

Conservation Grade

Nature Friendly Farming

Winter 2009

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**Biodiversity is life.
Biodiversity is our life.**



Celebrating the International Year of Biodiversity 2010

2010 has been declared the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB) by the United Nations and as an IYB partner, Conservation Grade



Common Toadflax

is planning a range of activities during the year to show how it delivers a huge range of benefits to animal and plant life.

According to IYB, biodiversity is the variety of plant and animal life in an ecosystem, or on the Earth as a whole. The greater the variety of plant and animal life, the healthier the ecosystem. It says:

“These ecosystems provide us with food, fuel, health, wealth and other services vital to our well-being. We form part of the Earth’s biodiversity and yet our activities are destroying it at an alarming rate”.



Pond Dipping

Throughout 2010 the organisations partnering IYB will be promoting the importance of safeguarding biodiversity and indeed our very existence! IYB says: “Much has been lost already, but we can do a lot to prevent further degradation if we act now”.

The good news is there are many success stories and Conservation Grade’s *Nature Friendly Farming* is one of them. By encouraging the establishment and management of a range of specific wildlife habitats, the *Nature Friendly Farming* system has been proven to increase farmland biodiversity.

So watch out for a number of activities during the year when we will be reaching out to food chain, farming, business and consumer audiences to show why *Nature Friendly Farming* really does deliver the biodiversity agenda.

And visit www.biodiversityislife.net to find out more about the threats to global biodiversity, the success stories, and other events going on throughout the UK in 2010.



Corncrake

T. Nevard

CG protocol updated to benefit birds and bees



Bird populations will enjoy a 33% boost in food supplies on some CG farms next winter following a revision of the Conservation Grade protocol.

The protocol is increasing the areas required to be sown with wild bird seed mixes such as cereals, quinoa, sunflower and millet, from 1.5% to 2%. It is also newly supporting the introduction of bee hives on all its farms as a 'desirable option', to go with the existing requirement for owl and bat boxes.

The new recommendation to include bee hives is simply providing further opportunities for honey bees to utilise the food supplies from the wild flower and legume habitats required by the protocol.



Jordans Cereals Marketing director Carol Welch said: "Conservation Grade sustainable farming underpins our supply chain and we're delighted we can offer our consumers this additional boost to wildlife, especially as this year, 2010, is the International Year of Biodiversity."

The wild bird seed mix area has been increased because of compelling evidence of the optimum concentrations of seed growing areas to provide maximum benefit to birds.

Recent Defra research conducted by a group of conservation and biodiversity groups (including the RSPB, British Trust for Ornithology, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Central Science Laboratory, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology) has confirmed that the optimum size for a block of wild bird seed mix is two hectares per one hundred, or two per cent. It may seem like a small change but on our CG farms alone this could produce as much as 375 tonnes of extra bird seed each year.

conservationgrade

Conservation Grade farming means 'Nature Friendly' food.

Have you seen the new Conservation Grade website yet?

Visit www.conservationgrade.org and tell us what you think.



The Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE)

CAMPAIGN
FOR THE FARMED
ENVIRONMENT.



The Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) was launched on Thursday 5th November. The voluntary scheme aims to retain the environmental benefits formerly provided by

set-aside by encouraging the positive management of well located habitats in three key areas - resource protection, farmland birds and farm wildlife.

The Campaign is asking farmers, and land managers to:

1. Renew their existing Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) agreements or enter for the first time and choose at least one in-field option.
2. Retain and correctly record their current area of uncropped land.
3. Adopt at least one voluntary measure outside of an ELS agreement to meet the campaign targets.



A Elms

If its targets are not met, the Government will impose regulation on the industry, via cross compliance, to compel arable farmers to undertake environmental measures.

If it works, with farmers voluntarily delivering measurable environmental benefits, the ground-breaking model could be repeated on a range of issues from, for example, phosphates to bystander exposure to sprays.

