



FEBRUARY

SPRING 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!

Around now, you may begin to see the first queen **bumblebees** coming out of hibernation.



Now's a good time to plan **spaces** where you are happy for vegetation to remain uncut during the flowering season – allowing a range of grasses, herbs and other plants to flower and seed.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

The queen bee emerges from the hole in the ground in which she has been hibernating all winter. Right away, she needs to find nectar and pollen to replenish her energy levels and fat reserves. She will spend the next several days searching for a nest location.

These are all good sources of food and shelter for pollinators and others, including predatory insects, which help protect crops. As you get the mower ready for its first outing, can you leave patches, strips or entire sections of the field, garden or the driveway to grow and attract pollinators?



Bogs

Bogs in winter can seem desolate. However, life does go on: an early morning dew can reveal an intricate carpet of **spiders** webs, the weave stretching out across the wet bog under slanting winter sunlight.



Beneath the surface these wet bogs are also busily absorbing and **storing carbon** as vegetation partially decays into peat. This is a slow process – it takes ten years for a single centimetre of peat to form, making **peat** a very precious resource!



Buildings
& walls

Time to put up a few specialist bird boxes - for birds like the **swift**.



Put up swift boxes well before May when the birds return to Ireland. They like the eaves of buildings and return to the same spot to breed each year. Modern construction methods are providing fewer and fewer homes for them.

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Coastal
farms

Machair is a Gaelic word that refers to low-lying, fertile coastal plains. This habitat supports an incredible array of wildlife, including birds, wildflowers and invertebrates. It is also one of rarest habitats in Europe – occurring only on the west coastlines of Ireland and Scotland.

Watch out for rock **doves** on rocky cliffs in remote areas.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Machair thrives under light management and low intensity, traditional farming methods. To conserve this prized habitat:

DO: graze in winter but fence out livestock during the flowering season – May to August

DON'T: drain the land or apply chemical fertilisers

The rock dove is the wild ancestor of all feral and domesticated pigeons. The rock dove was originally domesticated as a source of food. The result of this domestication was the **feral pigeon**, which we commonly see in towns and cities today.



Garden or
farmyard

Male birds are beginning to strut about in their striking **breeding plumage**. They will soon start to sing to attract females and to mark out their breeding territories for the spring.



As winter food sources run low, hanging feeders for **tits**, **finches** and **sparrows**, and scattering some feed on the ground for **blackbirds**, **thrushes** and **starlings** can help birds to survive the 'hungry gap' before the spring.



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Hedgerows

If you have **goat** or **grey willow** trees ['sallies'], they are one of the first sources of pollen and nectar – vitally important for early queen bees.

The **blackbird** is an early breeder, building its first nest around now.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Both species of willow grow in damp soil and have catkins or 'pussy willows' that produce pollen. The goat willow will also grow in rough ground in drier areas. Many people will have bad memories of the 'sally rod' from their school days but don't let that put you off this important native plant!

Listen for the loud 'alarm calls' of the adult birds if you disturb them in the nesting season.

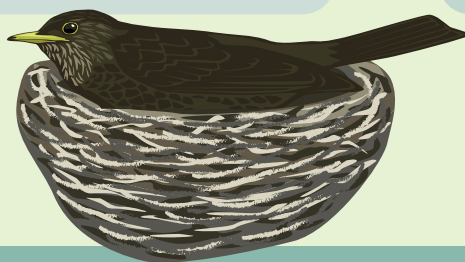


Hill pasture

Should hill pasture have **trees**?



Historically, much of our upland landscapes would have been covered by a mosaic of trees, shrubs and grasslands. Many of the seeds of these ancient trees still lie dormant in the soil. Consider fencing off a small section of the hillside this spring (so that emerging saplings are not browsed by animals) and observe the **natural regeneration** of shrubs and trees over the coming years.



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The first **dandelion** flowers are showing - an important plant for insects in early spring.



Pasture, meadows
& field margins

Did you know that any **mushrooms** that we observe around the farm are only small parts of much larger organisms?



Dandelions provide vital food for bees and other early-flying insects such as butterflies. Later, when the flowers disappear, birds such as the **goldfinch** and **greenfinch** feast on the seed-heads.

