

Sutton Baynham Farm Wildlife

A wildlife review by The Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group

Sutton Baynham Farm is a 25 acres farm (10Ha) rich in wildlife, having a mixture of woodland and pasture, ancient coppice and ponds, with a variety of wild flowers and wild animals including deer, bats, foxes, birds and amphibians. There is also much wildlife that lives in the local area that visits the farm from time to time. From the top of the farm there are spectacular views of the Forest of Dean, and this quiet area of the farm it is often possible to see small herds of fallow deer that slip away into the woods when disturbed. Buzzards are a common sight circling over head, looking for their next meal.



The Local Area

The Forest of Dean is one of Britain's premier oak forests, covering 35 square miles, which has been important to man for millennia. The trees, principally sessile oak, supplied charcoal to smelt iron already being exploited in the Forest over 2000 years ago. The Dean acquired its status as a royal forest when it was designated as a hunting forest following the Norman Conquest in the 11th Century.

There are around 400 Fallow deer that can regularly be seen roaming through the woodlands of the Forest of Dean. The Forest is subject to ancient rights and customs that have to be accommodated within its management. Sheep grazing is a traditional privilege long associated with the Forest. Flocks of sheep can be seen wandering through the trees and across the roads. Wild boar are known to be in the area though they are rarely seen. Nightjars nest at Tidenham, Pied fly-catchers at Nagshead Nature Reserve and many more exciting species can be found in the area.



The Forest of Dean is also a good place to see birds of prey in action. Peregrine Falcons can be viewed from Symonds Yat Rock, Goshawks from the New Fancy viewpoint and buzzards throughout the woodlands. The Dean is a complex forest in landscape, species and habitat terms. Whilst traditionally the Dean was considered to be an oak forest, today the Forest is almost exactly balanced between broadleaf and conifer. The main conservation value of the Forest is associated with approximately 1000ha of old oak planted in the early 19th century, centred on the Cannop Valley. There are 10 Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the Dean managed by the Forestry Commission and in addition there are 40 local reserves managed in partnership with the County Wildlife Trusts.

Sutton Baynham Farm has a long history with the historic field names giving a clue as to how the land was farmed in the past.



The paddocks above the farm buildings, below Wellington's Grove including Briar Close, Little Rough Piece and Well Piece, are still rich in wild flower species today. This includes species like sorrel, common cats ear, yarrow, ribwort plantain, stemless thistle, red and white clover, comfrey, bird's foot trefoil, dog's violet, dandelion, great stitchwort and wood anemone. The grasses include sweet vernal, cocksfoot and with red fescue dominating and the occasional patch of soft rush. There are an abundance of foxgloves that come out in June that flower along the wood edge making it a haven for bumble bees.



These areas of the farm are not fertilized or sprayed and are now grazed from time to time with horses, but great care is taken not to over graze the paddocks to damage the wild flowers. The dung from the horses is often removed so as not to increase the nutrient level of the fields and so damage the pasture. Bats like the insects that feed on the dung piles and care is taken that the horses are not treated with wormers that can be harmful to bats. The aim also is to enhance the wet areas of the fields to create a pond and to link these fields to Wellington Grove by planting a new hedge that will act as a flight line for the bats to reach the woodland area for foraging at night.

The western end of Wellington Grove is woodland with a predominant mixture of conifers and silver birch, ash and hazel with the occasional veteran oak tree. Over time, some of the conifers will be removed to allow more light to get through the woodland canopy. The native broad leaf trees will be left to grow on and with more light a greater variety of ground flora will cover the woodland floor. A recent discovery from night walks is the iridescent glow worm, where the male can be seen illuminating itself in the dark as an invitation to its partner to find it amongst the vegetation. To help the glow worm, woodland rides are cut to enable this impressive display to be more visual and successful for this rare species to survive.

Further east the Grove shows evidence of ancient coppicing with some veteran beech trees showing thick multiple stems that give clues to the woodlands historic past. The understory is coppiced hazel and silver birch, with bramble and bracken giving good cover for wildlife.



This thick layer of cover is regularly cleared so as not to allow it to encroach too much on the blankets of bluebells, wood anemone and wild garlic that flower in the spring. This coppice area is home to many song birds such as great tits, long tailed tits, robins, chif chaf with the call of the green woodpeckers being easily identified. A small amount of the coppice area will be rotationally cut to ensure the structure and the diversity of the woodland is maintained for the birds. Coppicing was the traditional method of harvesting wood for fuel and making wood products such as hurdles. The hazel stands are cut close to the base and allowed to shoot again and grow in to new timber that can be harvested again in several years. It is necessary to protect the re-growth from deer as their foraging can damage the stands. Often the branches are piled up against the freshly cut stems to prevent them from grazing the new shoots.

The fields on the top of the farm, by their names, Homeward Plough Piece, Briar Piece and Further Plough Piece suggest that they were cultivated. While to the west the Homeward Hill Meadow and Further Hill Meadow may have been predominantly down to pasture.

