

Norfolk Broads farmer celebrates 25 years of Environmentally friendly farming

2012 marks the silver jubilee of England's agri-environment schemes

Lapwings, redshank and rare water plants have thrived on a farm on Halvergate Marshes in the Broads thanks to 25 years of the landmark schemes that have been encouraging environmentally friendly farming practices.

Agri-environment schemes now operate across the country, with almost 52,000 farmers signed up. Barry Brooks of Beckhithe Farms on the Halvergate Marshes in Norfolk was one of the first farmers in the country to sign up to the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme in 1987, which paid farmers to safeguard and enhance areas of landscape, biodiversity and cultural importance. He was also one of the first farmers to join the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) in 1991 to conserve wildlife in the arable areas of his farm.

Barry Brooks said: "I love all wildlife and it has been wonderful to see the noticeable increase in birds of prey, shrews, weasels and owls in the hedges and margins. We have excellent numbers of lapwings and also an increase in redshank. It's wonderful to be able to create these habitats for wildlife and then see the results. I think about what the land is going to look like in another 10 years."

25 years ago Barry Brooks worked as a butcher and bought some marsh land on Halvergate on the Norfolk Broads. Not long after that he swapped butchering for farming and has never looked back.

Barry is managing director of Beckhithe Farms who over the last 14 years have established themselves as one of the country's most highly regarded beef producers. They have a herd of 3,200 cattle utilising 1,300 hectares of grazing marshes and 1,000 ewes that are out on the marshes 52 weeks of the year.

Farming Minister David Heath said: "Farmers and land managers are the guardians of England's iconic landscapes. Over the past 25 years agri-environment schemes have played a key role in enabling them and environmental organisations to improve the countryside and look after our wildlife".

The first ESA schemes were launched in five areas: The Broads, Pennine Dales, South Downs, Somerset Levels and Moors and West Penwith. This was a new and bold way of providing practical support to land managers to retain and protect valuable and threatened landscape, wildlife and archaeology, which might otherwise have been lost to intensification. Conserving hedgerows and field margins, reducing fertiliser use and supporting extensive grazing were among the early priorities of the ESA schemes. From the experiences learnt in the early ESAs came the development of more targeted schemes and agreements to conserve and enhance the countryside, which have helped to bring about and respond to environmental changes.

In the Broads, the first tranche of ESAs were developed to protect the grazing marsh. Much of this land is now moving into the successor scheme Environmental Stewardship (ES) with the opportunity to recreate valuable biodiversity habitats.

Barry said: “At first very few farms went into agreements. MAFF (now Defra) had a real job to get farmers to change from corn and wheat to grass. For me, it meant I could expand the farm. It enabled me to buy land closer to the farm and sell land further away. I also grew the cattle numbers from 180 cows to 1,200 at present.”

Sarah Dawkins, Natural England Regional Manager said: “The unique wetland of the Broads forms one of the few remaining large areas of lowland floodplain grassland in Britain, and is renowned for its remoteness and sheer visual expanse. The river valleys, marshes and fens are ideal for wading birds, such as lapwing, redshank and oystercatcher, and provide habitats for endangered species such as fen orchids, swallowtail butterflies, fen raft spiders, water voles and otters. Natural England is delighted to work with Barry and his team to ensure the continued delivery of such valuable and important environmental benefits on his farm”.

On the arable land outside the floodplain, Barry has created six metre wide wildlife margins around the edges of the fields and planted many hedges. He has wild bird mix on most of his fields and will be changing this to a pollen mix for bees next year. This year in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency, Barry took some land that had been grazed by sheep and created new ditches and scrapes to provide wet habitat for breeding and wintering waders. Barry added that RSPB surveys had shown there to be 500 to 700 lapwings present.

Andrea Kelly, senior ecologist at the Broads Authority said “We are very proud that the Broads Authority played a fundamental role in how farmers are supported for looking after the environment today. In the mid 1980’s there was increasing conflict between those who wanted to plough the marshland to convert it to more economically valuable arable land, and those keen to retain it as grazing marsh as an important wildlife habitat, rich in plant and bird life. In 1985 the Broads Authority and Countryside Commission introduced a pilot scheme which gave farmers financial incentives not to drain and plough. This paved the way for nationwide schemes, such as ESAs to support farmers to ‘do the right thing’ for the wider environment and countryside for the enjoyment of all.”

Andrea Kelly added: “Thanks to the financial support given to farmers by agri-environment schemes, the Broads grazing marshes remain wildlife hotspots, renowned for thousands of wintering birds on migration and breeding waders. The marshes make up 40% of the Broads globally important wetland, supporting 10 species of wintering waterfowl. In the spring some areas are alive with breeding redshank and lapwing and the ditches packed with many invertebrates and plants. Yet other areas, despite the incentives, need further management for wildlife to achieve their full potential. By working with Broads landowners and national policy makers we aim to protect its unique and changing working landscape for the future.”

John Sharpe of the RSPB, said: “The birth of agri-environment in England was within the Broads to protect grasslands important for wildlife, now 25 years on there is a need to improve grasslands, arable lands and other farmed habitats to ensure the wildlife and the environment are protected and enhanced so the systems that farming and society rely upon are protected for future generations to enjoy and benefit from.”

There are currently 353 live agreements (ESA and ES) in The Broads committing over £4million annually covering more than 27,000 hectares of land, the equivalent of 44,000 football pitches.