



Welcome to the Winter Farming For Nature Newsletter

Welcome to our winter Farming For Nature (FFN) Newsletter, the last edition of a year which has seen many challenges for Irish farmers. Very poor weather conditions, fluctuating markets, rising input costs and ongoing high levels of uncertainty are making it difficult to plan ahead with any degree of confidence. But farmers are adaptive and resilient and so, as we enter into a quieter season in the farming calendar, it is a good time to catch up on longlisted jobs but also perhaps to reflect on the year ahead and how to respond to the shifting sands of policy and market.

Here at FFN we are basking in the afterglow of our annual Farming for Nature Ambassador Awards. We got to meet our ten new Ambassadors in person, and more importantly they got to meet some of the 80+ other members of their 'tribe'. The diversity – from intensive dairy to goat farming to rearing

racehorses – and eloquence of these exemplary farmers is really inspiring. They are the real heroes, quietly going about their business, embodying the change and meeting the challenges that we all face. These farm families are leading the way when it comes to ecologically sound, economically viable and agriculturally progressive farming – and doing so with an infectious enthusiasm and joy.

We also pleased to be welcoming 6 new Ambassadors from Northern Ireland – to be announced at a ceremony later this month, organised by our NI partners ‘The Nature Friendly Farming Network’. Nature knows no boundaries nor does good land stewardship, so we hope to share a lot of learnings with these farmers, as we have done with our Austrian Ambassadors when they visited Ireland earlier this summer.

We hope you enjoy this newsletter and find some ideas and inspiration in it – or at least some food for thought for the winter months ahead.

Our annual Farming For Nature Gathering was a great success

Our 2023 National FFN Gathering & Ambassador Awards was held in Gort Co. Galway on Saturday 28th October as part of the annual Burren Winterage Weekend. This day is a celebration of the Irish farming community an important opportunity for Ambassadors, farmers, landowners, policy-makers, researchers and the general public to come together and hear about the various ways farmers are working to support nature on their land and to manage healthy farms and farming communities across the country.

The gathering was an inspiring day of farmer-led panel discussions, agri-policy updates and finally our 2023 Ambassador Awards where we officially welcomed 10 new farmers into our growing network of 91 FFN Ambassadors - meet these farmers below! Topics of discussion on the day included ‘building resilience on Irish’ farms through nature-based solutions, diversifying income streams, direct

selling and cutting costs. Another topic of focus was 'farming and social sustainability' and the role of Social Farming, community growing, feeding the local community and maintaining strong communities in rural Ireland.

We would like to thank the following FFN Ambassadors who contributed to these important discussions on the day: Kim McCall, Cathal O'Rourke, Mona Muller, Gearoid Maher, Kate Egan, Nadia Pickersgill, Tommy Earley and Colm Gavin. As well as Hannah Quinn Mulligan, Brendan Dunford, James Moran and Laurence Dooley for leading sessions.

The Sunday saw the annual cattle drive in the Burren held on the farm of Michael Shannon. This was a wonderful event as always, attracting many people from all walks of life and giving people the opportunity to take part in this wonderfully unique transhumance experience. Well done to our sister organisation Burrenbeo Trust for hosting yet another excellent Burren Winterage Weekend!

See a selection of photos from the weekend below!







Meet the 10 new 2023 Farming for Nature Ambassadors

Blátnaid Gallagher, sheep farmer, Co. Galway

Blátnaid Gallagher and her husband Niall manage a diverse farm with a range of different habitats such as woodland, permanent pasture, bogland and rewilded land. Blátnaid runs a small flock of pedigree Galway ewes, producing organic lamb and Galway wool. The farm is very extensively managed, with no chemicals used and external inputs are extremely low. Geese, ponies and donkeys are also kept on the farm. Much of the land is left for biodiversity and wildlife, including 6ha of bogland which is now a dedicated butterfly sanctuary, providing a habitat for the rare Marsh Fritillary butterfly as well as numerous other insects and birds. Mature hedgerows, woodland and nature corridors throughout the land provide habitat for the healthy populations of birds on the farm, as well as badgers, hares, pine marten and foxes. More information on Blátnaid's farm [here](#).

