



# Naturally opinionated

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Appropriately enough, you might think, farming is one of nature conservation's sacred cows.

Even to mention that countryside wildlife is greatly diminished by it will bring accusations of farmer-bashing down on your head. We need a re-think of how, and perhaps whether, public funding goes to farming, otherwise the countryside will never improve for wildlife.

The classic indicator of wildlife in the countryside has been with us for over a decade, namely the Farmland Bird Index (FBI). This was brought in by the last Labour Government as one of a suite of indices to measure the sustainability of UK life. The index is updated annually, taking into account the rises and falls of farmland-dependent species, from Woodpigeon (whose numbers have increased) to Corn Bunting (whose numbers have decreased).

The index now stands at 48 – compared with the reference figure of 100 in the year 1970 – indicating that, despite the large increases in some individual species, the overall populations of farmland birds have more than halved in the last 40 years. My children grew up in a countryside with less bird song than the one in which I walked as a boy.

If we had a farmland plant index, it would surely have taken the same hammering in the 1970s as did the FBI – there were then great changes afoot, with intensification and specialisation of farming that did wildlife no favours. If we had farmland insect, soil carbon, earthworm and Harvest Mouse indices, what a tale they might tell of the decreasing baselines of wildlife that we pass on to future generations. And the UK has one of the greatest declines in farmland birds of any European country – we do lead Europe in some things.

But whose fault is it? Changes in agriculture have been driven by technology (e.g. new herbicides) and modulated by public policy. Nobody has set out to remove wildlife from the countryside, but still it has been removed.

Farmers are very touchy about wildlife losses, and understandably so. To be a member of an industry which has depleted the country's wildlife assets so much and so quickly, and more than your counterparts in other countries, is not perhaps a great position to occupy, but those were yesterday's farmers, driven by yesterday's policies, so it is surely time to move on together and see what can be retrieved. And that is what many farmers are doing on their farms: organic farmers, LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) farmers, many shooting estates and a range of others are putting wildlife back in the countryside. Nature conservationists should, and do, applaud and assist them.

Yet despite the efforts of many farmers, farmland wildlife is not increasing overall. And remember, you are paying for it! £2 billion of taxpayers' money goes to English and Welsh farmers through the Common Agriculture Policy each year. Three-quarters of that money is simply income support and has very few strings attached. It is a payment for being a farmer. And the other £500 million is the good stuff – this is what pays for wildlife-friendly farming.

Both the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the RSPB have farms which show that wildlife and profitable farming can go hand in hand; Skylarks increased fourfold at the RSPB's Hope Farm and wheat yields increased, too.

We should expect a greater return for our investment, and that return could be delivered very easily if only Government would make a few tweaks to the wildlife-friendly farming grants so that they encouraged more farmers to take up the more wildlife-friendly options. There's a lot of our money rewarding farmers for management that doesn't do enough good for wildlife.

We already pay farmers for food in the shops. The reason that farming is different from car manufacturing, newspaper publishing and most other economic enterprises is that much of what we value from 'good farming' cannot be sold to us – the Skylarks, the Cornflowers and the bumblebees. These are public goods that are influenced by how farmers go about wealth creation. I am happy that we pour £2 billion a year into farming, but only if we get more back for our money.

I fear that some in the farming industry have forgotten the privileged position they occupy. The large transfer of money from every taxpayer to farmers is not a right, and at times of high wheat prices for farmers and low job security for public sector workers and many others, it would be good for the farming industry to recognise that. I don't particularly want my taxes to go to those farmers who are richer than I am just because they are farmers, and I don't particularly want to give income support to those farmers who do least for wildlife just because the current system is flawed.

Politicians are the interface between taxpayers and farmers, and should ensure that the former get good value from the latter. Current Defra ministers, Caroline Spelman, James Paice, Richard Benyon and Lord Taylor, are all either farmers, landowners or ex-NFU employees, so they should understand these issues very well. Unless the wildlife dividend is increased, we should all start to ask for our money back.