Farmland projects showcase ways to halt the biodiversity crisis

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The success of two farmland projects run across the North Sea region have shown that there are potential ways to halt the biodiversity crisis.

BEESPOKE and PARTRIDGE, both led by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, presented their results at a conference in Brussels.

Farmers, scientists, conservationists, farm advisors, hunters, and policymakers gathered to share their solutions and recommendations to reverse biodiversity loss across the region and increase wild bee numbers to aid crop pollination.

The two projects used the grey partridge and bees as their respective indicator species to show the impact of good advice, collaboration and innovation as tools to deliver more nature in the farmed environment.

Despite support and policy from the European Commission, the farmland bird index has fallen by 34% since 1990, with the grey partridge one of the worst affected, and a third of bee species are in decline.

What these two projects offer is hope and clear solutions for success by facilitating stakeholders to work together. Farmers are brought together in clusters, supported by advisors, hunters, agronomists, local and national authorities and the wider public.

Under the PARTRIDGE Project, ten 500-hectare demonstration sites have increased wildlife-friendly habitats by an average of 4.5% to an overall 11% since 2017, which is far more than the average 4% on Europe's farmland.

Seventy farmers, supported by 615 researchers, students, volunteers, and hunters undertook habitat management and wildlife monitoring to improve the landscape and boost biodiversity.

To get an accurate picture of their progress, participants undertook farmland bird monitoring by walking a combined 5,000km, the equivalent of walking from Brussels to Baghdad.

Specific seed mix

Their hard work has led to significantly higher diversity and abundance of farmland birds as well as flower-rich pollinator habitats, compared to what is typically found on conventional arable farmland.

Key to the project's success was the creation of a specific PARTRIDGE seed mix, which contains almost 30 species of plants, 19 of which are native to Britain.

This supports considerably larger insect numbers than a standard wild bird seed mix and has now been adopted by more than 2,000 farmers after the project saw it introduced as an agri-environment scheme option in the Netherlands, Flanders, England and Lower Saxony.

The project concluded that if all arable farmland looked like its ten project sites, the farmland biodiversity crisis would not exist, and hence offers a blueprint for policymakers and practitioners to halt and reverse the decline of biodiversity on Britain's and Europe's farmland.

Biodiversity umbrella species

Why did PARTRIDGE choose the grey partridge as their flagship species? In the words of Dr Francis Buner, project lead for PARTRIDGE and a head scientist for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust in the UK: "If we do what is right for the grey partridge, we do what is right for farmland biodiversity."

Recognised as a farmland biodiversity umbrella species, the partridge's need for good nesting cover, a rich availability of insect life, and protection from predators year-round means that if they are thriving, so too should, in Dr Francis' words, "bees, birds, mammals and anything that's crawling on the ground".

The BEESPOKE project, which began in 2019, showcases a similar level of innovation, with different

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seed mix prescriptions for different crops, including soft fruits, top fruit and grassland. This link between supporting pollinators and increasing yields is hoped to encourage farmers to establish new wildflower areas.

Professor John Holland, who led BEESPOKE in the UK, and Dr Michelle Fountain, spoke about the predictive tools they have produced, demonstrating the added value flower strips can provide for farmers and how much habitat is needed to boost pollinators on a local level.

Different bees also have different needs, as beekeeper Lotta Fabricus was keen to highlight. Honeybees forage up to 3km, whereas solitary bees are only foraging over 100m.

“Key threat for humanity”

Speakers at the conference, held on 30 May, were keen to showcase that our biodiversity crisis is not just bad news for the birds and the bees, but for mankind as well.

“Biodiversity loss is a key threat for humanity,” said Anne-Sophie Mulier, Policy & Project Officer of the European Landowners’ Organisation (ELO) during her introductory keynote speech.

The facts she laid out were striking – half of global GDP is linked to nature, with insect pollination worth €15 billion to the EU every single year.

These projects have each shown that there is potential for us to turn around this crisis, but we need much more engagement and ambition.

“What we have seen in PARTRIDGE is that we need to increase the scale from the farm to the landscape level," said Andrea Kuiper of Birdlife Netherlands.

It is essential that farmers are engaged and economically incentivised and are also able to see the impact of their hard work.

“Farmers must be rewarded for their efforts and rules must be kept simple and clear, otherwise farmers won’t take part," emphasised Laurent Govaert, a young farmer from Flanders who took part in both projects.

“We see the effect - a lot of insects, butterflies we’ve never seen before. The effect is real. If you can bring this to the people and the industries using our products, that’s good,” he said.

Ends

Note to editors:

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust gwct.org.uk – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain’s game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies.

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