

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Common Curlew

What a difficult spring it has been. I have seen many loads of straw travelling down to the west country on the A303, no doubt to assist those whose winter feed is running low.

Last spring, we were hit hard by an early drought and some fields failed to produce the yields of silage and hay that we were expecting. Fortunately, I have come to rely more and more on oats and vetches, which whilst providing an excellent nectar source for bees and butterflies, produce extraordinary yields. The silage is a bit low on protein but is nutritious, palatable and filling. Better to have contented cows than trying to eke out a high protein silage by underfeeding. This winter I continued my perennial practice of feeding our yellowhammers, corn buntings and linnets by running grain, normally oats, along the base of various hedgerows.

Demand peaked in late-February to mid-March with up to 300 yellowhammers and 160 linnets at one site. The birds were so prolific that it was looking at a brown blizzard as they flipped along the hedge in front of me. It is well worth putting any waste or other corn to one side for the birds and helps to demonstrate and affinity with nature which I believe should form part of the ethos of every organic farmer.

Spare a thought for the ironically named Common Curlew. If you are fortunate enough to have a pair of these birds on your farm, they will need very detailed attention to allow them to successfully rear young.

Britain has about 30% of the worlds breeding population, but they are rapidly declining. Predation of chicks by foxes and badgers together with the accidental killing of chicks by grass cutting, are just some of the hazards they face.

Foxes should be controlled and badgers can be deterred by electric fencing put around the perimeter of the field where the birds are breeding. Try and delay cutting until the chicks have fledged. Get help from your local branch of the RSPB and endeavour to ensure a successful fledging of this magnificent and enigmatic bird. The loss of that warbling, piping call, will leave all of us the poorer.

Henry Edmunds FRES

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