

A Special Mix: Farming for nature on the Mullet Peninsula

“create the habitat and the species will come.”



Image: fodder radish/kale year 1 from the farm of Feargal Ó Cuinneagáin in the Mullet Peninsula in County Mayo.

Feargal Ó Cuinneagáin is a young farmer and vet, son of a Kilkenny man, born and reared in Limerick, based in Dublin and farming in Mayo. A special mix in one person. Feargal has brought this mix to bear in blending farming and wildlife on a 10 hectare plot on the Mullet Peninsula in the far west of County Mayo. The National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Feargal entered an agreement under the [NPWS Farm Plan Scheme](#) in March of 2016. The primary objective of the plan was to return Corncrakes to the farm, while also boosting wider biodiversity including Twite (another ‘red-list’ bird), Chough, Barnacle Geese, pollinators, and habitats in their own right like a species-rich fen. Again, a special mix! The Agri-Ecology Unit of NPWS and Michael Martyn Agri-Environment Consultants worked closely with Feargal in designing and implementing a series of measures to convert what was a rather lifeless monoculture of grass to a tapestry full of colour, sights and sounds as would have been commonplace throughout the Irish countryside in previous generations. This plan however is not a step back in time, rather it is seen as the way forward. Dr. Barry O’Donoghue, Head of Agri-Ecology with the NPWS/Department of Culture, Heritage & the Gaeltacht explains that biodiversity ultimately underpins the viability of farming: “for example pollinators are vital in our food production systems and to the survival of flowering plants. One third of our global food supply is pollinated by bees. Simply put, bees keep plants and crops alive....without bees, these crops would cease to exist. Furthermore, in most of the High Nature Value farmland across Ireland, the income derived from agri-environmental schemes, is a lifeline in keeping farmers farming. The NPWS Farm Plan Scheme is seen as a positive and proactive approach in engaging with farmers for bespoke and targeted action on a field by field level and through this, valuable lessons have been learned to inform wider roll-out in national agri-environmental schemes like GLAS. By working with Feargal on his land, we have not only created a

haven for important habitats and species, but we have also trialled new and innovative measures in managing for wildlife on productive agricultural land.”



Image: Corncrake Nettle Bed from the farm of Feargal Ó Cuinneagáin in the Mullet Peninsula in County Mayo.

Michael Martyn, the farm planner explains what changes have taken place, from the first turning of the sod: “It is said *create the habitat and the species will come.*” On this farm the species rich meadows with abundant yellow rattle produce an open sward favoured by the corncrake for nesting. But early in the season when the corncrake arrives back from overwintering in Africa to begin the breeding cycle again, nesting cover and food source is in very short supply in this exposed coastal landscape. In response to this we set about creating Early and Late cover (ELC) plots. If Corncrakes arrive onsite, mowing is delayed until late summer. The centre-out mowing is used and a generous headland remains uncut and this and the ELC margin provide a refuge for broods to escape into cover safely. For Twite and other farmland birds, a cereal/brassica mix such as kale, mustard or radish and triticale was sown. This creates both a Summer/Autumn crop and a Winter crop producing bird seed of

different sizes, insect food and cover while doing so in the “hungry gap” late Winter/ early Spring period. The plan adopts a holistic approach, creating the traditional agricultural habitat mosaic and restoring natural habitats on the farm.”

Feargal, who has a great admiration for wildlife has been delighted with the fruits of his labour, within a short few years.

“For me, entering the NPWS scheme has been a welcome boost due to the grant I receive, as well as having advisory support. Since I joined, there has been a remarkable increase in the rare and threatened wildlife on my farm. Twite arrived in 2017 with at least twenty six twite feeding on the crop we created. There were no Corncrake present when I joined, and in the summer of 2018 there were six calling males. In the Winter, Barnacle Geese graze on the farm. The air is filled with the sound of Skylarks in the Summer. A family of Chough have started to nest in a neighbouring derelict building, after I installed a nest box provided by the NPWS. I have also managed the hay meadow, specifically by focussing on Red Clover, as well as planting Phacelia and Kale, resulting in a benefit to the threatened Great Yellow Bumblebee.”

This special mixture of people, mixture of seeds and mixture of habitats has resulted in a piece of the West of Ireland now teeming with life. “It has been a pleasure working with Feargal and Michael on this and to see the hard work of Feargal and his father Seosamh pay off” says O’Donoghue. “We are in a positive space working with the farmers in our Farm Plan Scheme and there is an appetite out there among many farmers to farm in a wildlife friendly way. What Feargal has created here will be a great legacy and it is only early days yet”.



Image: fen with ragged robin from the farm of Feargal Ó Cuinneagáin in the Mullet Peninsula in County Mayo.

