

Managing for nature

A farmer's view on wildlife schemes

This article gives a farmer's perspective of working with agri-environment schemes. Experience to date has been positive, with a track record of helping wildlife flourish on the farm. But farmers are wary of cumbersome processes, hence the jury is out on the new Countryside Stewardship scheme.

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The holy grail of Countryside Stewardship (CS) is a viable farm burgeoning with wildlife. From a farmer's perspective I want an agreement that is simple to administer, practical to undertake and flexible enough to function in our diverse countryside. As Defra is at the helm of one of the most progressive schemes known, I hoped the new approach to CS would be a major advance in nature conservation.

High yields for nature

At Montague in East Sussex, we have delivered agri-environment for 25 years. We are a 320ha all-grass organic beef and sheep farm, three quarters of which falls within the Pevensey Levels SSSI. Our results are measurable, going from 0 to 40 pairs of Lapwing, 1 to 10 fields containing green-winged orchids and recording 19 different dragonfly species. Hence our surprise at having been inspected 3 times in the past decade for our Higher Level Scheme (HLS) – though one of these was an inspection of the inspector.

Montague was the first farm to enter the HLS 10 years ago, when the buzz was on "outcome" and "indicators of success". Understanding "yield", many farming colleagues were wryly content with these concepts. We hope to enter the new CS, in January 2016, so are among the first to be grappling with the new application process, relying heavily on our outstanding Natural England (NE) adviser. It has been a cold shower for us both. "Outcome focus" has been replaced by the throttling Jabberwocky of "mandatory evidential requirement". Ecology, flexibility and collaborative commitment are being rinsed from the system, and replaced with the dead hand of grimly-reaping European Inspectors.

New bureaucracy, endless distraction

Our first sight of the nesting wader prescriptions revealed a compulsory stipulation to gather up to 17 pieces of evidence, per field per year. These contain no mention of "bird", let alone "fledging success". Instead, having many small fields, we face taking hundreds of photographs of grass, water and trees, and keeping multiple

records of process, simply to make our annual payment claim. So complex is this that non-compliance seems inevitable, even though our lapwing, whom we are being paid to conserve, may be cavorting merrily. This represents serious financial risk and, for other farmers, a fundamental barrier to entry.

To the credit of the Natural England hierarchy, harrowed responses to the new CS have been noted and some alterations to the regime have been made, but the crushing principle of remote inspection with no regard to wildlife conservation assessment remains. Blending the new prescriptions together in our proposal, we have discovered that small option changes have had a large impact on farm viability. Austerity has bitten hard. About one fifth of the farm has been removed from the agreement and payment levels are less than they were 10 years ago. In tune with other businesses and most public services, we will be doing more for less. We are, though, grateful not to be facing the moral predicament of African farmers forced to tolerate rampant elephants, or hungry lions, with zero compensation.

Capital works have to be completed within 2 years of the agreement start, which runs counter to the guidance in the manual for our ditch and pond work. Disproportionate inspection criteria have diluted the ecology and practicality that should lie at the heart of CS. If we are unable to amend details now, it will be a backward step from previous schemes. There is real danger of conservation becoming a paper industry. Someone must re-assert the vitality of science-based action.



Shelduck on Montague mud, Pevensey Levels.

Photo: Martin Hole



Part of Montague Farm at Pevensey, in condition for its Countryside Stewardship agreement.

