

# SEEDS OF SUCCESS

HOW **AGRI-ENVIRONMENT** CAN YIELD  
RESULTS FOR NATURE AND FARMING



nature's voice

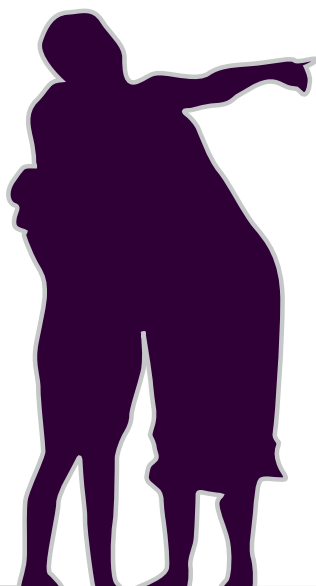


# INTRODUCTION

In a gloomy world of threatened natural and financial resources, this document sets to one side the problems and celebrates the best that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has delivered. We showcase excellent examples of agri-environment schemes in action, and illustrate how these achievements could be replicated and spread right across Europe.

It's not all bad news.

Europe's countryside is facing huge challenges. The historical damage associated with the CAP must be reversed. In many member states wildlife is declining, water quality and availability is still a great cause for concern, and many farming systems continue to contribute significantly more to greenhouse gas emissions than they need to.



In some areas more traditional farming systems persist. This farming, which has delivered benefits for society for generations, is however changing. In response to poor market returns and an inadequate share of the CAP support, people in these areas are

abandoning traditional practices, with serious consequences for local communities and the wildlife dependent on their farming systems.

What we need from the next Common Agricultural Policy is therefore action on a scale not seen since the Policy was developed. The CAP must face up to existing and new challenges. In particular, Europe committed at the UN biodiversity conference in Nagoya, Japan to halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services by 2020. Europe is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020. European farming must play a new role in helping to secure global food security. All this must be achieved at a time when the financial pressures facing Europe are enormous.

Set against this gloomy picture, the task for decision makers seems impossible. But we must not forget that the CAP has already taken huge steps in starting to address previous problems and in supporting benefits, other than food production, that the farmed countryside can give to society.

Agri-environment schemes have been compulsory for all member states since 1992. These schemes are intended to target money at farming practices and measures, which allow wildlife to thrive, maintain clean air and water, and protect the cultural landscape.

However, the funding available for these schemes is still tiny in comparison to money available for direct subsidies, and more is desperately needed.

