



Sheet 8.

Nature at Westthorpe



Wildlife at Westthorpe Hall

Westthorpe Hall is probably unique in the UK care field in not only occupying a fascinating place in England's history, but also in providing the elderly with a beneficial link to the English countryside.

Stewardship of the land

The Barker family have long regarded the environment as warranting care and attention as they seek to leave their land in a better state than when they acquired it. As a consequence their farming practices have consistently sought to conserve and protect not only farmland birds, but also flower meadows, pond fauna and wild animals.

Almost ten percent of Lodge Farm's area is now devoted to wildlife, while their crops are grown and harvested in an environmentally considerate manner. As a result wildlife is much in evidence in and around the farm.

Nature's contribution to care

The access we can provide to the natural world at Westthorpe Hall is potentially extremely valuable to our Hall residents.

Why the countryside connection matters

The health benefits of contact with Nature are now well attested. Spending time connected to the natural world reduces stress levels, quietens the mind, improves concentration (a valuable asset if we are to contend with dementia) and leaves people happier, calmer and more contented.

At Westthorpe Hall we believe, unusually in the care field, that allowing our residents to have secure access to the farm and its wildlife can be beneficial for them. Contact with Nature is therefore valuable. This, plus our serene surroundings, as countryside views are known to have stress-reducing effects as well, means our residents are contented too.

This is why, alongside the typical range of elderly activities we arrange at Westthorpe Hall, we also have seasonal trips to natural features around the farm with ample opportunities to encounter its wildlife.

Westthorpe's Nature connection

Throughout the year we find ways for our residents to touch Nature and benefit from the calm it can introduce into their lives. From year-round feeding of our garden birds within the moated area of the Hall's grounds, to 'live-can' feeds from our nesting Barn Owls or Kestrels, or to see the increasingly rare Grey Partridge and witness feeding of farmland birds over the winter. There are also seasonal trips to the wild flower meadow we have created. Plus visits to our rejuvenated ponds, where we are encouraging rare Great Crested Newts to breed.

Westhorpe Hall's wildlife year

This list of farming activities and wildlife events demonstrates there is plenty to see all year-round – a full set of images can be found on our website www.westhorpehall.co.uk/wildlife

January

Spindle – Spindle berries on this small tree/shrub are highly attractive, but strongly emetic and purgative – not surprisingly they are only eaten by goats.

Fieldfare – A winter migrant from Scandinavia – a Fieldfare feeding on fallen apples in the Hall's orchard.

February

Tawny Owls – One of the earliest nesting raptors, these owls have consistently bred well on Lodge Farm – we usually have two or three pairs breeding close to the Hall.

Robin – A wintry Robin.

Long-tailed Tits – These attractive small birds (which are not actually tits) are master nest-builders. Each male will prepare at least two or three nests for his partner to pick. Each is cleverly built, with a capacity to expand with their young as they grow. This trick is achieved by weaving spider webs into the ball of feather, moss and lichen they gather. A large nest can contain upwards of 2000 feathers. Tiny flocks of them are to be found around the farm throughout the winter.

March

Sprayer – Spraying the crops to increase the yield. We try to keep the application of chemicals to a minimum so as not to damage our conservation efforts.

Daffodils on farm drive – Acknowledged as another of the heralds of spring, clumps of Daffodils are to be found across the whole farm.

Bees on the farm – Bees take advantage of all blossom. They are vital for pollination, but their numbers are declining, partly as a result of intensive agriculture. On Lodge Farm we make a great effort to keep pesticide and herbicide use to a minimum so bees like this are not a rare sight here.

April

Barn Owls – Barn Owls are prominent morning and evening hunting for Voles and Field Mice to feed their young.

Roe Deer – Roebuck with his three does – a family party of our smallest native deer.

Small Tortoiseshell – A first brood Small Tortoiseshell – often second and even third broods will appear later on

in August and September to give this butterfly a lengthy presence in the countryside.

Peacock – A handsome Peacock butterfly, usually waking from hibernation in March and with their numbers peaking in April. One of twenty-one species of butterfly found across the farm.

Grey Partridge – Our farm's population of English Partridge is slowly growing – we now reckon to have five pairs.

False Oxslip – One of over sixty species on our flower meadow – the False Oxlip is relatively common in Suffolk. Resembling Cowslips, but with the flower varying in colour from a primrose yellow to an orangey-red.

Great Crested Newt – A rare male newt in one of our ponds. They are protected by law and are the UK's largest newts. Our pond restoration work is ensuring their presence across our farm estate.

