

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD NATIONAL JUDGING FORM

REGION/COUNTRY	EASTERN ENGLAND	FARMER	Nicholas Watts
FARM ADDRESS	VINE HOUSE FARM, LINCS		
FARMING SYSTEM	ARABLE	FARM SIZE (ha)	700

Birds

Since 1982 Nicholas has kept records of birds in the area and since 1992 carried out bird surveys on the farm. These detailed accounts have kept track the decline and increases in farmland bird numbers. Analysis of this data is produced in the form of maps for each year overlaid with cropping data. Nicholas has used this cumulative data as a base to undertake conservation measures on his farm for individual species and a wider range of taxa using birds as the proxy.

Nestboxes have been erected within the spinney's (which were planted by Nicholas in the 80's) and close to wet features such as ditch re-profiles specifically for tree sparrow ensuring nest sites are close to areas of high aquatic born invertebrate to feed to their young.

A range of field ends, corners and short works are used to good effect to benefit wildlife through the provision of wild bird seed mixtures, nectar flower mixtures and cultivated plots or margins. These are often juxtaposition with spinneys or areas of scrub.

Nicholas's focus is to increase bird populations of existing species rather than attracting new species. An old dyke was widened and planted with reed with newly laid hedging adjacent to the created habitat.

Barn owls are catered for through the provision of the many barn owl towers which also cater for tree sparrows.

Excellent habitat has been created for turtle dove through pond creation and management, scrub creation and restoration and cultivated margins for arable flora providing conditions for a range of summer seed bearing arable plants.

A female grey partridge and her young were disturbed from the nectar flower mixture on the visit which also had a sawfly species in it – the larval form clearly food for hungry partridge young.

A novel way of providing for corn bunting has to "contaminate" wheat crops with a small inclusion of barley, this may influence corn buntings to lay earlier as their could be a link between their egg laying date and the ripening of grain in the nesting crop. This may have some influence but additionally it is a seed that is available late in the summer for corn buntings ahead of wheat harvest and therefore should be utilised by the species and Nicholas has observed birds using this.

Lepidoptera and plants

Although butterflies have only been recorded fully more recently (2012 and 2013), Nicholas has a passion to create the right habitat, at the right scale, in the right location for a range of Lepidoptera and Hymenoptera.

A wildflower meadow has been created on an ex-mineral extraction site and supports areas of bare ground with some great plants for butterflies and other pollinators. Common spotted orchid, viper's bugloss, yellow rattle, greater burnet, yellow loosestrife and ox-eye daisy were amongst the many plants species to be found here.

12 spp. of flowering plants including birds foot trefoil, marjoram and vipers bugloss were harvested from the farm and sown between a planted double hedge to produce a warm micro-climate to increase insect biomass but in particular to produce nectar rich habitat for butterfly species. The planted hedge includes crab apple, dog rose, hawthorn, alder buckthorn and blackthorn.

Brown argus, common blue, holly blue, small copper, comma, painted lady and clouded yellow are among the many widespread species of butterfly that occur here.

Annual lists of plants on the farm have been kept with over 70 species recorded at any one time. Night flowering catchfly and common gromwell are among some of the more scarce plant species to occur.

Other wildlife

Pipistrelle and Daubentons bats can be found on the farm with brown hare common across the holding and water voles found in the many ditches.

Commercial

Vine House Farm is the centre for a bird seed business alongside 2,500 acres of arable farmland growing crops on a 3 year rotation of grass for seed, winter wheat, stubble turnips, spring wheat/triticale. The bird seed business turns over more than the arable commercial business.

Vine House Farm takes its environmental responsibilities seriously not only ensuring protection of water courses and the provision of wildlife habitats but also in lowering the carbon footprint of the business. This is done by using renewable energy technologies from solar and small wind turbines but also recycling of resources already in use; waste heat from potato refrigeration, waste oil from tractors and a biomass boiler help to lower costs and reduce the environmental footprint.

Maintaining, restoring and creating habitats on the farm

Nicholas demonstrates a deep passion for wildlife and conservation. His deep understanding and knowledge of how wildlife declines are linked to changes in agriculture through long term monitoring also enable him to adapt management accordingly rather than following blindly. This enables Nicholas to overcome problems in a strategic manner and ensure habitats deliver the highest possible return for wildlife.

Not many farmers would attempt to cultivate margins on heavy land but Nicholas demonstrates how that is possible both agronomically and proves the benefits.

Ditches are managed sympathetically with wildlife in mind to support open areas and areas for wildlife, this has led to the creation of ditch re-profiles to give access for wildlife and encourage a range of aquatic plants.

Wild bird seed mixtures are managed to provide nectar rich habitat as well as seed habitat. A small inclusion of phacelia ensures that nectar loving insects benefit in the summer as well as granivorous birds benefiting throughout the winter.

Nectar flower mixtures have fared very well and many are maturing with over ten years of service without the need for re-establishment. This is undoubtedly down to careful management and diligence but these need to be carefully monitored going forward to ensure their future viability.

Future improvements

Nicholas discussed how planting the spinney's in the 80s may not have been the best thing to have done and wonders if planting and managing more scrub habitats would have reaped larger benefits for wildlife.

Nicholas is hoping to transfer his "*classic*" countryside stewardship scheme to the Higher Level Scheme in the future.

Promoting the conservation messages to others

Nicholas demonstrates a deep passion for wildlife and conservation. His deep understanding and knowledge of how wildlife declines are linked to changes in agriculture are evident through his long term monitoring.

Nicholas has given talks across the country for many years. He has studied agriculture and wildlife nationally and internationally and clearly conveys his conclusions from what he has learnt.

Nicholas put himself forward for the board of the water drainage board and was successfully elected. He has been able to enhance the wildlife value of drainage dyke management by influencing the board to change the management of the dyke from an intensive cutting regime to one side per annum.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION AND PHOTOGRAPHS



Tree sparrow nestboxes



Barn owl nesting tower



Common spotted orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsia*)



Corn bunting feeding on barley in wheat crop



Cultivated margin



One of the many ditches at Vine House Farm



Red kite over wild bird seed mix



Nectar flower mixture

All photographs taken at Vine House Farm, © Simon Tonkin