

Down on the Farm

Farmland and Grassland

To many of us, heaven might be the meadows of Edwardian England, the big blue sky, the haycocks a-drying, the clean river running by; while we laze in the sun, read poetry and listen to the bees and skylarks.

Peter Marren, *British Wildlife* (1995)

ONE MORNING, ROUGHLY 5,000 years ago, a young man went to work on what we now call the Marlborough Downs, in the county of Wiltshire. As the sun rose over the distant hillside to the east, he took out a long, narrow blade carefully shaped from a piece of flint, and knelt down by a stone.

Leaning forward, he placed the flint into a groove already cut in the stone's surface, and began to sharpen it. Finally, satisfied that the tool was ready for the job in hand, he set about the day's task: cutting down trees to create an open clearing, where he and his companions could plant seeds to grow crops.

This long-forgotten man was one of the earliest farmers, the first in an unbroken line of individuals and

communities who have worked our land to provide food for themselves, their families, and – in later eras – for the rest of us.

Standing by this same stone and looking across this vast, open, windswept landscape, I find it almost impossible to imagine what this place would have looked like before those first people settled here. Today, these rolling hills and downlands are the quintessential farmed landscape of lowland England: what we know and cherish as a picture-postcard image of ‘the countryside’.

We take comfort from the apparently unchanging nature of this scene; and yet if we dig a little deeper into its history, we soon discover that, like most of Britain, there is nothing remotely natural about it at all. Everything I can see, all around me, has been shaped – and indeed is still being shaped – by human hand.

So although we think of Britain’s farmed countryside as somehow traditional, consistent and unchanging, it is anything but. It is crucial that we bear this in mind when we contemplate the state of Britain’s wild creatures and the places where they live, and try to decide what we can do to bring them back from the brink.



TO REALLY APPRECIATE the way that successive generations of farmers have transformed the landscape I only need to travel a few miles north of the Marlborough

Downs, and take the M4 motorway towards London. On both sides of the road, for mile after mile, the predominant colour is green: a patchwork quilt of various shades, occasionally broken by a square of wheat or barley, or the electric yellow of oilseed rape; but mainly the green of highly fertilised grass grown for grazing or silage.

In the words of cultural historian Michel Pastoureau, green is ‘a ubiquitous and soothing presence as the symbol of environmental causes and the mission to save the planet’. But this vivid emerald hue, stretching as far as my eyes can see, has nothing natural about it at all. This dazzling green is the colour of intensive farming. By associating it with something positive and ‘natural’, as many continue to do, we become blind to its real meaning.

Try this simple experiment: look across an intensively farmed landscape, almost anywhere in lowland Britain, and imagine that every green field you can see is a vivid, luminous red – the colour we associate with danger. Now imagine seeing field after field of magenta, scarlet and crimson, stretching off into the distance like a scene from some manic film-maker’s futuristic apocalypse. You might not be so inclined to regard our farmed countryside in quite the same way.

The reason this is so important is because it covers more than twice as much land as all our other wildlife habitats combined. Indeed, roughly three quarters of the whole of Britain’s land area is defined as ‘farmland’. From the arable fields of the lowlands to the hill farms of the

uplands, this vast area – about 70,000 square miles in all – is used to grow crops, raise livestock, produce timber or, increasingly, for wind and solar power. Without question this is by far the most important habitat in the country – not just for wildlife, but for Britain’s 64 million people too. This is also what we call the countryside.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word ‘countryside’ as ‘the land and scenery of a rural area’; while its *Cambridge* equivalent expresses the concept in rather more passive terms: ‘Land not in towns, cities or industrial areas, that is either used for farming or left in its natural condition.’

But neither of these definitions gets anywhere near capturing the profound resonance of the word ‘countryside’ to the British ear. This resonance is shaped by memories of our early childhood, poring over picture books showing kindly Farmer Jim on his bright red tractor, surrounded by happy-looking hens, pigs and cows. It is fuelled by the cultural connections of the word, from the poetry of Keats to the music of Vaughan Williams. And it is reinforced each day, as we are bombarded with bucolic images on advertising hoardings, which exploit our deep love of the countryside to sell us everything from milk to mortgages.

These images and cultural associations take us far beyond any prosaic meaning of the word ‘countryside’. Together they conjure up a rose-tinted view of rural Britain held dear by millions; one that is shamelessly

exploited by self-appointed, minority-interest pressure groups whose claim to be the guardians of the countryside would be amusing, were its consequences not so serious.

Although this simple word evokes a sense of pride, warmth and affection in the hearts of millions of Britons, we need to think again. The truth is that the vast majority of our lowland countryside is a factory, producing food to sell to the supermarkets and manufacturers, food that will eventually go into our shopping baskets and end up on our dinner tables.

Farmers will tell you that their primary job is to produce food, and they are right. What they may not tell you is that under the current system, in which the supermarkets and wholesalers continually force down the prices they pay farmers for their produce, in order to provide cheaper food for us (and better profits for their shareholders), the farmers themselves have little or no choice but to maximise their yields by using every means possible.

In practice this has meant removing hedgerows to create larger and larger fields, ploughing up field margins so they can plant up to the very edge of the land, and continually spraying with poisonous herbicides and insecticides to wipe out any wild flowers or insects that might compete with their precious crops.

This approach certainly works: it enables Britain's farmers to maximise their resources and produce food at

the price that retailers and consumers demand. But it has two major problems. First, that however hard they work, and however much they increase their production, most of Britain's farmers see little or no profit for their efforts. No wonder that so many of them are struggling to survive, or simply going out of business.

The other problem is that modern intensive farming leaves little or no room for the plants and animals that have shared this rural space with us for thousands of years: the birds and mammals, bees and butterflies, grasses and wild flowers of the British countryside.



TAKE A WALK along a public footpath across open, intensively farmed arable land almost anywhere in East Anglia during the spring or summer, and you'll soon be struck by an odd sense of something wrong. It may take you a while to put your finger on what this is, but after a few minutes it will dawn on you that one important thing is missing: birdsong.

In the bright skies, where distant skylarks should hang in the air, pouring out their song like a leaky tap: silence. In the hedgerows – if you can find one – where whitethroats should be launching themselves skywards and singing their scratchy little tune: silence. And along the edges, where unseen partridges should be revealing their presence by their harsh, grating call, again, all is silent.

