# Honeygar FAQ August 2021

***Putting Honeygar in context***

Our vision is a Somerset wide Nature Recovery Network creating more space for wildlife, benefiting everyone and playing its part in helping us reverse biodiversity loss and tackle the climate crisis.

Nature reserves and protected sites on their own are not enough. In order to reverse the decline in species' diversity and abundance, and create resilient landscapes and habitats for wildlife and for people that can adapt to climate change, we must work with, learn from, encourage and support landowners to manage their land positively for nature, for example through regenerative and nature-friendly farming practices, and, quite simply, we must create more space for nature. We also need to connect wildlife-rich spaces across the wider landscape, whether a reserve, park, woodland or garden and create a resilient network of connected wildlife-rich places – a Nature Recovery Network - for Somerset. This is at the core of our new strategy – Wilder Somerset 2030. As part of this strategy, and with The Wildlife Trusts nationally, we are calling for at least 30% of land to be managed positively for nature by 2030. What we do in Somerset contributes to that national ambition.

***How does Honeygar contributes to nature's recovery at a landscape scale?***

Our goal is to work at a landscape scale creating the conditions to restore natural processes, increasing biodiversity and bioabundance, creating more space for nature to thrive and to fill the many gaps in Somerset's Nature Recovery Network while adapting to climate change. This approach will enable wildlife species to travel freely and help to restore and replenish the broken ecosystems that provide us with healthy soils, clean air and water. We will work with a wide range of partners to achieve this:

1. We want to work with, learn from and support other landowners, councils, communities and farmers to manage their land to benefit nature.
2. Where we think we can have the most impact we will seek to acquire land to buffer, protect and connect our existing landholdings.
3. Acquire land that is currently low value in biodiversity and allow it to return to a more natural, wildlife-rich condition.

Any acquisition will be carefully considered and measured against its potential to contribute to the Nature Recovery Network. Honeygar provides us with one such opportunity to achieve these goals.

**How does this fit into our overall presence on the Somerset Levels and Moors?**

Somerset Wildlife Trust has owned and managed land on the Somerset Levels and Moors, primarily in the Avalon Marshes area for over 50 years, since it bought its first land at Westhay Moor, a post-industrial peat extraction site. The Trust has continued to seek opportunities to acquire more land in this landscape to create, strengthen and protect one of the UK's most significant wetland habitats for wildlife, and ensure connectivity within and to the wider Somerset landscape. We also know that the rich peatlands that this area is best known for, can be precious wildlife habitats, and vital carbon stores that, when well-managed, can contribute to reducing the impacts of climate change. The best option for nature and the environment for all our sakes, is to keep peat in the ground and keep it wet; when peat is extracted or dried out it becomes a source of carbon emissions. The Somerset Levels and Moors is therefore one of our priority landscapes in our Wilder Somerset strategy.

**A little more about Honeygar and the adjacent land**

Honeygar has historically been managed as a dairy farm with grazing cattle and grass grown as silage. The site is 46.5 hectares. With the purchase of the additional land adjacent to it (34 hectares) and new land at Westhay Heath, this brings our total land ownership on the Somerset Levels to 418 hectares and marks a significant step in achieving our Wilder Somerset 2030 strategy.

The Avalon Marshes has a fantastic network of existing nature reserves managed by SWT, RSPB, Natural England and The Hawk and Owl Trust. Somerset Wildlife Trust's Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve is within a mile of Honeygar and home to a range of iconic and rare wetland species including bittern, great white egret, otter and eels. Also nearby is our important Catcott nature reserve and smaller reserves of Westhay Heath, Burtle Moor and Tealham and Tadham Moors.

Honeygar is a vital missing link in the ecological network of the Avalon Marshes, vitally enhancing species connectivity. Restoring this land to nature and allowing natural processes to function will provide significant opportunities for populations of rare and precious species to spread and flourish.

