

FARMING FIT FOR THE FUTURE

HOPE FARM

Farming for food, profit and wildlife

BACKGROUND

Hope Farm is a 181 hectare arable farm in Cambridgeshire, owned and managed by the RSPB. When we bought the farm in 2000, it had a simple rotation of autumn-sown crops – two years of wheat, followed by a year of oilseed rape – typical of farms in the area. Other than a small number of hedgerows and grass margins there was little habitat for wildlife. The RSPB wanted to use Hope Farm to build on our knowledge of arable farming and to help develop and encourage wildlife-friendly practices.



CHRIS COMERSALL (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

HELPING WILDLIFE

Over the last 15 years we have diversified the crop rotation to include legumes and some spring-sown crops, and provided a greater area and variety of habitats for wildlife, supported by an Entry Level Stewardship agri-environment agreement. We have continued to manage the farm conventionally, using pesticides and other chemical inputs within a framework of good practice.

Hope Farm has been an outstanding success story in terms of wildlife. By choosing our agri-environment options carefully, we have been able to provide all three of the key needs of farmland birds: summer and winter food and safe nesting habitat. By 2011, the Hope Farm breeding bird index showed that this suite of farmland birds had increased by an average of 211% since 2000. Other wildlife, including plants and insects, has also shown a good response.

WITHOUT REDUCING PROFITS

At the same time, Hope Farm has remained profitable and productive. We have maintained or even improved wheat yields and the farm is consistently profitable (annual farm accounts are published on the RSPB website). By focusing on providing high quality habitat through our agri-environment options, we have delivered significant benefits to wildlife while minimising the area of land taken out of production. Many of these options are located in 'awkward corners' or otherwise less productive areas of the farm, further reducing the impact on overall food production.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Many challenges remain for Hope Farm, including further reducing our carbon footprint, safeguarding water quality and improving the health of our soils. Our management of Hope Farm will continue to evolve to address these challenges and others.



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