



Help our *wildlife...*

A 10-point action plan for the smallholder, with Penny Bunting

During the last 50 years, many of the UK's habitats and ecosystems have come under serious threat from urbanisation, pollution and intensive farming.

A staggering 95 per cent of our wildflower meadows and 50 per cent of our lowland woods have been lost – and as habitats like these shrink and disappear, the wildlife they support disappears as well.

Doing something about this is important for wildlife – and it's important for us too. Natural environments are essential for our mental and physical wellbeing – and for smallholders, managing your land with wildlife in mind can bring additional benefits. Many of the creatures that share our outside space are welcome visitors, and can help by pollinating our crops and controlling pests.

Using wildlife-friendly agricultural practices can help protect the farmland habitats that are so important to the nation's wildlife – and the good news is that boosting biodiversity on your smallholding is easy. It doesn't have to cost a small fortune, either, as it's often as much about what you don't do, as about the positive actions you take.

And sometimes it's just a matter of making environmentally-friendly choices for a job that needs doing anyway. Here are 10 easy and affordable ways to make your smallholding more wildlife-friendly. Even if you do just one, you'll be making a huge difference to the wildlife on your plot.

REDUCE USE OF CHEMICALS

Pesticides and fertilisers can have devastating effects on wildlife, and their manufacture contributes to climate change. Environmentally-friendly ways to protect crops from pests include crop rotation, covering with netting and attracting natural predators, such as hoverflies, ladybirds and lacewings.

There are many natural alternatives to chemical fertilisers, too – and many vegetable growers who use organic feeds such as comfrey tea claim to enjoy bumper harvests.

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FEED THE BIRDS

The UK's wild bird population has declined over the last 40 years, with farmland birds, such as lapwings, skylarks and tree sparrows, being hit particularly hard.

A few feeders in your garden will help birds survive through winter, and will soon attract a variety of different species – try peanuts for blue tits or nyger seed for finches. Some kitchen scraps are suitable too, and are free – blackbirds adore windfall apples, and grated cheese and cooked rice will give birds a welcome energy boost.

Or you could go one step further and plant

a wild bird seed mixture, to provide birds with a vital winter food source. Yellowhammers, corn buntings and song thrushes will all benefit from this type of planting.

Having birds regularly visiting the smallholding is lovely in itself, but they are also useful allies – many wild birds feed on garden pests such as aphids and caterpillars.

PLANT A BUTTERFLY GARDEN

Choosing nectar-rich shrubs and perennials will attract beneficial insects to the smallholding. Butterflies and bees love buddleia, sedums, lavender, thyme and field scabious. Hoverflies particularly enjoy marigolds and daisies.

Many of these plants are easy to grow and need little maintenance. And if expense is an issue, seed packets of annuals such as cosmos, borage and love-in-a-mist can be bought for just a few pounds.

Apples, raspberries, broad beans and courgettes – amongst others – all rely on insects for pollination, so it makes sense to get these six-legged helpers buzzing about.

MAKE A LOG PILE

Many smallholders with a log-burning stove will already have a log pile – and this makes an excellent habitat. But for even greater wildlife benefits, a pile of wood that is left alone to rot is even better. Any damp corner that's not doing a lot else is great for a log pile – under trees, where nothing else will grow, is ideal.



Reducing the use of chemicals can allow rare plants like orchids to flourish



Bird feeders will help birds like this long-tailed tit survive the winter



Log piles are a fantastic habitat for invertebrates and small mammals



Use nectar-rich plants to attract pollinators like tortoiseshell butterflies



Orchard trees like apple, plum and pear are loved by bumblebees

Invertebrates love rotting wood, and small mammals such as wood mice will nest in log piles. No logs? Piling up a heap of branches, twigs and other plant material will create a fantastic habitat for hedgehogs and toads – and is a more wildlife-friendly option than lighting a bonfire.

PLANT A TREE

Trees absorb carbon dioxide, so planting a tree is always a positive step towards protecting the environment. But trees also support an enormous range of different species – and can provide food and fuel for humans, too.

Even if you don't have enough space to plant a wood, planting a single native, broadleaved tree will create a habitat that could benefit wildlife for hundreds of years. And there are all sorts of trees to suit the space you have available: big trees include oak, beech, and ash; small trees include holly, hawthorn and rowan. Or you could plant an

orchard tree. Apple, plum and pear trees are fantastic for wildlife, and have the added benefit of providing a free supply of fruit year after year.

PUT UP A NEST BOX

Nest boxes are cheap to buy and even cheaper (and relatively easy) to make. Within 10 years nest boxes can provide shelter for 100 baby blue tits. Or, if you have space, how about a barn owl box?

Barn owls have suffered badly in recent years, with a decrease in their population of around 70 per cent. One reason for this is a lack of nesting places, as old barns are pulled down or renovated to provide housing for humans.

Owls like to hunt in areas of rough, tussocky grassland – the perfect habitat for field voles, the barn owl's favourite food. But wild flower meadows, overgrown hedgerows, rough field margins, young tree plantations and woodland edges also offer good hunting

opportunities. So if you have any of these on or near your smallholding, you may be able to provide the perfect home for a barn owl – just add a nest box!