Bruce Thompson, dairy farmer, Co. Laois

Bruce Thompson runs dairy farm in Ballyfin County Laois. He is an 8th generation farmer. The farm which was traditionally a mixed farm is now a commercial dairy farm with a herd of 320 cows. Bruce operates a grass based, high efficiency production system. In 2020, Bruce started a Nuffield Scholarship and from this he developed a passion for dung beetles. On his own farm he has a particular interest in reducing animal remedies through prevention, with a focus on animal wormers. He has made dramatic reductions in his wormer usage by making use of his farm microscope for diagnosis and pioneering new grazing strategies. Other actions taken for

nature on his farm include managing hedgerows for biodiversity, planting new hedgerows and incorporating multi-species swards into his grassland to help reduce inputs. More information on Bruce's farm [here](#).

David Kerr, dairy farmer, Co Laois

David Kerr is a commercial dairy farmer from Ballyfin Co Laois. He milks 150 cross-bred cows, "following the old farming mantra of one cow to the acre". He also keeps a small flock of Dorset Horn sheep on the farm. 20% of the land has been reseeded with multispecies swards and clover and this has helped reduce the amount of artificial nitrogen spread on the land. There is 3 acres of woodland on the farm, mainly oak, which was planted by Davids late father George. To honour the passing of George in 2021, David devoted an area of land to a 1.5 acre wildlife pond on the farm. David has left approximately 12% of his farm as non-commercially productive land and he values this land for its biodiversity and wildlife value. More information on David's farm [here](#).

Diana Pickersgill, mixed stock farmer, Co. Westmeath

Diana Pickersgill runs a mixed organic farm with her daughters Penn and Nadia, near Mullingar Co. Westmeath. There is 40 acres of multispecies sward and about 8ha of mixed broadleaf woodland on the farm which is operated under a continuous cover forestry system. An advocate for the importance of maintaining diversity on farms, Diana keeps a variety of stock on the land but maintains low stocking numbers. They keep Dexter cattle, sheep, sows, donkeys and chickens. There is also a kitchen garden on the farm and oats are grown to supplement winter feedback and provide straw for bedding. Habitats on the farm include woodlands, hedgerows, wetland areas with 2 ponds, and orchard, meadows and wildflower areas. More

information on Diana's farm [here](#).

James Gilmartin. Mixed stock farmer, Co Leitrim

James Gilmartin is a 7th generation farmer, who farms alongside his father in North County Leitrim. James runs a mixed organic farm. He keeps a suckler herd and a small herd of Dexters, as well as a small flock of sheep. He keeps a bees and chickens too, producing honey and eggs for local customers. As a farmer, James doesn't want to push the land beyond its natural capability, thus low stocking density, low external inputs and extensive management of the land are crucial elements of his farming system. Through the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme, James is just one of a few farmers currently trialling NoFence cattle collars to deliver targeted grazing in an upland setting. He has installed PV panels on the shed roof. There is a small pond on the farm and James enjoys planting trees and hedges on the farm every year. More information on James' farm [here](#).

Justina and Liam Gavin, mixed stock farmers, Co. Roscommon

Liam and Justina Gavin run Drumanilra Organic Farm on the shores of Lough Key, Co. Roscommon. They manage a 300-acre mixed livestock and horticulture farm. They farm a herd of pedigree Irish Dexter cattle, a flock of Jacob sheep and a flock of laying hens. The organic animal produce is processed locally and sold direct to their customers via their farm shops/restaurants. The market garden produces organic salads and vegetables which also supply their restaurant business. A Holistic Planned Grazing system is practised on the farm and multi-species herbal leys have been sown to help regenerate soil and provide nutritionally dense food for the animals. Habitats on the farm include pockets of mature broadleaf forestry, wetlands along the lake shore and mature habitats running throughout the farm. More information on Justina & Liam's farm [here](#).

