



DECEMBER

WINTER on the farm

NATURE'S CALENDAR & PRACTICAL ACTIONS

As the farming year unfolds, are you keeping an eye out for what wildlife appears on your farm?

What flower or bird brings you joy as the seasons change? What can you look forward to appearing this month? What wildlife might be on your land? What more can you do to encourage it and enhance it?

HERE IS A MONTH BY MONTH GUIDE TO HELP YOU FARM FOR NATURE!

This is just a start – please help us create a rich calendar to celebrate and support farming for nature! What have we forgotten? Do you have any useful 'nature hacks' to share? Let us know on info@farmingfornature.ie

Generally, there is a lot of good information available for farmers who want to help wildlife. We have many resources available on www.farmingfornature.ie

If you have any queries why not submit them to our **Farming for Nature Forum** on the website and allow other farmers to answer.

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NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!



Everywhere!

Keep an eye out at night for the **barn owl** - easier to see in winter as there is less foliage.



Barn owls are mostly found in the south and midlands. They like to breed in farm buildings and will use special bird boxes. Avoid using rodenticides as these are fatal for owls.



Bogs

Peat moss harvested from our bogs is a precious resource that takes thousands of years to form.



Short-lived Christmas poinsettias [with their festive green and red foliage] and other decorative Christmas plants are sometimes grown in **peatmoss**. These are often binned [precious peatmoss and all] straight after the festive season, so avoid buying if possible!



Buildings & walls

Woodlice [also known as **slaters**, **clocks**, **pigs** or **penny-pigs**!] are often found in dampish areas.



Woodlice play a crucial role in helping to decompose dead and decaying plant matter and wood - a key part of the nutrient cycle!



Coastal farms

Winter storms can deposit all kinds of things along the coastline. One treasure is the '**mermaid's purse**'. At first glance these capsules look like the flotation sacks on **egg wrack** or **bladder wrack** seaweed, however, they are in fact the **egg cases of sharks, skates and rays**!



Often about the size of your thumb, these capsules have trailing, spiralling tendrils, which are used to anchor them to seaweed deep underwater.

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Garden or
farmyard

Leaves, dried stems, seed heads and fallen branches all provide winter cover for useful **predatory insects** as well as other wildlife. Rather than burning, pile vegetation into a **wildlife hotel** and allow it to rot down naturally over the winter.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Take care not to disturb hibernating wildlife in the corners of sheds or under vegetation!



Hedgerows

In late Winter, the **ivy berries** provide a food source for the birds right through hungry gaps till March or even April.



Ivy provides precious shelter for hibernating **butterflies** and other **insects**. It gives some small **birds** a place to huddle together to keep warm on winter nights and helps them survive until spring [e.g. **long tailed tits**, **wrens**]. Ivy can be left on trees except where there could be safety issues - along roads, close to houses. Managing ivy by trimming it back occasionally from the crowns of trees may be the best option.

Many things are associated with the festive side of this month like **robin redbreasts**, **holly** with its red berries and the **wren**. The tiny wren has a loud call and it is often seen jumping amongst the undergrowth and ivy looking for food with its distinctive tail feathers peaked high.



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Hill pasture

Bare branched trees are standing starkly on Irish hillsides.



Pasture, meadows
& field margins

The end of the year often brings memories of past Christmases – what did nature look like in your townland for previous generations?



Ponds

If you have a pond on your land, floating something like a ball or piece of wood on it will keep it unfrozen for longer, giving wildlife an open water supply in any freeze over.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Despite their deadened appearance, as the rain falls, these trees gently hold soils in place with their far-reaching roots. Irish hillsides were historically clothed in stands of such trees – is there somewhere on the farm where a few more trees could help to reduce erosion?

Often the Irish names of townlands offer clues. Words relating to forests make up 20% of Irish placenames. For example, the Irish word *doire* [derry] means 'oakwood', while around 8% of Irish place names reflect an agricultural past, for example including words for meadows or rough pasture.

Floating a piece of wood will also help keep drinking troughs and storage tanks ice free. Installing stop valves and draining water pipes when not in use can also help prevent water pipes from cracking in icy weather. On bigger water storage tanks, having a wildlife escape ladder [a piece of rough wood or rope] may enable trapped wildlife to get out and thus prevent the water from being polluted.

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Streams & rivers

Watch out for the snow white plumage of the little egret as it hunts in shallow waters.