Apart from the gently waving heads of corn in the summer's breeze, there is an eerie stillness. Nothing moves. The flutter of butterflies, their colours catching the eye as they reflect the sunshine; the buzz of bumblebees, as they flit from flower to flower; even the flowers themselves – the crimson petals of the poppy, the intense blue spikes of the cornflower, the delicate pinkish-purple of the corncockle – are all absent. In the corncockle's case, this arable weed which was once widespread is now virtually extinct in the wild in Britain.

It's not the only familiar farmland species that has disappeared from vast swathes of the countryside. At first glance, a corn bunting looks rather like a sparrow that has let itself go to seed: a plump, brown, streaky bird with an unkempt plumage and a tuneless, jangling song. The corn bunting is so closely associated with the farmed landscape that, like the cornflower and the corncockle, our ancestors named it after our most important arable crops.

But in many parts of Britain, the corn bunting's song is now but a distant memory: nine out of ten corn buntings have vanished since 1970, and their breeding range has contracted by more than half during the same period. The same story can be told about the turtle dove, the grey partridge, the yellowhammer – even the once-ubiquitous skylark. During my own lifetime, roughly 2 million pairs of skylarks have simply disappeared; and the same is true of many other farmland birds, such as the tree sparrow,

yellow wagtail and grey partridge, whose numbers have fallen by four fifths in the past forty years.

Worryingly, these declines appear to be accelerating, despite efforts to make farming more wildlife-friendly. So the turtle dove, a bird once so familiar that it appears with the partridge in the celebrated song ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’, is now predicted to disappear as a British bird by the year 2021. If the corn bunting’s decline continues, it won’t be far behind.

But statistics only tell part of the story. It is the reality on the ground that really brings home the scale of these declines. Where once Britain’s fields echoed to the jangling of the ‘fat bird of the barley’, or the distinctive purring of the turtle dove, they are now often silent.

These birds are just the most visible tip of a very large iceberg. For all our farmland wildlife, the changes that have taken place over the past seventy years or so have been nothing short of catastrophic. As the countryside has become industrialised, simplified and homogenised, so wildlife has lost the variety of landscapes it needs to survive: the hidden corners where creatures can hide from predators, the hedgerows where they can raise a family, the ponds where they drink, the stubble fields where they feed in winter, have all vanished. In their place, we have what is an agricultural desert: vast monocultures of single crops such as wheat or barley stretching for hectare after hectare, with barely a hedgerow or tree left standing to break the monotony.

It's easy to look at today's countryside and assume that things can't be quite as bad as conservationists make out. But we only need to find out what we have lost since the end of the Second World War to realise just how much has vanished. During the past seventy years – the span of a single human lifetime – we have lost 99 per cent of our hay meadows, 96 per cent of our chalk and limestone grasslands, half a million farm ponds, and 300,000 miles of our hedgerows – enough to stretch from the earth to way beyond the moon.

For children growing up today, indeed for most of us who cannot remember back more than a few decades, the countryside may appear as if it has been the same for centuries. But those who can still recall the years between the wars know that our rural landscape was very different then: richer, more varied, and above all filled with a far greater variety of plants and insects, mammals and birds. This is not mere rose-tinted nostalgia – but a glimpse of the reality of what modern industrial farming has done to our countryside.

How have we managed to preside over such a cataclysmic decline in our farmland wildlife, a decline that may not be reversible? How have successive governments, conservationists, farmers and the people of Britain – many of whom care deeply about the natural world and would staunchly defend the importance of the British countryside – allowed so many once-familiar creatures to disappear?

To understand how this calamity has happened, we need to go back in time. And although most of the really major changes to our countryside have occurred in the past seventy years or so, to truly comprehend the enormity of this modern-day destruction we need to rewind the clock 5,000 years. Back to that anonymous early farmer, sharpening his flint axe on the hard, grey stone, before setting forth to chop down the trees that once covered these downlands.



IT WOULD HAVE taken a very long period – several of these first settlers’ brief and gruelling lifetimes – to make any significant change to this place; to begin to transform it from a closed, wooded landscape into an open, grassy one. As the forests disappeared, so the underlying shapes of the hillsides gradually became exposed: gentle, rounded, grassy slopes rising up above the surrounding lowlands. And as generation succeeded generation, the view gradually changed to something not all that different from the one we see today.

At Avebury, on the edge of the Marlborough Downs, these early settlers built a stone circle – the largest in Europe. Although not as famous as its neighbour Stonehenge, the Avebury circle is equally impressive; more so, perhaps, for being right by the main road that runs through the village, so that as it comes into view you

are suddenly, and unexpectedly, pitched thousands of years back in time.

Many centuries later, they cut through the grass and topsoil of these hills to reveal the chalk below, creating some of the region's most famous landmarks. So on a Dorset hillside above the village of Cerne Abbas, a naked man wields a fearsome club almost as long as he is tall, complemented by his huge (and magnificently erect) penis. Further to the north-east, on the edge of Salisbury Plain, is the more wholesome – and much more recent – chalk carving of the White Horse at Westbury.

These monuments and carvings are evidence of the continued human occupation of this area over thousands of years. It was these early settlers who also shaped the wildlife of this newly changed landscape. Although we have no written records from this period, we can assume that many species that would have been rare and localised until the forests were cleared were then able to take advantage of this new habitat, extending their range and increasing in numbers to become some of our commonest plants and animals.

As well as wild flowers and their accompanying chalkland butterflies, many birds such as the rook and the skylark would have benefited from the clearance of the forests. Mammals would have thrived too: the rabbit, introduced by the Romans, and the brown hare, often thought of as a native species but also brought here from abroad, probably by the Romans' Iron Age

forebears, soon became common residents of this new landscape.

When Britain was largely covered with trees, these birds and mammals would have been confined to the few areas of open land which suited their lifestyle: clifftops, the edges of higher ground, and any larger clearings within the woods and forests themselves. But gradually, as the trees were cut down and open grassland and crops began to dominate, they would have gained the upper hand on their woodland counterparts. For what we now think of as ‘farmland species’, the next few thousand years was a golden age, as they lived and thrived right alongside their human neighbours.



UNFORTUNATELY, FOR MOST of our human history on these islands we have very little evidence of the status of these, or indeed of any of our wild creatures. Only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when visionary observers such as the Cambridge botanist John Ray and the Hampshire parson-naturalist Gilbert White began to keep detailed notes and records, do we begin to get an understanding of the relative abundance of different species.

