

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 20th November 2020

What Counts for Biodiversity on a livestock farm?

Biodiversity on the Blackmore Farm

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Biodiversity is a broad term that refers our native flora and fauna. On every farm there are important habitats that provide food, shelter and space to a variety of plants and trees, birds, bees, insects and animals. Linear features such as hedgerows, watercourses, and field margins are some of the most common biodiversity features found on farms in Ireland. Other valuable biodiversity features on Irish farms include ponds, native deciduous woodland, wetland habitats, and low-input pasture, to name but a few. The role of biodiversity in agriculture has come to the fore in recent times. Farmers who availed of Nitrates Derogation in 2020 have also committed to maintaining their hedgerows for biodiversity. Future CAP will undoubtedly place a greater emphasis on biodiversity with farmers obliged to take part in eco-schemes and carry out environmental measures in order to receive a portion of their payments. The recently published EU Biodiversity Strategy also committed to having at least 10% of agricultural area under high-diversity landscape features by 2030. With all of this in mind, now is an opportunity for farmers to consider the biodiversity that exists on their farms.

A biodiversity baseline assessment was carried out on the farm of Brian Blackmore located at Rathaleek just outside Kilkenny City. This identified a variety of biodiversity habitats and management practices. Brian is a beef farmer who also runs a contract-rearing enterprise just outside Kilkenny City. The biodiversity features identified on Brian's farm account for 6.5% of the farming platform. As is the case on many farms, hedges on this farm are a dominant feature with more 10km of hedgerow criss-crossing the land. These hedges are networks for nature and contain a variety of native plants and tree species such as white thorn and black thorn. By allowing thorn trees to grow, mature and flower along hedgerows Brian ensures that there are flowers and fruit in the hedges at different times of the year providing a varied food source for birds and pollinators. Hedgerow height is also important. Birds will not nest in hedges that are cut too low due to threat from predators. Brian provides a safe habitat for birds to thrive in by ensuring that his hedgerows are at least 1.5m in height. A watercourse also runs alongside the farm. Brian has fenced off the bank of this watercourse which prevents livestock drinking access. These practices avoid damage and pollution to the bank and waterbed, protecting the instream biodiversity habitat. The extent of the linear features on Brian's farm is reflected in his average field size which is 4.6ha. The target for average field size is less than 5ha. The lower the average field

size the more linear features one can expect to find providing food, shelter and corridors of movement for nature on-farm.

A unique feature on Brian's farm is the picturesque (see photo) pond. Ponds are habitats that support a rich variety of plant and animal life. The still water in a pond creates the perfect conditions for a variety of plant species to flourish. In addition to plant life within the water, the vegetation that surrounds the pond is also an important biodiversity feature. Around the pond there are a variety of reeds, wildflowers, grasses and trees. Ponds such as this one also support an incredible range of animal life from insects such as dragonflies and damselflies that hover near the surface of the water, to mammals like bats, mice and hedgehogs who drink, forage, feed and seek cover in the pondside vegetation, to the predators that they attract like the fox. The pond habitat is alive with nature. To make sure this habitat remains a valuable refuge for biodiversity Brian has fenced off the surrounding area.

To further enhance the value of biodiversity on Brian's farm the following recommendations have been made:

- Avoid topping hedges and instead cut from a dense base up to a point in a triangular shape to ensure height and cover for hedge nesting birds.
- Adjust field margin practices by retaining 1.5m of field margin when cultivating and practice spot spraying of noxious weeds only.
- Increase watercourse margin width to provide space for native wildflowers and grasses naturalise and grow.

Brian's farm is a prime example of how farming and biodiversity can co-exist. With some simple yet effective management practices farmers like Brian can retain, maintain and enhance the existing features on their farms to protect biodiversity and contribute to sustainability.