CG therefore actively supports the campaign and agrees that all farmers, land managers and advisers have a key role to play in ensuring it is a success. ***In fact CG farmers are better placed than most to help with delivery of the targets as they already provide more of the key in***

field habitats (e.g. Pollen & Nectar, Wild Bird Food, skylark plots etc.) over and above those frequently used for basic ELS entry.

What it entails

- Local Liaison Groups have been set up in 22 target counties to provide advice to farmers tailored to the environmental challenges in their area via meetings
- A network of Beacon Farms will be established across the country to demonstrate how the CFE will work in practice, as well as allowing other farmers and land managers to share ideas in backing the Campaign.
- The campaign website (www.cfeonline.org.uk) provides more information.

The Campaign brings together the following farming organisations and advisory bodies, NFU, CLA, AIC, FWAG, GWCT, LEAF, AICC and CAAV, working in partnership with Defra, Natural England, the Environment Agency and the RSPB.

Targets over the next three years, include:

- Helping Natural England increase uptake of agri-environment schemes to 70 per cent of English farmland from 66 per cent now.
- Double the area of key in-field ELS options (additional 40,000 hectares)
- Retain 179,000 hectares of uncropped land across England and improve the management of at least one third of this land to support habitats for birds, insects and mammals
- Increase the current national level of voluntary environmental management by at least 30,000 hectares
- Encouraging 60 per cent of farmers outside agri-environment schemes to undertake voluntary environmental management by 2012.



J Capes



The Sweet Smell of Success!

CG member Ian Margetts manages the 2000 acre Malshanger Farm Estate for owner Sir Michael Colman at the foothills of the Hampshire Downs near



Basingstoke. When the price of peas dropped in the nineties, the business diversified into production of traditional English Mint.

They tried parsley, coriander and still grow some organic lavender, but it was the peppermint that caught Sir Michaels imagination.



“We used to produce the best mint in the world, the French still call peppermint *menthe Anglaise*, or English mint, but it died out in Britain during the Second World War and, since then, nobody has been able to

compete with the cheaper varieties.”

“We felt the food industry was selling its customers short by offering cheap peppermint oil blends that feature harsh-tasting imports from China and India — and we were sure that, once people experienced the clean, intense taste of pure English mint, they would appreciate the difference.”



Sir Michael’s first challenge was to find out about the crop, so he sent farm manager, Ian, to America. After much experimentation, they settled on the Black Mitcham peppermint variety that best suited the farms chalk soil over stone.

“We had no idea what we were doing. No-one in Britain knew. We had to re-learn lost mint farming skills from America. It took me eight years and five visits to study mint in America, mostly Montana, before I felt comfortable and confident about our crop”, says Ian. They set up Summerdown Farms Ltd and now the Farm has an annual harvest of 80 acres.

Peppermint is a perennial crop and in its first year after planting it is hardly worth harvesting. But through years two and three the plant takes hold and develops to provide a thick annual harvest.



From the autumn it will be sprayed once or twice for weeds but, as soon as the peppermint starts to grow back, its thick, dark canopy will defend it against

any other problems. The plant grows rapidly in May and June before its harvest in July and August.



When the forage harvester has completely filled up the trailer, it is backed into a

barn that houses all of the distilling equipment. They attach one large pipe to the bottom of the trailer or ‘cooker’ – which pumps steam in – and an outlet pipe is attached on the roof – to let steam out into the condenser.

The mint is then cooked over the next three to four hours, and every last drop of water and oil is siphoned out of the cooker into the condenser. Here the oil and water separate leaving a pure peppermint oil.



“Once we get the oil out, we treat it carefully. Like a fine wine, the oil will mellow and mature, so we will let it rest for up to two years in barrels. This gives the very best oil,” says Ian.



The 1.25 tonnes of “single estate” oil goes to produce the three products in the Summerdown Pure Mint range: four tonnes of tea as well as chocolate peppermint creams and mint crisp biscuits. Waitrose, Harvey Nichols, Whole Foods and Chelsea Market Baskets are all big name stockists of the Summerdown Pure Mint range, and there are also a raft of smaller outlets.