Yet there is another way to know how common a plant or animal must have been in the distant past: by examining any names (including folk names) that have

survived to the present day. The premise behind this theory is simple: rare creatures were hardly ever seen or noticed by most people, and so never acquired common names. Thus birds such as the avocet and the red-necked phalarope – both scarce and limited in range – were named in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by professional ornithologists. But common and widespread creatures had been given their names long before then by ordinary people, and in most cases had also been granted a series of alternative folk names, varying from place to place up and down the country.

Take that characteristic bird of the open countryside, the skylark. Originally simply known as the ‘lark’ (the prefix ‘skie’ was added in 1678 by John Ray), this once-ubiquitous open-country bird has over the centuries garnered a range of epithets, including laverock, heaven’s hen, skyflapper and rising-lark. Both the official and folk names reflect the bird’s amazing ability to sing while hanging in the air for what seems like hours on end; an ability so perfectly evoked in the opening lines of Victorian poet George Meredith’s ‘The Lark Ascending’:

He rises and begins to round,
 He drops the silver chain of sound
 Of many links without a break,
 In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,
 All intervolv’d and spreading wide,

Like water-dimples down a tide
Where ripple ripple overcurls
And eddy into eddy whirls . . .

This familiar bird is also embedded in our day-to-day language: we say of someone that they ‘sing like a lark’; we talk about an early riser as being ‘up with the lark’, and our grandparents’ generation used to talk about ‘larking about’, though this now appears to have gone out of fashion.

This wide range of names and phrases applied to the bird and its behaviour tells us that the skylark would have been familiar to everyone who lived and worked in the open countryside. The same is true of other species with similarly ‘basic’ names such as the rook (named after its call), the whitethroat (from its appearance), the yellowhammer (from its colour – ‘ammer’ is an old German word meaning ‘bunting’), the corn bunting (from its habitat) and the linnet (from its food – referring to the bird’s liking for the seeds of flax).

The populations of these birds – and the various mammals, insects and wild flowers associated with this ‘new’ countryside – would have remained fairly constant over time. Certainly until the Second World War these species could be found across vast swathes of lowland Britain, wherever the land was farmed in a traditional way – which was more or less everywhere.

That's not to say that things never altered during this long period of time. One of the most dramatic changes happened in just a few decades at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries, when the Enclosure Acts transformed Britain's lowland landscape for ever.

Enclosure changed the face of the countryside by encouraging the planting of hedges, which obliterated the previous system of open strip fields radiating out from a village, and created smaller, enclosed plots of land bounded by hedgerows. By allowing private landowners to separate their holdings from one another's, it also produced the familiar 'patchwork quilt' of fields we know today.

Not everyone welcomed this change: the poet John Clare, whose home on the edge of the Northamptonshire Fens was transformed out of all recognition by enclosure, was devastated by the changes to familiar landmarks. In his poem 'The Flitting' he wrote movingly of his sense of disorientation as the landscape he had known since childhood was utterly transformed in just a few years:

[. . .], and so I seem
 Alone and in a stranger scene,
 Far, far from spots my heart esteems,
 The closen with their ancient green,
 Heaths, woods, and pastures, sunny streams.
 The hawthorns here were hung with may,
 But still they seem in deader green,

The sun een seems to lose its way
 Nor knows the quarter it is in.

Devastating as the changes were for Clare and his fellow farm labourers, the effects on wildlife were not so serious. For although the hemming-in of fields and the move towards more organised agriculture might have affected some creatures of open ground, this was more than compensated for by the new hedgerows where birds could nest, insects feed and small mammals find a home. And once the disruption was over, the countryside returned to some kind of equilibrium, in which most of our familiar farmland species continued to thrive. A century later, this patchwork quilt of fields and hedgerows had come to be regarded as the traditional English rural landscape.

By then, the romantic view of rural Britain had become so familiar – not least through a series of novels by early-twentieth-century writers such as Mary Webb – that the journalist Stella Gibbons was able to parody the genre mercilessly in her classic satire *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). In the novel, the young but determined Flora Poste seeks to improve the lives of her cousins, the Starkadders, on their Sussex farm:

After another minute Reuben brought forth the following sentence: ‘I ha’ scranleted two hundred furrows come five o’clock down i’ the bute.’ It was a difficult remark, Flora felt, to which to reply.

But it was the purple prose used to describe the countryside around the farm – helpfully marked by the author using a rating system of one, two or three stars – that would have been instantly recognisable to the contemporary readers of *Cold Comfort Farm*. And as the book’s final sentence suggests, not only would those readers have recognised this portrayal of rural England; they would also have assumed that it would continue into the foreseeable future.

She glanced upwards for a second at the soft blue vault of the midsummer night sky. Not a cloud misted its solemn depths. Tomorrow would be a beautiful day.

Less than a decade later, that beautiful day was well and truly over. Britain’s farmed countryside had undergone a transformation greater than any it had ever experienced: more dramatic than enclosure, and bigger, even, than the original clearing of the woods and forests. And it happened virtually overnight.



THE OUTBREAK OF the Second World War in September 1939 appears to have caught the authorities unawares, perhaps because until the last moment they hoped the policy of appeasement would bear fruit. This, along with

the very real threat of invasion by sea, meant that growing our own food became the top priority for the wartime government. Food rationing was swiftly introduced, but there were still almost 50 million hungry mouths to feed, and the newly created Ministry of Food was charged with that task.

For the countryside – and in particular the lowland countryside of southern and eastern England – the resulting transformation was sudden and extreme. Precious, complex habitats, which had evolved over hundreds, sometimes thousands of years, were simply destroyed.

Hay meadows, chalk grasslands and rough pastures were ploughed and planted with crops. Farm ponds and fens were drained, hedgerows grubbed up, and woods and copses bulldozed, to maximise the land available to grow crops and raise livestock.

The slogan ‘Dig for Victory’ and the recruitment of thousands of Land Girls lent the campaign a jaunty, positive air; and it cannot be denied that these measures made a huge contribution to the war effort, perhaps even helping to tip the balance between winning and losing.

But for the wildlife that depended on these ancient, complex habitats, the changes were, quite simply, a disaster. Once ploughed up and planted with crops, a hay meadow or hedgerow cannot be restored to its original state; the ecological complexity, evolved over decades or even centuries, is simply impossible for us to reproduce. So although this drastic action was necessary to feed the

nation at a time of war, these precious places – and much of their wildlife – were gone for ever.