Photo: Martin Hole

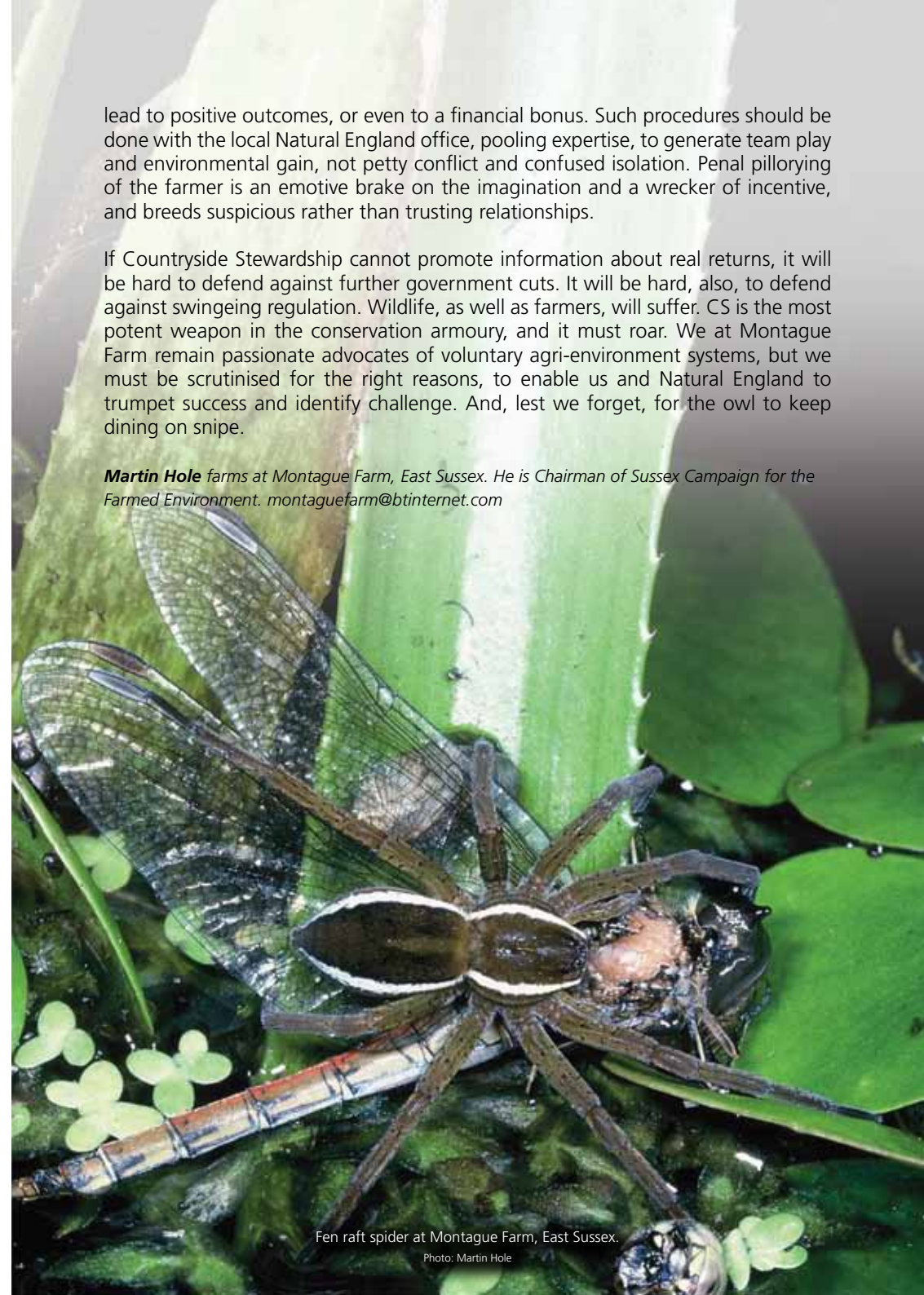
Indicators of a healthy ecosystem

We have fields where owls can be found hunting snipe. An ecologist may glean from this behaviour proof of high water levels (snipe) as well as a mix of grass sward heights (owls) in the same field (owls catching snipe). For the fiscal auditor, it satisfies the demand to know how taxes are spent and whether that expenditure is achieving the desired outcome. The man on the Clapham omni-bus (the electorate) enjoys the owls more than he might value the dusty accrual of incomprehensibly detailed grazing records.

One reason for fixating on nesting waders, other than their worrying decline, is that they sit at the top of an ecological pyramid. The ecosystem must be humming 'beamishly' and determined predator deterrence must be in place before these ground nesting birds can succeed. Like the owl, waders reproducing on the farm are proof of suitable management and biological health. Their quantification, much like weighing a crop, should be the mandatory main method of policing CS. Gathering the data through actual wildlife observation gives critical first hand involvement with target species, as well as a crucial measure of their thrift. It could be collaborative and constructive in ways which the potentially hostile inspection that farms already endure, through the Rural Payments Agency and other organisations, are not.

Working for nature, against the odds

The application process itself is labyrinthine, and could be rationalised to produce specific baseline information which could then be actively monitored. We can provide useful information annually at option level, especially if the process were to



lead to positive outcomes, or even to a financial bonus. Such procedures should be done with the local Natural England office, pooling expertise, to generate team play and environmental gain, not petty conflict and confused isolation. Penal pillorying of the farmer is an emotive brake on the imagination and a wrecker of incentive, and breeds suspicious rather than trusting relationships.

If Countryside Stewardship cannot promote information about real returns, it will be hard to defend against further government cuts. It will be hard, also, to defend against swingeing regulation. Wildlife, as well as farmers, will suffer. CS is the most potent weapon in the conservation armoury, and it must roar. We at Montague Farm remain passionate advocates of voluntary agri-environment systems, but we must be scrutinised for the right reasons, to enable us and Natural England to trumpet success and identify challenge. And, lest we forget, for the owl to keep dining on snipe.

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Fen raft spider at Montague Farm, East Sussex.

Photo: Martin Hole