For further information:
Summerdown Farms Ltd
www.summerdownmint.com



WE NEED YOUR SURVEY INFORMATION.....

Have you had any species counted on your farm?

Within Conservation Grade we know that farming the Conservation Grade way leads to increases in biodiversity, but now's the time to make sure everyone else knows! As we seek to get Conservation Grade and *Nature Friendly Farming™* firmly established in the minds of brand owners and consumers as a sustainable production system we are getting more and more enquiries about the increases in bees, bugs, birds, and mammals that our way of farming brings.

In order to answer these questions we are building up a dossier of information from Conservation Grade farms.

Bees

If you have bee hives on your farm, we would like to know how many there are; who looks after them (you or a local bee keeper); are the hives static or are they moved around the farm; is the honey collected from them; is the honey sold?



Birds, Butterflies and Small Mammals

We would also like to hear from you if you have had any wildlife surveys conducted on your farm, for example a BTO or RSPB bird survey, or possibly an independent survey. Perhaps you have had the local butterfly numbers counted or maybe a small mammal survey.



We are very interested in both recent and older data from your farm as this will help show where species numbers have changed over the years. If you are planning to enter HLS (Higher Level Stewardship scheme) it is quite likely that you will have had (or will need to have) some wildlife surveys conducted to establish baseline data on your farm.



Your help in this matter is vital to the Conservation Grade PR campaign, so please fill in the form inserted in this newsletter and return it to us in the SAE provided. Copies of surveys and any pictures, either posted or scanned and emailed, would be greatly appreciated.



Regional Technical Updates - Winter 2009

Brin Hughes reports....

Once again we had fine, but chilly weather for our 3 winter technical updates and CG members were treated to guided tours of 3 excellent farms.



Steve Armstrong pointed us in the right direction at the Central Region Update.....

Chase Park Farm, Northampton Nov 2009

.....and members were impressed as Steve showed us a fine example of Winter Bird Food, sown this spring.



Bill Jordan took a shine to Steve's farm truck.

Malshanger Farm, Basingstoke Nov 2009



.....and Farm manager, Ian Margetts, led us round not only his terrific CG habitats, like this wild bird food mix....

Sir Michael Colman's estate was the venue for the Southern region technical update....





.....but also explained how he grows organic lavender & peppermint (see article on page 4)



Then we were guided round the peppermint still where Ian produces his "single estate" Summerdown peppermint oil.



**Dane End Farm, Hertfordshire
Dec 2009**



Frank Sapsed's Dane End Farm, near Ware in Hertfordshire was the venue for the Eastern Region Technical Update.

Frank and Barbara are currently putting the farm through the application process for HLS, so CG members were able to learn just what is required to gain entry to HLS. We will be covering the subject of HLS applications in a forthcoming training day in February.

Many thanks go to our hosts:



Steve Armstrong



Ian Margetts



Frank Sapsed





ELS handbooks online

The new 3rd edition environmental stewardship handbooks for ELS, OELS & HLS are available for download from the Natural England website. They include the new and revised options for farmers and land managers & details of the new uplands strand of ELS.

The handbooks come into effect on 1st February 2010, but NE has made the information available online for planning purposes.

Below is an example of a few of the changes to ELS:
Full details are available at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>

New Options (subject to EU approval):

		ELS points	
Earth bank management (1 or both sides)	O/EB12/13	7/14	per 100m
Establishment of hedgerow trees by tagging	O/EC23	1	per tree
Hedgerow buffer strips on cultivated land	O/EC24	400	per ha
Hedgerow buffer strips on grassland	O/EC25	400	per ha
6m buffer strips on cultivated land next to a water-course	O/EE9	400	per ha
6m buffer strips on grassland next to a water-course	O/EE10	400	per ha
Extended overwintered stubbles	EF22	410	per ha
Winter cover crops	O/EJ13	65	per ha

Changes made earlier in 2009 and available now:

		ELS points	
12m buffer strips for watercourses on cultivated land	O/EJ9	400	per ha
Enhanced management of maize crops to reduce soil erosion and run-off	O/EJ10	94	per ha
Maintenance of watercourse fencing	O/EJ11	4	per 100m
Uncropped cultivated areas for rare plants	O/EF11	400	per ha



The Big Buzz wins Silver

The Jordans and Ryvita Company's Big Buzz Campaign has won silver in the Environment category of the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) Community Partnership Awards 2009.