When the war was finally over, things might have been expected to return to normal. But they did not – indeed could not – for several very good reasons. First, the food shortages continued; indeed, in some ways they got worse. The effort of winning the war had almost bankrupted Britain, and the country was in no position to let up on producing as much food as possible. Food rationing continued for a further nine years – three years longer than the duration of the war itself – only coming to an end in 1954.

But another, more sinister factor dealt the final blow for Britain's traditional lowland countryside. A combination of economic development and scientific breakthroughs led to the rapid and wholesale adoption of 'chemical farming': the use of newly created nitrate fertilisers to increase yields of crops.

At the same time, the scientists also produced a whole new range of pesticides and herbicides, which were sprayed over fields to kill off insects and weeds. Using this chemical armoury enabled farmers to squeeze even more productivity out of each precious acre of land, and feed Britain's rapidly growing post-war population.

For politicians, farmers and consumers alike, this must have seemed like the answer to their prayers. The government would be able to feed the nation and reduce expensive imports; the farmers would be able produce more food, which they could sell at a handsome profit;

and the 'housewife' (as this new breed of consumer was soon dubbed) would be able to get cheaper food.

As we now know to our cost, the new scheme worked so well that it led to a complete shift in the way we produce, buy and consume food. Whereas our grandparents bought just what they needed, day by day, from the butcher, baker, greengrocer and so on, within a couple of generations we were buying weekly, in bulk, at out-of-town supermarkets. Whereas they abhorred waste, and regularly made meals with 'leftovers', we think nothing of throwing away millions of tonnes of food, worth billions of pounds, every year. And whereas they spent a huge proportion – up to one third – of their meagre incomes on food, today we spend less than one eighth.

But in other ways, the new style of farming hasn't worked at all. Farmers have produced higher and higher yields, but this has driven prices down so far that many struggle to make a profit. They have been forced to completely change the way they farm: low profit margins and high labour costs mean they must do the vast majority of the work themselves; even at their low wages, farm workers are often too expensive to employ.

To maximise yields, they are in hock to the major chemical companies, without whom they simply cannot produce the food at the price they will be paid. And they have had to choose between different types of farming: 'mixed farms', raising livestock as well as growing crops, have now virtually disappeared; instead farmers are

forced to specialise in either arable or pastoral farming. Thus our countryside is now divided between the wetter west, where livestock dominates, and the drier east, where arable farming rules.



NOT SURPRISINGLY, THIS change in the way we farm the land continues to have a devastating effect on our wildlife. In 2013 an alliance of twenty-five environmental organisations produced the *State of Nature* report, launched by Sir David Attenborough. The report revealed that of just over 3,000 species surveyed, 60 per cent have decreased, and almost one third have decreased strongly. Not surprisingly, given the prominence of farming, creatures of the open countryside featured prominently, with more than one third of the 1,064 species dependent on farmland declining strongly, especially birds, butterflies and wild flowers.

The report firmly put the blame for these declines on changes in the way Britain's countryside is managed, especially those designed to boost productivity. It also pointed out that despite the introduction of 'agri-environment schemes' specifically designed to boost wildlife, most farmland species have failed to recover from the declines of recent decades.

Cynics might dismiss this as a bunch of greenies crying wolf, were it not for the fact that the government's own research has come to exactly the same conclusion.

A report from DEFRA (also in 2013) on wild-bird populations in the UK revealed that farmland birds have declined faster and further than any other group, and that even though the largest decline occurred between the late 1970s and early 1990s, there has been a further major fall in numbers during the past decade.

The government's report concluded that many of these declines have been caused by the intensification of farming, including the loss of mixed farming, a move from spring to autumn sowing of arable crops, a switch from making hay to producing silage (fermented grass used to feed livestock), increased use of pesticides and fertilisers, and the removal of hedgerows – all of which are proven to be detrimental to wildlife.

Habitat loss is only one problem. Another is the constant refinement of chemical weapons used to wage war against any insect or invertebrate 'pests' that might reduce the yield of arable crops. One group of these, the neonicotinoids, has recently become the subject of controversy and debate: do these chemicals, as the manufacturers suggest, target pests so efficiently that they cause little or no harm to benevolent insects such as butterflies and bumblebees; or are they, as the evidence now appears to show, lethal both to those insects, dramatically reducing their numbers, and to the birds that eat seeds treated with them?

As the decline in farmland wildlife continues – despite many schemes to restore lost habitat and provide wild creatures with homes – it seems more and more likely

that when we use these lethal pesticides to kill off billions of insects, we also kill off the insect-eaters; by removing the essential food supply these birds and mammals need to feed their young. These chemicals also stay around for a very long time, contaminating soils and entering watercourses such as ditches, streams and rivers.



THE NATIONAL FARMERS' Union (NFU) would have us believe that nothing is wrong. As their 2015 General Election Manifesto proclaims, 'UK farmers and growers are proud of the environmental improvements made over the past twenty-five years.'

But the reality on the ground clearly contradicts this view. Those of us who have witnessed these catastrophic declines within our own lifetimes know that our farmland wildlife is declining as never before. And now both independent and government reports have confirmed this.

What is abundantly clear is that the system of farming in Britain is broken. True, some people do benefit: supermarkets and their shareholders; a handful of very rich landowners, foreign oligarchs and pension funds, who between them own vast swathes of Britain's farmland; and of course the rest of us – at least anyone who buys cheap food. That means virtually everyone.

Those who lose out include most farmers, many of whom struggle to make a living, as the price they receive

for their produce is forced lower and lower by predatory wholesalers and supermarkets. Sometimes, as in the case of milk, the price per litre paid to the farmer is actually less than the cost it takes to produce. But the biggest losers are the wild creatures that used to thrive in our fields and meadows; and the millions of Britons who, whether they live in the cities or the countryside, care deeply about the natural world.

We urgently need to find another way of farming: a way that would make room for wildlife while still producing the food we need – albeit at prices that reflect the effort that goes into this process, and reward the farmers properly for all their hard work.

Opponents claim that this would cost too much money: reduced yields would mean less income for the hard-pressed farmers, which would tip them over the edge into economic ruin, force prices up in the shops and lead to food shortages and empty shelves in the supermarkets.

