

A man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a green jacket, is shown in profile, looking out over a blurred field. The background shows a tractor in the distance under a cloudy sky.

STORIES FROM THE FARM

*"It's important for farmers to be paid to produce a crop,
but also farm to benefit wildlife and the environment"*

Ralph Parker

Highfield Farm, Cambridgeshire

STORIES FROM THE FARM

Weeds or wildflowers?

Once a common sight in arable fields across the UK, arable 'weeds' or wildflowers have declined in recent decades as agriculture has intensified and many of these plants are now considered rare.

Ralph understands that arable wildflowers are an essential source of pollen and nectar for bees, butterflies and other pollinators. The plants also support spiders, insects and a variety of other invertebrates, which are ideal for birds feeding their chicks in spring. Furthermore, the wildflowers provide food for large populations of small mammals during the winter months.

"Management for these arable wildflowers is relatively simple" says Ralph. His field margins are a haven for the plants and he deliberately disturbs the soil each year to encourage their growth and *"the seed bank in the soil simply takes advantage of these areas"*.

Some wildflowers are particularly suited to the chalk soils at Ralph's farm. Plants with fantastic names like corn spurrey, dwarf spurge and round-leaved fluellen are among those recorded in the field margins at Highfield Farm. Fine-leaved fumitory has also been recorded nearby.

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A man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a green jacket, is crouching in a field of wildflowers. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred field of trees and foliage in autumn colors.

STORIES FROM THE FARM

The arable fields at Highfield Farm are a key habitat for many farmland birds, including corn bunting, lapwing and grey partridge, and as part of the Jordans Farm Partnership, Ralph manages his land to give them a helping hand. Rather than sowing all his crops in autumn, after a harvest Ralph drills around a third of his crops in the spring. This means that the winter stubble left from the previous crop offers cover for wildlife and provides a vital area of foraging ground for farmland birds. Broad-leaved plants are encouraged to grow in these unplanted fields, providing seeds for the farmland birds to eat.

By growing catch crops, a quick growing crop that can be sown between main crops, Ralph also provides additional habitat for wildlife in other areas of the farm during autumn. A turnip catch crop provides shelter for invertebrates and also feeds the sheep on his neighbour's farm, which in turn naturally fertilise Ralph's land, meaning less agricultural inputs.

The mosaic of arable crops alongside hedgerows, trees and wildflower margins at Ralph's farm together provide food, nesting habitat and shelter for a range of wildlife species. *"Corn bunting, grey partridge and brown hare all do very well here"* says Ralph. He believes that farming for wildlife and farming for profit go hand in hand – *"quite simply, one complements the other"* he says.