

Ingham's WORLD

STROLL through much of the British countryside and you could be forgiven for thinking that you are in a wildlife desert. You'll always see pigeons, crows and rabbits but may have to walk miles before spotting yellowhammers, lapwings or water voles.

Part of the reason is the intensification of agriculture. For years fields were no different from factories. Matters are improving thanks to green farm grants, with thousands of farmers working to boost the environment. But farmland wildlife is still dramatically reduced compared to decades ago.

In the past 60 years 97 per cent of our herb-rich meadows have been lost. Since 1970 our farmland birds and bumblebees have declined by more than half.

There is, however, another way that goes beyond the demands of green grants. This year the Conservation Grade marks 25 years of helping farmers protect wildlife – and make a profit.

The deal is simple: Farmers devote 10 per cent of their land to a variety of managed wildlife habitats. In return they get a contract with firms such as Jordans, Allinson or Vitacress, which pay a premium because they can sell “wildlife friendly” food for more.

The farmers create meadows with nectar-rich plants such as clover. The meadows pull in bumblebees that pollinate crops or aphids which feed other wildlife.

Fields sown with wild-bird food keep tree sparrows and linnets alive in winter. Tussocky grassland supports spiders, beetles and voles which sustain barn owls. Hedgerows are planted, ditches dug, ponds and woodland restored.

The result is a massive boost to wildlife. Studies of various CG farms show 30 times as many mammals in the habitat areas than in the cropland, 41 per cent more birds, eight times as many butterflies, 13 times as many bumblebees and up to 100 times more bugs.

Yet CG allows pesticides on the crops. It is the creation of wildlife habitats that does the trick.



● **BIRDS** are no mugs. A blue tit has been roosting in our camera nestbox for the past fortnight, settling down every night at about 5.40pm. When it's raining, he comes in about an hour earlier. He wisely clocks off early when the weather's bad.

● **WITH** the rain lashing down and temperatures falling, it is hard to believe that spring is here. But a Woodland Trust website uses satellite imagery to show the greening of Britain. The animated maps show the country turn from cream to brown as chlorophyll breaks down in plants over winter and then from to yellow to green as the plants are reborn (www.naturescalendar.org.uk/findings/spring_from_outer_space)

GREEN TIP: Deter cats from bird tables by putting citrus peel, eggshells, prickly plants or stone chippings underneath. Cats Protection says moggies hate them all.



BRITAIN yesterday created the world's largest marine reserve – 250,000 square miles in the heart of the Indian