That might be true if Britain's farming system were a genuinely free market, but of course it isn't. It is a dependency culture, corrupted by a system of taxpayers' handouts that makes social-security benefit cheats look like rank amateurs; a system that rewards the bigger, richer farmers and penalises the smaller, poorer ones, by forcing down the prices they get for their produce; and a system that seems expressly designed to be bad for Britain's wildlife and the wider countryside.

This system, which has now been running in one form or another for almost seven decades, depends on vast subsidies to keep it afloat: £3 billion every year – roughly £50 for every man, woman and child in the UK. So a typical ‘hard-working family’, to use a phrase beloved of our politicians, pays Britain’s farmers £4 a week – £200 a year.

What is most pernicious about this continued subsidy is that while in the past it was at least vaguely related to the way each recipient farmed their land, under the new Basic Payment Scheme the money each landowner receives is entirely dependent on the area of land they own. So the more land they have, the more of our money they get – about £200 per hectare, every single year.

Roughly 100,000 people claim farm subsidies. So on average, each should receive £30,000 a year; but given that there is a huge disparity in size between small family farms and large estates, this of course varies hugely. Indeed, many of the larger landowners – including several current and former government ministers – have over the past decade been given millions of pounds in taxpayer-funded subsidies. But much of this doesn’t go to the people who actually farm the land. That’s because much of Britain’s farmland, which includes grouse moors and shooting estates as well as arable and livestock farms, is worked by tenants, but owned by huge corporations and wealthy foreign individuals. Environmentalist George

Monbiot has aptly described the latter as ‘the world’s most successful benefit tourists’.

It doesn’t have to be like this. We could simply shift these subsidies so that they reward farmers who are doing their best – against the odds, and with little or no encouragement from the NFU – to farm in a more wildlife-friendly way. Without paying out a single penny more in taxpayers’ cash, we could not only help wildlife but also create a host of wider environmental benefits, from preventing floods to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. We’d have a more attractive, cleaner and much more accessible countryside. And it goes without saying that we would have a lot more wildlife.



THE GOOD NEWS – and there is not much good news out there – is that a substantial minority of farmers agrees with the view that farming must actively seek to make room for wildlife. Living and working on the land, they have grown to love the wild creatures they come across, and to value a rich and diverse landscape. Some, indeed, have gone one step further: ensuring that they farm in a wildlife-friendly way, even if this may mean sacrificing a small proportion of their profits to do so.

One of these was – until he retired from farming a few years ago – Chris Knights. Norfolk born and bred, with the soft local burr and idiosyncratic view of the world often

found in this corner of East Anglia, Chris now has plenty of time to pursue his passion for wildlife photography, travelling the world to obtain stunning shots of birds and other wild creatures.

But his fascination with wildlife never distracted him from the important business of making a living from farming, working hard to produce crops on his land to supply our shops and supermarkets, and put food on our dinner tables.

When I entered Chris's farmyard for the first time, on a hot July afternoon more than a decade ago, initial appearances were deceptive. Bits and pieces of old machinery covered with weeds might have led me to assume – quite wrongly – that this was no longer a working farm. The impression that things had been benignly neglected was deliberate: Chris never believed in clearing up too much, for a messy farmyard is always better for wildlife than a tidy one. And the place was simply teeming with birds: a blackbird with its bill crammed with worms to take back to its hungry brood of young; a pied wagtail balancing uneasily on the lichen-covered weathervane on top of the barn; house sparrows, as I expected, but also the scarcer and shyer tree sparrows; and flocks of chaffinches, linnets and goldfinches, the latter using their needle-sharp bills to extract the tiny teasel seeds from their cases.

Swallows perched on telegraph wires, twittering to one another before sallying forth to grab a tiny insect from out

of the ether. House martins, looking like miniature killer whales in their smart navy-and-white plumage, grabbed beakfuls of mud to take back to their nests suspended beneath the eaves of Chris's farmhouse. And hidden in the foliage along the old brick wall of the farmhouse garden, a dunnoek sat snugly incubating her clutch of five eggs, whose pale blue colour seemed to reflect the shade of the summer sky above.

Chris took me on a tour of the farm in his Range Rover, and I discovered just how good farmland can be for birds – when, that is, the land is managed with their welfare in mind. The native grey partridge – what Chris calls the 'English partridge' – is one of the most subtly beautiful of all our birds, as I saw for myself when we came across a pair of nervous adults accompanied by their chicks. As they hurriedly led the youngsters to safety in the long grass, I noticed the delicately mottled browns, buffs and chestnuts of their plumage, mingling with soft pearly greys to produce a very pleasing whole.

Grey partridge numbers have gone down by more than 90 per cent since 1967, and the species' breeding range has shrunk by almost half during the same period. Ironically, it mainly hangs on where the land is deliberately managed for shooting and, on some estates, because birds are artificially bred and released to maintain their numbers.

Chris still had good numbers of partridges on his land for one very simple reason: he always left the fringes of the fields alone, so that daisies, docks, mayweeds and

thistles could thrive. This created plenty of cover for the nesting birds, and attracted insects on which the chicks then fed.

But Chris had saved his star bird until the very end of our tour. We walked slowly by a strip of maize planted along the edge of a ploughed field, and as we did so a long-legged bird rose slowly from the ground, took a couple of steps forward, and then melted back into the crops, just out of view.

It was a stone-curlew, surely one of Britain's most bizarre birds. Technically it is a wader, though I have never seen one anywhere near water, let alone wading. Like the partridges it evolved to live on semi-natural grasslands, and now ekes out a precarious existence on a few areas of farmland in East Anglia and the chalk downlands of southern England, wherever landowners are sympathetic to its complex needs.

As with the partridges and farmyard songbirds, the stone-curlews are only here because Chris created the habitat for them. Instead of the wall-to-wall crops found on most other farms in this area – and indeed on most arable farms in Britain – Chris deliberately made room for species such as the stone-curlew to thrive. It's a species he has known well since he was a teenager – he recalls taking his very first photos of this enigmatic bird back in the late 1950s.

These birds are simply the visible tip of a much greater range of wild creatures: they are only here because

of the wild flowers and insects, which in turn encourage small mammals, most of which we never see, but which help support a range of larger predators such as owls and raptors.

For Chris, having these creatures on his land is what has made his life as a farmer worthwhile: he may have lost a tiny percentage of his profit, but in his view that has been more than compensated for by the joy and pleasure he has always gained from watching the wild creatures with which he shares this little corner of Norfolk.



