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The RSPB UK newsletter  
on agriculture and wildlife

# FIELDFARE

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## Environmental Stewardship under review

**England's agri-environment scheme is being examined by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), to see whether the scheme can be made more effective.**

The RSPB has always been a huge champion of both the concept of agri-environment and Environmental Stewardship itself. However, that doesn't mean there is no room for improvement.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) is a fantastic scheme, allowing land managers to look after rare wildlife, and protected areas. We were very relieved when its budget was protected during the spending review. But this budget is still comparatively small, and very stretched. It is crucial that funds are carefully targeted, so that the most environmentally valuable places are supported.

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) is a different matter. Although the concept of the scheme is brilliant, to date it

has not performed as hoped. Although the Government have tried advice-based approaches, progress has not been as fast as expected – this review is a great opportunity to make much-needed changes.

The changes necessary are small. All that is required is some way of ensuring that all agreements contain a good balance of different options. This could be delivered through ensuring farmers take up option 'packages', alongside a limit on the proportion of points gained from any one option.

ELS is on the very brink of delivering widespread countryside benefits. Uptake by farmers has been outstanding, and the scheme contains everything needed for real improvements. With a few tweaks, we could see that potential become reality.

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**In this issue:** Environmental Stewardship reform • Corn buntings • CAP reform • Great bustards • Predation  
Systemic pesticides • Futurescapes • *The Future of Food and Farming* report • Livestock and carbon



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

# POLICY NEWS

## Getting the CAP to 'step up for nature'

A key part of the RSPB's new *Stepping up for Nature* campaign is to work with farmers and decision makers alike to ensure our countryside is a haven for the suite of farmland species that depends on sensitive land management.

Critical to transforming our countryside is to secure a policy framework that rewards those farmers who go the extra mile to protect and enhance environmental quality on their farms, and also encourages others to adopt more wildlife-friendly measures.

The current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) does not adequately reward those farmers who work with nature. The RSPB is fighting hard to ensure the forthcoming CAP reform puts in place a strong foundation upon which all farmers can step up for nature, not just to protect wildlife but also to protect and enhance the raw materials required for food production and the long-term future of farming itself.

Find out more about the campaign here: [www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup](http://www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup)

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## All change in the countryside

A reformed Common Agricultural Policy is on the horizon. Closer to home, agri-environment schemes in England and Wales are under review, along with farming regulation in England. The Natural Environment White Paper will also bring changes.

All this is playing out against a background of climate change, debate about how we can sustainably meet world food requirements, and continuing degradation of biodiversity and natural habitats across the globe.

The challenges are therefore huge, and the mechanisms and tools at our disposal to meet them uncertain. The RSPB will be working to ensure that the policy structures in place in the UK and Europe as a whole are fit for purpose to support a truly sustainable agriculture industry, which is enabled to tackle the challenges of public goods provision alongside food production.

As always, alongside future uncertainty, this issue of *Fieldfare* contains articles that remind us of the path that change should take – proof that agri-environment systems can deliver, and examples of farmers working together to maximise the benefits delivered by their land.

These farmers are shining examples of people stepping up to help struggling wildlife. The RSPB is asking everyone to do something, big or small, to *Step up for Nature* too. Have a look at our website and see what you can do to make a difference.

Mike Clarke, Chief Executive



Laurie Campbell (rspb-images.com)

**We're urging the Government to**

Arable fields and woodland in Wiltshire

## Futurescapes

To reach our target of halting biodiversity loss by 2020 we shall have to improve delivery through current conservation methods and add landscape-scale delivery to that mix. This is now widely recognised by all parts of the nature conservation community and there are already many landscape-scale initiatives in development (Integrated Biodiversity Delivery Areas, Ecological Restoration Zones, Living landscapes and our own Futurescapes). These are broadly similar approaches and are predicated on working with partners across landscapes to ensure more space for nature.

Key to the success of this new partnership approach will be appropriate funding streams and policy support frameworks. Agri-environment (AE) schemes will therefore play a significant role here as a set of payments designed to support wildlife-friendly farming both at the farm scale and across landscapes.

Landscape-scale conservation is widely seen as a long-term programme of work running over decades. It will therefore need the continuation and expansion of AE schemes after 2013 if this important increase in delivery is to be achieved.

The RSPB's Futurescapes programme, in its first phase, will have 35 Futurescapes. These are located throughout the UK and will seek to use AE schemes and other public policy instruments to influence land management in these areas. Many incorporate areas of High Nature Value farming and extensive livestock systems, which again will need more explicit support through a reformed Common Agricultural Policy.

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Common blue butterfly



## Seeing into the future?

The Foresight report on *The Future of Food and Farming* published earlier this year highlights how the global food system is consuming the world's resources at an unsustainable rate and yet the overall number of people affected by chronic hunger has scarcely changed.

The report outlines five challenges:

- Balancing future demand and supply sustainably
- Ensuring that there is adequate stability in food supplies
- Achieving global access to food and ending hunger

- Managing the contribution of the food system to the mitigation of climate change
- Maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services while feeding the world.

