



MARCH

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!

Farm planning? Where are you concentrating your efforts on the farm? Are there less productive places (steep slopes, wetter areas etc.), which you could manage for nature? These 'hare's corners' can provide vital refuges for wildlife, without hitting your farm outputs.



Bogs

Keep an eye out for **breeding frogs**.



Where small areas of land can be taken out of intensive production, they should be managed extensively (and not fertilised) to increase the growth of wildflowers. These provide food for our pollinators and other insects, including those that help keep crop pests under control. A healthy diversity of nature and habitats on the farm can benefit agricultural productivity overall.



Buildings
& walls

Warmer evenings will see **bats** emerging.



Breeding involves the male attaching himself to the female by holding on tight behind her forelegs, and not letting go until she's laid her eggs!

Bats use a wide variety of structures to roost in as their requirements change throughout the year. Roosts are needed for different activities – hibernation roosts and maternity roosts – and at different times of the year. Different bat species choose different structures for different activities.

Many farms have these types of features, so it is important to be aware of their importance for bats. Many buildings on farms can provide important roosts for bats, particularly large stone buildings with slate roofs and large, open roof voids. It's really good to get advice before changing any of these structures if you think bats are using them.

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March means it won't be long before grass growth starts to pick up in earnest. It's a good time of year to consider the habitats on your farm and how they can be protected from, or enhanced by, grazing livestock.

Between March and late autumn, **basking sharks** can be spotted from some coastal farms on the south, west and north coasts. The largest fish in the north Atlantic, the **basking shark** or 'sun-fish' is a gentle giant, travelling thousands of kilometres each year to feed on plankton.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

On coastal farms, machair, dune systems and salt marshes are all fragile ecosystems that will benefit from careful management, low inputs and light grazing pressure. Using temporary fencing to prevent overgrazing, restricting livestock access during the flowering season (June-August) and feeding and watering away from these areas (to reduce poaching) will help to maintain these fragile and valuable ecosystems.

Keep your eyes peeled for their huge tail fins as these giants bask near the surface of the water.

If possible, try to leave some of your **winter vegetables go to seed** rather than pulling them when they are finished cropping.

Brussel sprouts, curly kale or leeks give some very early flowers, loved by the pollinators, as well as providing seeds for birds.



Coastal
farms



Garden or
farmyard

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Primrose sightings pick up in March – the first, fragrant ‘rose’, the *prima rosa*.

Your hedges may begin to show the first clouds of snow-white **blackthorn flowers**. These flowers appear even before the leaves do [unlike whitethorns whose leaves precede the flowers].

Some of the birds that winter in Ireland like the **fieldfare** and **redwing** will be leaving around now. Many of the local birds like **blackbird**, **robin**, **thrush** and **sparrows** are really finding their voices, but the smaller **tits** and the **wren** are not to be out-sung with their strong calls coming through.

In spring, **hares** come together for courtship and there is a higher chance of seeing these otherwise elusive animals.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

Generally flowering best from April to May but can appear before the end of the old year in sheltered places.

Blackthorn also provides a valuable source of nectar and pollen for **bees** in spring. Its foliage is a food plant for the **caterpillars** of many **moths** and is used by the black and brown **hairstreak butterflies**. Birds nest among the dense, thorny thickets, eat caterpillars and other insects from the leaves, and feast on the sloes in autumn.

Fieldfare and **redwing** both breed at more northerly latitudes, including as far north as Scandinavia and Russia. Imagine the journeys that lie ahead of these tiny creatures!

The **Irish Hare** is unique to the island of Ireland. The best opportunity to see hares is likely to be early morning or at dusk during springtime. Their courtship is very energetic with ‘boxing’, kicking and lots of leaping around! They live above ground and settle/rest in ‘forms’, which are shallow depressions in dense vegetation such as tall grass, rushes or heather.



Hedgerows



Hill Pasture

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Pasture, meadows
& field margins

Carder bee queens, emerging from hibernation, will search for nesting sites at the base of tussocks.

Grassland areas for wildflowers should have livestock excluded from late March/April [depending on the year] to late summer.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

At the end of each summer, try to leave some patches of long, tussocky grass and tall wildflower seed heads to provide food and shelter in the hardest months for carder bees.

