



JANUARY

# 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](mailto: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](http://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!

Shhh!! Careful now, you don't want to wake anyone up!

It is a good time to look up any **wildlife management projects or other supports** for special habitats or species on the farm that may be struggling locally or nationally.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

In Ireland, **bats** and **hedgehogs** are the only animals that undergo true hibernation, conserving energy at a time when food supplies are low. Disturbing them at this time can be fatal to their chances of survival. **Badgers** don't hibernate, but do build up fat stores in autumn so they can reduce activity during cold winter weather.

Birds like the **hen harrier** and the **curlew** have special projects dedicated to helping them along. There are also projects trying to halt the loss of species in aquatic habitats, for example, the **pearl mussel**, **crayfish**, and **salmon**. There should be plenty of good advice out there for these species even if you're not a participant in one of these projects. Or else contact your local NPWS ranger for advice.



Bogs

On a clear, crisp day in January views across the open bog landscape can be truly spectacular!



The spectacle continues at night, with the dark evenings and lack of light pollution offering the chance for some winter stargazing. Light at night can confuse wildlife and even cause birds to start singing. Where possible, try to minimise light pollution at night by closing shed doors and turning off lights in the yard when not in use.



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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!



Farm buildings and old stonewalls provide shelter for a wide range of birds, insects and small mammals. As spring approaches, birds will begin to look for nesting sites. The **blackbird** and the **robin** are two of the earliest to do so and both have been recorded nesting as early as January.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Birds that traditionally nested in old outbuildings, such as **swifts**, **kestrels**, and **barn owls**, will readily nest in man made nest boxes. A wet week in January can be an ideal time to think about building or sourcing some nest boxes for the farm. **BirdWatch Ireland** have great instructions on their website, or you can contact them directly for advice.



The fragments of Ireland's rocky coastline that are difficult to farm [e.g. cliff edges, rocky peninsulas, steep banks] often end up covered in a thick layer of scrub. To maximise the biodiversity supported by these fragments of **scrub**, it can be helpful to encourage a more diverse mix of native flora.



If you have large areas of monocultural scrub on your land [i.e. dominated by just one species], consider clearing a few small patches each year and planting some **native trees** or bushes that grow well in the local environment. Bracken, bramble and gorse are shade intolerant, so as the trees grow and develop their canopies, patches of scrub will die back beneath them, creating a more diverse [less monocultural] habitat, which in turn will support more wildlife. An even better strategy than planting is to have a closer look at your scrub and see if there are native trees already trying to emerge [e.g. **blackthorn**, **whitethorn** or **willow**]. You can give these trees a helping hand by lightly pushing back the surrounding vegetation to allow sunlight to reach their leaves.



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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!

For example, previously cleared land, that is then left fallow, will often be colonised by **bracken**, **bramble** and **gorse**. Each of these species are important for wildlife, however, by blocking the sunlight from reaching the ground, these **colonising species** can also slow down the establishment of a more diverse range of native flora.



Coastal farms

Did you know that one third of the world's species of **whales**, **dolphins** and **porpoises** have been spotted in Ireland's coastal waters?



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

**DO:** remember to clear around saplings in spring and summer for the first four/five years, or they will likely be outcompeted by returning scrub!

**DON'T:** clear all the scrub in an area – while once considered 'wasted land' research is increasingly showing the importance of scrubland for wildlife!

**DON'T:** clear scrub around emerging trees if you have deer in the area – thorny scrub provides a natural tree guard for emerging native trees!

The giant **humpback whale** is one species that is often spotted from the Irish coastline. Sightings are most common in autumn and early winter along the south and west coasts. From a viewpoint on a clear day, watch out for tell-tale signs across the water. These often include splashes, breaching, or a plume of spray from the blowhole.





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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!



Garden or farmyard

Make a home for the **solitary bees**. These bees aren't like honeybees that live in hives. As their name suggests, they make their own nests and lay their eggs in tunnels, such as in dead wood or hard exposed soil.



Hedgerows

Depending on how mild the winter is, you may start seeing the **primrose** or the lesser celandine flowering from late January.



Hill pasture

High grazing pressure during the winter can lead to long-term damage of vegetation, soils and water features. Grazing animals will also select for certain plants, meaning that high stocking rates will reduce the diversity of the sward over time.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Have you got some old, untreated timber lying around? Just drill some holes [between 2-6mm diameter] a couple of inches deep in it, and either hang it up or leave it as is, and you have made a potential home for the solitary bees! To be most successful, it needs to be off the ground, over a metre long and facing south. A bit later on, observe the solitary bees fill the holes of the 'bee hotel' with eggs and food and then seal the entrance with mud or pieces of leaves.

The Latin name for primrose – '*prima rosa*' – means 'first flower'. Another early flower is the **lesser celandine** – a buttercup-like yellow flower found in shaded areas: a welcome sign of spring!

Reducing stocking levels at this time of year will allow taller vegetation to develop and create the conditions for a mosaic of flowers and shrubs to appear in the spring.



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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!



Pasture, meadows  
& field margins

Depending on your location and the suitability of ground and weather conditions, you may be **spreading slurry** around now, so please think about safeguarding water courses from run off.

**Barnacle geese** have arrived from Greenland to flock on the green fields and salt marshes.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Field margins and good buffer strips can really help protect wildlife in streams, rivers and ponds. Fencing to keep livestock back from watercourses can help prevent both water pollution and bank erosion.

These geese love to feed on our coastal pastures during winter.