Lisa Gifford, goat farmer, Co. Leitrim

Lisa Gifford grew up in the U.S., but her Irish roots brought her back to the land in 2016 and she bought a small farm in County Leitrim which she manages with her daughter Gypsy Gifford and daughter-in-law Richelle South. There is a range of stock on the farm including goats, sheep, pigs and chickens. The main commercial aspect of the farm is milking goats and producing farmhouse goats cheese that is sold at local farmers markets. An old farm building has recently been retrofitted and converted into an on-farm micro-dairy. There are mature hedgerows around the farm and the family are planting trees on the land and in field corners to provide

shelter and improve soil structure, as well as creating additional habitat for wildlife. More information on Lisa's farm [here](#).

Mariann Klay, stud farmer, Co. Kildare

Mariann Klay runs a stud farm in Swordlestown Little, Co. Kildare where she breeds thoroughbred horses for the horse-racing industry. The farming system is extensive, and no chemicals are used on the land. Mariann ensures the stocking density is never too high and the land is aerated every year to minimise soil compaction. A nature lover her entire life, Mariann places biodiversity and wildlife at the centre of every decision relating to the land. Thick and mature hedgerows line every field and corridor on the farm. A pond was dug on the land a few years ago and it has become a central point on the farm, attracting an abundance of insects and birds. There is steam on the land which provides further water habitat and there is an area of wetland on the farm as well. There are pockets of mature woodland throughout the farm which provides a habitat for the diverse array of wildlife that lives on the farm. More information on Mariann's farm [here](#).

Michael Keegan, Farm manager at Luggala Estate, Co Wicklow

Michael Keegan is farm manager of Luggala Estate in Co. Wicklow. The 5000-acre estate is a mix of upland blanket bog, dry heath, acid grassland, meadows, mixed woodlands some of which are native and some conifer plantations. There are also two large lakes and two rivers running through the land. Michael is now implementing an extensive environmental management plan throughout the entire estate. Actions to date include heather cutting, treatment of the invasive Rhododendron plants in the woodland, bruising and treatment of bracken, repair and restoration of the traditional drystone walls, management of deer population, tagging and recording of raptors, gathering seeds from native trees and shrubs on the estate for propagation and woodland restoration and gully planting with native trees and shrubs. There is a small herd of Belted Galloway cattle on the estate who play an important role in conservation grazing and managing vegetation on the land. More information on Michael's farm [here](#).

Tom Tierney, tillage farmer, Co. Kildare

Tom Tierney runs a 200-acre regenerative tillage farm in Co. Kildare. He has been running a direct drilling system since 2015 and has observed tremendous benefits of this lower soil disturbance method for life both above and below the soil surface.

He has reduced the amount of synthetic inputs required on the farm and there has been no insecticide used on the land in 6 years. He has two wormery's on the farm and he makes his own bio-stimulants from vermi-juice, seaweed, molasses and silica which further build the soil biology. There is about 30 acres of mixed forestry on the farm, 60% hardwood and 40% softwood and Tom operates a continuous cover forestry system. There are about 12 acres of conservation areas on the farm. There is an acre of wetland with naturally regenerating woodland. There are 7 acres of wildflowers on the farm and 4 acres of permanent clover. More information on Tom's farm [here](#).

FFN will feature each of these farmers in detail over the next 10 months, giving people the opportunity to hear their stories and learn about the different ways they are working to support nature on their land. Keep an eye on FFN's social media platforms/website to access farm videos, podcasts and other educational resources featuring these 2023 Ambassadors.

The National Farming for Nature Ambassador Awards is sponsored by Bord Bia and supported by a wide range of farming and conservation interests including the Dept of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the National Parks and Wildlife Service.



[Meet all our Ambassadors here](#)

Farming for Nature farm walks

The end of our farm walk season is in sight, but what a wonderful season we have had.

There are still spaces on our last farm walk happening this season:

- 18th November 2pm Madeline McKeever Co. Cork ***“Vegetable seed production and building habitats on farms”*** [Book here](#)

So far this year, we have run 20 farm walks across 16 counties with over 400 people in attendance. This year’s farm walks have covered topics from hedge-laying to holistic planned grazing, community food growing to low-input dairy farming, rewilding to viticulture, beef farming to forestry, and everything in between!