'Wilded' under the Trust's ownership, Honeygar will enhance ecological connectivity not only to nearby nature reserves but also west along the River Brue to Bridgwater Bay and Somerset's coastal network, east towards Glastonbury and north to the Mendip Hills creating important natural corridors for wildlife to spread across the wider landscape.

***How will you be managing the land?***

We're not in a position to define our exact plans at this point in time. We're right at the start of what will be a long transformation for the new land, so our priority for the coming year is to get to know the land better and see how it responds to being taken out of intensive management before we make any hard and fast decisions as to the route that transformation will take. Thanks to funding from the People's Postcode Lottery, working with the University of West of England and Somerset Environmental Records Centre, we are now beginning our baseline carbon, soil, species and habitat monitoring work, a vital first step alongside hydrological assessments, in collecting the key information we will need to monitor change across the site over the coming decades.

Once our baseline monitoring has been established, we will look to manage the land in a way that enables the peat soils to recover from more intensive agricultural management, allows the vegetation to develop more naturally and encourages wildlife to return. We will begin the process of rewetting peat soils and watch to see what habitats form. Our experience with other reserves, such as Catcott Lows and Catcott Heath, tells us that once the peat soils start to recover, we will begin to see creation of fen and wetland habitat, but we may well be surprised by what we see.

The soils at Honeygar are peat, drained for centuries for settlements to form and for agriculture. Rewetting the peat soils is the priority at Honeygar to begin the process of reversing the damage caused to the soil, declining biodiversity and to turn the site from carbon emitting to a net carbon sink. Currently most of the site is part of a drainage scheme, designed to remove water and maintain a low water table to deliver agricultural practices. The water is drained and pumped from the site into the viewed ryhnes.

Blocking strategic points across the site to reduce drainage from the burtle (raised area of clay or bedrock covered in sand) and under drainage from the fields will have immediate and positive results for rewetting peat soils and allowing wetter habitats to begin to form. This will be done carefully and considered, in consultation with our neighbours, to ensure no impact on surrounding land.

We hope to create diversity in the grasslands with low intensity grazing systems, using a variety of grazing animals, and hay-cutting to reduce the dominance of lush grasses and allow for more botanical diversity to develop. We will manage ditches sensitively for the species that they support. We will manage the land in a way that enables it to store more carbon and water, reduce nutrient levels and support abundant wildlife.

***Are you (re)wilding it?***

Definitions and perceptions of rewilding or wilding are broad. For some, rewilding means doing nothing at all, for others it means introducing apex predator species. For Somerset Wildlife Trust it means managing land in a way that begins to put nature back in charge to restore natural processes and rebuild ecosystems that restore biodiversity and can help us respond to extreme weather events and other impacts of a warming climate. In some cases that might mean the reintroduction of missing species, but only where they can have meaningful impact and existing populations of species are stable. Honeygar will be wilded to benefit biodiversity and improve its potential for carbon capture.

***What habitats do you think are likely to form at Honeygar once you rewet the peat?***

Honeygar is less than a mile from our Catcott complex of nature reserves (SSSI, SPA). The starting point for Catcott was similar to Honeygar, agricultural land with drained peat soils. Our expectation is that similar habitats will emerge.

Catcott is now an established wetland mosaic of traditional hay meadows, wet woodland and wet grazing marsh and fen. This has encouraged a wealth of species to feed, breed and roost all year round and it has become internationally renowned for its birdlife. Once the peat soils are wetter, we hope to see a range of species emerge.

Winter splash flooding will encourage bird species such as great white egret, little and cattle egret, grey heron, wintering bewick swan, wildfowl and lapwing. Wetter conditions in field through the spring will encourage feeding snipe and nesting skylark. Seasonal pools and standing water will benefit amphibians such as great crested newt, Palmate and smooth newt, frogs and grass snakes.

