

# Farming, food and birds



Farming and other organisations must accept joint responsibility for producing food and enhancing biodiversity, believes **Rob Yorke**



I should declare my interest. I like birds: watching them, feeding them, listening to them, hunting them and eating them. A member of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the British Association for Shooting & Conservation and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), I am frustrated by increasingly polarised debates over conservation that alienates balanced discussion with potentially detrimental impacts on wildlife.

The countryside, 75% of it agricultural, is home to two inextricably linked requirements: food and biodiversity. Vast swathes of farmland – from salt marsh to uplands – hold the bulk of large-scale ecosystems necessary for biodiversity and food production. But although the politics that flavour everyday life mean little to the long-term health of the environment, it cannot be ignored. Politics dictate policy and policy demands data.

## Data tools

The Farmland Bird Index (FBI), made up of 19 generalist and specialist birds all dependent on lowland agriculture, is used as a barometer of the countryside's health. While some believe it is

an index of how chickens fare on farmland, others wield it as a stick to suggest how farming has messed up birds. *The state of the UK's birds* 2012 report ([bit.ly/stateofbirds](http://bit.ly/stateofbirds)) influences policy, and much of the data provided is from volunteers spending just two mornings a year counting birds in one square kilometre.

Both data tools indicate overall long-term declines in what are perceived as priority bird species, from grey partridges and skylarks to wood warblers and tree sparrows. But no-one knows how well skylarks are doing in the neglected uplands. This is where it all gets a bit warped. The very mention of some conservation organisations can put some landowners' hackles up. When I asked farmers what they thought of the RSPB for my paper *New demands; old countryside* ([bit.ly/countryside](http://bit.ly/countryside)), their responses ranged from quizzical to rude.

Agri-enviro schemes, publicly funded and supported by the RSPB, are lauded for their take-up but have done little to boost farmland birds. Alan Buckwell, previous policy director at the Country Land & Business Association (CLA), has said: "If farmers set their minds to getting the FBI to go up by feeding them, providing habitat and ensuring they can breed, then the whole discourse might be different." Eminent ecologist Sir John Lawton has said that where predator control works, we should get on with it. I believe the National Farmers Union (NFU) must take its teeth out of the RSPB and the RSPB must not pander to members' subjective feelings,

because this can result in unscientific policy. Has 'dry' science been eschewed by all to enable antagonistic 'juicier' fundraising campaigns?

## Building on synergy

Those that set out to save cute-looking birds rather than tackle non-native invasive species, and those that believe they should be producing food at any cost rather than husbanding soils, both pay scant regard to trade-offs that might interfere with their respective campaigns. UK food security champion Tim Benton has demonstrated that crop yields, not farming practices, have significant impacts on some biodiversity (*Food production vs biodiversity: comparing organic and conventional agriculture*, [bit.ly/bioimpact](http://bit.ly/bioimpact)), and RSPB Chief Executive Mike Clarke talks about conservationists needing to confront trade-offs implicit within multiple land uses. We should build on synergies gained from positive examples.

There are many progressive agri-business farmers boosting biodiversity, and shooting interests working with the RSPB to help birds, sustaining economic viability underpinning a vibrant countryside.

Conservation scientist Steve Redpath has said "engagement via dialogue is likely to be far more productive in these debates than relying on enforcement". Now is the time to initiate dialogue between landowners, farmers and conservationists to work towards robust solutions for competing land uses. Challenge your clients, weed out poor shooting and farming practices, engage ecologists

to set up more effective agri-enviro schemes, work with NGOs to complete wildlife data and dispel disapproval of sound game shooting and farming methods.

It is easy to talk around problems rather than work towards solutions. Bring in BTO and GWCT science, blend it with the CLA's strong interrelationship between food and environmental security, combine knowledge from the Royal Agricultural Society of England's *Sustainable intensification and farmland birds* conference with the NFU's *Farming delivers for Britain* campaign, and top up with the RSPB's Volunteer & Farmer Alliance project, to move us all in a positive, non-partisan direction.

There are shared challenges that come with joint responsibilities of managing land to produce food and enhance biodiversity. From assisting in the provision of accurate wildlife data, to sponsoring peer-reviewed science, we must all aim to find long-term solutions, even if at times unpalatable, that benefit both our health and that of the environment. ●

**Rob Yorke** FRICS is a Rural Chartered Surveyor and commentator  
[ry@robbyorke.plus.com](mailto:ry@robbyorke.plus.com)  
[twitter.com/blackgull](https://twitter.com/blackgull)

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