

# A personal reflection on the need for UK high nature value farming

By Pat Thompson, RSPB Senior Upland Policy Officer

**I was brought up in a small village in the Scottish Highlands with my early years in the 1960s and 70s spent 'working' on a typical mixed upland farm.**

This was a period of major agricultural reform, as post-war modernisation brought many changes to the way the family farm was run, including increased investment in machinery, infrastructure (especially buildings) and inputs. These changes, hastened by entry into the 'common market' and an increase in forestry, had a profound impact on wildlife. While the curlew and cuckoo persist, lapwing and redshank have gone, and the corn bunting and corncrake, formerly common in east Sutherland and Ross-shire, have long fallen silent. We lost something special and I suspect that my experience is far from unusual.

While it is easy to suggest changes in upland farming alone have affected wildlife, other changes (especially afforestation) have also played a part in decline.

As the RSPB's uplands policy officer, I frequently find myself talking to farmers at events or on the farm, often in some of our most special landscapes. I enjoy meeting farmers, I really do, but I sometimes find the public face of how we interact rather wearying. Indeed, it is often difficult to get to the heart of what we should be talking about because we spend all our time arguing about the things we disagree about. For example, I'm amazed at how often our conversations turn to predators!

Of course, predators can have an impact in some situations, but they don't explain the loss of floristically diverse and colourful hay meadows.

I'm far from unusual in thinking like this. Colleagues who have worked closely with upland farmers for many years often comment on the impact our wider policy messages (sometimes perceived as farmer bashing) has on their work. I think we need to move on and work together to secure a better future for the sort of farming that allows farmers to make a better living and is good for the environment.

## HNV farming

RSPB has a long-standing interest in what is known as high nature value (HNV) farming. This is farming systems with traditional practices and using local breeds that have largely created and maintained the high nature value, species and habitats of European conservation concern. These farming systems typically comprise extensive, low-input, traditional farming which are now largely confined to marginal areas where agricultural productivity is constrained by physical factors such as poor soils, steep slopes, high altitude and a challenging climate (i.e. many upland regions). HNV farms are often at the heart of special landscapes, such as National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and may also be distant from markets.

Throughout Europe, HNV farms are increasingly a refuge, even a stronghold, for species such as the curlew and corncrake, and for habitats such as hay meadows. Yet these important farming systems remain economically fragile and

## NSA comment

Support for high nature value (HNV) farming is coming from organisations such as RSPB and is acknowledged by NSA as an interesting area of activity. HNV farming makes a strong case for policy support, which would bring the financial incentives needed, but could also allow products (such as sheep meat and even wool products) to be developed, branded and attract market support. See the comment from Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, on page 2.

increasingly vulnerable. Across Europe, HNV farmers, the people who manage these special places, are faced with the stark choice of intensifying their farming or abandoning altogether.

RSPB has been working with a wide range of partners to argue for a better deal for HNV farmers, as current policy largely fails to recognise the wider cultural and economic contribution they make to rural communities, and fails to adequately support the most vulnerable farming areas, in particular those associated with HNV farming practices. Yet these farms deserve policy support and could be better supported through market differentiation too.

## Manifesto

In the run up to the last CAP negotiation, a coalition of interested parties published a manifesto for HNV farming. Now, as then, we identify a need to act urgently to support HNV farming and prevent any further loss of the habitats and species closely associated with it. Recent work led by the Northern Upland Chain Local Nature Partnership also draws attention to the challenges facing HNV upland livestock farming, the sort of change required to secure a more viable future, and the environmental benefits they provide.

The voice of HNV farmers needs to be heard so the many benefits provided becomes better recognised and supported. These calls will be louder and more likely to be heard coming from farmers themselves, so if your farming system has some special wildlife, let's work together positively to ensure HNV farming doesn't simply become a memory.

More on the HNV Farming Coalition at [www.highnaturevaluefarming.org.uk/five-asks](http://www.highnaturevaluefarming.org.uk/five-asks), and on HNV Farming in the Northern Upland Chain at [www.northpennines.org.uk/Pages/HighNatureValuefarming.aspx](http://www.northpennines.org.uk/Pages/HighNatureValuefarming.aspx).



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The redshank is one bird that Pat Thompson laments the decline of.