ANOTHER OF EAST Anglia's wildlife-friendly farmers lives not amongst the gently rolling hills of west Norfolk, but on the stark flatlands of Lincolnshire, in what was once the Fens. Hundreds of years ago this was home to some of the greatest wildlife spectacles Britain has ever seen: awash with wetland birds, butterflies and a host of other wild creatures. But as Britain's population grew, such a paradise could not last. From the Middle Ages onwards, concerted efforts were made to remove the water, turning the Fens into land that could be ploughed and planted with crops, or used to graze animals.

This area of East Anglia has become the breadbasket of Britain, where intensive farming has reached its logical zenith. So as I drove north-westwards, circling the edge of the Wash and entering this flat, bleak landscape with

its wide-open fields and big skies, it was all too easy to become depressed by the wildlife I was seeing – or rather, by the almost complete lack of it.

The odd crow flapped lazily across a field of wheat or barley, and small flocks of gulls gathered along the roadsides; but otherwise the absence of wild creatures was increasingly apparent. The Ry Cooder track playing on my car stereo – all shivering slide guitar and bottleneck rattling the strings – seemed strangely appropriate to this flat, unbroken landscape of big skies and heat haze on the horizon. If I half-closed my eyes, I could be driving across the vast prairies of the midwestern states of the USA, rather than rural East Anglia.

I stopped in a lay-by and got out of the car, being careful to avoid a juggernaut thundering along the carriageway towards the west. As the sound faded away, I cupped my ears and listened to . . . nothing. Not a sound. Not the tuneful song of the skylark or the discordant jangling of the corn bunting. Not the croak of a partridge hidden in the crops, or the buzzing of bumblebees as they foraged in the adjacent field.

I got back into the car, turned up the stereo, and headed from Norfolk into Lincolnshire. Then, on the edge of the village of Deeping St Nicholas, the view began to change; becoming less uniform, less rigid, and a little messier at the edges. Pulling over once again, I opened the car window and to my joy I heard a chorus of skylarks – the first I had come across for many miles.

From a deep dyke forming a watery border between the field and the road, an excitable, chattering sound indicated a hidden sedge warbler, presumably nesting in the thick vegetation along the banks. It was swiftly answered by the more rhythmic, measured tones of its cousin the reed warbler. In the distance, three species of buntings chorused away: corn bunting, sounding like the rattling of a bunch of keys; yellowhammers, with their ‘little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese’ song; and from a crop of oilseed rape, a reed bunting, sounding rather like a bored sound engineer checking out his PA system before a gig: ‘one . . . two . . . testing . . .’

I could almost begin to imagine what this wider landscape might have sounded like before drainage and industrial agriculture transformed it into the food factory we see today. But it doesn’t take much to make room for wildlife. A strip of weeds here, a stand of reeds alongside a dyke there, are all birds, bees and butterflies need to make a home.

This is Vine House Farm. The reason so many birds live here is because the man who farms this land, Nicholas Watts, is also a lifelong ornithologist. Nicholas comes from a long line of farmers: his great-grandfather moved here in 1883, and four generations of the Watts family – including Nicholas and his three daughters – have been born and raised here. So he has always felt a deep connection with this corner of Lincolnshire, especially with its birds and other wildlife.

One morning more than thirty years ago, Nicholas set out with a pen and a map to systematically record the birds breeding on his farm, something he has continued to do every year since. But as time went by, he began to notice that the classic birds of arable farmland – especially skylarks and corn buntings – were beginning to decline, so he decided to give them a helping hand by putting out large quantities of seed in his farmyards.

This proved so successful that he held an open day, inviting his neighbours and any passers-by to drop in and see the birds for themselves. Some of the visitors asked if he sold birdseed, so he packaged some up for them, giving the proceeds to the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust. Thus, completely by accident, he realised he might have a business opportunity that would benefit both him and the birds.

Today Nicholas – together with his daughter Lucy and son-in-law Robert – now has more than 160 hectares (over 400 acres) devoted entirely to growing bird food: not just sunflowers, but also red and white millet, canary seed, oats, wheat and oilseed rape. Vine House Farm Bird Food is now a thriving commercial business, selling birdseed by mail order all over the country.

But Nicholas didn't stop there. Year after year, he has taken steps to improve the habitat available for wildlife. First, he persuaded the local drainage board only to cut the vegetation along the dykes on alternate sides each year, and not until late autumn, thus preserving a vital habitat for species such as those sedge and reed warblers

I heard on my way to the farm, along with even scarcer species such as yellow wagtails. He also keeps a 2-metre strip along the margins of each field free from crops; which may not sound much, but with 25 kilometres of field margins this adds up to 50,000 square metres – 5 hectares – of extra wildlife habitat.

Nicholas has planted more than 6 kilometres of hedgerow in the past ten years, along with three woodland spinneys, 8 hectares of wild-flower meadows, and a series of farm ponds. These support a wide variety of wetland birds including oystercatchers and fifty pairs of common terns, whose harsh calls echo around the Lincolnshire landscape on spring and summer days, bringing a flavour of the seaside far inland.

This isn't just on his own farm: he has also encouraged his neighbours to keep, rather than demolish, redundant barns and other farm buildings, and as a result in 2014 twenty pairs of barn owls nested in the area – the best year ever. Overall, almost all the farmland species declining locally as well as nationally are now on the increase here.

Ironically, it could so easily have been very different. At the time when Nicholas started his bird-food business, he faced intense pressure to make his farm not more wildlife friendly, but less. Falling prices paid by the big supermarkets to farmers were forcing many of his neighbours to fill in their dykes to create much larger fields, and to maximise yields by removing any vegetation along the field margins. By deliberately taking a different

path, and yet still making a healthy profit through his birdseed and farm business, he has proved that you don't need to exclude wildlife to farm successfully, even in the modern age.

For all the hard work he has done to draw attention to the plight of farmland birds and ways to improve their fortunes, Nicholas has deservedly won a number of honours, including the MBE in 2006, and in 2013 the prestigious RSPB Nature of Farming award.



CHRIS KNIGHTS AND Nicholas Watts are just two of an increasing number of far-sighted farmers who have decided not to go down the road of producing food at any cost, but to do so in a way that makes room for wildlife. So why can't the majority of Britain's farmers join them, to work their land in a sustainable, wildlife-friendly way? Unless they do so, the declines in our wildlife are set to continue.