Fence off or reduce stocking density in certain areas to let taller grass grow and for longer into the season. Ideally, allow **wildflowers to bloom** throughout spring and early summer and **fungi to fruit** in late summer and autumn.



Ponds

Frogs produce their spawn from here on - thousands of black eggs enclosed in an envelope of jelly!



A useful way to monitor climate change at a local level - keep a note of when you first see frogspawn every year.



Streams
& rivers

Lampreys spawn in spring and early summer, often in similar places to trout and salmon. Lampreys look a bit like eels... but they have no bones or scales and sport a single nostril on the top of their heads!



Three species of **lamprey** occur in Irish rivers. They are important '**ecosystem engineers**' as their nest-building activities shape channels and create habitat for other species. Changing the flow patterns of rivers [including dredging, dams, weirs or channelisation] can devastate lamprey habitat - conserve the natural flow patterns of rivers on your land, and urge your neighbours to do the same!



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Tillage fields

Many species of small mammals navigate farmland using a complex network of secret pathways, rarely emerging into the open. These pathways also exist in the air – with species such as bats and owls much more likely to follow hedgerows and field margins from the sky than to head out over open cropland.

While not many mushrooms are visible in March, their **fungal hyphae** are busy below ground, binding soil, improving drainage, and recycling nutrients.



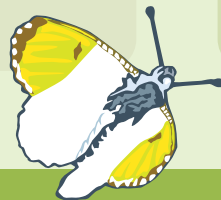
Wet or rough ground

In damper grassland areas the **cuckoo flower** will be showing. It's also known as **lady's smock**.



Woods

The **lesser celandine** is one of the first flowers to open on the woodland floor in early Spring, closely followed by the **wood anemone** – its white flowers complementing the celandine's yellows.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS AND NOTES

To encourage wildlife to use hedgerows, fallow plots, beetle banks and rough grassland on your farm, think about how you can **connect these habitats** up so that wildlife can easily move between them. For example, a short strip of hedgerow could be planted to connect two small pieces of woodland, making it easy for secretive woodland creatures to move between them!

Did you know a single cubic inch of soil can contain **eight miles of entangled mycelium** (fungal hyphae)? To protect this valuable resource, where possible, minimise tillage and chemical inputs – especially fungicides!

This is the food plant for the well-named **orange-tip butterfly** [which appears from April onwards].

Competition time – what's your first wildflower of the year? Shady areas are a good place to search as flowers try to avail of the open canopy before the leaves fill in and shade them out.

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TIPS FOR THE MONTH!



Climate

With DAFM paperwork deadlines beginning to loom, have you considered going **organic**?



Organic farming prohibits the use of many petroleum-based chemical inputs. As such organic farming is not only good for soil, water and food, but reduces the farming footprint too!



Pollinators

Can you provide some of the **bumblebee's** favourite food plants?

Also, keep an eye out for the **grey mining bee**, a black bee with two grey bands around its middle. It emerges out of hibernation in March and begins searching for some bare earth in which to make a burrow and lay its eggs.



In March, these include **willow, dandelion, lungwort, rosemary** and **heather**.

'**Bee scrapes**' or man-made bare patches of earth on a ditch or in a field corner can provide great habitat for the grey mining bee and other solitary bee species seeking to dig these little burrows for their nests.



Water quality

Did you know that **soil temperatures** affect the rate of absorption of nutrients?



To maximise absorption of inputs, and minimise harmful run-off, spread fertiliser and FYM on **warmer days** [soil temp at least 6°C].



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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

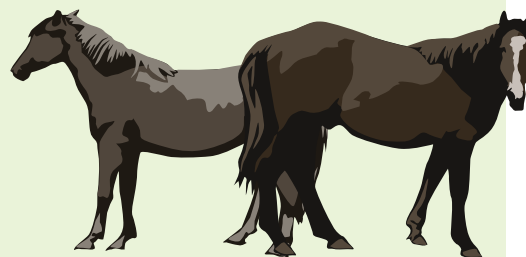
www.birdwatchireland.ie

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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