

FARMING WITH WILDLIFE IN MIND – PATRICK BARKER

E. J. Barker and Sons is a family owned partnership based at Lodge Farm, Westhorpe in North Suffolk focussing primarily on growing winter and spring cereals, oil seed rape, spring beans and herbage seed. The 513 hectare farm has been run by cousins, Brian and Patrick Barker since 2005.

They understand the role of a balanced ecosystem with regard to farming and increasing biodiversity and look at everything from the soil up. Detailed nutrient mapping is carried out and crop pests are monitored to ensure they only apply treatments when and where they are most needed. They have a long crop rotation using appropriate cultivation techniques depending on soil condition so that they get the full benefit from agrichemicals and reduce fuel usage. They produce high crop yields as well as delivering a plentiful all year round food supply, numerous safe breeding habitats and protection for their farmland birds, insects and mammals.

They have reduced their machinery fleet, monitor fuel usages, recycle all farm waste, harvest rain water and have made energy saving alterations to their crop drying facilities. All this has significantly reduced their energy consumption and they now generate electricity with solar installations on farm buildings.

They continue to maintain and create habitats so that there is a range of heights, ages and density of vegetation – varied habitats mean varied species. They have created a 'Green Grassland Corridor' through the middle of the farm to allow for safe wildlife movement by linking various pounds. Wild food provision is key with ancient and new native hedgerows providing a mix of different plant species that flower and bear fruit throughout the year. Large areas of wild seed mix and wild flowers are planted each year which act as giant bird tables during the hungry gap in winter.

Farm species include Skylark, Linnet, Cuckoo, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, Dunnock, Bullfinch, Turtle Dove, Starling, Song Thrush, Marsh Tit, Grey Partridge, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Owls, Kestrels, Common Toad, Great Crested Newts, Hedgehog, Brown Hare, Dormouse, Pipistrelle Bat and Badgers.

One of the most interesting projects they are involved with is the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's Suffolk Community Barn Owl Project . The project covers the whole county with over 1200 boxes or natural nest sites monitored by over 100 people throughout the breeding season and is administered by the Trust.

When visiting boxes care has to be taken to minimise any disturbance and take all measures to avoid upsetting any birds which can cause abandonment of eggs. Once chicks are hatched it is rare for a pair to abandon and in fact, the male is not allowed to roost in the box by the female as we believe she does not trust him not to eat them. This process of checking boxes includes blocking the hole before approaching with a ladder and when done properly after looking in a box the birds remain in situ quickly forgetting that they have just someone peering in at them. In Suffolk, Barn Owl numbers have increased from 100 pairs to over 400 in 20 years thanks to better grassland management and the installation of nest boxes.

Lodge Farm is as LEAF Demonstration Farm. These are commercial farms which show the beneficial practice of integrated Farm Management (IFM) to a broad range of audiences through organised visits. They communicate an understanding of IFM in order to encourage uptake by farmers, support from the industry and political awareness of sustainable food and farming. Farms like Lodge Farm demonstrate that it is possible to farm profitably, and benefit the environment.

