

Farmer: Rob Allan
County: Oxfordshire
Farming system: Mixed
Farm size: 776HA

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

Birds

Deep consideration has gone into planning, creating and maintaining habitats for birdlife on his farm. For example, winter and spring sown wild bird seed mixes ensure arable birds are present in good numbers, nesting plots for corn buntings have been created, and skylark plots have been created in wheat and oats. 18 of the 19 farmland bird species are present on the estate. Rob has created 150 ha of overwintered stubble and forage stubbles within his HLS agreement, which fits well within with his farm. Extended winter stubbles coupled with fallow plots have benefitted breeding lapwing and over 10% of the arable land on the farm is in conservation habitats. A neighbouring farm now out winters its cattle and sheep, providing ideal sites for overwintering lapwing and golden plover. Moreover, numerous nest boxes have been erected for tree sparrows and barn owls, with both breeding successfully on the farm. Rob has also extended established hedgerows, providing a diverse network across the farm.

Butterflies/moths

It is estimated that 26/36 species found in Oxfordshire breed on this site (including White-letter Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary), supported by floral plant species in the margins. Sorrel and native grasses are also well distributed. This provides good habitat and food sources to a wealth of species. The diverse hedgerow mix across the farm provides varied habitat for butterflies. Also specific habitats have been created such as woodland thinning and edge scrapes/scallops to encourage the Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper. Further work is planned to establish the Dark Green Fritillary. A sloping arable field has been reverted to a wildflower meadow, in addition to flower rich margins on both light and heavy soils providing a considerable network across the farm. The slope leads to a lake, where the edges have been cleared of trees to allow in light so meadow species can extend their range. Blocks of pollen and nectar mixes have provided fantastic habitat and food sources for many butterfly species such as the marbled white. Several areas of nettles are left which provide food and nest sites.

Plants

Rob has cultivated margins for arable flora leading to Shepherds needle becoming established. Care has been taken to use native sourced seed when creating new projects.

Other wildlife

Bees are a high focus here, and have been shown to respond to 'the sandwich margins', or flower rich margins next to legume-rich pollen and nectar mixes. Moreover, bare ground creation next to woodland has provided habitat for mining bees; this is voluntary and is not part of the HLS scheme. Comprehensive species records also list Natterers bat, Long eared bat from 20-40 years ago, water vole in 1984 and the Common lizard which was listed in 1960.

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

Rob's management choices on this large estate need to be commercially robust in order to be approved by the estate owners, board and interest groups. Much of the conservation work is possible as all the arable crops attract a conservation premium (Conservation Grade/ Leaf Marque/Red Tractor FAS). The farming income is important to the estate, yet it is operated within certain constraints eg: no oil seed rape on the higher land, due to conflict with a thoroughbred stud and racing stables on site. Rob's aim for the farm is to deliver an effective balance between food production and food for wildlife – Rob's ethos is that Upton is "farming with wildlife". He makes a compelling case that siting wildlife features on the least productive parts of the fields improves food production profitability on the rest of the field. Average yields are increasing on the more productive land, and Rob believes that maximum yields come from top quality habitats. His farming ethos includes a focus on the sustainability of the farm. Two woodchip boilers (with plans for a third) in the commercial units (created from a redundant dairy) are fed with woodland thinning from the estate (in perpetua), with help from WIG, with butterflies benefitting. The heat is sold to the occupiers on a therm basis. One building has solar PV units to supply power and again, these are to be installed on further suitable buildings. Rob has decreased the farms dependence on the oil based fertilisers by buying in local chicken litter and coffee waste (from Kraft) to use on the arable land, thus making the most of local resources, decreasing costs and increasing the sustainability of the farm. Rob is looking for a local source of phosphates in order to complete the NPK requirements of the estate.

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 management of the estate is targeting priority farmland birds (including corn bunting, lapwing, tree sparrow and turtle dove), butterflies and bees. Rob argues that "if conservation is important to the farm, you make time to seek out the best advice from the beginning". The advice gained from wildlife consultants, an independent agronomist, Natural England, Butterfly Conservation Trust and the RSPB is then incorporated by Rob into his ideas for the management of the farm, and he considers wildlife when he is choosing the options available to him. Rob's estate is involved in environmental trials for Natural England and others, and many of the findings are incorporated into the stewardship agreements on a national level. Rob takes on board suggestions, whilst being conscious that it will have to fit with the Estate and the owners' interests.