Maybe there is a way to change the way we farm – not just through individual farmers, but on a far bigger scale. For, as we are discovering in all areas of nature conservation, we really do need to think big.

Back on the Marlborough Downs, 5,000 years after those early farmers first began the task of turning this land from forest into farmland, that's exactly what is happening. Here a group of more than forty farmers –

some of whom own vast estates, while others run small family farms – have joined forces to make the place better for wildlife. Together they own more than 10,000 hectares – about 40 square miles – stretching from the outskirts of Swindon in the north to the ancient settlement of Avebury in the south. So as I walk westwards along the Ridgeway, virtually the whole of the land I can see, all the way to the horizon in every direction, is under their stewardship.

These men and women are driven by a combination of hard work, determination and a good dollop of bloody-mindedness. They have also sought help and advice from outside experts, along with a chunk of money from the government, as part of a pilot scheme known as a Nature Improvement Area (NIA).

They are doing this because although they want to produce food and make a living, they recognise – as do, in my experience, most farmers – that nature has an essential part to play in our agricultural landscape. They believe that the British countryside without wildlife would, to all intents and purposes, cease to be the British countryside: in the words of ornithologist Jeremy Mynott, it would become the ‘non-urban green space’.

These people are not idealistic hippies, ‘hobby farmers’ or millionaire former pop stars who can afford to lose money in order to salve their social conscience; they are pragmatic, hard-headed businessmen and -women. When asked what is their main purpose in life, they will

say that it is to produce food, to sell to consumers to help feed the nation, and in turn enable them to support their own families – both now and in the future. They see themselves, quite rightly, as the temporary caretakers of the land, and know that just as they benefited from the hard work and tough decisions taken by their forebears, so their own descendants will only be able to continue to live and work here if they manage the land properly.

Above all, they care deeply about the environment – which is not surprising, really, as they spend the vast majority of their lives here. David White is one of the driving forces behind this project, and his deep connection with this place is obvious the moment I meet him. He is the fourth generation of his family to have farmed this corner of Wiltshire – his son, who now does much of the day-to-day running of the farm, is the fifth, and already there are grandchildren being lined up to follow him.

David greets me outside his beautiful fifteenth-century farmhouse with characteristic bonhomie. Along with his home and family, he has another passion that he is eager to share with me: photographing the wild creatures that live on his land. He proudly shows me his portfolio of pictures: stunning images of a kestrel grappling with a barn owl in flight, a roe deer peeping shyly out of a field of golden barley, and a pair of birds so rare I cannot even name them here, but which are amongst the scarcest breeding birds in Britain. I'm eager to see this wildlife for myself so, climbing into David's battered and muddy

Land Rover, we head out of the farmyard, along the road and onto the farm itself.

As we toil up the hill towards the top of the ridge, small birds flit in and out of the hedgerow: linnets, their flickering wings glinting in the midday sun, and yellowhammers, the males proudly showing off their canary-coloured heads. A grey partridge runs rapidly across the track, swiftly followed by another, while in the distance I can hear the jangling song of a corn bunting, serenading his harem of females.

Almost all of these are absent from my own corner of the countryside, an hour or so's drive down the road in Somerset. Yet here they are thriving; and they're not the only ones. Hares sprint along field boundaries before diving for cover. Roe deer pop their heads up from the middle of the barley crop, before bounding off into the distance on spring-loaded legs. And bumblebees and butterflies float over the hedgerows, before descending to feed on nectar-rich wild flowers, whose heady scent fills the summer's air.

This wonderful array of wildlife isn't here by accident. David and his fellow farmers have encouraged it, nurtured it and enabled it to thrive by a carefully planned strategy of extending existing habitats, creating new ones, and joining them all together in a way that encourages a greater range and number of plants and animals.

We pull up at the edge of a field and David introduces me to Matt Prior, a local birder who has devoted countless hours to studying the lives of the tree sparrow, the scarcer

and less familiar cousin of the humble house sparrow. I can recall watching tree sparrows in Bushy Park on the western outskirts of London back in the 1970s, but they are long gone from there; and indeed from much of the rest of Britain, having declined hugely during the closing decades of the twentieth century. Although numbers have slowly risen since then, there is still a very long way to go until this unassuming bird returns to many of its former haunts.

We are standing at the corner of a field with a thick hawthorn hedgerow running alongside it, and after a few moments I notice a small flock of birds amongst the dense, prickly foliage. Each superficially resembles the more familiar house sparrow, with the same squat shape, buffish-grey underparts and streaky black-and-chestnut back and wings. But they appear somehow neater, with a bright white face set off with a small black spot behind and below the eye, and a rich, chestnut-coloured cap.

Matt tells me that just as we humans have certain very specific requirements when we are looking for a place to live, so do tree sparrows. Indeed, their habits are so like ours – colonial, sociable and at times rather fussy – that we are able to draw an analogy between life for the local people in this area of rural Britain, and what kind of ‘des res’ the sparrows require: a tree-sparrow village, as Matt calls it.

Tree sparrows are sedentary birds, with the youngsters from last year’s brood sticking close to where they were

born and raised, so we need to create ‘starter homes’ close to existing colonies. Matt does so by providing specially made nest boxes, ideal for the youngsters to move straight into the year after they fledge.

Like us, tree sparrows need to feel safe and secure, especially when bringing up a family. So dense prickly scrub like this stand of hawthorns is ideal, enabling them to avoid predators such as roving sparrowhawks, always on the lookout for an easy meal. They also need a convenient supply of food – ‘a village shop’, if you like – so the farmers here have planted seed mixes along the edges of their fields. These provide plenty of seeds in autumn and winter, and nectar-rich wild flowers to attract insects during the spring and summer.

Finally, for tree sparrows – and indeed for all farmland wildlife – corridors are vital: as stepping stones that enable them to travel safely from one area to another, and gradually expand their range. So the farmers have planted mile after mile of hedgerows – the bird equivalent of country lanes, with routes in and out of their ‘village’.

It is this kind of far-sighted yet simple and practical approach that has enabled these farmers on the Marlborough Downs to boost both the quality and quantity of wildlife found on their farms, while continuing to produce food and make a profit. Elsewhere, farms may provide one or two of the things wild creatures need: hedgerows, perhaps, or a farm pond; but lack other fundamental requirements such as nectar-rich flowers

attracting insects in summer, or seeds and grains on which birds and mammals can feed in winter.

