

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Higher Pasture Farm



Name:	John Fisher
Region/County:	North West/Lancashire
Address:	Higher Pasture Farm Lancashire
Farm Size/Type:	714 hectares/Upland farm
Stocking:	1,000 sheep and 30 suckler cows. Grazing is quite extensive with considerable off-wintering of sheep from the moorland
Land features:	The farm's key ecological habitats are degraded blanket bog, species-rich acid grassland, flushed rush pasture and clough woodland
Key objectives:	Management and enhancement of rough grazing in upland fringe areas to provide habitat for curlew, lapwing, redshank and snipe, all of which breed on the farm. Other key options include the maintenance and restoration of areas of lowland acid grassland and lowland meadows and pastures on the upland fringe.

Higher Pasture farm lies at the very heart of one of Lancashire's key conservation areas. John Fisher and his family have been tenant farmers for over 40 years. A 714 hectare upland farm, it hosts a mosaic of dry heath, blanket bog, species-rich grassland, rush pasture and clough woodland. It is a tenanted holding of United Utilities and borders Belmont Reservoir which is an important site for wintering wildfowl.

Key species found on the farm are wading birds (curlew and snipe), redshank, golden plover, barn owl, reed bunting, skylark, darter dragonfly and bog rosemary.

The farm also hosts many BAP species and habitats, including a sizeable percentage of blanket bog and associated areas of dry heath on the West Pennine Moors, one small part of a British habitat of international significance, an array of species-rich grasslands and flushes, fast disappearing from the Lancashire uplands, upland oak and wet alder woodland and lapwing.

John Fisher joined the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) in 2007 with the aim of defining ways of protecting and enhancing such diverse habitats without compromising the farm's commercial viability. His main objectives were to improve the rough grazing which provide habitat for curlew, lapwing, redshank and snipe, all of which breed on the farm; the restoration of the moorland habitat by improved grazing management and the restoration of the farm's woodland.



Whilst active woodland works are yet to be undertaken, the most important step of securing their boundaries has now been completed and a plan has been agreed. The enhancement of rough grazing for birds has included the management of grazing, cutting and weed wiping to control rush dominance and construction of a series of shallow 'scrapes'.

A recent inspection of the 'scrapes' discovered many tracks of a variety of wading birds using these for feeding. Moorland restoration has included the complete exclusion of stock to allow some large areas to recover and the restriction of grazing on others; including winter exclusion. Together with an extensive programme of works

to block moorland 'grips', this has led to dramatic improvement in the health and abundance of dwarf shrubs and promises much for the future development of a healthy mosaic of heath and bog habitats on the moor.

John appreciates and enjoys the wildlife on the farm and wishes to encourage it. He also enjoys seeing the public's pleasure in seeing the birds and the landscape.

"Joining the HLS has been a way of doing that and it is also financially rewarding. I particularly appreciate the improvement in the condition of our woodland since livestock have been excluded and the improvement in landscape and stock control through a wall restoration programme as a part of the agreement."

Despite some initial scepticism, John has seen that his scheme is worthwhile from a financial business perspective and is delivering worthwhile benefits to society. The keys to the success of the scheme from his Natural England adviser's perspective have been partnership working and communication.

An example of this in action has seen the provision of private funding for the grip blocking works (digging ditches to drain wet areas of heath and blanket bog) facilitated by the landlord, United Utilities.

This followed a joint visit with United Utilities, John and Natural England to look at the area, deal with questions and agree the scope of the works. The efficacy of the grip blocking works has been augmented by the stock exclusion delivered by HLS, in cooperation with John's active shepherding. It is hoped that this will remain a 'live' scheme which can be adjusted over time in order to continue to deliver multiple benefits through appropriate responsive management.

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