



Let's be fair to **NATURE**

Farmer Robert Law in the wildflower habitat on his farm, with Conservation Grade's Brin Hughes. New initiatives are helping farmers like Robert produce crops in a way that helps nature.

From farm to bird feeder, there's a revolution happening in your garden bird seed – and the RSPB is leading the way, says **Adam Marek.**

Big Garden Birdwatch is coming, and maybe you're already getting prepared by stocking up with bird food. But the seed in your feeder is undergoing a dramatic change. RSPB bird food now reaches a special environmental standard. It means something big: every time you feed the birds in your garden with RSPB bird food, you're simultaneously feeding birds across Europe.

FAIR TO NATURE

Simon Tonkin is the Conservation Manager at Conservation Grade – an organisation that seeks to marry the worlds of nature conservation and food production. Simon is on sabbatical from the RSPB, where he spent over 10 years creating wildlife habitats, so he's ideally placed to be working on Fair to Nature – an innovative new scheme of food accreditation that allows consumers like you and me to tell when our food has come from farms where nature is given a home.

"We've seen serious declines in farmland wildlife across the EU," Simon says. "We're here to deploy measures that allow farmers to grow crops while protecting and enhancing wildlife, all based on the latest scientific research."

To qualify for the Fair to Nature accreditation, farmers must fulfil a number of obligations: they must give 10% of their land to nature conservation; they must attend training in managing habitats for wildlife at least one day every year; and their farm must be audited every 12-24 months for its environmental measures, ▶

energy efficiency and the quality of the wildlife habitat provided there. It's a big commitment, but the farmers are paid a premium for doing it and they get the pleasure of knowing they're helping boost wildlife on their land.

As of January 2015, 76% of the seeds in RSPB bird food are Fair to Nature accredited, and by the end of 2015, it will be 90%.

BIRDS WITHOUT BORDERS

If you're a farmer wanting to earn the Fair to Nature accreditation, the first step is a visit to your site from Simon and the team. The team includes people from Conservation Grade, the RSPB and, if it's an overseas farm, the local BirdLife International Partner. Together, they provide expertise in ecology, agriculture and conservation.

Every farm is different, Simon explains. You can't just provide a one-size-fits-all list of advice for helping wildlife on your land and then send it to farmers in France, Portugal and Senegal. The wildlife of each region has its own specific needs, so the process of accreditation is done face-to-face, with the team giving bespoke advice to each farmer.

Simon's team at Conservation Grade works very closely with the Birds Without Borders team at the RSPB. Birds Without Borders is a group of projects to save our declining long-distance migrant birds.

"The demand for food around the world is growing and bird populations are declining," says Danae Sheehan, head of Birds Without Borders. "The current reality is we're not able to create enough nature reserves to save them. We must protect habitats wherever we can, but we also need to influence the way arable land is managed, for the benefit of both people and birds."

The Fair to Nature accreditation has huge potential to help our struggling migrants – especially our most vulnerable farmland bird, the turtle dove.

THE TROUBLE WITH TURTLE DOVES

Right now, the turtle doves that purred in British fields in spring are spending the winter in West Africa. It's the

Left: Simon Tonkin works with growers to make nature a priority.



Products that help wildlife

Look out for the Fair to Nature mark when shopping. Buying from these companies will help safeguard wild flora and fauna.

About Fair to Nature Conservation Grade began working with farmers to improve biodiversity over 30 years ago, and implements the Fair to Nature hallmark. This nature-friendly scheme is a way to make sure produce is grown in a way that encourages wildlife – so when you see the hallmark, you can be confident that you're helping wildlife. Fair to Nature is the only hallmark dedicated to bringing nature back into our countryside, and is now expanding to a variety of

brands and products across Europe and beyond, including:

RSPB BIRD FOOD
Simply the best bird food on the market. The best quality seeds are carefully selected to provide the ultimate nutrition for your garden birds. Every aspect of their production considers wildlife and the environment.



STEVE'S LEAVES
A range of tasty mixed leaves grown in Britain, Spain and Portugal on farms that support wildlife. Their healthy salad mixes include fennel tops, pea shoots, baby watercress and wild red rocket.

ALLINSON FLOUR
Allinson's top-quality plain and self-raising flours use wheat grown on Fair to Nature farms.



DINTON FARM EGGS
These free-range eggs are sourced from a high welfare family farm in Buckinghamshire, where Fair to Nature practices are applied to the hens' paddocks and the grain they eat.

THE TOMATO STALL
These tomato growers on the Isle of Wight grow more than 40 varieties.



dry season there. The landscape is arid. The grass is brown. The cattle of nomadic herders gather around the few acacia-fringed pools. Soon these pools will dry up and people will have to dig deep to find water. The human population has quadrupled here in the past 40 years – an explosion that's created a huge demand for commodities. And just as in the UK, this increased demand for food has resulted in intensive farming, at the expense of wildlife habitats.

Senegal, in West Africa, lies partly in the Sahel region – a band of relatively verdant land that crosses Africa, marking the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. You can imagine the relief that turtle doves and other migrating birds must feel, after their 3,000-mile journey through Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and the fierce conditions of the Sahara, to finally reach food and water. A place they can safely spend the winter, and recoup their energies for making the return trip to our shores in spring to breed.

But the journey has been getting harder and harder, as turtle doves struggle to find food – in both their UK summer grounds and Senegal winter grounds where they might arrive to find their foraging areas turned into farm crops – and all the way along their migration route too. It's no wonder fewer and fewer of our migrant birds make it back every year to breed. Since 1995, the UK has lost 88% of its turtle doves.

"In the 1960s, turtle doves were having four broods in a summer," says Simon Tonkin. "In the 1990s, they were having one or two broods. Today, turtle doves are lucky if they can raise a single brood."