The mushroom is the **fruiting body** of the fungus. Underground, the fungus comprises a complex network called **mycelium**. Mycelium is made up of tiny hair-like structures called **hyphae**. These hyphae can stretch through the soil for many metres (or even kilometres!), breaking down organic matter and returning nutrients to the soil. Tillage, fungicides and chemical fertilisers break up these fungal hyphae and inhibit the growth of healthy soil-enhancing mycelium.



Ponds

Watch out for **frogs** becoming active after hibernation.



Creating a pond is a wonderful way to attract wildlife to your farm. If space is a problem, even a tiny (bathtub sized!) pond, in a quiet and shady spot, can attract a range of wildlife, including insects, amphibians, birds and mammals. Make sure your pond has gently sloping sides to allow wildlife to drink from the pond edge.

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Streams
& rivers

Springtime **slurry applications** will be happening now. Slurry can be a great resource if used properly, but it can be an environmental disaster if it's thoughtlessly applied. Think about where, when and how you can use your slurry for optimal impact.

Fence off watercourses to prevent bank erosion – this time of year, banks may be very susceptible to erosion from sudden, extreme rainfall events.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Field margins and good riverside buffer strips really help to mitigate negative impacts from slurry – preventing excess nutrients from the slurry reaching watercourses. Such run-off can easily result in water pollution causing some plants and algae to take-over, robbing the oxygen from fish and other aquatic life. Avoid spreading if the weather isn't suitable – a lot of your nutrients will just wash away. If possible, get a contractor who will spread your slurry using low-emission machines.

Good fencing may allow native vegetation to grow along the riverbank to stabilise it against erosion and absorb nutrient run-off. But if fencing off, remember to provide alternative drinking sources for livestock. Simple solutions may include pasture pumps or simple pipe-n-troughs.



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Tillage fields

Fallow plots for ground nesting birds like the **lapwing** need to be harrowed in February or early March to create a rough bare surface for birds to nest.



Wet or rough ground

One of our earliest flowers, the **colt's-foot**, will be showing now.



Woods

Female **hazel flowers** are in bloom – see if you can find some?



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Fallow plots are areas with short or limited vegetation, providing suitable conditions for birds like the **lapwing**. They can be created by ploughing in autumn and leaving alone over winter, or by harrowing in February or early March.

One of the first flowers to poke its head up before the end of winter, the tough little yellow blooms of the perennial colt's-foot brighten up any day from February to April.

Female flowers are tiny, bud-like with red styles, designed to capture the clouds of pollen emitted by the yellow male catkins – resembling lamb's tails – that appear before the leaves and hang in clusters from mid-February.



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TIPS FOR THE MONTH!



Climate

Long nights and housed livestock can mean higher energy usage through the winter.

Maximising energy efficiency and moving away from fossil fuels are two ways in which farms can minimise their carbon footprint.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Consider installing solar or other **renewable energy** sources on farm. A shed roof can be the ideal place to install solar panels. There are also supports available for farmers interested in investing in on-farm energy sources.

Many fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides are manufactured using fossil fuel based products. Reducing such chemical inputs where possible will reduce the carbon footprint of the farm.



Pollinators

Consider planting an **herb bed** this year.



Herb beds are not only great for seasoning a Sunday roast, but also provide a food source for bees and other pollinating insects. Pollinator friendly herbs include **angelica, chives, fennel, mint, oregano, summer and winter savoury, thyme, and sage.**

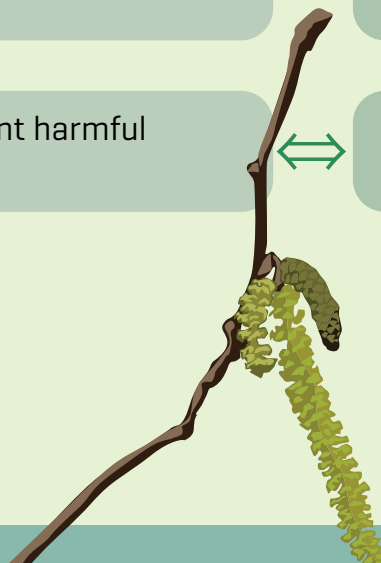


Water quality

Waste silage can cause significant harmful run-off.



As silage pits are emptied, make sure to collect any fallen or waste silage and store it with FYM.



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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

www.biodiversityireland.ie



c/o Burrenbeo Trust
Glebe Road Kinvara Co.Galway

info@farmingfornature.ie

www.farmingfornature.ie

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This leaflet has been jointly supported by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

