

Farming for wildlife

Hall Farm is much more than a very good shoot and highly efficient farming operation, as MIKE BARNES discovered

There are conservation driven farms, there are wild bird shoots and there are reared bird shoots on intensively farmed land, but there can be few who manage to combine all of these philosophies into one operation in a way that Sutton Estates does at Hall Farm in the Lincolnshire Wolds.




Sir Richard Sutton

The list of awards won by Hall Farm gives a broad hint. Malting Barley award in 1997, 2004 Silver Lapwing Award (both England and UK), 2004 Lincolnshire Grey Partridge Award, and 2007 Natural England Future of Farming Award. It is also a LEAF Demonstration farm. Added to which it has 23 days of seriously good pheasant and partridge shooting.

Make no mistake, this is a highly efficient farming operation, but at the same time its approach to being environmentally friendly is all embracing. This should come as no surprise, as owner Sir Richard Sutton, won the Purdey Award for Game & Conservation on his Benham, Berkshire, estate in 2002. He is a keen shot, conservationist and farmer in equal





measure. The driving force behind Hall Farm however, is estate manager Chris Dowse, who in turn is quick to credit the Sutton Estates Board and family for their support.

Hall Farm covers 6,000 acres in and around Stainton-le-Vale, a pretty village nestled in the Wolds – the contours of the land would come as a shock to those who regard Lincolnshire as flat. It was bought by Sir Richard Sutton’s Settled Estates in the 60s, but they already had ownership of 850 acres on the Humber Bank for many years and to which a further 850 acres was added recently. There is also an additional further 600 acres in between the two main blocks. All three farms are in the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme.

Of the 23 days shooting, eight are taken by the family, the remainder are sold – bags are mostly in the region of 200, though there are three or four 100 bird days. The quality of the birds presented, pheasants and partridges, is exceptional – even on the filthy wet day when our photographer was present! The let days are mostly sold to regulars. Redleg partridges are shown on most drives as well as pheasants – though there will also be some wild greys.

“We ask people not to shoot the greys,” says Chris Dowse. “Though we have no fining system and the odd mistake ➡

SHOOTING & CONSERVATION

Operation bumble bee

During the spring of 2009 the Sutton Estates management took part in a day's environmental training, delivered by the Syngenta Operation Pollinator team, writes Geoff Coates.

The training is directed at high quality habitat (wildlife crops) delivery. Farmers are the UK's biggest and most important provider of wildlife crops, so training regarding the selection of the right mixtures, correct sowing, establishment methods and aftercare management are vitally important. Successful wildlife crops are not just drilled and left but cared for just as with any other crop on the farm. The training allowed the estate to target specific species and establish a range of quality habitats which complement their soil type, farming systems, their landscape. Independent research shows there is a clear link between the creation of suitable habitats and abundant wildlife.

These newly created wildlife crops will deliver huge increases in biodiversity from the bumble bee species and butterflies that visit the pollen and nectar to the many farmland bird species and game that feed upon the wild bird seed mixtures. Both habitats feature in our existing Environmental Stewardship Schemes in the UK and also ideally fit the criteria to support the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

Sutton Estates at Hall Farm, Stainton-le-Vale demonstrates how successful sustainable farming and abundant wildlife can exist on the same farm. Put back quality managed habitats and the wildlife will return, it really is as simple as that.

Geoff Coates is the Syngenta Agri-Environment Manager
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PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES MARSHALL ROBERTS

90 **FIELDSPORTS**



Margins are now in place around almost all fields



Pollen and nectar three-year mix in full flower, as a 24m field margin

“No-one realised just what a devastating effect it was to have on wildlife.”



Pollen and nectar mix in its first year, showing annuals with the mix which will need mowing to move the mix to its perennial phase in year two

happens, but on the whole people are very good. It was an excellent year for English partridges and we had a lot of broods hatched successfully. We have an excellent keeper in Tim Moss (Gamekeeper of the Year in 2004) who initially counted the greys on the whole of the farm, but being single handed it's simply impossible to fit it all in - he is however vigilant on vermin control.”

Chris arrived at Hall Farm 21 years ago. Living in the countryside near Ottery St Mary in Devon, he enjoyed a classic country childhood. “There were no boundaries. Everything in the countryside fascinated - birds, fish, butterflies. I remember going into traditional hay meadows where there would be legions of butterflies of endless varieties. We collected birds' eggs, caught newts - it was what you did. As habitat, landscape, wildlife and biodiversity always interested me, it was inevitable that I would study agriculture at Reading. Farming was always going to be my life.”

He says his entry into farming as a career, was, like all other students of the time, shaped by the 1947 Agriculture Act which was introduced

following the debacle of the Second World War where Britain was unable to feed itself. The act meant that there were reasonably reliable incomes enabling farms to invest, and with drainage and building grants, be able to feed the nation. Of course we now know it all led to surpluses.