FEEDING BIRDS ALONG THE FLYWAY

The RSPB and Conservation Grade are specifically seeking out farms to supply their bird food that sit along the migration routes of our most vulnerable birds. Every farm that adopts the Fair to Nature principles means another safe pit stop where birds can find the food they need to make the next leg of their epic journey.

The RSPB's decision to insist that its bird food comes from Fair to Nature farms has hugely expanded the reach of these conservation principles. ▶

European sunflower fields help feed migrating birds.

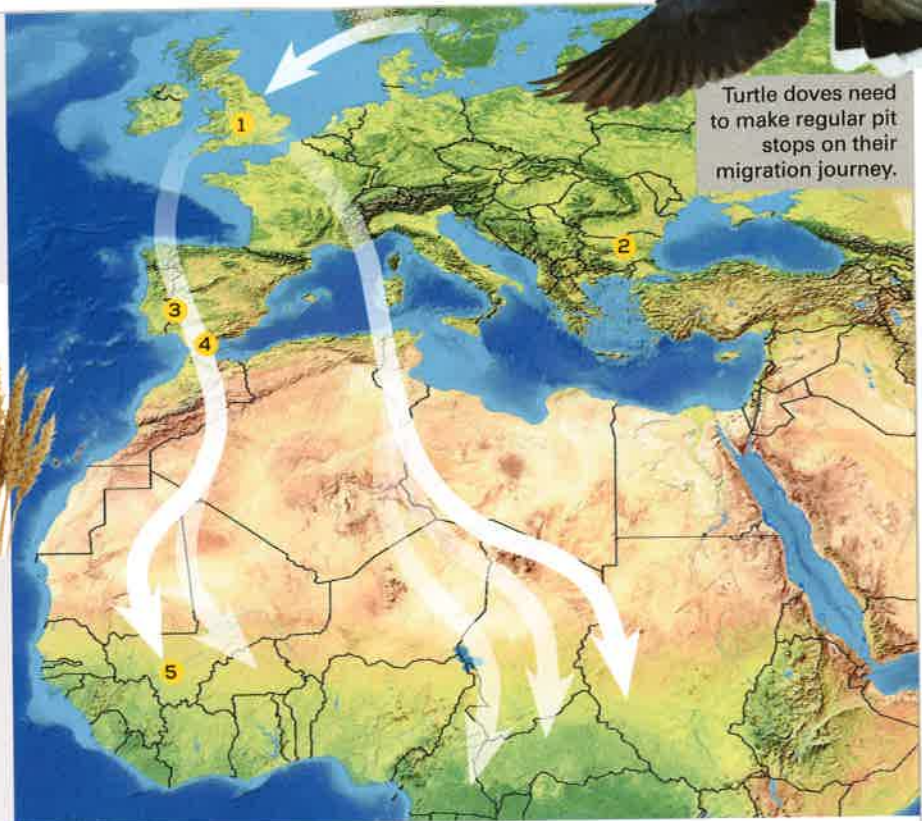


bird food

Fair to Nature farmers are helping our birds as they move along their migration routes.



Turtle doves need to make regular pit stops on their migration journey.



1 Oats, barley, maize and wheat from the UK

In the UK cereal fields where migrant birds spend the summer, Fair to Nature farmers provide a good mixture of nectar-rich plants to encourage insects. They also plant fumitory – a vital plant for turtle doves.



2 Sunflowers from Bulgaria

RSPB bird seed now contains sunflower hearts from Bulgaria, where farms can be the size of Manchester. Fair to Nature growers set aside 10% of land to provide bug-rich feeding grounds for crested larks, corn buntings and red-backed shrikes.



3 Salad leaves from Spain and Portugal

Steve's Leaves (see page 63) are grown in Fair to Nature fields along the Iberian flyway. These fields provide a safe pit stop for turtle doves and yellow wagtails, before they continue South.



4 Salt from the Bay of Cadiz

Marisima 21 produces salt using traditional artisan techniques, collecting salt by hand without any chemicals. Management of the salt-pan environment has boosted waders, flamingos and the fish they rely on.



5 Peanuts from West Africa

RSPB bird food will soon include Fair to Nature peanuts from West Africa. In the intense heat, farmers will create pools for birds to drink from, and preserve acacia scrub where turtle doves can roost, rather than felling it for firewood.



“You’re helping the birds in your garden **SURVIVE** the winter and you’re helping **OUR MIGRANT BIRDS** in Europe and West Africa.”

Now, the Fair to Nature principles are being adopted in France, Spain and Portugal, and soon in Africa, where the RSPB and Conservation Grade have already started exploratory work to focus on the production of peanuts in Senegal and The Gambia.

HELPING THREE WAYS

RSPB Product Manager, Matthew Morris, tells me that now, when you buy RSPB bird food you’re helping wildlife in three ways: “You’re helping the birds in your garden survive the winter here, you’re helping our migrant birds in Europe and, shortly,

West Africa, and you’re supporting other RSPB projects as well, because the profits from your RSPB bird food go straight to funding more conservation work.”

The RSPB is encouraging other bird food suppliers, premium food brands and supermarkets to adopt the Fair to Nature principles. So if you’re stocking up on seed mix for your Big Garden Birdwatch, look for the RSPB logo and know that you’re helping our turtle doves and other summer migrants travel safely home. ■



To find out more about Conservation Grade and the Fair to Nature hallmark, including a list of products, visit conservationgrade.org

➔ **SHOP FOR BIRDSEED**

The RSPB’s range of Fair to Nature bird feed is available at RSPB reserve shops and can be ordered online at shopping.rspb.org.uk



Photos: Bob Glover, Andy Hay (both rspb-images.com)