

# **Farming Matters**

## **Weather**

January was a dry month with only 18mm or  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch of rain, my fourth driest January in the past 45 years here at Deeping St Nicholas. This is completely the opposite of January 2014 with rain and gales making it the wettest January since 1956. The younger generation would say we have been unlucky so far this winter as we have missed out on the snow, but most of us would say that we have been lucky - quite simply the older we get the less we like the snow and frost.

## **On the farm**

Field work for farmers in this part of the country has been at a standstill, our land in the main is too heavy to be ploughing and cultivating in the winter when the soil is wet. By heavy land, I mean land with a lot of clay in it. We can bash it about when it is dry, but when it is wet it is best to leave it alone as it gets very sticky, and we just make a mess and spoil the soil structure. In areas of the Brecklands or the East Anglian sands or the coastal strip, work is going on drilling spring barley and other crops such as carrots, parsnips and onions. Fleece is being laid over complete fields to bring the crops to harvest a week or two earlier.

Even though we have no work in the fields James is still busy. We have machines to maintain and modify in some cases, and conservation work to do. A lot of our wheat and Oilseed rape are programmed to be collected in February and March, as that is when we are not very busy. We have loaded about 38 lorries with wheat or Oilseed rape during the last 2 weeks. Most of our wheat goes to feed chickens or pigs, as we cannot grow wheat in this area of a suitable quality for bread.

As a friend has commented to me, potatoes are still proving difficult to sell and to get the buyer to keep them. He had seven tonnes returned to him two weeks after he sent them, saying that some of them were going rotten. The pre-packer had sold all the larger potatoes, returning to him the smaller ones that would pass through a 65 mm riddle; it so happens that there is a surplus of these smaller ones.



This sugar beet loader will load a lorry in 3 minutes

## **Wildlife**

### **In the Garden**

It is this time of year when natural food is hard to come by, so if you want to see a lot of birds now is the time to attract them to your garden as they need feeding right up to the end of June at least. There won't be many plants going to seed over the next three months and there aren't many insects around because we have altered this world. We, as a nation, have laid a lot of tarmac and concrete, built a lot of houses and drained the land and that hasn't suited the majority of birds. If you eat grass like the feral geese do, live on road kills like the crow family, or eat dry grain like the pigeons, this world is for you, but most species do not come into these three categories. Nearly all other wildlife is just getting brushed to one side - some people are aware of this but others just don't realise it. Wildlife is amazing but some of it is disappearing and those species that are disappearing are the ones we like best, so we must look after them if we want to continue to see them.

We can help them by putting out food in our gardens. Any bird food that you can buy will feed the birds, but if you want to feed the small birds only a few of them like wheat and none of them like barley, so avoid those mixes containing a lot of wheat and barley. Our smaller birds need high energy food, ideally insects, but sunflowers,

peanuts, fat and other small seeds will do very nicely until mid-April. By mid-April, robins, blackbirds and thrushes will have young and those young have to be fed with moist food. As birds cannot bring water to their young, the water has to be included in the food. Good examples of this are insects or unripe seeds but if you look around your garden, I am sure you will not find many of either. If you want to help the birds, feed them live mealworms and just see how quickly your local robin will take to them. In early May, blue tits and sparrows will make good use of them. They are also popular with blackbirds and starlings; starlings will bring their friends as well, so I feed mealworms in a bowl with a cage around it, so the starlings cannot get at them. I feed the starlings fat and soaked sultanas also in a cage so the pigeons cannot get to them. We sell all these things in our shop, but you may well be able to make your own cage if you use an upturned hanging basket of the right size mesh.

We have had over 100 linnets feeding on the mustard cover crop during the past 2 months. There seems to be a large number of yellow hammers where I am feeding the small birds every other morning with a variety of seeds. These include about 10 reed buntings, 25 chaffinches and 40 yellowhammers. These numbers have built up through January as I have fed them every day at two sites on the farm. We have even had 6 tree sparrows feeding on the seed and fat balls outside the back yard along with the long tailed tits, and the blue, great and marsh tits.



Birds feeding from Live Food Window Feeder