

# A day in the life...

**Lucy Taylor** manages wildlife-friendly, family-run Vine House Farm, which produces seed for wild birds from acres of spectacular sunflowers

INTERVIEW **CAROLINE ROBERTS**

## 🕒 6am

I'm up early to walk Fernie the Labrador before our two-year-old son, Ralph, wakes at seven o'clock. It's a beautiful morning so we have breakfast in the garden by the bird feeder. Ralph loves to watch the birds' antics and look out for his favourite, the robin. The daffodil farm where I live with my husband, Sam, is a half-hour drive from Vine House Farm and I drop Ralph at the childminder on the way to work.

## 🕒 8am

I head straight to the sunflower fields to check the pigeons aren't making a meal of the young plants. It's so magical to hear the skylarks singing as I walk across the fields. The farm, in the Lincolnshire Fens, has been in our family for four generations, and I loved growing up here and being a complete tomboy. One of my earliest memories is sitting on my father's knee driving down the farm track in his truck.

My father, Nicholas Watts, turned his birdwatching hobby into a business in 1992, when he started growing and selling birdseed. He also dug ponds, and planted hedges, spinneys and wildflower meadows, making the farm a haven for declining bird species. His work has earned him an MBE and lots of awards for wildlife-friendly



The farm grows stunning sunflowers

farming. The older I get, the more I realise how unique and conservation-minded he is and how lucky we've been to learn from him.

## 🕒 9am

I drop into our warehouse to check everything's going smoothly with packing the seeds for our mail-order business. We have 100 acres of sunflowers – we're the biggest growers in the UK – and 300 acres of other birdseed crops such as millet, canary seed and oilseed rape. We also buy in some ingredients for our mixes, such as peanuts, sultanas and sunflower hearts, or seeds with the husks removed – these come from Bulgaria as there's no husking plant in the UK.

We have two groups of customers to please: the people who buy the seed and of course the birds



A reed bunting

themselves. Birds with tiny beaks prefer the sunflower hearts, while others love to take the husks off. Some people want a tidy garden so we offer a 'won't grow' mix, and others might have a garden backing onto woodlands so they need a mix suitable for the birds that live there.

## 🕒 10am

I head over to the farm shop and café, where we sell our organic vegetables and other local produce. We're going to install a takeaway cabin outside so I need to measure the space. The café overlooks an amazing 10-acre wildlife garden with plants such as buddleia, cosmos and lavender to attract butterflies and bees, and a native woodland area with beech, oak, alder, mountain ash and hazel. There's also a pond with a small house that's currently inhabited by a moorhen and her fluffy little chicks, and customers can watch them from the café balcony.

## 🕒 11am

Time to catch up with emails in the office and help answer the phones. We have a lot of older customers who like to order by phone, which is lovely as you get to have a chat, hear what's happening in their gardens and answer questions. One of the most important things I tell people is to feed live mealworms, not dried, in the early summer when birds are looking after

their young as they need the moisture. The live ones may be wriggly, but dried mealworms are produced for human convenience and not for the benefit of the birds.

## 🕒 1pm

Lunch is a quick sandwich so I have time to take Fernie out. She comes to work with me and has been waiting very patiently for her walk.

## 🕒 1.30pm

Emma, the relationship manager with The Wildlife Trusts, joins us for the afternoon. We've been working closely with the

Trusts ever since the seed business started and 4% of our sales goes to them to support their vital conservation work. Last year, the money raised passed the £2m mark!

## 🕒 2pm

Children from a local primary school arrive for a farm walk and Emma and I tag along as Dad takes them to see a wildflower meadow, our wind turbines and a tree sparrow colony. The tractor and trailer ride goes down well too! They're so curious about everything. As children, we have a built-in fascination for wildlife, but then we get distracted by our busy lives.

It's lovely to reawaken that passion in adults too, and we do regular farm walks.

## 🕒 We've raised over £2m for The Wildlife Trusts

People often say it's inspirational and makes them realise how much they can help wildlife, even if they only have a small garden. August is a popular time to visit as the sunflowers are in full bloom and it's just a sea of glorious sunshine yellow. It's a rare sight as they're usually grown for the flowers rather than seeds so they're cut before they open.

## 🕒 3.30pm

Emma and I head for the café for a nice cup of tea and a fruit scone. It gives us a chance to discuss our communication strategy and look at what people have been saying about the farm on social media.

## 🕒 4pm

Home time. I pick up Ralph on the way, he has his tea and then we spend some time in the garden. He loves using his watering can and goes around watering everything in sight. When Sam arrives home, he gets Ralph ready for bed while I go for a bike ride. It's a great way to wind down and really appreciate the environment. I listen out for the trilling of the corn bunting and the screeching of the swift, and see if I can spot some yellowhammers in the hedgerows. It's so satisfying to know that what we're doing on the farm is helping these wonderful species to survive.

## 🕒 7.30pm

We sit down to supper and then watch a bit of TV before bed at around 10pm, ready for another early start. After school, I went to agricultural college and worked in the fresh produce industry for four years, but my dream was always to come back and manage the family farm. I feel so lucky to be living that dream every day.

Find out more at [www.vinehousefarm.co.uk](http://www.vinehousefarm.co.uk)



Keeping it in the family: Lucy with dad Nicholas and son Ralph