The Community Partnership Awards celebrate the many ways in which different companies make a difference through their community projects. The Environment category was new for 2009 and introduced to recognise the work that companies are doing to reduce their environmental impact.

The Big Buzz Campaign aimed to engage people with bees as pollinating insects and educate them to the fact that farmland wildlife habitat loss has massively contributed to the decline of bees in the UK.

During the Campaign, almost 35,000 bee-friendly plants were given away and it is estimated that around 400,000 people annually will see the Big Buzz educational exhibitions, located at Pensthorpe Nature Reserve in Norfolk, the Hitchin Community Bee Garden in Hertfordshire and Kew Gardens.

The plight of the bee will be a continuing theme for 2010. More to come in the next newsletter....



Hedgehogs & Harvest Mice

The hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) is common in parks, gardens throughout Britain and Ireland and has also been introduced to many of the surrounding



islands. Hedgehogs prefer woodland edges, hedgerows and suburban habitats where there is plenty of food. Intensively farmed arable land probably provides a poor habitat, as are moorlands and

dense conifer forests. They eat beetles, worms, caterpillars, slugs and almost anything they can catch, though little plant matter. They will take eggs and chicks from ground-nesting birds though rarely in large numbers and far fewer than foxes or crows

The females have litters of 4-5 young, between April and September. The males do not assist in rearing the young. The later born young are often too small to survive hibernation and therefore die. They need to weigh at least 450g (1lb) to last the winter. Hibernation usually begins about November and ends around Easter, but it is very much affected by the weather. Hedgehogs normally wake several times throughout the winter and often build a new nest. In the spring they commonly spend a few days active then enter hibernation again during a cold snap. The winter nest (hibernaculum) is made of leaves tucked under a bush, log pile or garden shed, for example.

Hedgehogs travel about 1-2km each night, males more than females. They return to the same daytime nest for a few days then use another nest. Hedgehogs can live for up to 10 years, but this is exceptional; over half die before their first birthday and the average life expectancy is about 2-3 years.

Hedgehogs are partially protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act and may not be trapped without a licence from Natural England, the Countryside Council for Wales or Scottish Natural Heritage.

The biggest threat to hedgehogs is probably habitat loss. The use of chemicals in gardens and intensive farming kills the creatures that hedgehogs need for food and may also poison them directly. Many are also killed on the roads. Hedgehogs may become locally scarce or even disappear but nationwide extinction is unlikely. Although the total population is unknown, hedgehogs appear to be in decline. The majority of the evidence is based on studies using road-kill statistics or a collation of reports from the general public.

The harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*) is much smaller than other British species of mice, with a blunt nose and small hairy ears. Its prehensile tail is the same length as its head and body. Its fur is russet orange with a white underbelly. It weighs 4-6g.

Harvest mice are mainly found from central Yorkshire southwards. They are extremely active climbers and feed in the stalk zone of long grasses and reeds, particularly around dawn and dusk. Their hearing is acute and they will react sharply and either freeze or drop into cover to rustling sounds up to 7m away. Although their vision is not particularly good they will react to a change in silhouette.

Harvest mice have high energy requirements and eat a mixture of seeds, berries and insects, and occasionally moss, roots and fungi. They sometimes take the grain from cereal heads leaving characteristic sickle-shaped remains. Noticeable damage to cereal crops is extremely rare.



The harvest mouse is the only British mouse species to build nests of shredded, woven grass well above the ground. They are generally located on the stalk zone of grasses; at least 30cm above the ground in short grasses up to a metre in tall reeds. They tend to be found in dense vegetation such as grasses, rushes, cereals, grassy hedgerows, ditches and brambles.