The report is refreshing in that it recognises that many farming systems are unsustainable and highlights the need to tackle consumption and waste issues and to safeguard biodiversity.

In addressing these challenges it calls for more food to be produced sustainably. However, the robust definition of sustainability is undermined by the suggestion that food security issues may make application of this definition too difficult. In the long term, sustainability is the basis of food security and must be central to the 'sustainable intensification' approach championed by the report.

Despite the recognition of these five challenges, the report's recommendations fall short in their ambition. The UK government needs to step up to the challenge and clearly signal how they intend to tackle these issues through policy, advice and research to help farmers align their business with sustainable practice to ensure both UK agriculture and the UK's biodiversity can thrive into the future.

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**support farmers who are *stepping up for nature* –**

## Good news for corn buntings

Farming funds could transform the fortunes of corn buntings. Recently published research by RSPB Scotland has revealed that agri-environment schemes have the potential to reverse declines of the corn bunting, one of Scotland's fastest declining birds.

The study looked at more than 70 farms in eastern Scotland over seven years, and found that corn buntings continued to decline rapidly on farms outside agri-environment schemes, but populations remained roughly stable on farms in the main national agri-environment scheme, and increased on those which provided targeted management backed by advisory support.

A quarter of the corn bunting population currently benefits from this targeted management. Halting the decline would need this approach to be extended to three-quarters of the corn bunting population. Overall, the cost would be £120,000 per year or just 0.02% of the total subsidy for farming in Scotland.

This study highlights the importance of tailored schemes in halting declines of farmland birds and the need to deliver management to a sufficient proportion of the population. Ensuring that enough funds and monitoring are devoted to targeted agri-environment schemes is critical.

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## Systemic pesticides – friend or foe?

There has been much coverage in the press recently on the role of pesticides and their impact on non-target organisms, in particular bees. Neonicotinoids are systemic pesticides often applied as seed dressings or soil treatments from where they are dispersed around the plant, which can result in the contamination of nectar and pollen.

An RSPB review of existing research has shown that there is growing evidence that these pesticides have negative impacts on the abundance and/or behaviour of a wide range of non-target invertebrates including earthworms, beetles, ladybirds, crustaceans, honeybees, bumblebees, solitary bees and various aquatic invertebrates. There have been calls for a ban on these substances. However, an outright ban might result in increases in the use of other types of widely used insecticides known to have serious negative impacts on non-target invertebrates and whose usage has been declining in recent years. The RSPB is calling on Government to carry out field experiments to determine the exact nature of the threat posed by neonicotinoids to farmland biodiversity so that appropriate action can be taken.

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## Predation

Results of the Repeat Upland Birds Survey have shown that predation by carrion crows is one of several factors correlated with breeding success of curlews and lapwings nesting in upland areas. It appears that a key factor influencing this is the presence of forestry areas next to upland moorland, which could allow more crows to breed in moorland areas, thus potentially increasing predation. This correlative study will be used to direct future research in the area, in order to better understand the complex interactions at play.

In other predation news, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust will be carrying out a trial cull of crows and magpies at several sites on behalf of SongBird Survival, to look for any impact on songbird numbers. This is somewhat surprising considering a correlative study funded by SongBird Survival, and carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology last year, found no evidence for any impact of crows and magpies on any songbird species and seems unlikely to significantly further our understanding of predation dynamics.

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Steve Round (rspb-images.com)



Corn buntings can benefit from agri-environment schemes

## Livestock and carbon

**There is growing concern about the role of the livestock sector in the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG), and a number of studies have recommended a reduction in livestock production to help the UK meet its climate change targets. A report, *Livestock's long shadow*, by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) puts livestock-related GHG emissions as high as 18% of the world total, while in Europe meat and dairy products contribute about half the food GHG burden. Ruminant livestock (sheep and cattle) are less efficient converters of plant feed into animal energy than pigs and poultry. They also produce far greater methane emissions as part of their normal digestive process, so switching to consumption of white meat is often proposed as a way of reducing emissions, along with moving to more intensive production systems (based, for example, on faster maturing breeds and higher feeding of concentrates) to maximise growth rates. However, the situation is complicated for a number of reasons. Grazing livestock are often reared on land unsuitable for arable production and can convert the inedible – grass and other fibrous vegetation – into the edible. Pig and poultry production, by contrast, currently depends heavily on feed that is – to all intents and purposes – suitable for human consumption.**

Extensive beef and sheep farming also provides valuable benefits in addition to food production. The RSPB is well aware of these benefits as we need livestock to manage many important habitats on our estate – around 27,000 head of livestock graze our reserves across the UK annually, a third of which we own and manage commercially. Grazing is also essential for maintenance of many habitats through the wider countryside, habitats that can provide important services such as improving water

quality and flood prevention. In the UK, High Nature Value (HNV) farming is almost entirely associated with extensive livestock systems based on semi-natural grazing and low-intensity grassland systems. Furthermore, habitats maintained by livestock grazing sequester carbon – for example, one study concluded UK grasslands sequester larger amounts of carbon than forests, whereas arable land has a net loss. New research indicates that extensively grazed permanent pasture in the EU may have a much greater carbon sequestration potential than previously estimated. Livestock also have an important role in closing nutrient cycles and their manure makes a valuable contribution to improving soil structure – a foundation of sustainable farming practice.

