

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD NATIONAL JUDGING FORM

REGION/COUNTRY	MIDLANDS	FARMER	RICHARD AND INGER MEE
FARM ADDRESS	OAKLEY GRANGE FARM, LEICESTERSHIRE		
FARMING SYSTEM	ORGANIC MIXED	FARM SIZE (ha)	660

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

• **Birds**

- Formally ploughed land and river meadows in river flood plain converted to extensive grassland for wintering and breeding waders. Extensive grazing by livestock to prevent over-grazing and maintain sward.
- 3 sets of breeding barn owls in boxes, supported by plentiful small mammals that reside in the numerous 6m margins.
- Margins and mixed rotation on the arable land have created habitats for skylark and grey partridge. Both species significantly increased in number from Volunteer & Farmer Alliance surveys in 2003 to those in 2012.

• **Butterflies**

- Pollen and nectar mix is of a substantial size – sheltered by a fence now covered in brambles – food for adults. Peacock, orange tip and green-veined white seen on visit.
- Intention to plant arable land bordering woodland, paying particular attention to butterfly supporting species - detail later.

• **Plants**

- Trefoils, clovers, ribwort plantain and chicory in the grassland and wild flowers in the wildlife habitats provide nutritionally balanced forage for the livestock and a habitat and food source for the wildlife throughout the year.
- Hedges are left untrimmed over winter to allow fruit and berries to be utilized by the wildlife, and provide shelter.

• **Other wildlife**

- Otters have been sighted and construction of an otter holt is planned.
- Numerous small mammals in 6m margins, providing enough food for 3 sets of breeding barn owls.
- Numerous brown hare and bats – increase recognized since conversion to organic in 2003.
- Badgers are present on a neighbouring farm – not regarded as an issue to livestock.
- Foxes are present, rarely controlled and then only if a danger to young lambs in spring.
- Dead trees and fallen wood is left to provide homes and shelter for insect life and amphibians.

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

- Lincoln Red beef cattle are reared (supplying Waitrose) along with pigs and Lincoln Longwood sheep – both supplying the local butcher and sold in the on-site farm cafe/deli.
- Cereal and pulses grown to feed farm animals minimising the need to buy-in from external sources and thus keeping control over their diet. Fruit, salad vegetables and eggs are raised for the farm cafe.
- OELS and HLS agreement are a significant income stream – used well to buffer the SSSI, provide arable Farmland Bird Package (FBP) in field corners and manage access issues across the land.
- Conversion to organic could have been achieved without the conversion funding – the choice driven by lifestyle/ethics and personal belief rather than perceived profit from organic food.
- The organic system was chosen for rational, forward-looking reasons and much of their experience has been developed through managing a rotational system.
- Investment in on-farm cafe – purposefully placed in the middle of the farm, a thriving business engages thoroughly with the local community and schools through various events.

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?

- The farm is ideally placed, bordering a village, roads on other boundaries and only one farming neighbour (which is organic) – an advantage to minimising drift from insecticides/pesticides, enabling a strong focus on working with the land and conditions they have.
- Harrowing of cereals is avoided in the nesting season to stop destruction of nests and young birds.
- Minimum cultivation of soil, to encourage invertebrate life within and retain fertile productive soils.
- Poor looking parts of a cereal crop are left unharvested, especially if a spring crop follows, along with overwintering stubbles to provide a food source for birds.
- Reliance on mains power decreased by almost 100%. Willow is pollarded and used in the biomass boiler producing heat and water for farm and café, backed up by solar panels.

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

- Field margins are beneficial for several satyrid (brown) butterflies.
- South facing sheltered pollen and nectar mix very useful for adult butterfly food.
- Issues with access – the farm has a vast number of historic public footpaths. Although the farmers are keen to share the land, problems have arisen with dogs off leads, with birds and farm animals in the same field. The local council agreed for a footpath to be fenced off to solve the issue. Two permissive footpaths have been added to connect existing footpath networks.
- The farmers have made good use of support and advice provided by FWAG, NE and the Woodland Trust in order to design and fine tune their HLS agreement.
- When willow was coppiced, locals accused the farm of “killing trees”. A sign (in co-operation with the local parish council) was erected, and an article was published in the local paper to explain how coppicing is a management tool along with the benefits to wildlife.

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

- Intention to plant 5 acres of woodland on current arable land – trees and shrubs specifically beneficial for butterflies and moth. Inclusion of oak, buckthorn and disease resistant elm.
- Build an otter holt as otter has been sighted on several occasions.
- Review of grassland management - to improve for wading birds.
- Intention to leave an area aside, in nettles, as food for adult butterflies.
- Ongoing promotion of the farms’ ethos to neighboring communities.

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

- The farm is located in a highly populated area – this has been turned to an advantage with the investment and development of the farm café and deli.
- The farm has run two Open Farm Sunday events, in 2012 and 2013. Over 540 attended in 2012. Events included nature walks, bug hunts, pollen and nectar surveys, crop ID quizzes, child-friendly farm wildlife quizzes, hog roast (raised on the farm), promotion of local food, promotion of organic food, and a local craft market.
- The farm will host an event in June 2013 led by the Woodland Trust, an opportunity to promote its message to farmers and the public.
- The farm has regularly hosted visits for the village school children promoting organic wildlife friendly farming.
- An Easter egg hunt in 2013, over 320 attendees with no advertising save a notice on the farm gate, indicating the local support for this farm within the community.
- The farm has its own website, promoting the farm, products, wildlife, café, deli - <http://www.oakleygrange.co.uk/>
- The farm also utilizes social media to promote its messages. It is regularly updated and heavily visited. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Oakley-Grange-Farm-cafe-and-delicatessen/255609457845815>
- The farm café hosts evening events – music/food/art, again building links with local communities.
- There are two million people within a 10 mile radius of the farm – it is ideally placed to share its messages and promote conservation and wildlife friendly farming.

Summary

An impressive amount of thought, energy and effort has been put into building a sustainable tenant farm business, based on ethics they value, and turning challenges into opportunities. They have shown good use of support and advice from FWAG, Natural England and the Woodland Trust. They are convinced that organic farming is the right thing to do, for them, in their location. They have been rewarded with an increase in the abundance and diversity of wildlife and are keen to continue learning about and sharing the wildlife on their farm with the wider community.

FARMER STATEMENT:

“We are convinced that organic farming, hand-in-hand with protecting wildlife, is the right thing for us to do.”