

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

Many birds and animals live life on the hedge – let's give them a hand

The humble hedgerow provides food and shelter for many of our farmland birds but the drive towards more extensive farming and less mixed farming since the 1950s has seen many of them lost.

Through late November and early winter, the blackthorn, hawthorn and rowan cling on to their berries, and beech hedge desperately hold onto its brown, withered leaves until their spring drop. Hedges, along with farm woodland, field margins, stubbles and headlands, provide that semi natural habitat on which many of our farmland birds have come to rely.

But read the latest Defra report Wild Bird Populations in the UK 1970 – 2016 and it's a disconcerting picture where farmland bird species have been hard hit and some such as corn bunting, grey partridge, turtle dove and tree sparrow are identified as being in "strong decline".

Generalist species too, such as yellow wagtail, kestrel and greenfinch, once far more common over farmland, are also struggling.

But it is not all doom and gloom. For example Scottish Government data shows that it has contributed £32 million through its Rural Development Programme to create some 2655 km of hedgerows, all of which will benefit biodiversity. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, as well as pressing government to do more, has developed a bank of science tracking



Dr Dave Parish encourages people to be aware of the wildlife under their feet when out for a winter farmland walk

how habitat – hedges, field margins and neighbouring woodland – provides food and cover for birds and other wildlife such as brown hares and bats. This work is being undertaken at the Trust's Allerton project, and at Rothamsted, and now in Scotland at the Game & Wildlife Scottish Demonstration Farm at Auchnerran on Deeside.

Out on a winter walk on Boxing Day, to shake down the excesses of too much turkey, cake and too many chocolates, it's worth stopping to take a look at the hedgerows.

A good hedge can take up to 10 years to become properly established (and blackthorn can reputedly live up to 100 years) and, cut to an 'A' shape, this provides shelter but limits the shading of herbaceous plants beneath. It is home to finches, blackbirds and thrushes, and no surprise then that the chaffinch and blackbird were the two most commonly seen species recorded in the Big Farmland Bird Count in Scotland in February.

The field margins below the hedge provide valuable food, shelter and nesting cover for grey partridge, yel-

lowhammers, warblers, whitethroat and other species, so do consider what you might be disturbing as your dog snuffles his way through these inviting strips of ground.

The hawthorn's dark red berries are a staple diet for blackbirds and thrushes and can be stripped completely by the foraging of winter visitors such as redwing and fieldfare that come here to escape the bitter cold of Russia and Scandinavia.

There are valuable links for biodiversity between hedges, field margins and farm woodland, not just for farmland birds and mammals, but also for insects and pollinators.

Clear scientific evidence has been found between a rich harvest of berries and the success of pollinating insects. Prescriptions through the SRDP particularly have helped Scottish farmers to maintain and promote habitats that benefit biodiversity and, come Brexit, early indications are that future subsidy support will be significantly geared towards farming for the environment.

There is a delicate balance, however, between farming for nature and



↑ The humble chaffinch was one of the most commonly seen species of birds

farming for food. It's not easy when farm businesses also need to make a profit to survive and no one really knows what can be expected post Brexit and 2021. The general public has a responsibility also – think where you walk and what you might disturb. In and around farmland,

keep to footpaths where possible, and be conscious of where your dog is and what it might be doing!

Farmers have every reason to take pride in the hedges in their stewardship – we know the benefits they bring and the part they play in farmland conservation. So, enjoy the

in Scotland during the important Big Farmland Bird Count, which took place in February this year

festive break, and enjoy your walk!

The Big Farmland Bird Count takes place between 9 and 18 February 2018, when farmers are asked to spend 30 minutes on any day between these dates recording the species and numbers of birds seen on one particular area of their farm. The count

is sponsored by BASF and delivered with FWAG Association and LEAF, and support from the NFU and CLA. Google 'Big Farmland Bird Count' for more details.

Dr Dave Parish, head of lowland research, Scotland, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.



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We need to grow more trees – how about a Chief Forester to make it happen?

Planting is vital to support jobs and climate targets, says Stuart Goodall

It is rare for a draft Bill to secure cross-chamber support, but that's just what happened last month with the first stage of the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Bill.

The support is testament to efforts by all parties at Holyrood to deliver a positive future for the £1 billion forestry and wood processing sector in Scotland, the 25,000-plus jobs it provides and the rural communities it supports.

Credit is also due to Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing MSP, who made it clear he wanted to work across the floor to take the Bill forward.

However, the support came with caveats and the Bill will be amended before it becomes law. A principal

area for improvement is the lack of a commitment to increasing the area of Scotland's forests and woodlands and to guaranteeing future timber supply.

There are a variety of reasons for greater tree planting. As head of the sector's trade body, representing more than 600 forestry and wood-using businesses across Scotland, I understand the need for confidence in future wood supply. I hear from my members every day that they need that certainty to continue the investment that supports so many jobs.

Strong wood supply in recent years, thanks to high levels of planting in the past, has led to significant investment by big players in the sector – sawmillers BSW at Fort William, James Jones at Lockerbie and in the North-

East, and panel board manufacturer Norbord. The £95 million invested in Norbord's plant at Dalcross, Inverness, represents one of the biggest inward investments in Scotland for many years and is both a massive vote of confidence in the local workforce and in Scottish forestry and wood processing.

The signs for the future are positive; new tree planting is nudging up towards the Scottish Government's current annual target of 10,000 hectares and might get close to 12,000 hectares in 2018.

Future targets have been pushed upwards, to 15,000 hectares by 2025, with clear links to policy areas important to the Scottish Government – using more domestic timber in house-building and increas-

ing forestry's already significant contribution to Scotland's ambitious climate change targets.

Against that backdrop, making a commitment to planting as part of an assessment of future wood supply needs and meeting Scotland's carbon reduction targets seems like a natural next step – and during the period leading up to the final passing of the Forestry and Land Management Bill, Confor will be pressing hard for this to happen.

While the current Scottish Government is committed to driving up planting, with cross-party support, this is not a 'bankable' position and forestry is a long-term business. We need analysis of future wood supply to be part of every future forestry strategy – a feature of the

draft Bill. This will provide assurance that the Government understands the need to look to the future when acting now.

We also need to accept in Scotland that we will not meet our greenhouse gas reduction targets through reducing emissions alone. We have to take carbon out of the atmosphere and tree planting is currently the only proven 'technology'. It is also staggeringly cheap compared to the carbon capture and storage that usually 'captures' the headlines.

A second important issue in the Bill is that of forestry expertise. It makes sense to ensure that forestry advisers are in the centre of government, especially at a time of change to rural policy and mounting pressure to tackle climate change. However, we do not

want to lose the professional knowledge and skills of foresters in the civil service, as well as the motivating sense of being part of the 'forestry team' in government. It is crucial that the Bill recognises the need for continued expertise and one way of promoting this would be through the creation of a new role of Chief Forester.

This was a suggestion by Confor early in the legislative process and it is gratifying to see how many people and organisations support the idea.

As the Bill winds its way through Parliament, Confor will continue to feed in to the process. It is important that the voice of the industry is heard clearly when new legislation is being shaped and Confor has worked with MSPs of all parties to explain the issues that really matter to forestry



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