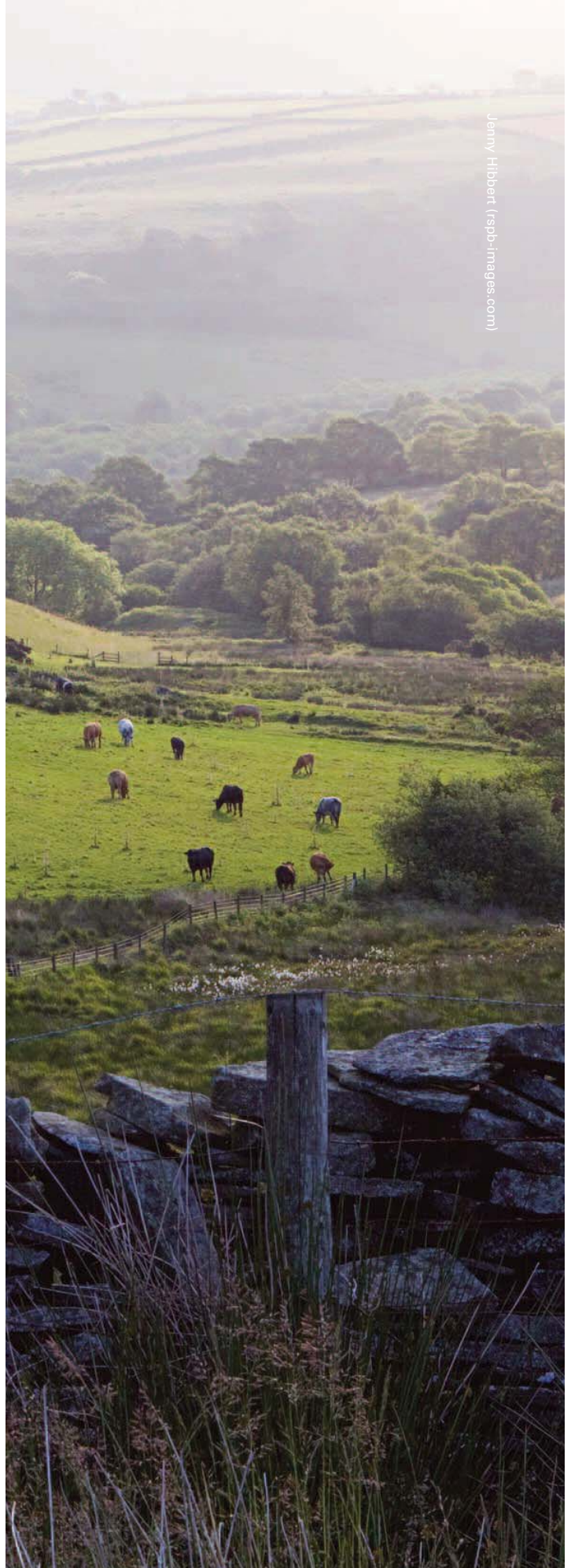
In High Nature Value farming systems the agri-environment model of compensating for the income lost by opting for more wildlife friendly farming does not work due to low market returns. A new model is required to tackle the challenges of these vulnerable systems. Furthermore, some agri-environment money is used to support damaging or inappropriate practices and some good schemes are poorly targeted and monitored so the benefits are not realised properly.

Although these issues must be addressed, there are a number of examples from across Europe where agri-environment has delivered visible and tangible benefits. Here we showcase some of the best.

Wildlife has been the focus of many agri-environment schemes and we look here at a number of approaches, from widely available schemes to targeted work aimed at specific species. Some are new measures, some build on long-standing agri-environment efforts. All are examples of member states embracing agri-environment and delivering real benefits for wildlife and people.

In difficult times there are reasons to feel positive. These case studies are shining examples of how agri-environment money properly spent by Governments and farmers can achieve amazing things.

We hope you enjoy them and will join us in taking action to make sure agri-environment schemes are at the centre of the new CAP.



Jenny Hilbert (rspb-images.com)

# MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPES – PROTECTING PORTUGAL'S CEREAL STEPPES

The Castro Verde in Portugal is one of Europe's last remaining magnificent extensive cereal steppe landscapes. Restored to its former glory using agri-environment, steppe wildlife and traditional farming are both thriving.

Historically much of Mediterranean Europe's farmland consisted of a mosaic of cereal fields, fallow land, pastures and ploughed fields, created by a rotational regime of low-intensity cereal cultivation. However in recent years, changes in land use, such as agricultural intensification, land abandonment and afforestation, have led to losses of the type of land steppe wildlife depends on, and many of the most vulnerable species have suffered serious declines. The cereal steppes of the Castro Verde in southern Portugal are one of the last refuges in southern Europe for unique steppe wildlife, including the great bustard, little bustard, black-bellied sandgrouse and lesser kestrel.

To turn around these losses, the Castro Verde Zonal Programme agri-environmental scheme was launched in 1995. This programme aims to protect the traditional management of the area and its wildlife. It supports farmers for maintaining traditional rotational farming practices and promotes the reduced use of insecticides and herbicides, and the control of grazing levels.

Since the programme began, the types and numbers of both threatened and non-threatened bird species have increased significantly. The great bustard population has more than doubled, in stark contrast to the steep declines seen elsewhere in the region. Populations of other birds, including the lesser kestrel and little bustard, have also improved.

Basic measures can deliver huge benefits to wildlife. Simply by promoting the use of traditional practices and limiting agricultural intensification, the Castro Verde Zonal Programme has created a 64,000 hectare area of high-value steppe where some of Europe's most threatened farmland birds can thrive.

