

## FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

# Farmers working together can be a force for good soil, water and wildlife

**T**he 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



**Dr Dave Parish** shows how conservation can give real benefits for the landscape they live and work on

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. That approach needs to be sensitive and aspirational. Ask a farmer what wild-

life 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 of farmers working together can do more than individuals in helping

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 secur-

ing 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

to deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife on the land under their stewardship

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.

*Dr Dave Parish is head of lowland research, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust*



**If land users want public cash after Brexit, they need to show a good case for getting it**

**Andrew Midgley** looks at the challenges facing rural policy in the future

**T**he European Union has played a pivotal role in rural Scotland over the last 40 years, so it is hard to overstate the importance of the decision to leave the EU. Today we stand at a crossroads in terms of rural policy; it is a moment that will shape rural areas for decades to come.

Whatever happens — whether we leave the EU, become a completely independent country or become an independent country within the EU — there is a need for a much more strategic vision and public debate about where Scottish rural policy should be heading. This debate cannot wait until we have clarity on Brexit negotiations or independence. Collectively we need to be thinking about the future of rural policy now.

Clearly there are some critically important and immediate challenges. European legislation and policy extends into every fibre of rural Scotland and disentangling ourselves from that bureaucracy will represent a mammoth task. There are also questions around the continuity of public financial support for rural businesses. Many farming businesses are currently reliant on direct farm support from Europe in order to remain in business and any radical changes to that support will almost certainly present many with financial difficulties.

But there are also some opportunities. The most important is that we should be able to design rural policy in a way that is specifically tailored to our needs. Brexit should allow us the

opportunity to think carefully about what we want to see rural areas deliver, and design policy to achieve those ends. It is here that Scottish Land & Estates wants to make the positive and progressive case for a reformed rural policy that reflects modern and relevant land ownership and management.

While we believe that there will be a continued need for public investment in land-based businesses and rural areas, we also believe that defending the status quo is not an option.

Land management currently receives large amounts of public money. At a time of increased pressure on public budgets and public services, it strikes us that land managers will need to come up with the strongest possible arguments

in order to justify ongoing public investment. Land managers will have to more clearly demonstrate what public investment in farming and land management delivers to society as a whole.

Clearly there is a critical national interest in maintaining a viable farming industry and our food production capacity, and this does represent an important argument for continued support to some degree. But farmers should be able to make a return through the market rather than being dependent on public support.

Scottish Land & Estates therefore believes that the strongest justification for ongoing support revolves around the wider suite of goods and services that land managers deliver to society. We are supportive of

long-term moves to redesign rural policy so that financial support to land managers is related more to the extent to which they deliver public goods such as enhanced biodiversity, flood alleviation, climate change mitigation and so on.

We are very aware, however, that we have to start from where we are and, given Scottish Government figures which suggest a very high level of dependency on public financial support within farming, we believe that enhancing the profitability of Scottish farming has to be a top priority.

While we do want to see a move towards a greater emphasis on public goods, we cannot just flick a switch and immediately reorientate support for farming and land management.

We are very aware of the potential for making decisions that inflict a great deal of pain on rural businesses, so we believe that we need a measured transition to our desired end point, not drastic change.

It will be vital to remember when we talk about changing policy frameworks relating to farming and rural businesses that we are talking about people's jobs, livelihoods and communities.

So in broad terms, Scottish Land & Estates recognises the need and believes we have an opportunity to change policy frameworks relating to land management, but at the same time believes that a great deal of care is needed to avoid damaging our land-based businesses. We need to work to enhance the profitability

of these land-based businesses and support them in a process of change, moving towards a support regime that provides the most robust case for public investment in land management. *Andrew Midgley is projects and research manager at Scottish Land & Estates*



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