Ponds

While most pond life is quiet at this time of year, **stoneworts** and **mosses** continue to grow



Birds and mammals will continue to visit the pond to drink – make sure there is always a gently sloping edge to the pond so that wildlife can reach the water without risk of falling in!

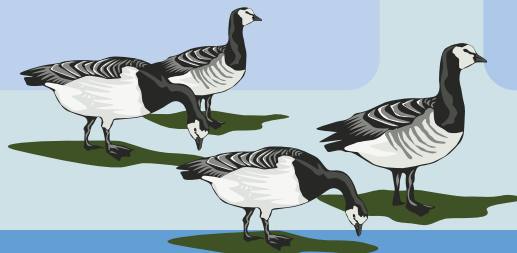


Streams  
& rivers

The sight of a shy **otter** porpoising in a river or gambling on a river bank has got to be one of the most rewarding wildlife experiences in Ireland!



As well as clean river systems, **otters** need rich and diverse riparian boundaries in which to rest and build their dens – consider planting willow thickets along riverbanks; otters and other wildlife will love them, and this will have the added benefit of filtering any farm run-off before it reaches the watercourse.



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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!



Tillage fields

Any **unsprayed stubble** left in a field, especially with remains of the crop and the weeds that grow in it, can be a good source of food for wildlife.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

This is especially true if the field is not cultivated until the spring. Many species benefit from unsprayed stubble, particularly the **linnet**, **skylark** and the **hare**.

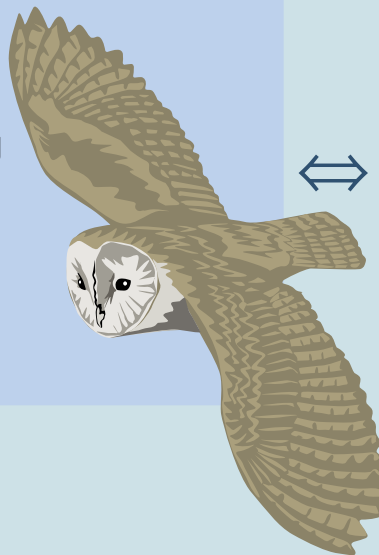


Wet or rough ground

Keep an eye out for **barn owls** perching on fence posts in January.



To save energy on cold days, **barn owls** will hunt from a perch rather than from the air. If they are very hungry, they will also risk hunting during the day rather than at night. In the past, barn owls would often hunt rodents inside barns during the winter – earning them the nickname the ‘farmer’s friend’. Where this is no longer possible, try to maintain some rough grassland on the farm year-round, as this is the ideal hunting habitat for the barn owl.



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### NOTICING NATURE - AND SOME WAYS TO HELP IT!

**Woodlands will spread** if you let them - do you have the space for a bigger woodland area?



Woods

The aptly named **jelly ear fungus** is festooning dead and decaying wood at the moment. Elder is a favourite tree of this flesh coloured, ear-shaped wonder. When trees on the farm are lost to age or disease, consider leaving some standing deadwood - it's a crucial habitat for many of our species of native fungi.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

It is a good time to think about this as you may be considering woodland or hedgerow management. Allowing a buffer of vegetation to grow along the edge of your woodland will improve its value for wildlife. No need to plant trees - they will come if you give them time and space (so called 'natural regeneration'). This area creates a gradual change from bigger trees at the woodland edge to smaller trees and then shrubs giving way to grassland. In addition, if you have space, linking up wooded areas or expanding from existing patches of woodland will make a real difference.

Native Irish trees have co-evolved with many types of native Irish fungi. Invasive fungal pathogens, however, can be fatal to our native trees. These include **Dutch elm disease** and **ash-die back**, which were introduced to Ireland on imported wood and nursery stock respectively. To reduce the risk of accidental species introductions, it's always best to try to source local provenance nursery stock.

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### TIPS FOR THE MONTH!



Climate

Don't treat soil like dirt! It's your greatest resource!

Building **healthy soils** to sequester and store more carbon is known as **carbon farming** and has a wide range of benefits.

As well as storing carbon, healthy soils will reduce fertiliser needs and weed pressures and increase water infiltration, nutrient levels and crop resilience.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

- Do not leave soil exposed.
- Avoid poaching and pinch-points.
- Nurture the soil and build humus – give back [healthy] nutrients by applying compost or growing cover crops.
- Minimise tillage or try no-till cultivation.
- Add species diversity to your sward.
- Reduce or eliminate chemical inputs.



Pollinators

Keep an eye out for **winter bumblebees**.



Normally, worker bumblebees die off during the colder months, while the queen bee hibernates and waits for spring. In recent years, active bumblebees have been spotted throughout the winter – if you see one, you can report it to the National Biodiversity Data Centre where researchers are trying to better understand the effects of climate change on our native pollinators.



Water quality

From mid-January FYM can be stored in a dry field.



When storing FYM in this way, minimise run-off by covering the heap with a tarpaulin. To ensure any remaining run-off does not enter watercourses, store FYM at least twenty metres [ideally more] from any drains, streams or rivers.



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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](http://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](http://www.irishwildflowers.ie)**

FOR NATIVE TREES SEE HERE - IT WILL GIVE YOU ADVICE ON DIFFERENT TREES  
**[www.treecouncil.ie](http://www.treecouncil.ie)**

FOR NATIVE BIRDS SEE HERE  
**[www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)**

FOR NATIVE BUTTERFLIES SEE HERE  
**[www.irishbutterflies.com](http://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](http://www.biodiversityireland.ie)**

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