

# Habitat banking in action

**Across a patchwork of fields now alive with birdsong and movement, a quiet transformation has been unfolding, not driven by necessity, but by intent.**

Since 2023, Oxwillow's Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) habitat bank has been taking shape, built on a clear vision: to create meaningful, measurable ecological improvement alongside a working agricultural business. What began with ponds, hedgerows and carefully selected seed mixes has evolved into a dynamic landscape where nature is not simply accommodated but actively designed for.

The early stages of the project focused on habitat creation. Ponds were excavated in naturally low-lying areas, introducing open water and pond margins that quickly became focal points for wildlife. Surrounding areas were sown with species-rich grassland, replacing simpler swards with diverse mixes designed to support pollinators and invertebrates throughout the growing season. Hedgerows were planted to restore connectivity across the land, providing shelter, nesting sites and vital corridors for movement.

While such interventions are increasingly familiar within environmental schemes, what distinguishes this project is both its pace and its outcomes.

### **Tracking change from the ground up**

From the outset, technology has played a central role. Baseline ecological data was captured early, providing a clear picture of existing biodiversity and allowing progress to be measured over time. That data has since documented a steady uplift, not just in species numbers, but in ecological activity.

The land now "hums" with life. Birds have established themselves across the hedgerows and pond edges are alive with wildlife, while insect populations have flourished in response to the species-rich grassland.

# Case Study: Habitat banking in action

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Perhaps most striking has been the appearance of species that were not initially expected. Their arrival speaks to the wider ecological connectivity of the landscape, and to the idea that, given the right conditions, nature can recover quickly and in complex ways.

For the farm, this ability to evidence change is critical. As BNG policy becomes embedded within the planning system, habitat banks must demonstrate real, quantifiable gains. Here, data is not just a record of success; it is the foundation of a new business model.

## A different kind of productivity

Biodiversity Net Gain is reshaping how land is valued. Under the policy, developers are required to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than before, often by investing in off-site habitat creation. For farmers, this opens the door to generating income through environmental delivery, provided the outcomes can be proven.

In this case, the habitat bank represents a proactive response. Rather than reacting to policy, Oxwillow positioned itself at the forefront of it, as one of East Cambridgeshire's first habitat banks, creating a landscape that delivers biodiversity units alongside its wider agricultural role.

Importantly, this has not been about replacing farming but complementing it. The project reflects a broader shift towards multifunctional land use, where food production, environmental stewardship and commercial resilience are increasingly intertwined.



## From habitat to heritage

Inspired by the success of the initial work, we are expanding our vision further with the introduction of a traditional orchard. Planted with local heritage varieties, the orchard adds another layer of biodiversity while reconnecting the land with regional food culture.

Traditional orchards are widely recognised for their ecological value, supporting pollinators, birds and a range of other species. But they also offer something less tangible: a link between farming, community and place.

Here, that connection is being actively developed. There are plans to involve the local community in processing future apple harvests, creating opportunities for shared use and local supply. The aim is simple but significant, to produce "local food for local people", rooted in the landscape itself.

## A model for what comes next?

As agriculture navigates a period of rapid policy and environmental change, projects like this offer a glimpse of how farms might adapt. They demonstrate that biodiversity enhancement need not be an abstract goal, but can be embedded, measured and, crucially, valued.

There are still questions to answer around long-term management, market stability and scalability. But the direction is clear. By combining practical land management with ecological insight and data-led monitoring, this habitat bank shows how environmental ambition can translate into tangible outcomes.

And as the ponds settle, the hedgerows thicken and the orchard begins to take hold, the result is more than a scheme or a strategy. It is a landscape in transition, one that reflects a growing recognition that farming's future may depend as much on restoring nature as it does on producing from it.

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