None of these farm walks would be possible without our incredible FFN Ambassadors. We would like to take this opportunity to thank these wonderful farmers for opening their farm gates and welcoming everyone so kindly to their farms – showing walk attendees around the land, sharing tips on how they farm for nature, answering questions, leading by example, and engaging in important conversations over a cup of tea after the walk!

Thank you to this year’s wonderful FFN Ambassadors and farm walk hosts this year:

- James & Martina Ham (Co. Westmeath)
- Sean Condon (Co. Limerick)
- Olly Nolan (Co. Dublin)
- Aonghus O Coistealbha (Co. Galway)
- Gerry Fitzsimons (Co. Cavan)
- Sinead Moran (Co. Mayo)
- Maurice Deasy (Co. Tipperary)
- Cathal & Bronagh O'Rourke (Co. Clare)
- Darina Allen (Co. Cork)

- Cathal Mooney (Co. Donegal)
- Brigid O'Connor (Co. Kerry)
- Colm Flynn (Co. Kildare)
- Paul McCormick & Jacinta French (Co. Cork)
- Thomas & Claire O'Connor (Co. Kerry)
- Eamonn McDonagh (Co. Mayo)
- David Dennison (Co. Waterford)
- Kate Egan (Co. Westmeath)
- Andrew Chilton (Co. Roscommon)
- Eoghan Daltun (Co. Cork)
- Rod & Julie Calder-Potts (Co. Kilkenny)
- Madeline McKeever (Co. Cork)

We look forward to returning next year with another season of FFN farm walks for you all to come, see, learn and enjoy!



[Farm Walks Booking](#)

Ask the Farmer Q&A is back this Winter

Join us on the second Tuesday of every month when we chat to our more recent Ambassadors and you can ask your pressing questions.

First up is Leitrim farmer - James Gilmartin on '*Farming progressively whilst working within the land's natural capacity*' on the 5th December.

Free to attend just register your email below so you can be sent the link.

[Ask the Farmer Q&A with James Gilmartin](#)

"Managing your Riparian Zone" video

We recently launched this video on how to manage riparian zones - the areas around your rivers, your streams and other waterways.

This short video follows Tipperary-based Farming for Nature Ambassador Michael Hickey on how he manages the riparian zones on his farm and the benefits that his type of management creates for nature, for his farm and for him and his family.

['Managing your riparian zones' video](#)

The Horse's Mouth Farmer to Farmer Mentorship - Great feedback

Our farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and mentorship service has been in full swing around the country with 50 farms across 21 counties being visited by 25 of our mentors. Some feedback here:

"I think it's a fantastic project and the more people that learn of it and take part in it the better for the future of farming in Ireland. It's about getting the word out there about it through social media, events like farm walks and general word of mouth. I hope that it keeps growing and growing to reach the younger generation of farmers out there."

"It really was a great experience having someone of such knowledge looking at your farm and helping you make sense of it all. His ideas made sense and were all practical and realistic to carry out in the future. "

"My mentor was so knowledgeable and generous with her time and anyone lucky enough to have a visit from her would see the benefit for years!"

"The Horses Mouth is a very clever initiative but more importantly it's really well executed and as a new grower, I was so glad to just meet an experience grower and get some hands on practical advice. It was a hugely motivating and worthwhile exercise for me. I am so glad to have these sorts of resources available to me, it makes me very optimistic for the future of farming in this country."

"We had a very special day on my little farm where I had the privilege of gaining the mentor's perspectives, insights and advice. I'm so happy to have had the opportunity to participate in this scheme."

This programme is aimed at supporting farmers and landowners who are looking for on-the-ground practical advice from fellow farmers on how they might improve their land's biodiversity and be productive farmers. Though every farm is different, you can't underestimate the value of some sound practical advice and encouragement from a fellow farmer. **Sound like something you would like to avail of - email us to be added to the interested**

list for 2024 and we will let you know when the call for applications is open:
info@farmingfornature.ie

The Hare's Corner - building up wildlife ponds

We are delighted to that we were able to offer funding to our ambassadors and those that had been through the above mentorship programme the opportunity to build a wildlife pond. So far 36 substantial ponds have been build this year and last year with funding through The Hare's Corner project. Wildlife ponds on farms are one of quickest ways to invite nature to your farm. If you would like to avail of this funding in the future - why not consider being part of our Horse's Mouth programme as a starting point. Interested parties to email us on info@farmingfornature.ie and we will let you know when the call for applications is open next year.

