

Farming matters

Weather

What seemed to be an exceptionally mild autumn here in Suffolk was not so unusual; maybe it is just that we have become used to some colder winters these last few years. The warmest autumn and winter that has been recorded was back in 1974 when the coldest temperature for the whole winter was recorded at only -2°C.

Like most of the country we have been suffering from excess rainfall in December here in Suffolk, our rainfall was above average, at 62mm, nearly 2.5 inches. January rainfall however is already well above average. The relatively dry September allowed us to complete our wheat drilling and ploughing.

On the farm

Although we do not grow sugar beet because of our heavy soil the rest of sugar beet in this area were taken up by a local contractor in early December and put in a heap for delivery in January or February. Due to the mild weather it had started to grow in the heap, using some of the valuable sugars we get paid for. The grower gets paid by the amount of sugar in the beet so that means he will get



paid less per tonne for this sugar beet. It is a trade off that they have to make every year to ensure sugar beet yield and quality and getting the next crop in the ground for the forthcoming year.

Although farmers on the coastal strip may be ploughing and drilling barley in January our soil is generally too heavy to be doing anything like that. For us it is a time to service and repair our equipment ready for starting our spring work in March. It is also a time for new projects such as maintaining machinery or extending buildings. Last week we out loaded 10 lorry loads of feed wheat (300 tonnes) which was delivered to local feed mills at Dickleburgh and Kenninghall. Most of our wheat goes for chicken or pig food (feed wheat) as we are unable in most years to grow wheat that meets the quality required to make bread. Growing wheat for bread requires a special variety and those varieties yield less than the varieties grown for feed wheat. It is well known that our area is not an area for getting the best quality of wheat for bread making so we stick to the higher yielding varieties. Most farmers in our area will grow the higher yielding varieties of wheat, they will also grow sugar beet, oil seed rape, wheat and spring peas for freezing, just 4 different crops and therefore have quite a simple farming operation. Here at Hillhouse Farm we grow 5 different crops which makes for more diversity and so better for wildlife, as well as spreading our risks. We have also out loaded the naked oats which were grown on contract to

a merchant for seed (for sowing the following year which has specialist oils and will be used for pet food or pig or poultry feed or even for pharmaceutical uses including ladies make up and the Boots sun cream).

Wildlife on the farm

We have had a lot of Mallard around our reservoir and our ponds due to how we manage some of our land that is in the Countryside Stewardship scheme. The males have been in breeding plumage for two or three months now. It puzzled me why they get into such smart plumage 4 or 5 months before they start breeding. The penny dropped a few weeks ago. Ducks choose their partners in the autumn that is why the drakes get in breeding plumage during October. I am sure many of you have noticed that ducks are paired up by now.

Despite the mild autumn weather we have collected up a good number of birds in various places on the farm where we have been feeding. This year we seem to have collected more Yellowhammers than usual.

It is again the time of year to consider putting up nest boxes. National Nest Box week starts on the 14th February 2014 – St Valentines Day.

We put all our nest boxes up with a 32mm hole in so that anything up to House Sparrow size can nest in them. Years ago we would mainly put up nest boxes with 25mm holes for Blue and Coal Tits or 28mm holes for Great Tits so that House Sparrows could not use them. House Sparrows were everywhere 30 years ago but today we are pleased to have them nesting in a nest box. How times have changed! I often recommend to people to use 32mm nest boxes so as not to limit the species that you get into your garden.



Long tailed tit