



MAY

# SUMMER 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!

Cuckoo calling is in full tilt during May.



Heralding the coming of summer, the pagan festival of **Bealtaine** was traditionally celebrated on the 1st of May.

### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

'The Cuckoo comes in April, she sings her song in May, in June she changes her tune, and in July she flies away'. One of our most distinctive and fascinating birds, its call – declining in some areas – is a connection to what generations before us would have experienced in the countryside.

**Bealtaine** meant celebrating the bounty of nature and bidding farewell to the harshness of winter for another year.



Bogs

The fluffy **cotton grass** [bog cotton] is in 'flower' as is the strikingly beautiful **bogbean**.



The 'flowers' are in fact hairy fruits that follow the earlier brown clusters of flowers. Bogbean's hairy petals are coloured white but tinged with pink. Its intense bitterness led to its use for brewing beer [a substitute for hops] and it was also once used for curing rheumatism, coughs and colds.

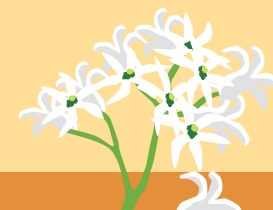


Buildings  
& walls

Many insects make use of old stone buildings. The **red mason bee** will readily nest in stone cavities.



**Red mason bees** really are busy bees... they pollinate a hundred times more flowers than the honeybee!



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



Buildings  
& walls

**Swifts** are also returning to nest in old buildings, especially in roof spaces and under eaves. Watch for swifts as they return to the exact same spot every year to breed. First time breeders are called 'bangers' due to their noisy habit of dive bombing and bumping off potential nesting sites to check if they are vacant or already occupied!!



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Make sure to seek advice before you undertake any changes/ renovations to old buildings. Swifts that return to Ireland to find their nesting spots damaged or no longer there often fail to find a new site to breed that year. If it's absolutely necessary to remove the nest site, make sure to carry out renovations outside of the nesting season and perhaps install some swift boxes and a calling system elsewhere on the farm so that the swifts have somewhere else to nest.



Coastal  
farms

**Phytoplankton** are tiny floating plants. These are naturally occurring, form the basis for all marine life and are also responsible for producing most of the world's oxygen! However, if there is an upset in the balance of nutrients in water (particularly an increase in nitrogen and phosphorus), phytoplankton can increase dramatically – causing an **algal bloom**. Algal blooms off the coast, therefore, are good indicators of water pollution. These blooms can also release **toxins** that are harmful for humans, animals (both wild and domestic) and marine life.

To keep our oceans clean and reduce the occurrence of harmful algal blooms, it's important to minimise any run-off of fertilisers or FYM into the sea. Run-off can reach the sea through rivers, streams, and estuaries, or from direct run-off onto beaches, roads, and cliff faces after heavy rainfall. Before applying inputs, consider how best to minimise run-off on your farm:

- Can you keep back from areas where run-off is more likely?
- Would a soak-away help to ensure water doesn't run freely down a laneway?
- Could a hedgerow or bank of trees **slow the flow** of water across your land?

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Coastal  
farms

**Sea beet**, with its edible triangular leaves, is popping up along the coast.



**Sea beet** is the wild ancestor of many common crops grown in Ireland, including chard and sugar beet.



Garden or  
farmyard

Help out pollinating insects by avoiding chemical sprays and letting native wildflowers like **dandelions** and **daisies** flower in your lawn.



Take care when buying potted plants from garden centres or supermarkets. These plants are often intensively grown and, despite being sold as 'pollinator friendly', often have **chemical residues** that can harm bees and other wildlife in your garden. The soil in potted plants can also harbour invasive pests such as the **New Zealand flatworm**, which kills our **native earthworm**. Where possible, source organically grown potted plants from a reputable seller or, better yet, **grow from seed**.

Sow **nasturtiums** as a decoy for **white butterflies**.

These colourful flowers are also edible in salads.



Hedgerows

The **willow warbler**, **chiff-chaff** and **blackcap** are back and letting everyone know about it, filling the field boundaries with noisy life.



These birds winter in Africa but return to our hedgerow trees just as they come into flower. Let's look after these birds while they visit!





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Hedgerows

Crab-apple, spindle, guelder rose and rowan may be flowering in hedgerows around now, but this is the month in which the whitethorn transforms the countryside with its frothy exuberance!



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

The flowers of the 'sceach gheal' [white thorn] have quite a 'musky' fragrance. The small red berries [haws] are an important food source for wildlife: in hungrier times both leaves and haws were also eaten by people, referred to as 'bread and butter'. Protected by the fairies, it is said to be bad luck to damage whitethorns!



Hill pasture

'Gorse [furze, whins] is in flower'...



... 'and love is in the air' [well, it flowers most of the year!]. One of the most beautiful perfumes of the countryside, gorse is of great importance to **spiders** and **songbirds** and can provide shelter for stock as well as young oaks and ash. A nitrogen-fixer, it was once harvested, crushed, and used to feed livestock. We have two species of gorse in Ireland, our native low-growing shrub and the introduced variety of European gorse. Both are great for wildlife, but the European variety can crowd out native species if not managed.