All these fields that are now down to permanent pasture, show a diverse mixture so of grasses and wildflowers, these include sheep's fescue, red fescue, sweet vernal, wood rush, meadow sweet, greater stitchwort, pignut, violets, cinqfoil, bugle, blue bells, cuckoo flower, meadow buttercup, hedge bedstraw with again fox gloves later in the spring. To maintain their diversity for wildflowers and grasses, the fields are not fertilized or sprayed and are cut for hay late in the summer, to allow the wild flower seed to drop. It is important for the hay crop to be removed so not to smother the wildflowers and if possible grazed with local cattle. These unimproved grassland fields have become a rare habitat throughout the country and often only exists as small remnants. They support a wide range of insects and other invertebrates that provide a habitat and food source at the bottom of the food chain and is important for



the whole ecosystem of the countryside. That is why it is important for these grasslands to be properly managed.



There are two ponds at either end of the fields that are of great value for wildlife, one in Homeward Plough Piece and the other in Further Plough Piece. The ponds are spring fed and as the fields are not fertilized or sprayed the water quality is maintained to a high level of purity. The areas around the ponds are cut in rotation one year in five to give tussocky habitat as it is important to allow them not to become too overgrown. The ponds are important places for invertebrates, frogs, toads and newts, wetland plants and as watering holes for birds and mammals such as badgers, foxes and deer.

Ponds at Homeward Plough Piece and Further Plough Piece



The ponds will have frequent visitors throughout the year and will be an important stopping point for wildlife, such as foxes, as they come out of the woodland for a drink.



The stones around the spring provide good basking places for amphibians.

Veteran Trees

The veteran oak and beech trees on the farm are an ideal habitat for many insects and hence beneficial to insect-eating birds and bats. Hollows and holes provide nesting and roosting sites for birds, bats, other small mammals and insects. Veteran trees form an important part of the cultural and historical heritage, greatly contributing to the landscape surrounding Sutton Baynham Farm. They are often several hundred years old and have a unique style and form. Many veteran trees have inadvertently been cut down as they were thought to be diseased or dying, however old trees with some dead wood will survive several hundred years. Each tree can support a very wide range of species, including plants, insects, lichens, fungi and micro organisms, many of which only survive in these specialised conditions and are therefore amongst our rarest.



The veteran trees are managed for wildlife on the farm by leaving climbing plants, such as ivy or mistletoe on the tree. These climbers do little or no harm to the tree and provide a great source of nectar and berries. Where possible dead wood is left on the tree as this is hugely beneficial to a wide range of species. In some cases the trees are partially or fully pollarded and if a tree has to be felled, some of the trunk is left as dead wood which can support a wide range of organisms. The horses are kept away

from the veteran trees as they can cause physical damage and contribute to compaction problems and soil erosion, often exposing and damaging roots. Again as fertilisers or sprays are not used on the farm there is no damage to veteran trees and their associated organisms.

Many bird species need trees as song posts and all members of the tit family need mature trees to provide them with insects on which to feed. Hedgerow trees can be particularly important for barn owls.

Many individual field trees are remnants from previous hedgerows and some of the trees, especially beech on the farm show that they have been coppiced many years ago. The aim is to achieve as much diversity as possible in the age structure of trees across the farm. Trimming, coppicing or laying hedges is beneficial for wildlife habitat, particularly for bats.

Sutton Baynham Farm is very important for bats as it is close to Dean Hall Site of Special Scientific Interest, one of the most important sites the Greater Horseshoe Bat. There are 17 species of bats in the UK. All feed solely on insects, mostly in flight at night. Bats roost in daytime, hidden away in deep crevices in buildings (roofs, walls) and trees (rot holes, cracks). In winter, when few insects are around, they hibernate in cool places, buffered from temperature changes outside – cellars, cavity walls, tree holes. In summer the females gather to produce single babies. Farm buildings and land are important to bats – they provide their insect food and shelter. Many bats are now rare or endangered due to rapid changes in the countryside, including loss of roosting places and food sources. All bats and their roosting places are protected by law from disturbance or destruction.

The Greater Horseshoe Bats that live in the area, can be easily identified by the flap of horseshoe shaped skin around its nostrils. The Greater Horseshoe Bat is known to eat large insects in flight and prefers to roost while hanging upside down. It is mostly active in woodland and often roosts underground. Detailed studies have been carried out to show how important it is to manage the local area, including Sutton Baynham, for the survival of this rare bat species, and provide roosting and foraging sites on the farm.

Though the buildings of the farm have been developed it is unlikely that the Greater Horseshoe bat would have used them, but mitigation measures have been



taken to ensure that there is no loss of roosting or foraging for other types of the bats on the farm. Special entrances to other farm buildings have been constructed and ledges provided that are suitable for roosting for species such as the Pipistrelle.



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