Farmer clusters can support wildlife

Tree Sparrows by Keith Cowieson

The amount that farmers do for Scotland's rural environment is often underestimated or taken for granted. Moreover, it is understandable that one individual can only do so much on their own farm and, where that unit is not of significant size, it may not be on a scale to feel that a significant or worthwhile contribution is being made.

What benefit is there in making every effort to promote conservation and sacrifice good, productive ground when one's neighbours are squeezing the soil over the march for every ounce of productive capacity?

GWCT knows the good work that farmers do and has clear evidence of the results – for example, our Big Farmland Bird Count in Scotland, the results of which have just been published, recorded 74 different species and featured 16 Red List species overall, with 11 in the top 50 – house sparrow (listed 13), tree sparrow (16), starling (17), yellowhammer (18) song thrush (21), fieldfare (30), grey partridge (31), herring gull (32), mistle thrush (35), skylark (40) and grey wagtail (44). This type of citizen/sector science is crucial to our broader understanding of what is happening out in the field. But when it comes to action, when farms work together they can be far more effective in what they can deliver – and that is where the farmer cluster concept comes into play. The idea, developed by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, in partnership with other bodies, helps farmers work more cohesively and successfully in their locality in the knowledge that together they can deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife at a landscape scale. It is a bottom-up process and usually farmer-led. They devise their own conservation plans, often with advisors who they know and trust, and use that extensive knowledge as a start point. There are prescriptions available to support their work through the agri-environment schemes, although regrettably the Environmental Co-operation Action Fund, part of the SRDP, did not live up to expectations. Across the UK, however, several farmer clusters have been set up with no external funding whatsoever. The development of a farmer cluster can often be best driven by a third party and GWCT has done this on a number of occasions, as have other advisory organisations.

Starling by Keith Cowieson

That approach needs to be sensitive and aspirational. Ask a farmer what wildlife he or she would like to see on their farm and there are a number of different answers, but there will also be several in common – grey partridge, waders, song birds, bees and other pollinators. The farmer cluster, once formed, needs to recognise that it is an entity with a purpose, with aims and objectives, targets, and the capability to report and record progress. GWCT has set up a number of farmer clusters specifically around its Partridge Count Scheme and we are hoping to establish more in Scotland under the auspices of the PARTRIDGE Project. This project is supported by the European Union Interreg fund and will use two demonstration sites in each of five countries in the north of Europe (Scotland, England, Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) to show practitioners the kind of measures grey partridge need to flourish, and to try to persuade policy makers of how support mechanisms available to land managers to help them farm the landscape more sympathetically, can be improved.

In the south of England, farmer clusters have formed the bedrock of a number of other GWCT research projects, including Waders for Real, where local farmers responded voluntarily to concerns about the conservation status of breeding waders, forming the Avon Valley Breeding Wader Project, and securing EU LIFE+ funding. There is also a farmer cluster centered on the GWCT demonstration farm at Loddington in Leicestershire, and another in the Howe of Cromar in Aberdeenshire, where the Trust's hill-edge demonstration farm at Auchnerran is situated. It sounds a lot like common sense, and it is. Collective clout, not always but often, is a more effective approach than individual effort. Those within a cluster will really want that project to work, and to see tangible results. There should be more farmer clusters, and they should be encouraged – for conservation, and for targeting specific projects. GWCT sees it as a logical way forward and capable of making a real difference in terms of wildlife on the farm.

By Dr David Parish

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