Here the ‘joined-up approach’ really does work. First, the farmers find out exactly what each species needs at each point in its complex lifecycle, and then they provide it. They do so on a landscape-wide scale, so that, instead of tiny, isolated outposts into which the wildlife must squeeze, there are thriving, varied and connected networks of habitat supporting a complex range of different plants and animals throughout the year.

This is just one small example of the work these farmers are doing to attract and keep wildlife. They are also creating dew ponds along the top of the ridge where birds and mammals can drink and bathe, planting tens of thousands of trees to create a more varied and visually attractive landscape, and creating wild-flower corridors to extend the chalk grassland habitat here on the Downs.

It’s hard to say how much it has cost to bring the wildlife back here, because we cannot put a price on the efforts of the individual farmers, their families, the professional conservationists and the many volunteers who give up so much of their valuable time to make this scheme work.

But we do know that the whole project has cost just £600,000 of taxpayers’ money spread over three years, in addition to the payments the farmers were already receiving from agri-environment schemes. £200,000 a year may sound a lot, until you consider that it is a mere 0.007

per cent of the £3 billion we give in subsidies each year to Britain's farmers, most of which produces absolutely no benefit at all for our countryside or its wildlife.

Put another way, of the taxes we all give to support Britain's agricultural industry, each of us has paid just one third of one penny towards the Marlborough Downs scheme. For what these farmers have given back to our natural heritage, landscape and countryside, that's pretty good value.

Ultimately, of course, farming in Britain will only change because the farmers want it to. And as the people on the Marlborough Downs like to point out, their scheme has only worked because the impetus came from the bottom up. Because all the farmers here bought into the project, and put in so much of their time to make it succeed, they feel a real sense of ownership. This personal connection means that in the longer term, when the government money runs out, wildlife-friendly farming will continue to thrive here. And the scheme has had other, unexpected benefits: allowing people to get to know their neighbours, creating a more cohesive sense of community, and putting the Marlborough Downs firmly on the map.



THESE FARMERS HAVE in common a deep passion for wildlife, and for the land they and the wild creatures

share: the countryside. They have turned this passion into practical ways of helping nature; while never forgetting that their primary aim is to provide enough food for the consumer – you and me. They have all gone the extra mile, showing their neighbours, rural communities up and down the country and organisations such as the NFU that with a little effort, thought and creativity intensive farming can indeed coexist with nature, feeding the nation while keeping our natural heritage alive.

Sadly, they are still in a minority. Most farmers – however much they care for the countryside and its wildlife – close their eyes to the harsh reality of what their way of life is doing: driving out nature until there is nothing left behind. Given the other pressures they face, this is perhaps understandable; yet if we cannot persuade them to change their ways, and give them practical help to do so, our countryside and its wildlife are ultimately doomed.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, many people continue to believe that our wildlife is safe in the hands of farmers. This might be because we are constantly fed an outdated view of what farming actually is – a benevolent, caring stewardship of the countryside, as opposed to the hard-nosed industry it has become.

And we continue to pay farmers huge amounts of taxpayers' money, with very little return for our wildlife. This isn't because the agricultural sector is a key employer – the number of people actually working on

the land, even in rural communities, is negligible. Nor is agriculture a significant contributor to the total economy, being dwarfed by financial services and manufacturing.

More and more, Britain's farming industry is coming to resemble the mining industry in the 1970s: a fiercely tribal group of proud, hard-working people led by a small band of inflexible ideologues, fundamentally out of touch with both public opinion and the needs of a rapidly changing world.

Millions of people – many living in towns and cities, others in the countryside – are members of conservation organisations: the 1 million members of the RSPB, the 800,000 members of the 47 Wildlife Trusts, and the 4.5 million members of the National Trust. Yet a relatively small minority – the 100,000 members of the Countryside Alliance and the 85,000 members of the NFU – currently dictate what happens in the farmed countryside, a place in which, whether they like it or not, we all have a stake.

The members – and the leaders – of those nature-conservation organisations must demand that they too are able to have a say in the way our countryside is managed. Its future is far too important to be left in the hands of those with a vested interest in preserving the status quo. And we must continue to ask the crucial question to governments, the food industry, supermarkets, the farmers' union and many of the farmers themselves: Why do you persist in following the same path, when it is so clearly unsustainable?

The farmers I have had the privilege to get to know are doing an incredible job for farming and wildlife, as well as for their local communities and the wider countryside. Instead of marginalising or ignoring them, we should place them at centre stage, rolling out the things they have done all across the farmed landscape of Britain. Then we would have the best of both worlds: a healthy supply of food and a place for Britain's farmland wildlife.

It seems to me that we have a simple choice. We can continue to farm unsustainably, with little or no regard for nature, to supply the ever-growing demand for cheap food. Or we can choose an alternative path, creating a way of farming which combines the best of the modern and the traditional, which is both sustainable and profitable, and which puts people, places and wildlife at its very heart. This is not about preserving the landscape in aspic, but instead – following in the 5,000-year-old tradition of change wrought by human hand – managing it to shape something that benefits us all. After all, we created this landscape; so we can change it for the better.



BACK ON THE Marlborough Downs, as dusk falls, a barn owl takes to the wing, a pale, ghostly shape floating low and silent in the evening air. It sweeps on soft, rounded wings across the hedgerow, and above the wild flowers

and long, swaying grasses growing along the margin of the barley field.

Hearing a rustle in the grass below it turns, folds its wings and drops down onto an unsuspecting vole. Moments later it rises back up into the air, its talons gripping its prey, and heads off to feed its hungry chicks. Here, at least, Britain's farmland wildlife is being given a second chance.

The Wild Wood

Woods and Forests

When the oak is felled the whole forest echoes with its fall, but a hundred acorns are sown in silence by an unnoticed breeze.

Thomas Carlyle

MY FRIEND AND colleague, the wildlife sound recordist Gary Moore, has described the experience of listening to the dawn chorus as ‘audio yoga’. And it’s certainly true that when you listen to a performance of spring birdsong you are left feeling calmer and more relaxed than when you began.

That’s why, on a surprisingly chilly May morning, I stand in the middle of an oak wood on the edge of a valley in mid-Wales, awaiting the start of what has been called the greatest free show on earth. It is still dark, and very early: at this time of year you need to be up and about before three o’clock in the morning if you want to hear the very first bird.

I shiver, and not just from the cold, but in delicious anticipation: which species will be the first to begin?