CREATE A BUFFER STRIP

Farming land right to the edges of fields, along with the removal of walls and hedgerows, leaves wildlife with nowhere to go and no way to move around.

Leaving a strip of just one metre uncultivated around the edges of fields can create a habitat for ground-nesting birds such as skylarks, grey partridges and whitethroats. Beneficial insects and spiders overwinter in grass margins, and buffer strips containing wild flowers will attract bumblebees and hoverflies.

Buffer strips and uncut field corners provide corridors for mammals to travel through – and small mammals such as voles and harvest mice will nest here, which in turn may attract owls and kestrels.



If you have space, how about putting up a barn owl box



Wildflowers like red clover may appear in uncut field margins



A small area of uncut grass will attract all kinds of wildlife

LEAVE AN AREA OF UNCUT GRASS

The UK's wildflower meadows have disappeared on a vast scale – which is bad news for the invertebrates, birds and mammals that rely on this type of habitat. Maintaining a hay meadow is something that many smallholders choose to do as part of their livestock grazing management. But if you don't have an acre or two to spare for a whole meadow, a small area of uncut grass can help too – and just 1.5m of uncut grass provides enough oxygen for one adult for one year. Leaving a patch of grass to grow long will allow wild flowers to grow, which will attract hoverflies, butterflies and bees. Frogs and small mammals will shelter in the long grass, and increased insect activity will attract insect-feeding birds and bats. It won't take so long to mow the lawn!

MAKE A BUG HOTEL

This is an excellent activity for kids, and costs nothing. Find a quiet corner of the smallholding and make a stack of three or four builder's pallets. Tuck a range of different materials into the gaps: try dry twigs, moss, cardboard tubes, cracked mugs, pinecones and dead, hollow stems from herbaceous plants.

Invertebrates such as ladybirds will love all the nooks and crannies you have created, and will reward you with their pest-eating services when they emerge from hibernation in spring. If you leave a few larger gaps in your bug hotel, you may find you also have a frog, a toad – or even a hedgehog – taking up residence.

MAINTAINING HEDGEROWS

Mature hedgerows provide food and shelter

for an enormous range of different species, and – especially when combined with buffer strips – create an important wildlife habitat. The nectar-rich spring blossoms of hedgerow trees attract insects, and autumn berries offer food to all kinds of birds. Mammals and birds nest in hedgerows, and will use them as corridors as they move around the countryside. If you have a hedgerow on your smallholding, avoid cutting during bird nesting season, and don't use chemical sprays on or near hedgerow trees. Occasional coppicing (cutting the stems at ground level) and planting new hedgerow trees to fill in gaps will help keep a hedgerow healthy.

Penny Bunting is a smallholder and writer living in the Peak District. She also runs award-winning environmental project Little Green Space (www.littlegreenspace.org.uk). Twitter @LGSpace



Building a bug hotel is fun for kids...

Case study

David and Felicity Brown, Peak District

For David and Felicity Brown, of Hoe Grange Farm on the edge of the Peak District, making wildlife-friendly choices has become second nature – and the abundant wildlife on their farm is one of the big attractions for guests staying in one of the four wind and solar-powered eco-cabins available for holiday rentals.

The 250-acre mixed livestock farm – which has belonged to the Brown family for over 60 years – has held Uplands Entry Level Stewardship since 2010, and has also achieved the Peak District Environmental Quality Mark.

David grew up here, and in 1998 he and Felicity took over the running of the farm. Since then they have used a range of easy-to-use methods to increase and enhance the farm's biodiversity.

A combination of minimal use of pesticides and fertilisers and careful management of grazing across the farm has allowed rare plant species, including orchids and cowslips, to establish and flourish.

David and Felicity have created conservation strips on field margins, along with larger field corners that are left well alone. This practice has attracted skylarks – a globally-threatened species that has suffered a sharp population decline in the UK in recent years.

Buzzards, kestrels, little owls and swallows are also frequent visitors to the farm, and badgers and hares are often spotted. Stoats and weasels are seen in and around the 11,000m of dry stone walls – also an excellent habitat for countless invertebrates – which are maintained and repaired annually.

Another important wildlife feature are four traditional dew ponds, which have been restored to encourage wildlife.

"Water is so important for all sorts of wildlife," says David. "We are delighted to have a large number of great crested newts in the dew ponds, and we also see dragonflies and even the occasional heron!"



David and Felicity Brown have created a haven for wildlife on their Peak District farm

Great crested newts are another endangered species, with populations in decline due to habitat loss and intensive agriculture – so ponds like those at Hoe Grange Farm are vital for their survival. David and Felicity manage the ponds carefully, carrying out any restoration work during the winter months, when the newts are away from the water, so as not to disturb or endanger this protected species.

"Farming in an environmentally-friendly way is easier than many people imagine – it's often just a case of looking at the available options and choosing the method that will benefit wildlife, rather than the method that won't," says David.

So when 100 trees needed to be planted to create a screen, native species – rowan, hawthorn and oak – were chosen. These are all fantastic for wildlife. Rowan and hawthorn berries provide food for birds, hawthorn makes an excellent nesting site, and a mature oak tree is believed to support a larger number of different life forms than any other British tree.

For more information about Hoe Grange Farm, visit www.hoegrangeholidays.co.uk/farm/