

Farming Matters, January 2017

One of the driest Decembers during the last 45 years, only 12.5mm or half an inch of rain, but we still ended up with 20% more rain in 2016 than average. Our average being 531mm and the 2016 total being 633mm. Six nights of frost in December, the coldest being -5°C.

All our work in the fields was finished in record time. This was due to us having an autumn where we lost very few days due to wet weather but prices of wheat and barley remain low. Farmers need high oil prices because when the price of oil is high everything else is high.



For most years that I have been farming we have always ploughed all the land that was going to be planted with a spring crop, but these last few years we have not ploughed some of it. About 120 acres have been planted with oil radish, which should have helped to condition the soil and stop the [black-grass](#) growing but all but 2 hectares was eaten off by slugs, leaving the field bare. Bird populations are declining because they are running out of food at certain times of the year. If we can provide more food when it is generally in short supply that must be a good thing, so this spring we will be monitoring those fields that are planted with oil radish as well as the surrounding fields.

A few years ago it would have required a very skilful driver to drill the seeds exactly in the correct spot, but today our satellite navigation system will guide the tractor and drill accurately across the field quite easily.

Winter is the time for maintenance; we have already started on some - but not the type of maintenance we had planned - together with cutting all our roadside hedges, which has taken over 7 man-days so far. There are more and more hedges not being managed in the Walpole area and growing out into the road to scratch vehicles and tear wing mirrors off vehicles. When planning on cutting roadside hedges, please remember that a tractor or lorry cab is three times as high as a car.

[A report from a farm in Lincolnshire.](#)

Winter is a time when we probably have more birds on the farm than at any other time of year because we feed the birds in four places on the farm each morning.

We expect to be feeding around two thousand small birds around the farm through the winter. Reed Buntings, Chaffinches, Tree Sparrows and Linnets make up the bulk of them but there are also Yellowhammers, Greenfinches, House Sparrows and Goldfinches amongst them. I have only seen two Bramblings so far this winter.



The Linnets on the whole do not come to the food, they are feeding on the wild bird cover plots that are growing in several places around the farm on the Natural England Higher Level Stewardship scheme.

With all those small birds around they quite naturally attract predators and it is quite possible to go down to the farm and see Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and Buzzard. Fifty years ago, the only one seen down the farm would have been the Kestrel. I am not seeing Barn Owls very often which is a good thing, there must be good numbers of voles around here to hunt at night rather than by day.

In Walpole we have more Blackbirds around this winter than usual, both on the farm and in the garden. There are two possible reasons for this:

The recent wet summer could have made more food available, such as a greater number of worms coming to the surface. This would have enabled the Blackbirds to feed their young and therefore they reared more young and of course if food was more available for the young birds, more would have survived into the autumn. A lot of young birds die in the first few months of fledging if food is not in surplus for them.

The other reason could be that in the autumn we had large flocks of Blackbirds that came to us on the north easterly winds from Europe. I remember one day in October seeing Blackbirds everywhere on the farm. Have you seen more Blackbirds about than usual?