

# Labelling lifeline for wildlife



A new food certification scheme aims to tackle the biodiversity crisis in our farmland says **SIMON BIRCH**.



A tree sparrow, one of the farmland birds that's been badly hit by the biodiversity crisis which the RSPB aims to help with its new Fair to Nature labelling scheme.

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**A**s fully paid-up ethical consumers, we all know that fair trade products help farmers and producers in the global south and that organic labelled food is better both for us and the planet.

Well, the good news is that there's now a new food and drink label that's looking to target the crisis in wildlife that's currently ravaging our farmland.

Launched this spring, the ground-breaking Fair to Nature food and farming certification scheme aims to tackle the enormous loss of UK biodiversity that threatens our long-term food supply.

Run by the RSPB, Fair to Nature is the only UK food and drink certification scheme with a focus on biodiversity and reversing the ongoing loss of nature.

## Reversing biodiversity loss

Tree sparrows, for example, were once a common sight in farmland, but between 1970 and 2008 their population plummeted by a whopping 93%.

And tree sparrows aren't the only birds struggling to hang on in our intensively managed farmland. Populations of corn buntings, turtle doves and yellow wagtails have all dropped by over 70% in the same period.

"Fair to Nature is a vital step in helping reverse the terrifying loss of biodiversity

that's taking place," says Mark Varney who heads up Fair to Nature.

"Over recent years in the UK, we've seen the disappearance of half of our native farmland wildlife and witnessed the ecosystems we all depend on for our food come under threat. Put simply, without nature there is no food."

The aim of the scheme, says Varney, is to mainstream biodiversity and wildlife every time we hit the shops.

Food brands and supermarkets who sign up to the scheme agree to buy from certified farms and can display the Fair to Nature logo on the packaging of certified products.

"This ensures that consumers are able

to make positive choices to spend their money in support of restoring critical farm ecosystems and wildlife habitats," says Varney.

And besides offering benefits to wildlife, Varney believes that the scheme has a sound commercial case too:

"Businesses can see that having the RSPB logo on their products is a compelling proposition because 75% of the UK public are aware of the RSPB and 70% of the public say that they trust the RSPB."

Varney says that there's great potential for the scheme which he believes could cover most of the UK's farming systems ranging from dairy and cereal producers to fruit and veg and even gin and whisky products.

Plus, over time he wants Fair to Nature-labelled products to be available everywhere from big supermarkets and contract catering companies to high-street cafes and restaurants.

## So how does the scheme actually work on the ground?

"In the standard, farmers must make at least 10% of their farmed land available to a range of high-quality nature habitats. They must also manage soils and inputs more sustainably to better support and work alongside nature," replies Varney.

One farm which shows that farming and wildlife can work together is Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire which has been run by the RSPB since 2000.

The farm grows a diverse range of crops including rapeseed oil which is one of the first consumer products to be sold under the Fair to Nature label.

Thanks to its wildlife-friendly management, the numbers of breeding farmland birds have increased by 177% and there are around 11 times more bumblebees.

"Being a member of Fair to Nature helps to ensure that enough of the right habitats are in place to make a real difference to wildlife," says Hope Farm's manager, Georgie Bray.

"It also illustrates that a farm is also a habitat and a means of looking after the environment for the future, in addition to its important role of producing food."

 @SimonBirchSays