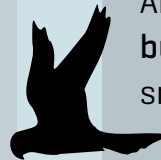


Little egrets were once hunted for their plumage, their elegant feathers thought to be just the thing for ladies' hats!



Tillage fields

Flocks of **yellowhammers** may feed in fields with winter stubble. The south and east is their main distribution in Ireland as these are the main the tillage areas.



Also look out for other seed eaters: **linnets**, **green finches**, **reed buntings**, **bullfinches**, and for **sparrowhawks** feeding on these smaller birds.



Did you know that **fungi** can help to keep your soils warm in winter?

Many fungi produce **antifreezing agents**, which have evolved to protect their mycelium during cold spells. These agents also protect the roots of grasses and other plants when temperatures drop below zero.



Wet or rough ground

It's mating season for **foxes**! Beginning in December, the howls and barks of foxes punctuate the quiet on crisp, clear nights. Rough ground with some scruffy scrub can provide a great place for foxes to rear their cubs.



As dusk falls, keep an eye out for **starling murmurations** that occasionally form over the woodlands and wetlands.

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Woods

Anytime over the next three months is a good time to plant **bareroot trees** while they are dormant.

It is a good time to assess what **deadwood** you have.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Try to source - or grow from seed! - local, native trees as these are generally more suited to the area and the resident wildlife. Plant your trees in pockets, strategically situated around the farm - by doing so you may be able to gain additional benefits for your livestock (shelter, shade) and for the health of the soil and water on your land. [Before planting, think about fencing needs - you may need to protect your trees against livestock or wildlife - see our best practice guides for more info.]

Standing deadwood provides important nesting sites for **hole-nesting birds** and some **insects** (solitary bees etc.). Dead wood in semi-shaded conditions is good for **fungi** and **invertebrates**. Standing deadwood rots from the inside out and lying dead wood from the outside in, and so each support different types of life.



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Climate

As the weather becomes less predictable, what steps can you take to build **climate resilience** on your farm?



Nothing beats nature for natural resilience to climate change: **boosting biodiversity**, from the soil to the tree-tops, will help your farming system to remain productive in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather events.



Pollinators

Fruit and **nut trees** can be great sources of food for pollinating insects.. and for us!



It's a good time of year to source some bare root fruit and nut trees and plant a **small orchard** in a sunny spot on the farm. Choose **heritage varieties** where you can, as these have evolved to thrive in our landscape without the need for harmful chemicals. Once established, **apple trees** can continue to bear fruit for half a century!

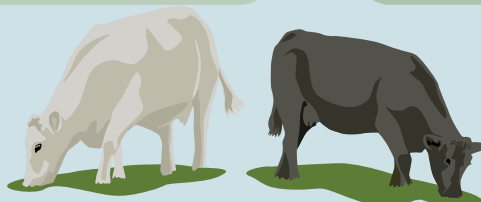


Water quality

Feeding livestock outside in winter can result in poached areas or 'sacrifice paddocks'. This can pose a risk to water quality as nutrients and sediment can build up and then be carried into nearby water bodies after heavy rain.



Moving feeders regularly, maintaining good lie-back areas and splitting large groups of livestock into smaller groups will all help to protect your fields and prevent poaching and harmful run-off in winter.



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Farming For Nature offers best practice guidelines and actions for different land types.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE GO TO www.farmingfornature.ie



To investigate what native species you have or could encourage on your land there are plenty of sources to help:

FOR NATIVE FLOWERS - YOU CAN SEARCH BY FLOWERING MONTH, COLOUR OR HABITAT

www.irishwildflowers.ie

FOR NATIVE TREES SEE HERE - IT WILL GIVE YOU ADVICE ON DIFFERENT TREES

www.treecouncil.ie

FOR NATIVE BIRDS SEE HERE

www.birdwatchireland.ie

FOR NATIVE BUTTERFLIES SEE HERE

www.irishbutterflies.com

FOR A COMPLETE BREAKDOWN OF ALL IRISH SPECIES, THE NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY DATA CENTRE IS THE KEY SOURCE. IF YOU WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO CITIZEN SCIENCE YOU CAN JOIN THE FARMERS WILDLIFE CALENDAR CLIMATE TRACKER BY RECORDING AND SUBMITTING YOUR SPECIES THROUGH THE BIODIVERSITY DATA CENTRE

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