



a million  
voices for  
nature

The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

# FIELD OF VIEW

ISSUE 10 NOVEMBER 2011



Thousands of people voted in the Nature of Farming Award, including Minister Richard Benyon

Gillian Baggett (RSPB)

## Welcome to the England issue

**As many agricultural issues and the opportunities to help wildlife vary across the UK, we are now producing different newsletters for each country. Welcome to the England issue.**

We report on the success we had in defending agri-environment schemes in Europe, with the help of those of you who joined us in lobbying against a decision to cut Pillar II funding, which pays for these schemes. This was one of the first actions of our new campaign, Stepping Up For Nature, where lots of people will take small steps that will collectively make a huge difference to our countryside.

Also inside, we profile the winners of the Nature of Farming Award, who represent some of the best examples

of farmers who are stepping up for nature. This year we have introduced a highly commended category to recognise farmers whose conservation work has delivered significant wildlife benefits.

In the first two weeks of the public vote to pick the winner, more than 10,000 votes were cast, which undoubtedly shows the support for wildlife-friendly farming. Richard Benyon, Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries, also gave his vote of confidence for wildlife-friendly farming (above).

We have worked closely with thousands of farmers to develop practical advice that can make a real difference to the wildlife value of farmland and other habitats. Inside,

we discuss the value of managing woodland for wildlife, update you on our arable farm in Cambridgeshire, and have news of an idea to help birds in ryegrass fields. We also have a report about wildlife-friendly farmers working together to develop bird friendly zones across the countryside.

Last, but not least, we have feedback from you on the advice and support we offer. We are keen to hear from everyone about how we can best help wildlife-friendly farming in the future. Our new farming blog gives you the opportunity to comment on our agricultural work.

**For more information and a link to the farming blog, visit the project website at [www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)**



The EU LIFE+ Programme funds RSPB work which supports wildlife-friendly farming that furthers sustainable development in the European Union.

**In this issue: The Nature of Farming Award results • Woodland life • Stepping Up For Nature • CAP reform • V&FA results • Hope Farm birds doing well • Big Garden Birdwatch**

ENGLAND



Woodland management, such as coppicing, helps woodland wildlife

Chris Gomersall | rspb-images.com

## Woodland life

We all seem to take for granted keeping warm in winter and the availability of fencing stakes. Meanwhile, the woods and copses that scatter our landscape for the most part now lie untouched and quiet. Yet it is only half a century since woodcutters were harvesting firewood, fence stakes and making charcoal from these woods.

We also take for granted that woodland wildlife thrives in the peace and quiet of passive neglect, but for many species this isn't the case. Many woodland birds, butterflies and wild flowers that thrived under repeated

coppice cutting and thinning are suffering as shade darkens the woods.

Several bird species that rely on woodland, including the hawfinch, lesser spotted woodpecker, pied flycatcher and wood warbler, have declined markedly since 1970. Although we don't fully understand all that is wrong, we do know that the features they need in the wood – coppice, sunny glades and rides, and mature trees with spreading crowns – are disappearing.

The cost of heating fuels is high, and likely to stay so, and this is driving a

new demand for wood fuel (logs and woodchip) that is unlikely to be just a passing fad. Harvesting to provide things such as wood fuel or fencing stakes also provides the woodland structure that wildlife needs, even in small copses that can contribute to local markets.

Returning woodland to management can be supported by grants from the Forestry Commission, or form part of an agri-environment package.

**For more information, contact Nigel Symes at [nigel.symes@rspb.org.uk](mailto:nigel.symes@rspb.org.uk) or call 01767 680551.**

## Stepping Up For Nature



Nature is in trouble – and millions of people are stepping up to help because our wildlife has been disappearing at an alarming rate. Small steps can make a big difference and if we all act together and get stuck in, we can save nature.

Nature is amazing. It enriches our lives. It makes us smile, cry and laugh. It brings us happiness, exhilaration and calm. But it's in trouble. Nature is in a steady, desperate global decline and one which will make our lives all the poorer, and threaten our very existence. We're determined not to let this happen. We're determined that by 2020, we will live in a world that's richer in nature – more beautiful, healthy and inspiring – than it is today. But we can't do this alone. We have to work with our supporters and Government to make it happen. That's why we're calling on millions of people to step up for nature.

Alongside our network of nature reserves across the UK, we need to restore vast swathes of our countryside to its former glory. We are working in rainforests in Africa and Asia. We need to save albatrosses in the southern oceans. To do this, we all need to step up – and connect every step we take together. A volunteer carries out a bird survey, a farmer helps wildlife on his land, the RSPB creates a wetland and the Government changes a policy for the good.

At our 200 reserves across the UK, we will continue to protect, restore and re-create some of the UK's most threatened habitats for the creatures that thrive there.