“The big change to the countryside however took place in 1976, within a couple of years of joining the EEC. So much habitat was removed, and the use of pesticides led to greater yields and a sharp decline in a majority of farmland bird species. You couldn't blame the farmers - they were doing what had been asked of them. And to be fair, I think no-one realised just what a devastating effect it was to have on wildlife. Like many others I became very concerned at what was happening, and when I came to Lincolnshire one of the first things I did was put a tea chest on a beam in a barn. A barn owl nested in it and there have been nests every year since. We now have 25 boxes across the farm (most with permanent grass nearby) and in the last 10 years have ringed 120 barn owls.”

What has really made a difference is Countryside Stewardship followed



SHOOTING & CONSERVATION



Planning the covers... Chris Dowse (right) with Belmont's Paul Broughton

by ELS and HLS schemes. "With CS this was the first time farmers were given an income on profit forgone when habitat has replaced cropping. We embraced the schemes and as a consequence have seen a massive increase in barn owls, partridges, lapwings and many other species.

"We went into Entry Level right across the estate, then into Higher Level in February 2008 so that now most of our fields have six metre margins - heavy land has five metres. The schemes also help to protect fragile habitats, streams, ditches, woodland - wildlife activity usually takes place at the edge of things. I have to say it works and farmers have to react to economic conditions, and these schemes in addition to helping the environment, also provide an income stream. Though there may be some bureaucracy to overcome, FWAG have been incredibly helpful. Taking natural farming skills (growing things and looking after animals) in other directions has big benefits. It's diversification for which you don't need planning permission - and unlike perhaps building a hotel or wind farm, it creates no local animosity."

The farm hedgerows are tall with good reason. "A tall hedge prompts a hunting barn owl to fly higher, so fewer get killed when crossing over the roads. It also provides more protection and food for the other birds. I loathe seeing hedges cut in early autumn - their berries are a food source for a host of birds."

They plant wild bird mixes extensively - 20 different ones. "I remember

before we had the margins seeing two adjacent fields of winter barley being harvested - a big covey of wild grey partridges had nowhere to go and it was as if the roof had been taken off their house. So we provide them with a 'house' which won't expose them."

The covers and margins have been designed and planted with the help of Paul Broughton of Belmont Seeds, who, with the estate works closely with Syngenta. "They have an initiative called Operation Bumble Bee which I felt was very impressive. It highlights the need for food for bumble bees, the great pollinators, in the early spring. In the absence of anything appropriate they gravitate to goat (pussy) willow. After Syngenta's visit, when holidaying in Scotland my wife and I saw some pussy willow, and sure enough it was covered in bumble bees. But we have to provide something to help them on the farm - no bees, no pollination."

Inevitably along with increased abundance of bird life, have come pairs of breeding buzzards and sparrowhawks. "But by providing good cover for partridges and pheasants, particularly at key times, they are not a concern. They may take the odd weak bird, but will more likely look for a tit or a pigeon. Nesting and brood cover are vital."

As a lifelong RSPB member, keen shot and innovative estate manager, he has, with the sympathetic support and encouragement of the directors, embraced the choice available to farms and shoots, to create something quite special at Hall Farm.



"Will it come to me?"



Gamekeeper Tim Moss



Wet but happy!

Carbon audit

A carbon audit of the estate came out with the CO2 equivalent production of 1.55 tonnes per hectare. "I had no real idea how this stood up," Chris Dowse explained. "But subsequently discovered that the average for this sort of estate is around 5 tonnes. So we're obviously delighted but plan to cut it further.

"Over 500 acres of arable land has been converted to grassland, half of which is to protect archaeology - there are remains of both Roman and medieval villages, and one of only two nunneries of a type in the UK, plus burial mounds.

"The other 250 acres is being used to recreate Bayons Park at Tealby, where we plan to plant lines of trees, clumps and woodland. We also have native breed cattle - Lincoln Reds are one of the best beef breeds. Also, to further help reduce carbon footprint, we are

contemplating grass clover break crops, with grazing sheep or cattle, leaving behind fertility without resorting to nitrogen (and all the fossil fuel it entails)."

Driven birds

Like most shoots which have developed a lot of bird friendly margins, it results in a scattering of game all over the estate, which is obviously good, other than when being driven on shoot days! It can involve a lot of gathering in. But they feel this is a small price to pay for holding birds and keeping them at home.

Scheme applications

Chris feels that when making a bid for HLS it is important to make it all-embracing. "This can include a measure of public access. We have joined existing footpaths for instance with permissive rights of way to provide circular walks around the farm. It's really important."



Birds well presented off the hills