Meanwhile if you would like to build a pond on your land but not sure where to start. See below.

[How to build a wildlife pond on your farm](#)

Nature's Calendar this Winter - observations & actions

Looking for information on what wildlife to look out for and what practical actions you can take on your farm to help nature this Winter, see our nature's calendar below.

[Nature's Calendar - WINTER](#)

Farming For Nature Podcasts

These podcasts are a great way to listen to what our farmers are up to on their land and how they are carrying out certain actions to improve nature on their farm. They can be enjoyed whilst out to on your tractor, milking the cows or when you are working the land - basically at a time and place that suits you. Subscribe to our podcasts through the usual means (Spotify, iTunes etc) and you will be notified when new episodes are issued.

Our most recent ones are:

- *Being economically viable whilst restoring nature on a dairy farm with Gearoid Maher, dairy farmer, Co. Limerick*
- *Making a living from 1 acre with Aonghus Ó'Coistealbha, Connemara, Galway*
- *Maurice Deasy, brewer, sheep & arable farmer, on why conservation agriculture is worth the risk*

Please rate, review and share in order to help get the message out there.

[Farming For Nature Podcasts](#)

Groundtips - advice from farmers for farmers

Groundtips provides practical advice and tips from farmers in their own words on how they have enhanced nature on their land. Each newsletter we like to share one of these opinion pieces with you. This month we are covering ***What is a fen and why is it important*** with tips from ambassador Stephen Morrison on improving your fenland for biodiversity. Click below to find out more.

[Why are fens important?](#)

Education

If you are a teacher (primary or secondary) or a trainer on ACRES/Green Cert courses you might be interested in the new section of our website that offers both resources to schools and other training environments that want to learn more about regenerative agriculture and food systems with accompanying activities and teachers notes.

[Education & Training](#)

Forum

This is space for farmers and others to ask questions and share information around farming for nature. Whilst it is primarily for farmers we welcome users that are able to contribute from related fields.

Most recent queries include:

[Research about Dutch cow breeds](#)

[Research to better inform sustainable growing practices](#)

[Forum](#)

Events Calendar

This section of our website has all our events up on it as well as events our Ambassadors are involved in, or other related organisations and groups. If you have relevant event coming up, please get in contact with us on lucy@farmingfornature.ie and we will put it up and share.

Upcoming events include:

- November 13 @ 9:00 am - November 15 @ 5:00 pm NOTS, 3LM & The Savory Institute – **Holistic Management Fundamentals** Co. Sligo
- November 14 @ 9:30 am - 12:30 pm Ballymaloe Farm School: **Planting and Caring for An Orchard** Ballymaloe Farm, Cork
- November 14 @ 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm **Information evening about the Old Irish Goats on Howth** Howth, Dublin
- November 16 @ 9:00 am - November 17 @ 5:00 pm **International Agroforestry Conference** Bantry, Co. Cork
- November 16 @ 9:30 am - 4:30 pm **Ballymaloe Farm School: Growing Healthy Vegetables in Healthy Soil** Ballymaloe Farm, Cork
- November 18 @ 2:00 pm - 4:30 pm **Farming for Nature farm walk with Madeline McKeever** Co. Cork
- November 23 @ 9:30 am - 12:30 pm **Ballymaloe Farm School: Winter Pruning with Elizabeth O'Connell** Ballymaloe Farm, Cork
- November 30 @ 7:00 pm - 10:00 pm **Farming for Nature Northern Ireland: Ambassadors Awards Ceremony**

More information on the below link....

[Events Calendar](#)

Farming For Nature

Farming for Nature is an independent initiative set up to inspire and encourage farmers that farm or wish to farm more for nature. We would love to hear any ideas, suggestions or feedback you have. Just contact us through the below website or social media platform. Hosted by the charity Burrenbeo Trust and funded by NPWS, DAFM and An Bord Bia

www.farmingfornature.ie



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