Farming Conference Director and Conservation Grade Advisory Board Chairman.

Robert's message is very clear; You CAN balance the needs of wildlife with the needs of a farm business and food production.

Robert has also enthused and inspired the farm staff, who are now very keen to create and manage the habitats for wildlife, keeping a watchful eye to ensure their success. Aware of the barriers to delivery for others in the industry, he strives to not only understand these but overcome them through his own advocacy.

Robert demonstrates a professional and credible approach to wildlife-friendly farming. Robert has probably experienced and been exposed to many of the barriers farmers may have when embarking on this type of management. However, Robert has overcome all of them to provide an exemplar to the industry of wildlife-friendly management whilst also balancing the needs of the farm business.

Robert has pooled all of the existing science together with his own practical knowledge to make an extremely exciting and successful combination.

The last and possibly most telling thing for us as judges was when Robert took us to a summer fallow which held lapwing, skylark and yellow wagtail. Almost ignoring us completely he crouched in the weedy growth with the biggest

smile on his face soaking up the song of skylarks everywhere and the calls of lapwing and said; 'Isn't it fantastic? I could stay here for hours'

Summary (100 words max)

Thrift Farm is an inspiring 1,500ha conservation grade farm, which takes in a chalk grassland SSSI, county wildlife sites and woodlands, as well as 1,200ha of arable food production with 10% of this area managed for farm wildlife through fallows, insect rich and seed rich habitats and skylark plots.

With his professional and credible approach to wildlife-friendly farming, Robert Law has grown the farm over the last 25 years into an example to the industry of wildlife-friendly farming within a successful commercial arable business.

He now takes great delight in hearing farmland birds, such as corn bunting, grey partridge, lapwing, skylark in abundance on the many habitats he's created, and following careful scrub clearance and grazing, rare chalkhill blue butterflies and pasque flowers also flourish on the heath.