By improving water quality of ditch habitats, increasing oxygen levels, stabilising water levels and reducing inputs, we should see botanical species such as arrow head, lesser water parsnip, crowsfoot, spearwort and bladderwort do well with increased dragonflies, damselflies. And as a result, more habitat will be suitable and available for water voles and otters and we should see an increase in the variety of ditch invertebrates and snails.

Grazing and cutting with extensive systems and wide margins will result in a wider variety of plants species some of which may include marsh marigold, birdsfoot trefoil, meadow rue, great burnet, meadow sweet, devil's bit scabious thistles, buttercups and red and white clovers. Increased numbers of butterflies, moths, spiders, grasshoppers (expanding local populations of large marsh grasshopper), beetles, flies, dung beetles, hornet robber fly, soldier flies and bees. With also increased numbers in brown hare, voles, roe deer. Some of the bird species that will benefit include barn owls, tawny owls, swallows, skylarks, and finches.

Not using avermectins (worming treatment) in cattle before grazing the land will result in increasing insect numbers, benefitting bats and birds. The overall system will benefit the soils resulting in increased soil microbes and invertebrates. There is one remaining black poplar on site, now one of the rarest trees in England. Once widespread, now only 7,000 left in England with only 600 females. We could plant male and female plants to encourage more of this important species to return.

***What are the external factors influencing your approach?***

Guiding the pace of our decision-making on the new land are external factors that will have implications for us as land managers, such as the new agri-environment Environmental Land Management Scheme. Much like other landowners and farmers in the area and across the county, we are still in a position of uncertainty as to what any new schemes will entail, particularly in terms of funding.

As a Wildlife Trust we have long campaigned for the government to support farming communities to adopt more sustainable, regenerative management practices, including pesticide reduction and to find ways to reward farmers for producing 'ecosystem services' such as clean air, water, and improving soil health through nature-friendly practices that also better support wildlife. We believe that the government has made positive progress, some of which can be seen within the government's paper, 'The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024' which highlights positive intent to support the farming community as it undergoes change. We hope the government's ambitions for a greener recovery will see an increase in the pace at which it provides its support to the farming communities across the county.

Natural England's recent announcement changing the condition of the Somerset Levels and Moors SSSI to 'unfavourable declining' due to phosphate levels being three times what they should be, also suggests that taking this land out of intensive management will contribute to the much wider efforts needed to reduce the levels of phosphates in our soils and water courses. We will be working closely with Natural England and other partners in the Avalon Marshes to find solutions across our landholdings to address the issue urgently.

*Somerset Wildlife trust is working with a range of local and national government bodies to better protect peatlands to support the county's move to being net carbon neutral:*

The England Peat Action Plan sets out the government's long-term vision for the management, protection and restoration of our peatlands, so that they provide a wide range of benefits to wildlife, people and the planet. The plan includes a Nature for Climate Peatland Grant Scheme which SWT is applying to, a commitment to end the use of peat in the amateur horticulture sector which SWT supports and a new spatial map of England's peatlands.

The South West group of DEFRA's national Lowland Agricultural Peat Task Force has the aim of recommending improved sustainable management practices that extend the useable life of our agricultural peatland soils, both to preserve the carbon stored in them, and to ensure that profitable agriculture can continue for decades to come.

In 2019, the Somerset local authorities (Somerset County Council, Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and South Somerset District Council) all passed resolutions declaring 'A Climate Emergency' and worked together to produce an ambitious, joint Climate Emergency Strategy which was published in 2020 which identifies ways that Somerset can work towards being net carbon neutral by 2030 and adapted to the predicted climate impacts. The strategy consists of various workstreams and SWT, through the Local Nature Partnership, is responsible for delivering on the Natural Environment and Food & Farming workstreams.

***Preparing for change***

While many think of the Somerset Levels and Moors as a beautiful, natural landscape, it is in fact human-made and a highly managed, complex landscape. Water levels are carefully managed to allow agriculture to continue and prevent land becoming too wet in winter months and too dry in summer months.

