

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: The Norfolk Estate

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Name:	Peter Knight (Estate Manager)
Region/County:	Arundel, West Sussex
Address:	The Norfolk Estate, Arundel, West Sussex
Farm Size/Type:	1,589.52 hectares
Cropping:	Rotations of malting barley, wheat, oilseed rape, peas, fodder brassicas and temporary grass
Stocking:	Estate's breeding sheep flock and grazier's sheep and beef cattle
Land Features:	Grassland, wet grassland, arable, hedgerows, two Sites of Special Scientific Interest, some historic features – field systems, barrows and dew ponds
Key objectives:	to recover farmland bird populations to pre 1996 levels or better, with a particular focus on the grey partridge.



The four farms on the Estate had been managed separately by tenant farmers until they were brought together under the management of the Norfolk Estate's Manager, Peter Knight. The land across the farms had large fields to suit farm mechanisation, hedges and margins had been removed and some areas of historic value had been cultivated and archaeology lost or ignored. Previously in environmental management since 2003 they were all entered into one HLS agreement in 2007 (comprising ELS and HLS options) which has provided greater scope for grassland and arable management and more tailored to the Estate's needs.

What they hope to achieve:

By blending conservation with a profitable food producing business, one of the Estate's aims is that was almost extinct on the farm by the early part of this decade. In some areas extra ELS options (going beyond the basic points threshold set for the farm) have been used to make the most of the potential to manage arable land for the benefit of farmland birds. Options for grassland management and protection of historic features have also been used to create a diverse and multi-objective agreement.

In some cases the Estate has gone beyond the regular HLS prescriptions and are experimenting to see whether sowing headlands with wider drill spacing to leave more room for arable wild flowers to flourish, will encourage greater numbers of wildflower and insects - staple food for farmland birds. Next to the headlands, strips of wild bird seed mix (HF2) and beetle banks (HF7) provide a variety of food sources and cover for birds, insects and small mammals, whilst the main crop area remains conventionally managed.

The Estate has the added bonus of local wildlife expert Dr Dick Potts monitoring wildlife levels in detail each year since 2003. He assesses breeding bird numbers annually from mid-March to mid-July, with game birds monitored separately in spring and after harvest. Surveys of arable weeds and insects are also carried out annually. Neighbouring farms that are still entirely conventionally managed provide a control. Initial results from monitoring have been highly encouraging.

Grey partridge and skylark have responded best to the agri-environment measures, especially the in-field habitat improvements provided by beetle banks and hedging, seed mixes and unsprayed headlands, and have done so similarly across all four of the Estate's farms. In 2008 grey partridge breeding success was the highest recorded for 55 years on the Sussex Downs.

Other farm birds such as corn bunting, lapwing and yellow hammer have shown less dramatic responses but the overall trend is for improvement. Overall, Dr Dick Potts estimates that 26 more "pairs" of birds have arrived per square kilometre (100ha) per year as a result of agri-environment measures and associated management.

Benefits to business and the environment

The Norfolk Estate was awarded the prestigious 2010 Purdey Award for its work in restoring biodiversity to the Sussex Downs. Peter Knight, the Estate Manager said "these results can be enjoyed by the many walkers and bird watchers, local and from further afield, who visit us regularly. The recovery in Grey partridge numbers is providing the economic driver for restoring an eco-system which is recovering and will be sustainable for the long term".

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