Harvest mice usually have two or three litters a year between late May and October. Most litters are born in August, although litters may even be born in December if the weather is mild enough! Cold, wet weather is a major cause of mortality. There are usually around six young in a litter. The young are born blind and hairless but grow extremely quickly and start to explore outside the nest by the 11th day. The young are abandoned after about 16 days and they continue using the nest.

Harvest mice are not legally protected in Britain. Changes in habitat management and agricultural methods are thought to have caused a reduction in numbers, although there have been no studies to quantify this change.

Harvest mice have many predators; weasels, stoats, foxes, cats, owls, hawks, crows and even pheasants. They generally form only about 1% of barn owl pellets.

*Article courtesy of The Mammal Society
www.mammal.org.uk*



Thompson's Topical Tips

By Peter Thompson



I commented about when to cut hedges in my last topical tips, but one of the main questions I get asked on farm is what height and shape should my hedges be? Well, the quick answer is "all sorts!"

Hedge Height

A number of species of birds like high hedges, with trees which they use as song posts. Birds such as Turtle dove, Bullfinch and Lesser Whitethroat will favour this type of hedge whereas species such as Grey partridge, Yellowhammer and Whitethroat prefer hedges no higher than 2 metres, ideally without trees. So you can immediately see that if you want to maximise the number of different species of bird using your farm, a good variation of hedge heights will help deliver this on the ground.

There are of course many different reasons that you might want different heights to a hedge. You may want to grow it up high to fly game birds over the top to deliver better quality shooting or it might be a historical parish boundary that you want to emphasise in the landscape. You may want to link two important old woodlands together so that species such as Dormice can travel freely between the two. I have even known growers to let a hedge go up high because they don't like the neighbour prying over the boundary to see what they are up to – which seems fair enough to me!



Some of the best hedges in the country are in prime stock areas where they are still used for one of the original reasons that they were planted – keeping animals securely in a field. Shorter thick hedges are best for this purpose and are really only equalled in "hunting country" where very similar hedges are prized for jumping over. Start off by thinking what you require from your hedges and how it might affect the farm in both a positive or negative way. It might be that you need them for shelter or to help prevent wind blow, on the other hand a tall hedge running east / west creates a northern shaded side, which in turn might impact on the adjacent crop. So give some thought towards your hedges to maximise the benefits

that they can bring to the farm, not just the wildlife.

Hedge Shape



There is a lot of advice floating around about what shape a hedge should be. There is some evidence to show that a slightly pointed hedge as opposed to a "flat topped" hedge helps to prevent predation, as a Magpie finds it easier to hop along the top and peer into the hedge spotting nests with ease, whereas a rounded or pointed hedge top provides better cover. Again you might

vary the shape a little, remembering however that tall hedges that only have the sides cut, will become "mushroom" shaped and will eventually start to topple over, creating gaps. Hedges do need to be managed otherwise they will either turn into a line of trees or have so many gaps due to fallen mature bushes, that they become a "lost" hedge in the statistics.

Supplementary Feeding

The supply of food starts to become scarce from now on, with January through to April being particularly difficult for many species. Many people who run shoots will happily put out hoppers for feeding Pheasants and Partridges, at least to the end of the shooting season, however it is really important that feeders should continue to be topped up long after the end of January. GWCT research has shown that game birds that are well fed will be less likely to desert a nest during periods of poor weather and, should eggs be lost through predation, a well fed bird will lay a second clutch whereas a bird in poor condition will not bother. We also know that for other species of farmland birds, this late winter, spring period is also a particularly tough time and that many also become dependent on hoppers that are put out for game. So if you are hopper feeding, perhaps move hoppers in February to places where game is most likely to breed – alongside woodland edge and good hedgerows, and continue feeding until the end of April at least.



Rats

The rat population is thriving in the countryside and some people are beginning to look at the wildlife mixes, game crops and feed hoppers that we are putting out onto farms and are blaming this for the huge population increases. They may well have a point. Should we be encouraging high numbers of rats



because of the food we are providing and do nothing to control them? Could these rats in turn be helping to cause declines in some of our farmland wildlife?