Spreading fertiliser – Brian Barker spreading fertiliser destined to encourage the growth of a wheat crop.



Fieldfare, ©Brian Barker



Bees, ©Brian Barker



Peacock butterfly, ©Brian Barker



Tawny chicks, ©Patrick Barker



Hare, ©Brian Barker



Four-spot Chaser, ©Brian Barker

May

Cowslips – A relative of the primrose, Cowslips can be found in many places on Lodge Farm where the soil is slightly alkaline and the surrounding grassland short. Flowering starts in March and ends around this time. They are an important nectar source.

Tawny chicks – Another successful brood of Tawny Owls, here they are waiting to be ringed by Patrick.

June

Hare – A suspicious Brown Hare. Intensive agriculture plus coursing and shooting have reduced the UK population by about 80% since 1900, but they find a safe haven here – despite their predilection for tender grass shoots and a tendency to damage crops.

Common Spotted Orchid – The most common of the UK orchids, the Common Spotted Orchid is one of the summer floral highlights of Lodge Farm's species-rich flower meadow.

Great Tit – A good brood of five fledglings using one of our 80 nest boxes scattered across the farm.

Buzzard – Buzzards have seen resurgence across the East of England and continue to

breed successfully on the farm – to date two pairs have bred here over the last five years.

Kestrel – Sadly even the once common Kestrel is declining nationally and here in the East it has been overtaken by the Buzzard in terms of species abundance. Fortunately at least two or three pairs of Kestrels still nest regularly around Lodge Farm and last year one pair close to Westhorpe Hall got five young away.

Red Admiral – Red Admiral resting.

July

Turtle Dove – Now extremely scarce, the attractive Turtle Dove is nevertheless maintaining its presence on this farm.

Comma – The Comma is primarily a woodland species, but in the summer it is to be found in meadows and gardens – this one is feeding on Thistle nectar, though it has a preference for Common Nettle.

Azure Damselflies mating – the male grabs the female just behind her head with his claspers, then in tandem the egg-laying commences with the female using her ovipositor – almost a hundred will be laid in one afternoon.

Four-spot Chaser – a regular visitor to the margins of our ponds and ditches.

Barn Owls – Four Barn Owl fledglings in one of the Lodge Farm's eight boxes.

Combine – Combining our grass crop.

Flycatcher – The increasingly rare Spotted Flycatcher can be found around the farm.

August

Painted Lady feeding on Sunflowers. This species migrates from North Africa each year, as it doesn't appear able to withstand our British winters.

A *Migrant Hawker* at rest at one of our ponds. It can be seen flying well into the autumn – sometimes as late as November.

September

Sloes, the fruit of the Blackthorn, ripening – many different birds feed on these.

Kestrels – A successful family of Kestrels comprising five ringed chicks ready to fly the nest.

Fendt tractor & plough – The new farming year commences with ploughing – here Brian is using a Kverneland six-furrow reversible plough.

October

Fendt 516 tractor & roller – With the ground now clear, this month there's also a flurry of activity around the farm preparing the seed bed.

Fendt 516 tractor – Spreading fertiliser on the grass seed crop.

Fendt 826 tractor – Mole draining the wheat stubbles to ensure water drains away through the winter months.

Caterpillar – The drilling of winter crops is usually almost complete by now.

November

Our *wild flower meadows* are grazed by sheep over winter to ensure increased floral growth the following spring.

Hedgehog – Young hedgehog feeding-up for the winter.

Hen Harrier – A rare migrant to the farm – a stunning male Hen Harrier.

December

Hawthorn Berries – Known as haws, provide vital food for many farmland birds – as the seeds contain cyanide they are discarded. The bushes also offer protection for small birds over the winter and provide safe nesting too during the spring and summer.

Large mixed flocks of finches are fed on the farm every winter – here Yellowhammer and Chaffinch feed on our winter wild birdseed mixes.

Hedging – There is over 40 kms of hedge on our farms so our three-year rotation programme of hedge cutting is a big task every year. The programme usually starts this month and runs through to February, once the wood is dead and brittle, and birds have stripped the hedges' berries. This timing for trimming reduces the damage to the hedgerows; it also ensures wild birds feeding benefits too.

Wintry scene – Whether you are a climate change sceptic or not, our weather is certainly becoming more erratic. As a result, these days' winters are just as likely to be hard as mild. It almost seems to be a lottery as to which we'll get each year.



Oil seed rape harvest, ©Brian Barker



Hedgehog, ©Brian Barker



Wintry scene, ©Brian Barker