Pasture, meadows & field margins

Early varieties of **red clover** are flowering.



**Clovers** are a cornerstone of organic farming and the engine that drives productivity. In contrast to **white clover**, **red clover** has an upright growth habit and a strong, deep root. All kinds of bumblebees love their nectar, if they are allowed to flower.

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



Pasture, meadows  
& field margins

This month is a great time to see a variety of flowers emerge. Early **purple orchids**, **twayblades** or some **bitter vetches** may appear in the shade of a hedgerow. **Yellow rattle**, **milkworts** and **speedwells** begin to show in unimproved grasslands, and any number of so called 'weeds' flower everywhere.

First cuts of **silage** are being taken.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Consider leaving areas of pasture un-topped so that the **thistle**, **yarrow**, **self-heal**, **plantains** and others can be a source of nectar for pollinators, and then later seeds for bird species such as **finches**. Most flowers/weeds are really great indicators of site management and soil health, such as soil compaction or soil acidity. 'Weeds' such as **dandelion**, as well as being great for pollinators, have taproots that break up compaction and absorb nutrients from below.

Consider if you can leave a 100m by 4m uncut strip along a **field margin**? Or can some fields be managed for later cuts or hay? This can help provide bees and other pollinators with the continuous supply of flowers they require to forage.



Ponds

Life is heating up in the pond! Look out for **shrimps**, **water snails**, **skaters** and **hoverflies**.



If pond vegetation is taking over, there may be an issue with run-off up-stream. You can remove some of the vegetation by twirling a stick in the pond. If possible, a reed bed or willow bank upstream will help to improve the water quality of your pond (and will be great for wildlife too!)

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



Streams  
& rivers

Listen out for **reed buntings** calling (a short "ziu") especially along stream margins and other wet vegetation.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

These wetland birds have, over recent years, spread into farmland. Sparrow-sized, the male has a black head, white collar and a drooping moustache.



Tillage fields

A really nature-rich farmed habitat can be created by sowing a hectare or more of **wild bird cover** around now.

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**Mycorrhizal fungi** are fungi that form mutually beneficial relationships with the roots of plants. The hyphae of mycorrhizal fungi carry **nutrients, water** and **chemical messages** to and from plant roots. In turn, plants provide the hyphae with **plant-secreted sugars**. These vast interconnected messaging and trading systems have been dubbed **nature's internet** or the '**wood-wide web**'.



Agri-environment schemes will usually help with the costs. The crop is left un-harvested over winter, providing seed sources for the birds. Consider adding additional species to the usual mix, as the more diverse the mix the more species it will feed and house!

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Plants with healthy **mycorrhizal fungal partners** benefit from increased availability of soil nutrients and moisture, as well as greater resistance to disease. Tillage, fungicides and other chemical treatments damage the growth of this network, reducing the natural benefits that it provides to crops. Reducing chemical inputs, minimising tillage and incorporating organic matter (e.g. straw) into the soil, can all help to promote a healthy population of mycorrhizal fungi in the soil.



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



Wet or  
rough ground

Look out for **yellow flags** (irises), **butterworts**, early marsh orchids and native **hogweed**.



### PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Pollinators love hogweed, while the beautiful butterwort is an insectivorous plant [it eats insects!]. Cherish your farm's wetlands, they are amazing!



Woods

For early risers, the **dawn chorus**, nature's very own orchestra, will be in full, glorious flow these mornings.



At its best, the dawn chorus is surely one of the greatest things to enjoy on a nice early summer's morning. Birds are busy finding mates, building nests and some will already be feeding young.



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### TIPS FOR THE MONTH!



Climate

With summer droughts becoming more prevalent, now is a good time to think about how to make your water system as efficient as possible.



>43% of treated drinking water in Ireland is believed to be lost to leaks. Is there a leaky pipe or tap that could be replaced on the farm?



Pollinators

Remember '**No Mow May**'!

If you've been tempted to cut the grass on lawns and road margins, now is a good time to hold off again to allow pollinators to feed from flowering species such as clover.



If necessary, you can cut some sections for pathways through lawns, or rotate the cutting so that there are always a few strips in flower.

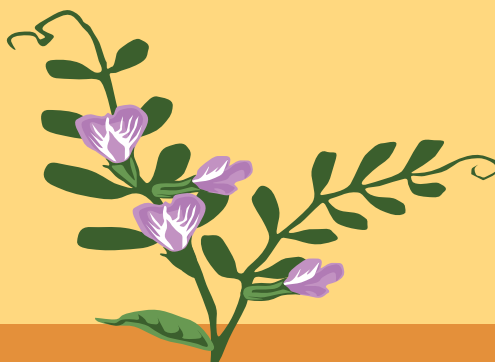


Water quality

**Silage effluent** can be very damaging if it escapes into watercourses.



Before filling silage pits, check that **all concrete is in good condition with no cracks** and that you have sufficient capacity in your effluent tank. If you are using round bales, try to **avoid stacking them on top of each other**, as this increases effluent.





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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

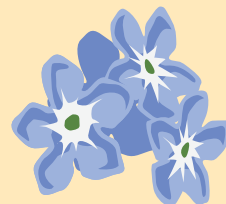
**[www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)**

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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