

HOPE FARM

The March meeting of the Ongar Wildlife Society, known as OWLS, was a fascinating talk entitled *Hope Farm – food production and wildlife living side by side* in which Ian Dillon, the manager of this Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) arable farm, talked about the ways in which farming practices can accommodate wildlife.

Ian presented his illustrated talk to a packed audience, beginning with an outline history of the 440 acre farm which is situated in Cambridgeshire. It all started when RSPB became interested in farmland because of its dominant land use in Britain and hence its importance for wildlife. RSPB purchased Hope farm in 1970 and were aware that over the previous 30 years bird numbers had reduced by 50%. Indeed some species, such as the grey partridge, had declined by 90%. In contrast woodpigeon numbers have increased by two and a half times over the same period, benefitting from the growth of a new crop, oil seed rape. Because of their high numbers many have migrated from farmland into our towns and villages.

Careful management of hedgerows and the provision of winter food and suitable places for birds to nest, such as skylark plots in wheat fields, has allowed bird populations to recover significantly. But can the success of Hope Farm be mimicked throughout the country? Regrettably the answer is almost certainly “no” as there is too much vested interest in farming for profit with ever larger farms becoming owned by investors rather than farmers.

Keith Snow