**FARMLAND WILDLIFE OFTEN DEPENDS** on traditional farming practices. Using agri-environment to help farmers continue these practices, when they would otherwise be forced to give them up, allows traditions and wildlife to survive together.

**FOCUSING RESOURCES** on farms within a high-priority target area can deliver excellent results for wildlife.







# HOPE FOR FARMLAND WILDLIFE

In the flat, intensive arable fields of Cambridgeshire, in the UK lies a small oasis rich in wildlife, where the volume of birdsong has been turned up loud and the fields hum with insects.

Hope Farm is the source of the noise and the cause is the successful use of the English widespread entry-level scheme.

Purchased in 2000 by BirdLife UK (the RSPB), with the aim of developing and trialling farming techniques that could produce food and still provide for wildlife, the farm is a medium-sized arable farm like any other. Conventionally managed like 95% of all arable farms in England, with a typical rotation of winter sown wheat, oilseed rape and spring sown beans, Hope Farm does not at first appear remarkable.

What is remarkable is the recovery of farmland bird numbers. The “farmland bird indicator” – the combined trend in numbers of a suite of farmland birds – has rocketed by 200% over the last 10 years. This is more impressive when viewed alongside continued regional and national declines. What may surprise some is that this recovery has been accompanied by an increase in food production.

Threatened species have fared particularly well on the farm. It now hosts 41 pairs of skylark compared to just 10 in 2000, yellowhammers number 36 pairs rather than 16, and grey partridge, lapwing and yellow wagtail have all returned to breed.

These results have been achieved by using a combination of simple measures available in a widespread agri-environment scheme (the so-called farmland bird package). Flower-rich grass margins, wild bird cover, pollen and nectar mixtures and skylark plots all combine to meet the requirements of farmland birds. Give farmland birds nesting sites, winter seed food and summer insect food – the “Big 3” of all they need to survive and breed – and the response can be miraculous.

Hope Farm does indeed give us hope for the future of farmland birds. Without sacrificing food production we can turn the volume up across Europe.

**THE RIGHT COMBINATION OF OPTIONS** implemented in the right place can result in dramatic widespread scheme success.

**FARMING CAN BE PRODUCTIVE** and profitable and still deliver astonishing results for wildlife.

**ALL INTENSIVELY FARMED ARABLE LAND** across Europe could look and sound like Hope Farm.

# FLYING HIGH IN THE NETHERLANDS

The wide skies of Groningen, Netherlands, are once again graced with the majesty of the Montagu's harrier.

The story of the recovery of this magnificent bird of prey begins with a happy accident, but continues with the implementation of beneficial agricultural policies including agri-environment.

In 1990, in the open arable fields of the most north-eastern part of the Netherlands, Ben Koks, the founder of the Montagu's Harrier Foundation stumbled upon a Montagu's harrier nest. At that time farmers and conservationists had almost given up this harrier as a Dutch breeding bird.

A flurry of activity followed to ensure the nest survived, and to attempt to increase numbers in future years. The first step on the road to recovery was to protect nests from farming operations. The second was to make the area more harrier friendly.

The introduction of set-aside in the late 1980s was a great help to the harriers and may have encouraged them back as a breeding bird. Set-aside provided uncropped land and allowed common voles to flourish, giving the birds plenty of food-laden tables in the countryside.

Dedicated agri-environment schemes followed in the 1990s and have been fundamental to the harriers' success. Field margins of between nine and 12 metres wide provide essential feeding areas. These features contain a variety of grasses and herbs of different heights, as well as some open patches – ideal for hunting. The patchwork of the wider landscape is also important. Around 7-10% of the area needs a covering of suitable features such as field margins for Montagu's harrier numbers to really take off.

The Montagu's harrier population of Groningen, Netherlands now exceeds 60 breeding pairs. With more of the right management, this bird is becoming a familiar sight.

**IT IS POSSIBLE** to bring species back from the brink using agri-environment schemes.

**SCRAPPING OF BENEFICIAL POLICIES** such as set-aside can have unintended consequences and tools should be put in place to ensure their benefits can be delivered in other ways.







