

Farming for Wildlife (Nicolas Watts) 19th February 2015

Nicholas Watts is a farmer and conservationist who has won more awards on his farm than any other farmer in the UK. He spoke about his experiences at his farm in Lincolnshire, where he grows wild bird seed which he packs on site and sells direct to the customer. Nicholas believes in farming in a way that encourages wildlife and in supporting the wide range of habitats it needs.

Nicholas' family moved into Vines Farm in Deeping St Nicolas near Spalding in Lincolnshire in 1883. The type of farming and the amount of man power required, machinery, yield and rate of harvesting has changed drastically over this time. Nicholas made comparisons from when he started farming in the 1950s through to the modern day. The statistics on the number of men required and rate of harvest from the 1950s to the modern day for each major crop highlighted the revolution in farming methods. He also highlighted the changes in chemical regimes since the 1950s – for example, for wheat only one chemical was used as a fertiliser in the 1950s and nowadays around six chemicals (fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides) are sprayed during the year. His farmland is fenland and in the 1950s it was mainly cattle on the land (Lincoln Red being the traditional breed in the area). Since then, the land has mainly changed over to arable and the cross dykes have been filled in to make larger fields more suitable for farming arable in the modern way. There remains a number of cattle yards with barns in the area and many of these have fallen out of use and into disrepair.

Nicholas is a keen birdwatcher and in 1992, he noticed that the numbers of birds and the number of species was dropping off. Over the years he has brought in a number of wildlife initiatives to encourage them back. He has created set aside strips of land, planted 500 yards of hedges, planted wildflower meadows, dug ponds and has planted a spinney (to which he planted a now flourishing area of bluebells). Nicholas has managed to obtain grants to have some of these barns in the cattle yards re-roofed and so prevent loss of these barns, which are important nesting sites for swallows and barn owls. He farms in a way to help nesting birds – for example, he leaves bare patches in the crops for skylarks to nest in. These sites are much safer from predators than the alternative nesting sites on the edge of wheel tracks as predators cannot find these nesting sites as easily. He now has healthy populations of corn buntings, the scarce tree sparrow, bramblings, goldfinches and yellow wagtails.

In 1993 he was feeding so many birds and it was a spectacle so he decided to organise an open day. This was a success and people asked him if he would sell bird seed to them. In 1994, Nicolas had another open day for the public and people again asked him if he would sell them bird seed. It was then that he had the idea to sell bird seed to the public and now has a flourishing mail order bird seed business and is the largest producer of sunflower seeds in the UK. He also grows millet, canary seed and oats for bird seed.