There are various methods of measuring the impacts of different livestock systems but these can give misleading results. For example, soy cultivation for animal feed is a key driver of deforestation overseas, itself a major contributor to climate change. The UK imports over a million tonnes of soy every year to feed livestock, mostly for the pig, poultry and dairy industries, with the beef and sheep sectors being relatively low users. However, the indirect impacts associated with higher input systems are rarely accounted for, while the non-edible services provided by extensive livestock farming are often treated as side issues, rather than as central to the debate about what a more sustainable industry would look like. We are continuing to advocate a more integrated approach to climate change mitigation in agriculture.

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**Cattle produce methane but can also have positive effects on the environment**

# SNIPPETS



Tony Wood with his son Jake

David Morris (RSPB)

## Collaborative working

Abbots Reading Farm is a 160-ha traditional beef and sheep farm in Cumbria. In 2010 the RSPB helped farmer Tony Wood transfer the whole farm into a combined Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement, which included incorporating a small proportion of arable into the farm, consisting of 7ha of spring wholecrop triticale and oats as well as the provision of winter seed food.

Tony's enthusiasm has resulted in what has now become a landscape-scale vision. By encouraging neighbouring farmers to take the same approach, the reintroduction of a small arable element has been taken up enthusiastically, with the crop becoming a valuable livestock forage. Despite some initial scepticism about arable cropping, the first year's successes provided a high value, high quality feedstuff, the establishment costs of which were covered by the Environmental Stewardship scheme. These farmers are now recommending this approach to their friends and neighbours alike.

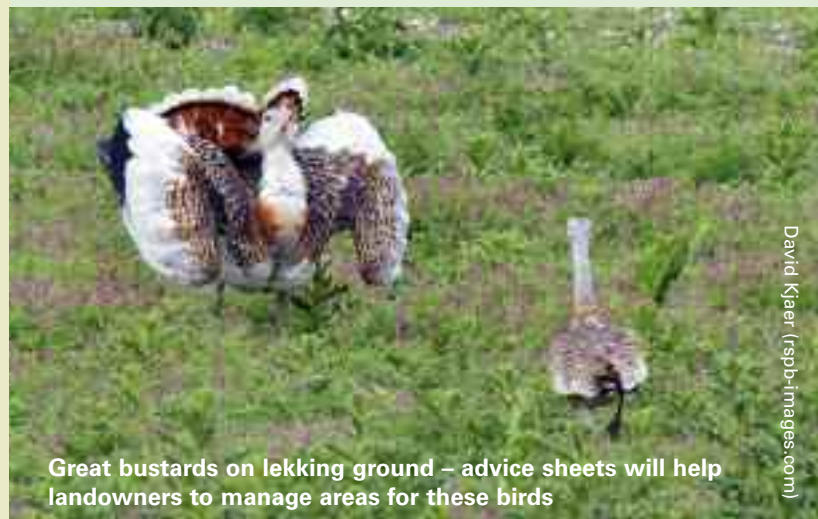
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## New LIFE for great bustards

The Great Bustard Reintroduction Project has received a boost through an EU-funded LIFE+ grant. This will enable the project to undertake a wide range of new work. Using the information provided by an expanded monitoring programme, with GPS satellite transmitters on all the birds, we plan to work closely with Natural England to identify target areas and develop Environmental Stewardship options for great bustards.

We shall produce advice sheets for landowners and, through a dedicated Project Adviser, promote bustard-friendly habitat in key areas. We shall also seek to create bustard management areas, important for lekking or breeding, with the help of local farmers and landowners. These activities are all crucial to provide safe places where the bustards can display, feed and, we hope, breed.

For more information contact Andrew Taylor, [andrew.taylor@rspb.org.uk](mailto:andrew.taylor@rspb.org.uk)



Great bustards on lekking ground – advice sheets will help landowners to manage areas for these birds

David Klaer (rspb-images.com)

## The RSPB at the agricultural shows

The RSPB will be present at the national agricultural shows again this year. We will be promoting the Campaign for the Farmed Environment at Cereals 2011. We are keen to hear from farmers who are doing their bit, but also to help farmers who are struggling for ideas on how best to meet the aims of the Campaign.

Applications for the Nature of Farming Awards are now being judged, and highly commended farmers, including our regional winners, will be celebrated at the Game Fair.

For more information contact Richard Winspear, [richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk](mailto:richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk)

## CONTACT US

If you have any comments about *FieldFare* or the topics discussed in this issue, please e-mail them to [agriculturepolicy@rspb.org.uk](mailto:agriculturepolicy@rspb.org.uk)



The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.



We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

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