

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD NATIONAL JUDGING FORM

Region/Country	Scotland	Farmer	Michael and Shirley Clarke
Farm address	Williamwood, Dumfriesshire		
Farming system	Lowland beef / sheep	Farm size (ha)	120 ha

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

• **Birds**

Following advice from Dan Brown, RSPB farmland advisor, the Clarkes have improved the farm for birds. They have installed nest boxes to help the tree sparrow population as well as boxes and raptor poles for kestrel, buzzard and barn owl, all of which have nested on the farm. Buzzards are encouraged to help control the rabbit populations. Wild bird cover and supplementary feeding is supplied over the winter period to encourage seed eating birds such as tree sparrow and yellowhammer. Feeders are situated around the site to help the birds and engage and educate the guests to the farm and their holiday cottages. Seed eating bird numbers are increasing as a result of Mr Clarkes careful planning of seed and insect rich habitats around the farm. Seasonal predator control is also carried out to reduce generalist predator numbers. They have created a new pond with several small islands to encourage wildlife including wildfowl, swallows and house martins. An area of wet rush dominated ground is actively managed for wading birds including lapwing and snipe. This management includes rush topping ahead of the breeding season and stock reduction during the breeding season. They have also created wader scrapes, blocked field drains in unproductive areas and instigating wildlife friendly cutting for silage fields on the farm to protect the wader chicks. The farm has been surveyed several times through the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance.

• **Butterflies**

Habitats on the farm which encourage butterflies include the species rich grassland, woodland and wet areas. A wild flower meadow has been sown, at the Clarke's own expense next to the pond to provide nectar and pollen rich habitat for invertebrates. Seed for this meadow is of native origin.

• **Plants**

Species rich grassland, moorland and wetland areas are being managed to increase the plant diversity on the farm. Following advice from SNH scrub has been removed from some areas. This alongside seasonal grazing from cattle has maintained and increased the diversity of plants on the farm. Bog Myrtle is being encouraged as part of this package and there has been a noticeable increase in the number of orchids. Ditches on the site are managed sympathetically, especially around the pond - providing habitat for wetland plants.

• **Other wildlife**

The Clarkes have built and installed over 100 bat and bird boxes around the farm. The bat boxes have been put up with the support of the local bat group who surveyed the site with several species recorded. Badgers, otters and red squirrels are regularly recorded on the farm. As a result of advice from the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, grey squirrels are now controlled to help maintain the red squirrel population.

[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?

Yes but they are always looking for new ideas and information to allow them to develop the site. Mr and Mrs Clarke have used advice from a range of organisations including RSPB, SNH, GWCT, LEAF, Red Squirrel Survival Trust, BASC and the Local Bat Group to help develop their own ideas to maximise the farms value for wildlife. This has resulted in improvements to existing habitats as well as creation of new ones. As highlighted in the previous section they are providing a series of packages;

- a) Farmland birds - a combination of insect and seed rich habitats, predator control and nesting sites
- b) Waders - in areas highlighted by bird surveys they have instigated a sympathetic grazing programme, along with specific management to control rush. Additional habitats have been created including wader scrapes and damp areas, by blocking drains
- c) Flowering plants - they have instigated a sympathetic grazing programme, along with specific management for rush control
- d) Butterflies / Invertebrates – created new native wild flower area close to the new pond. Woodland is being sympathetically managed improving ground cover
- e) Mammals – red squirrel advice has been sort as they are present on the farm. Hares, badgers and otter are all present and encouraged.

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

The Clarkes have created a lot of new habitats at their own expense. The SRDP agreement supports some of their delivery on wetland / grassland areas as well as the creation of new hedges / management of existing hedgerows.

Woodland / hedgerows. Approximately 10 ha which is a mix of ancient / semi-natural woodland and new plantings. Older woodland has been thinned and managed to allow sun in and keep the wind out. New and old woods have been fenced to exclude livestock. Small areas of new woodland have been planted with the help of local school children. These include seed and fruit bearing species. New hedges have been planted and there are more planned in the future. Existing hedges away from the roads are managed in rotation to maximize food whilst minimizing work.

Wetland /species rich wet grassland. A pond has been created at their own expense. Rushes are controlled on the species rich grassland through a combination of mechanical topping and cattle grazing. Wet grassland is being managed with waders and flowering plants as a priority.

Grassland. Long-term ley for silage and grazing with 5% permanent. Silage fields are cut in wildlife friendly way; grass margins have been created around the edge of fields to help protect the hedgerows / provide insects; wader scrapes have been created.

Wild bird cover / wild flower areas / wood pasture. Livestock are excluded (limited in the case of wood pasture). Wild flower areas have been sown with long-term native sourced species, the wild bird cover is re-sown annually with a specialist mix. Annual mixes have been chosen partly because of species on the farm and partly because of difficulties in growing two-year mixes. Creeping thistles were removed by hand in the wild flower area during the early years, assisting the establishment of less competitive species.

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

They have a long list of improvements they wish to make over the next few years. These are developing existing features as well as creating new. The Clarkes are also keen to improve the visitor experience to allow more people to engage with the work and wildlife on their farm. Areas they wish to improve are:

- 1) Double fencing most of the boundaries away from wader focused areas to create new and extended hedges with standard trees.
- 2) Continue rush control / vegetation management of wet areas to maximise its value for waders and flowering plants
- 3) Creation of more water and field margins around the farm
- 4) Creation of wildlife corners in fields
- 5) Instigate further biodiversity survey work to understand which species are present and assess the benefits of on-going work. A particular gap they would like to fill is butterfly and plant surveys.
- 6) Improving the interpretation around the farm. Their intention is to develop some bespoke boards highlighting the species, habitats and management carried out on the farm.
- 7) Increasing their work with schools and improving the access to conservation areas for visitors.

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

The Clarkes have been very keen to highlight their conservation and farming work to the general public. They have developed a series of walks around the farm, encouraging the public and guests of their holiday cottages to explore the farm. These walks have information boards provided by LEAF and highlight relevant features. The farm is open on Open Farm Sunday. Working with RET they have actively engaged with local schools hosting school parties at the farm as well as visiting schools in the area. School parties have helped plant trees as part of the experience of visiting the farm. During school and farm visits they explain how farming and conservation can work hand-in-hand highlighting the habitats and species associated with the farm. They wish to continue to improve this experience over the next few years encouraging the public to enjoy the farm. Finally, Mr Clarke has built a hide overlooking the large pond to allow the public to view the wildlife on the pond and in the wildflower area, without disturbing it.

Summary

Michael and Shirley Clarke run a 115 ha lowland livestock unit near Lockerbie, which include a herd of Highland cattle and 200 sheep. Their personal interest in wildlife has been integrated into their farming business. They have done this by incorporating wildlife friendly measures into existing grassland, woodland and wetlands whilst creating new features including a pond, hedgerow, wildflower meadow and wild bird cover. The result is a farm rich in wildlife including lapwing, barn owl otters, red squirrel and orchids.