

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Toft Farm

The logo for Natural England, featuring the words "NATURAL" and "ENGLAND" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font, set against a solid green square background.

Name:	Stuart Russell
Region/County:	West Midlands / Warwickshire
Address:	Toft Farm, Kites Hardwick, Warwickshire
Farm Size/Type:	350 hectares (ha) / Arable
Main Cropping:	Winter Wheat, Oilseed Rape, peas
Key objectives:	Declining Farmland Birds – focused on delivering the evidence-based Farmland Bird package that targets the six priority HLS farmland bird species which show the greatest declines across the country.

Stuart Russell and his father have farmed at Toft Farm in Warwickshire since the 1960's and the farm has been in a Higher Level Stewardship scheme (HLS) since February 2006.

Of his 350ha farm, around 300ha is arable with Winter Wheat, peas and Oilseed Rape forming the main cropping, and 30ha managed as wet grassland for breeding waders next to the River Leam, where there are now 8 pairs of breeding lapwing.

Mr Russell says "I signed up to HLS seven years ago because I wanted to develop what conservation measures we had already undertaken on the farm. We decided to focus on the options targeted towards declining farmland birds as we have five of the target HLS 'Arable six' bird species already breeding on the farm. These are yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, turtle dove, lapwing and grey partridge."

Annual monitoring by an independent ornithologist since 2009 has shown key farmland bird numbers on this farm are stabilising and in some species like lapwing, yellow wagtail and yellowhammer, they are increasing.

Mr Russell says "I'm really pleased with the increase in bird numbers especially as there is a decline nationally. It makes the hard work worthwhile."

The ES farmland bird package focuses on those options that deliver the 'big three' requirements needed in order for farmland birds to thrive throughout the year. These are a) in-field nesting habitat (some species like skylark and lapwing like nesting in the middle of fields and need special habitats created under HLS actually within the crop), b) summer chick food (most declining farmland birds feed their newly born chicks on insects which in turn depend on flower rich habitat) and c) over-winter food (declining farmland birds depend on a seed-rich diet through the winter). These are delivered at the scale that the evidence / science dictates is required in order for farmland birds to increase, which is 7-10 per cent of a 1km square in key arable options delivering each component of the 'big three'.

The farmland bird package delivered at Toft Farm consists of the following:

Over-winter food

8ha bird mix
20ha weedy stubble

Summer chick food

1.5ha wildflower margins
2ha field corner
3ha pollen and nectar

In-field nesting habitat

6ha lapwing plots



Lapwing nest at Toft Farm

The HLS 'ask' at Toft Farm is specifically calculated to deliver the options that best suit the needs of the declining farmland birds known to be present on the farm, and have been fitted into the day to day running of a successful commercial farming business.

The Farmland bird package isn't the only option on the farm. Mr Russell says "I undertake ten educational access visits a year for school children from Birmingham, Rugby and Coventry and I diversified into a carp fishing business after the wet grassland options were added in 2006."



Ringling barn owl chicks

Speaking about his Land Management Adviser Matt Willmott, Mr Russell says "without excellent advice from our 'on the ground' adviser we wouldn't have entered into HLS and taken on the wet grassland management. We would simply have built the fishing lakes."

"The fishing lakes were a diversification project for Toft Farm, but the environmental value that Matt has bought to the venture has given this farm a completely new lease of life. This farm won the Silver Lapwing award in 2005 - we could never have done that without that close adviser contact."

Mr Russell is viewed as an excellent commercial farmer by his peers, however he puts as much effort into the agri-environment options as he does his conventional crops.

Matt Willmott says "The HLS agreement at Toft Farm is one of the best I have had the pleasure to be involved with in Warwickshire. Stuart is passionate about farming and the environment, and the efforts he puts into managing the wildlife habitats on the farm are unparalleled. He is a superb advocate for the schemes, and we now have good, scientific monitoring evidence that some of us have known from the start of HLS – farmland birds can increase on farms where the key options are delivered on the right scale, but just as importantly to the best quality, of which they certainly are here at Toft Farm".

Where can I find out more?

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