



smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith

Gone completely cuckoo

I'll admit I'm not a huge believer in old weather sayings. I suspect it's because as much as I'd treasure an accurate long-term weather forecast, I've yet to find one and that, in turn, causes endemic grumpiness in my curmudgeonly brain.

The season of spring is always a good time to test climate lores for validity because

there are quite a few of them. For starters there's 'March, in like a lion, out like a lamb'. Sure enough March 2024 came in like a lion but went out like a 'bear with a sore head' with gale force winds and yet more rain. What's more there was no sign of the peck of dust that would be worth a king's ransom. Nonetheless, field work was persevered with in what could be described as a 'head-down approach'.

Aside from the usual springtime anxiety that comes with applying fertiliser in sporadically wet and/or windy weather, there was the added spur of having to get untreated urea fertiliser on by the end of March due to new application date restrictions.

Given the volatility of urea, I fully understand the wisdom of

getting it on before the weather warms up. Who wants to see good fertiliser disappear into the firmament like good money going up in smoke? However, one likes to think it equally stupid to farm according to the date rather than according to conditions. But rules are rules, so we duly applied the last of the untreated urea by 31 March, even if it was Easter Sunday!

As I nibbled at my Kit-Kat Easter egg in the tractor cab with the spinner on the back while the last few tonne were applied onto the winter wheat, it didn't escape my notice that if I'd decided to risk ignoring the cut-off date by a mere 24 hours then that would have been on April Fool's Day. Afterall, only a joker would accidentally put the wrong date down on the requisite application record.

To continue the theme of foolish farming, the other joker that haunts the April workload is the sound of the cuckoo. Having disrespectfully dismissed the old weather lores of our forebears as superstitious piffle, I'm still mindful that spring drilling has to be completed by the time the call of the cuckoo can be heard, otherwise you'll end up with low yielding, unprofitable, 'cuckoo' crops.

Accordingly, in the name of science-based agronomy, I can be found looking at the British Trust for Ornithology's website that tracks the flight of British cuckoos as they fly south to north from their wintering quarters in the African Sahel. It's an epic 7000 mile flight, all the more remarkable in that when I see them flit from bush to bush around our farm they hardly display much majesty in the air. They look more like a pigeon that's stolen a broody hen's feathers.

Nonetheless they usually arrive around mid-April to remind me it's time to put away the drill. One thought that does occur is that the cuckoos which the BTO follows have little tracking

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.

@essexpeasant

devices on their legs. I sometimes wonder if these geo-locators might slow them down meaning the ones on the BTO website are the laggards.

The BTO assures me that the devices weigh half a gramme, therefore they're no hinderance even over a 7000 mile flight. I'm sure the BTO has done its homework, but a quick Google search tells me cuckoos weigh in at around 100g, so the thing strapped to their leg represents 0.5% of their body weight. That's the equivalent of a 90kg man carrying round a pot of jam strapped to their leg. Not that I've ever tried it but I bet that would get right on my nerves if I was walking a few thousand miles.

This year, despite swearing last harvest never to grow the things again, we've put in 70ha of spring beans and peas. It's as if I've tried to break as many rules as possible when it comes to seedbed preparation.

Basically, there wasn't any preparation. Having repeatedly postponed all field cultivations since last November due to the relentless rain, we went direct and cut them in with the cultivator drill. Whether or not this proves a cuckoo idea will probably depend on the weather in May and June. Afterall, we're due a good drought!

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