# FARMING IN ROMANIA – MAINTAINING TRADITIONS TO HELP WILDLIFE

In Romania, the first examples of agri-environment schemes are operating alongside non-governmental projects to maintain traditional farming systems, which provide a landscape extraordinarily rich in wildlife.

The Romanian agricultural landscape is populated by large numbers of small-scale farmers. Many of these employ High Nature Value farming systems, producing remarkable wildlife and landscapes. In many areas these systems are faced with abandonment or intensification. Although they maintain crucial environmental benefits, they are not sufficiently rewarded economically so the farming practice is becoming increasingly unviable.

Agri-environment is one possible solution. The Romanian Government has designated areas with over 50% of permanent grassland as eligible for grassland support. This has allowed the introduction of a basic scheme where farmers are required to limit stocking levels, nutrient input and comply with set mowing dates. For a higher payment level, use of machinery is prohibited. Since the scheme was introduced, hay meadows are being brought back into operation and grazing rotation is more rigorously maintained, bringing security for the wildlife that depends on this type of management.

However, 1.9 million farms across Romania are excluded from support because of their small size. In areas like this local partnership projects are extremely valuable. The organisation, Fundația ADEPT (Agricultural Development and Environmental Protection in Transylvania [www.fundatia-adept.org](http://www.fundatia-adept.org)) has been running local projects in Romania since 2003, particularly in the Târnava Mare area. This semi-natural landscape of exceptional value has recently been designated a Natura 2000 site. The ADEPT team works with farmers to bring them into support schemes. Together with Government, it works to improve scheme design to ensure accessibility for small-scale farmers.

It is early days for agri-environment in this corner of Eastern Europe, but the signs are promising. With the right delivery of the right schemes, Romania's hugely important farming systems can be maintained into the future.

**LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS** have proved essential for the adjustment of measures and delivery of results from agri-environment in areas where agri-environment schemes are new for farmers and authorities.

**LOW-INTENSITY AND SMALL-SCALE FARMING** often deliver significant benefits. It is crucial these farming types are not excluded from basic support.

**ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS** are sometimes provided by the farming system itself. In these cases, paying farmers the income they lose through farming in a more wildlife friendly way does not work. Alternative ways of maintaining these systems are needed to secure the benefits they provide.

# SILAGE SANCTUARIES – SAVING THE CORN BUNTING IN SCOTLAND

In a quiet corner of Western Europe, corn buntings have taken their tentative first flight towards recovery.

The east of Scotland in the UK is a patchwork of sheep and cattle farming, mixed with spring and winter cereals. Oats, wheat, barley and potatoes are grown alongside hay and silage. But in this apparent farmland bird paradise, something went wrong, and corn buntings were one of the casualties.

Once widespread across the lowland arable landscape of Western Europe, corn bunting numbers have plummeted. The well-known story of 1970s and '80s CAP policies encouraging boundary and margin removal, winter cultivation, loss of mixed farming, herbicide use and grassland intensification began to play out in this bit of Scotland as it did elsewhere.

But here a happy ending could be written to this story.

Targeted agri-environment schemes delivered with advice have increased corn bunting numbers, while outside the agri-environment area numbers continue to fall.

Success for corn buntings came partly from an option to provide annually sown, unharvested crop patches, which increased cereal food availability. But only when the scheme was tweaked part-way through to delay cutting of silage was dramatic recovery witnessed – proof that monitoring and responding to results is essential for agri-environment schemes to work.

The task now is to deliver this success across a bigger area. To allow the people of eastern Scotland to see good numbers of corn buntings again, three-quarters of the bird's population needs to benefit from targeted agri-environment. This might sound daunting, but in fact this would only cost 0.02% of the agricultural and agri-environment subsidies paid out annually in Scotland.

Surely not too much to ask for such a satisfying reward?

**TARGETED AGRI-ENVIRONMENT** delivered with advice can result in impressive responses in rare and declining farmland birds.

**FLEXIBILITY TO ALLOW MISTAKES** to be fixed and improvements to be made can boost scheme success.

**TARGETED DOES NOT MEAN** small scale. Wider roll-out of tested, targeted approaches could produce results at a national or European scale, using a tiny fraction of total subsidy payments.

