

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Stud Farm



Name:	Mr P Whittaker
Region/County:	Yorkshire and Humber / Yorkshire
Address:	Stud Farm, Yorkshire
Farm Size/Type:	22 hectares / mixed arable
Cropping:	Sheep
Stocking:	3.6 hectares spring corn
Key objectives:	Pond restoration, creation of species rich grassland, arable bird options, new hedges and new trees

Mr Whittaker has farmed Stud Farm, his 22 hectare holding in Yorkshire, for over 50 years. Built in 1898 as the stud to the adjacent 17th century Plainville Hall, it was used for dairy production until 1970 and then let off for grazing. Mr Whittaker went into retirement in 1994 but when his tenant vacated he decided to indulge his passion for conservation and enter into a Countryside Stewardship Scheme Agreement to enhance the environmental features on his land.

Stud Farm has now been in a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement since 2006. The main option chosen was 'creation of species-rich, semi-natural grassland' which is intended to benefit lowland meadows and pastures. An inspection in 2009 concluded good progress had been made with 30% coverage of wildflowers and sedges (grass-like plants) and eight positive indicator species were noted, including goat's beard, great burnet and meadowsweet. Allowing such herbs and flowers to thrive results in attracting insects that in turn attract rare species and a previously unseen butterfly called the brown argus was recorded on the farm for the first time in 2011.

"When I took my land back my main objective was to concentrate on nature conservation" said Mr Whittaker. "The meadow creation from some of my arable land has been surprisingly successful and I'm really proud of it." It takes great patience to create a hay meadow as it requires a lot of careful management afterwards and some seed take several years to germinate when using locally sourced green hay as Mr. Whittaker did.

Stud Farm's main ecological habitats include mature ancient trees and hedgerows consisting of, amongst others, blackthorn, hawthorn, oak, dog rose, elder and field maple. Measures taken to preserve these habitats include cutting at the right time as over cutting can be damaging, maintaining the largely intact enclosure pattern through restoration of existing boundaries, replanting of derelict ones and the establishment of a new generation of hedgerow trees to ensure the continuation of the existing mature boundary tree network.

Thick, wide hedgerows provide food, shelter and nesting habitats for a range of birds and Stud Farm is home to many declining species such as barn owl, corn bunting, snipe, curlew, tree sparrow, bullfinch, grey partridge, linnet, marsh tit, starling, kestrel, lapwing, skylark, song thrush, bats and brown hare.

Mr Whittaker lets out some of his land for grazing sheep, and sows spring cereals for overwintered stubble. This provides an important winter food source for seed eating birds such as tree sparrow, corn bunting and yellow hammer. This year Mr Whittaker is looking to add wild bird mix as he has not been that impressed with the spring corn.



Brown Hare

Mr Whittaker is also very proud of his woodland and pond restoration. "I've managed the woodland by removing the scrub and sycamore and now regularly have birdwatchers visiting the site. Since joining the scheme bird numbers have increased, my son counted 47 different species in the winter." Species include great spotted woodpecker, green woodpecker, siskin and large mixed flocks of finches, buntings and tits. Buzzard are now also a resident breeder on the farm.

At the start of the agreement the existing ponds were shaded, drying out and vegetating over and needed restoration if they were to be retained. Mr Whittaker restored them through a combination of HLS and an Environment Agency pond programme. Work has included de-silting half of one of the old field ponds and creating 4 new ones to provide better links between existing ponds. Depths have been varied to create new permanent and seasonal ponds. The area is known for great crested newts and these ponds, coupled with rough grassland management, would provide the perfect habitat. Some marginal wildflower planting has also taken place to further diversify the interest of the ponds and these are now establishing an interesting fauna including dragonflies and Damselflies not previously recorded on the farm.

Mr Whittaker is very pleased with the results of the scheme as he can see the difference it is making environmentally and he takes great pleasure in what is being achieved. Financially it works well for him as the income is approximately the same as when the land was rented.

Jessica Rowe is the Adviser to the farm and said "Stud Farm provides an excellent example of a multi-objective agreement, using different techniques to encourage a variety of wildlife onto the farm. Through Higher Level Stewardship, habitats are being managed to support important farmland and woodland birds. The highly successful reversion of arable land to grassland has created a wonderful species rich meadow and is testament to the careful management that Mr Whittaker has carried out."

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