

## Cress farm uses falcons to scare off pests

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By Diarmuid MacDonagh

A PEST-FIGHTING force has taken flight at a watercress farm.

Falconer Bob Dalton and his birds of prey have been hired to scare off scavenging pigeons that have developed a penchant for salad.

Staff at The Watercress Company at Waddock Cross say the bird man and the flock of seven falcons are the solution they've all been waiting for.

Fruitless attempts to keep pigeons at bay from the produce involved the use of bangers, kites, helium balloons, spinning devices and an inflatable man.

Managing director Tom Amery said: "Pigeons have always been on the farm but in the last five years they've become more of an issue.

"They've become in favour of eating watercress and they absolutely love green pea tops.

"As they've become more accustomed to it we've been affected by it.

"We decided to invest in a way of dealing with the pigeons and tried to use bangers – they were okay but not perfect and the pigeons got used to them."

Running out of options, the company – which has five different farms in Dorset – heard of falcons being used at airports to scare away pigeons.

Enter Mr Dalton and his birds.

Mr Amery said: "Bob brings the birds in, flies them around and exercises them. He sends them into a figure of eight and it spooks the birds.

"The physical presence of the falcon terrifies the pigeons."

Mr Dalton stressed that his birds are used purely to scare off the pigeons and don't actually kill any of them.

He said: "Falcons are used because they are a natural deterrent.

"We have been doing it since April and nothing has been killed."

Mr Dalton has to rely on the weather to send the falcons on a particular course over 300 acres of salad.

Mr Amery said: "They are flying over huge areas, it's all quite technical. The precise locations are decided according to which direction the wind is blowing in and he works out a system to get the falcon flying along the length of the farm."

Regular falcon flights over the five farms are the perfect organic solution to the pigeon problem for a company that produces 80 tons of salad a week.

He added: "It's a winner because everyone is happy.

"The birds enjoy the flights and get a chick afterwards for their efforts.

"It's something that doesn't involve pesticides because we don't use them on our salads and it's as green as you can get."

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Brabus the falcon with owner Bob Dalton at the Waddock Cross cress farm