Rob's trials of winter sown versus spring sown wild bird seed mixes have identified practical solutions which allow heavy land areas to grow high yielding areas of wild bird food. This is transferable to other heavy land farms, providing other farmers with a proven method of establishing and delivering high quality bird food from land that would previously have potentially delivered very little.

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

The wildflower habitats are of a very high quality, and wild bird seed mixes are well thought out. Also, the quality is very good, considering the scale of work and breadth of interests going on the Estate. The cultivated margins for arable plants were tricky to establish, but through focus and dedication Rob believes that they have found a good way forward. It has now been accepted and written into new agreements that this option can and should be rotational, thus delivering great

results on new areas every year. Most rare arable weeds are annual and able to thrive under this management and recharge the seed bank each year. Also the estate is good at rotating arable options to minimize weed problems and so a range of management techniques are incorporated to ensure maximum potential. Some margins are mown in places and the hay crop is removed to decrease fertility, whilst others are grazed to a varying degree- field margins are present in all fields and link into permanent grasslands and other habitats, giving very few barriers to seed and species dispersal. "Rougher" areas of nettles are dotted about the farm, providing a valuable resource for butterflies and nesting habitat for avian species.

The woodland work carried out with Butterfly Conservation is not a requirement of the HLS scheme and is entirely voluntary; flower margins and bird seed mixes to fulfil the requirements of the Campaign of the Farm Environment have been sown, over that required for the Estate's HLS scheme. Also two existing semi natural grassland fields have been protected using stewardship options and sympathetic management techniques.

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

Rob has many plans! He intends to He intends to:

- Spread hay from the reverted wildflower meadow with herbs into reversion site next door with low herb content
- Continue to look at installing stock owned by the estate once it is profitable to do so in terms of livestock cost, rearing, and benefits to wildlife on the farm
- Increase the area of existing woodland scallops for butterflies and create new sites as they have the perfect environment for a number of rare local butterfly species
- Decrease competing vegetation in open soil areas to provide nesting sites for butterflies
- Increase woodland thinning programme and embed it in the Estate's ongoing workplan and install a third woodchip boiler
- Clear area around lake edges but removing some trees and thinning the ground layer in order to allow wildflower seed dispersal from adjacent meadow to colonise down to waters edge
- Utilise the natural water springs on the estate by capturing and storing this resource for the needs of the estate, in order to decrease the estates reliance on external sources
- Ensure that soil management is a high priority by continuing to mintill heavy land and keep abreast of the latest technological developments
- Investigate rotating cultivated plots for arable weeds, as although results are brilliant in year 1, they decline in year 2
- Replace an area of conifer with mixed species of broadleaf woodland including areas of bushy scrubland with the intention of providing ideal habitat for turtle dove, one of the species most under threat in Warwickshire and missing from Upton at the moment
- Plant a new woodland coppice this autumn 2012, with the intention of introducing traditional coppice management, which will provide stakes and binders for their hedge laying as well as create a new habitat to the estate.

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

Rob is an excellent communicator; he comes across as thoughtful, commercially-grounded, but very enthusiastic and passionate about what he has built up at Upton. He runs over fifty educational access visits per year, ranging from primary school children to degree level students, to the Chinese

and Japanese Ministry of Agriculture. UK farming industry groups have visited the farm including Defra, Natural England, Campaign for the Farmed Environment and the RSPB. Neighbouring farmers have visited the farm and seen various agri environment plans in action; Rob is a keen advocate and firmly believes that is more advantageous to “show people how to farm for food and wildlife” rather than legislate and force farmers into various methods and styles of production. Local youth clubs, gardening clubs and Eco clubs as well as Earthwatch have all visited the Estate, and with five miles of permissive footpaths and bridle ways, locals are welcomed to enjoy the wealth of wildlife present on the farm. The land around the commercially let units is planted up with wildflower mixes rather than mown “tidy” grass strips, inspiring conversations and further dissemination with the business sector about the conservation and the wider work on the Estate. Finally, Upton Estate won the Cherwell Business Award for most sustainable business 2012 and Rob is a finalist in the Farmers Weekly Countryside Farmer of the Year award for the second year.