We work positively with many farmers, landowners and communities in Somerset and across the Levels and Moors. The people we work with know that change is needed to address the ecological and climate emergencies, this is as vital for people as it is for wildlife. Land managers, whether conservation organisations like SWT or farmers, recognise that soil health, declines in pollinators and flooding are issues that directly impact us all and we need to be proactive about finding solutions. Many farmers are already taking positive steps to introduce new approaches to land management, to adapt, and readying themselves for change - and looking at new ways to diversify their interests. They and other landowners such as ourselves are asking government to show leadership and set clear expectations for land management. Change will be challenging, but with collaboration it will be possible to achieve positive solutions that benefit all and create a sustainable future for this very special place. We have a project that is specifically looking at change and adaptation pathways. Check out the 'Adapting the Levels project here.

***Are you not taking land out of circulation for food production?***

The land at Honeygar has to date been drained and sown for grass and silage to facilitate intensive dairy grazing. Part of our initial management will be to continue to take grass cuts, working with local farmers to make sure this is done in the most productive way. Honeygar will continue to be grazed and we will experiment with different grazing practices to balance food production and carbon sequestration.

There are lots of discussions happening across the UK and globally about food production in the context of the climate and ecological emergencies. All of us will need to consider our food choices to make smarter, more informed decisions about the benefits of shopping locally more frequently and buying in season. We are not experts in farming or food production, but we are realising as a society that our constant demand for cheaper food will result in increasingly intensive agricultural practices with little benefit to the farmers, heavier use of pesticides, deteriorating soils and damaging wildlife. This relationship needs to be reset, by us as consumers, by working with farmers and by government policy. Poor soil health and ecological breakdown pose a far greater threat to food security in the long term, so as consumers we need to change to enable farmers to operate differently and more sustainably.

The Agriculture Act begins to reset this relationship and the changes to agri-environment schemes following the UK leaving the EU need to be instrumental in driving this change. The concept of 'public money for public good' and how that is delivered through the Environmental Land Management Scheme will bring about significant change.

***Farming on peat soils***

Agricultural production on peat soils requires the peatland to be drained, which results in large amounts of carbon and other GHG's being released from the soils. The more intensive the production is the drier the soils need to be and the larger the emissions are, so carbon emissions from maize fields are higher than from intensive grasslands, which are higher than from extensively grazed grassland.

So, producing food on peatlands automatically gives the food a much higher carbon cost than producing the same food on non-peat soils. Reducing food production on peat soils is an essential part of the agricultural sector reaching net zero. This is a useful source for more information: - https://www.ceh.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Peatland%20factsheet.pdf

***How many greenhouse gas emissions are UK peatlands producing?***

The first comprehensive research into emissions from peatland areas in the UK was carried out in a study led by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the James Hutton Institute. It estimated the overall, net, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from peatlands could exceed the equivalent of around 20 million tonnes of CO2 each year. This revised calculation adds around 4% to the UK's previously estimated total annual GHG emissions. Globally, scientists estimate peatlands are emitting the equivalent of 1-2 billion tonnes of CO2, which is around 2-4% of all human greenhouse gas emissions. A large proportion of these emissions are being produced by the tropical peatlands of Southeast Asia.

***How do you see the land acquisition in the longer term?***

Honeygar provides us with the opportunity to explore, develop, test and deliver a range of nature-based solutions that can result in carbon / methane sequestration and phosphate neutrality alongside biodiversity net gain, helping solve some of the environment's and the county's most pressing challenges. This will also enable us to develop new and emerging funding mechanisms for nature's recovery that will bring benefit for the wider community and economy.

What's really important about this project for us is we don't have all the answers, we are using it to test new approaches and learn from them. We will share our learning, the successes and failures, with others so everyone can join us on this journey.

***How have you afforded to buy Honeygar this year?***

We are extremely grateful to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their support in buying Honeygar Farm for us through their land purchase scheme, which gives us until early 2023 to fundraise for it and the additional 85 acres. We are currently planning a major Honeygar fundraising campaign.