

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 31st July 2020

Helping our farmland Habitats

The Importance of Bees

There are 99 bee species in Ireland: the honeybee, 21 species of bumblebee, and 77 species of solitary bee. Bees are the most important pollinator of crops and native plant species in Ireland. They are a key component of our wildlife and one of the busiest, least appreciated work forces we have. A study from the Department of the Environment found that bees are worth €53m a year to the economy. Globally, 100 crops provide 90% of food and 71 of these crops are pollinated by bees. The most important managed pollinator in Ireland is the honeybee. However, more than half of Ireland's bee species have undergone substantial declines in their numbers since 1980. Three species have become extinct, six are critically endangered, ten endangered and fourteen vulnerable.

Bees need flowers to get pollen and nectar for food. On many Irish farms, the most common flower is the whitethorn in the hedgerows. Allowing whitethorn hedgerows to flower is very important to maintain bee populations. Haws, the fruit of whitethorn trees provide food for birds in winter. Tall uncut hedgerows flower profusely and therefore provide a vital food source for our Bees.

Maintenance of Hedgerows

Hedgerows provide a vital habitat for wild life on our farms and they underpin the ecosystem by providing food, shelter and protection to many of our native species of insects, birds and small mammals. Increasing the variety of hedgerow types in terms of height, width, shape and species mix promotes diversity in flora and fauna. The quest for neatness should not take precedence over ecological and landscape considerations. However, many hedgerows are unnecessarily trimmed routinely. Whitethorn flowers are not produced on these over-managed hedgerows and they are therefore no good to bees and are generally too low to be of any use for nesting farmland birds. Because they do not flower, they do not produce berries and haws that provide winter feed for birds and small mammals. It is really important to allow whitethorn trees to grow to a minimum of 1.4 metres so that they can flower and produce fruit for wildlife to live off. It is also worth reminding farmers that those who have applied for a nitrates Derogation in 2020 have also committed to adopting at least one of the following measures from the All Island Pollinator Plan.

- Leaving at least one mature Whitethorn or Blackthorn tree within each hedgerow.
- Cut or trim hedgerows in rotation rather than all at once and after the 31st of August.

Hedgerows should be maintained on a minimum of a 3 year cycle. By doing this, only one third of the hedgerows on a farm are cut each year and the remainder are left to flower and produce food for wildlife. The bird nesting season lasts from 1st March to 31st August and no hedge cutting can take place during this period. Hedge cutting is only permitted from 1st September until the end of February. Under Cross Compliance rules, a penalty will apply if birds or their nests are deliberately disturbed during the bird nesting season.

Bird Nesting

Recent Teagasc Research by Dr Catherine Keena showed that your typical farmland birds including the Thrush, Blackbirds and Robins build their nests in hedgerows over 1.4 metres high and no less. These hedges provide cover from ground predators such as foxes and overhead predators such as magpies. Hedgerows with a dense base require trimming to prevent shrubs escaping into individual mature trees. Hedges should be side-trimmed to a triangular shape from a wider base, leaving the peak as high as practical, but at least 1.4 metres.

Other Development Works

If you are carrying out works on your farm which require the removal or restructuring of features such as hedgerows, it may be necessary to apply for permission from the Department of Agriculture under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations. If in any 5 year period you are removing field boundaries over 500 metres or beginning to use uncultivated land or semi-natural areas for farming,

which impacts greater than 5 hectares or Land drainage works on lands used for agriculture which impacts greater than 15 hectares, you must apply for permission. In relation to hedgerows, work cannot be carried out during the bird nesting season 1st March -31st August inclusive, and it is necessary to plant the equivalent linear length of native hedgerow somewhere else within your holding before you remove the hedgerow. For more information see the EIA summary on the Department of Agriculture or contact your local Teagasc advisor.

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