HEMSWORTH FARM: An Organic Farming Case Study

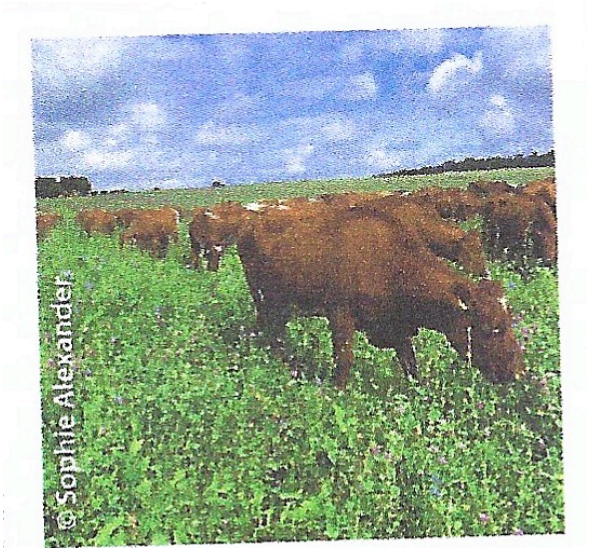
With nearly 80% of Dorset classified as farmland, agriculture has an increasingly important role to play in determining the future of the county's threatened wildlife. Dorset Wildlife Trust Conservation Officer, Hamish Murray, shares his experience of how Hemsworth Farm, an organic farm in Dorset, strikes a balance between being profitable and increasing biodiversity.

By Hamish Murray · Dorset Wildlife Trust

A range of agri-environmental schemes have proved successful in helping halt some of the decline in biodiversity, and more radical solutions such as rewilding are also having a positive impact, but organic farming may offer the most viable, long-term approach for wildlife conservation. Studies show that organic farming generally increases biodiversity by around 30% and species abundance by up to 50%.

Hemsworth is a 420ha mixed farm near Witchampton in Dorset which has been fully organic since 2014. Sophie Alexander, the farm owner, sums it up as: "An endeavour to run a financially viable business that prioritises the health of soil and livestock as well as biodiversity regeneration. Our byword is achieving optimal production rather than maximum production".

Sophie added that to achieve this, a flexible approach is adopted in which the grazing areas change every year to include all fields on the farm over a six-to-seven-year cycle, rotating with the cereal crops and herbal leys. It is a whole farm system in which biodiversity can flourish and develop without the threat of chemical inputs.



CATTLE FEEDING ON HERBAL LEY

There are currently 280 milking cows with 89 replacement heifers born this spring. Cereals including spring wheat for milling, winter oats for porridge and spring barley for malting are grown in rotation with the herbal leys.

In 2019 Sophie approached Dorset Wildlife Trust to carry out a long-term study on the farm's biodiversity so, on a sunny April morning in 2019, I visited Hemsworth. First impressions were certainly favourable; the air was full of skylark song while, along the hedgerows, the 'little bit of bread and no cheese' of countless yellowhammers competed with the jangling refrains of numerous corn buntings. A closer look revealed an abundance of insects which was, as I wrote in my notebook, 'like stepping back in time'.

Hemsworth also supports other key habitats including 14ha of field margins, 17ha of woodland, 8ha of rewilded land and a 2km stretch of the River Allen. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, most survey work was carried out in 2019 when three transects were established covering a cross-section of the farm's habitats. A simple walk-over survey method was used, recording any wildlife seen along the route. It is hoped that this method can be continued by volunteers beyond the Dorset Wildlife Trust study period. Where necessary, additional survey techniques such as moth trapping, pitfall traps and acoustic monitoring are also used.



As the surveys progressed it became clear that Hemsworth was an exceptional place for wildlife. So far, more than 25 'Dorset Notable' plants (indicators of good habitat) have been noted at Hemsworth. Hemsworth also seems to be an important re-fuelling stop for migrant birds. More work is required to assess the farm's mammal populations but some of my most enthralling moments at Hemsworth have been spent watching the numerous brown hares.

It is worth emphasising that Hemsworth is a profitable, modern farm which uses the latest technology to ensure optimal yields. Sophie Alexander, Chair of the Dorset Country Landowners and Business Association (CLA), won the Innovative Farmer of the Year Award in 2017 so I'll leave the last word with her: "I think mankind will look back and be incredulous about the quantities of expensive chemicals we use, not just to produce food but throughout our lifestyles generally. We are afflicted with tidy mindedness gone mad. Our obsession with weed-free lawns and disinfecting everything out of existence is threatening to life – including our own. Nature is ordered and complex but it is certainly not tidy. Allowing diversity gives us the best chance of resilience and ultimately survival".

Original article and photographs: Dorset Wildlife Trust. Text by Hamish Murray.

Species at Hemsworth

The original mock diary entry and wildlife photographs are reproduced below as a single composition to preserve their captions, visual detail and original presentation.