In the late winter rats will congregate around feeders and create “runs” to and from their holes to the hopper. It is a relatively simple task to put block bait down these holes and block the hole up with soil. Return a couple of days later and re-bait any hole that has been re-opened. This method ensures that rats die underground and therefore are not putting potential carrion eaters at risk of secondary poisoning. It is also a very effective way of killing rats out in the wider countryside as they gather around a food source.

Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE)



The Campaign for the Farmed Environment has now been launched and farmers are being encouraged to get involved. Obviously Conservation Grade growers are doing as

much as any farmers in the country to look after and create habitats on their land, but remember that unless you are doing it within a Stewardship scheme or similar, the Government may not be aware of the “extras” that you are also doing! I know that many of you have things that you do that are not paid for – you just do them because you feel it is the right thing. If it is to be counted in the campaign figures however, then we need to register these “extras”.

About a third of farmers are not in any environmental scheme – so if we can encourage these growers into doing something on their farms – in or out of a scheme – then surely we can avoid compulsory set-aside being bought back in the future. So let’s all put a bit of peer pressure onto this third of the industry that as yet has not embraced the environmental side of farming, or at least declared that they have.

For more information about the campaign, go to; www.cfeonline.org.uk

Woodland

Don’t forget that during the winter months is the best time to manage your woodland. Many woods in this country have little or no management at all and are accordingly very uniform in structure. All you really need is a chainsaw! Skylighting – opening up the canopy to allow light to penetrate through to ground level, coppicing and opening up rides through woodland, all have a dramatic effect on the wildlife that lives in woodland. You usually do not have to plant anything – the light hitting the ground will bring life back into the lower layer of the woodland – which is so important within this ecosystem.

If you take an area of woodland and coppice the shrub layer down, it is important to also thin some of the taller trees out, as the shrubs will struggle in shaded conditions. In the vast majority of cases, far too many standards are left behind – it may look as though you have taken a lot out in winter, but on returning in the summer, you will invariably wish that you had taken far more out! So be bold and really take a lot of wood out – the ground flora, followed by the butterflies and songbirds will flourish if you do.





nature's
voice

Nature of Farming Award 2010

Here's something that may be of interest to those of you who are Conservation Grade farmers....

The RSPB, in conjunction with Countryfile Magazine, Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation, is running a competition to find the best farms for wildlife across the UK.

With a top prize of £1000, the competition is now in its 3rd year and was established to reward the efforts made by farmers to manage their land in a way that benefits wildlife.

Conservation Grade farmers would have no difficulty in filling in the simple online questionnaire, so if you fancy having a go visit www.rspb.org.uk. The closing date for 2010 entries is the 28th February. Any entries received after this date will be considered for the 2011 competition.



Congratulations Nick!



Conservation Grade Advisory Panel member, Nick Rowsell, was a finalist in the Arable Farmer of the Year category of the 2009 Farmers Weekly competition.

Nick farms 1400ha near Winchester and another 290ha near Newbury, on which he grows Conservation Grade oats and rye. He has been a CG member since 2006 and was elected on to the Advisory Panel in 2008.

The Farmers Weekly judges liked Nick's focus on niche and high premium crops for the more challenging areas of the farms. The thin land at Newbury is ideally suited to oats and rye while poppies feature in the rotation on the main farms.

They also admired his enthusiasm for conservation while maximising income from available resources.

Photo Competition

In the last issue of the CG Newsletter we ran a competition with the aim of obtaining some lovely photos that we can use in Conservation Grade publicity. Thanks you to all those who entered. The standard of the photography was high.

Here are the winning entries:

Flora & Fauna



Ian Margetts

Scenic Shot



Jon Capes

The Farming Day



Jon Capes
(the only entry in this category, but a lovely photo nevertheless!)

Boys Toys



Harvey Sherwood

Winners will receive selection of Jordans goodies!