On our farm in Cambridgeshire, we will continue to test farming techniques to help farmland wildlife without affecting livelihoods. Through our Futurescapes programme, we will work with farmers, landowners and managers to restore and re-create habitats and to bring more wildlife-friendly features into farms and forests.

Some of the best examples of stepping up for nature are from our Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) volunteers. Not everyone has to take such direct or such large steps for nature to feel the benefit, but their contribution is greatly appreciated.

We will encourage our supporters to take steps for nature, no matter how small. Millions of personal actions will help wildlife on the ground. But together, they will represent something much bigger – a vast movement of people determined to bring the nature we love back from the brink. This movement will strengthen the voice of conservation and encourage governments to make the right decisions for nature.

**Nature is amazing. Nature is in trouble. Let's step up and save it – together. For more information, visit [www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup](http://www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup)**



Andy Hay | rspb-images.com

Stepping up for nature: both you and wildlife will reap the benefits

# The V&FA continues to provide valuable results

Results from annual, periodic and one-off surveys, together with findings of recent studies, have been published in *The state of the UK's birds 2010*. This provides an up-to-date overview of the health of bird populations in the UK. Numbers of some migrant birds are increasing, but many others are declining, including cuckoos, turtle doves and yellow wagtails.

The declines in these bird populations might be influenced, in part, on conditions outside the UK. But their future in the UK, along with that of corn buntings, grey partridges and other widely distributed birds, is likely to depend upon the sympathetic management of farmland and woodland habitats.

It was another busy year for the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) with data potentially being used to support important conservation projects, including the *Bird Atlas*. The results table highlights the most significant results.

- A farm in Lincolnshire smashed the regional record for most species recorded during a survey, with a whopping 85 species, including breeding avocets! This beats the previous record where a volunteer counted 78 species.
- The number of species on farms in the North West has ranged from 17 to 64 this year, including a wide variety of birds from the diminutive marsh tit to the majestic marsh harrier.

## Percentage of farms where birds were found

	Eastern England	Midlands	Northern England	South East England	South West England
Corn bunting	23	11	21	14	15
Cuckoo	34	40	14	46	10
Grey partridge	46	31	56	14	3
Kestrel	51	60	56	61	28
Lapwing	34	40	75	32	10
Linnet	80	78	55	57	55
Skylark	91	91	72	71	63
Starling	69	71	79	46	30
Tree sparrow	14	38	50	0	3
Turtle dove	14	2	0	7	0
Yellowhammer	80	89	62	64	65
Yellow wagtail	28	22	12	0	3

Species such as the cuckoo have shown a rapid and so far largely unexplained decline



Stephen Blah (RSPB)

- While undertaking a survey near the coast in Devon, one volunteer was surprised to encounter a golden oriole.
- Eight new volunteers were happy to join this ever-growing project in the Midlands, with an incentive to get up in time for the dawn chorus. There was an 'explosion' of whitethroats on one farm!
- Thanks to the hard work of our volunteers, we have enjoyed another successful year across the South East, with an average of 35 bird species per farm. A farm in Kent recorded 61 species, including quail, ring ouzel and spotted flycatcher, and there have been some encouraging numbers of corn buntings on farms in Berkshire.

# RSPB fights against Pillar II cuts

In June, it became clear that plans were afoot in Brussels to apply significant cuts (30-40%) to Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which funds agri-environment schemes, as part of the draft EU Budget.

In response to this, the RSPB stepped up its direct advocacy to politicians, including an e-action campaign to Commission President Barroso (who was spearheading the proposed cuts) to continue to fund agri-environment schemes and wildlife-friendly farming. This generated more than 8,000 e-mails from RSPB supporters, and a parallel e-action targeting the Agriculture Commissioner (in partnership with BirdLife partners) generated over 3,700 e-mails from members of the public across six EU countries.

At the same time, we asked farmers with whom we work to tell us, in their own words, how important agri-environment schemes are to them. The response was amazing and we included over a dozen quotes in briefings submitted to Downing Street, urging the UK Government also to fight to protect Pillar II funding.

Our members' voices and the voices of farmers championing agri-environment were most certainly

heard and Pillar II funding received a much smaller cut than expected. This is in part an excellent result. Without agri-environment schemes in the UK and EU, wildlife-friendly farming would become extremely difficult, and the outstanding work that many farmers have been doing would have been all but lost.

However, the funding available to Pillar II has still been reduced, to the tune of about 8.2%. The exact details of the budget were not clear at the time of this newsletter going to print, but there is still a risk that further cuts will be applied to the CAP budget.

The RSPB will continue to play a valuable role in defending the need for agricultural funding to reward farmers for the delivery of valuable public goods, such as protecting and enhancing biodiversity, contributing to climate adaptation and playing a greater role in maintaining good water quality. We will also support farmers and our members to make their voices heard at the highest political levels.

For more information, contact Jenna Hegarty at [jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk](mailto:jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk) or call 01767 680551.



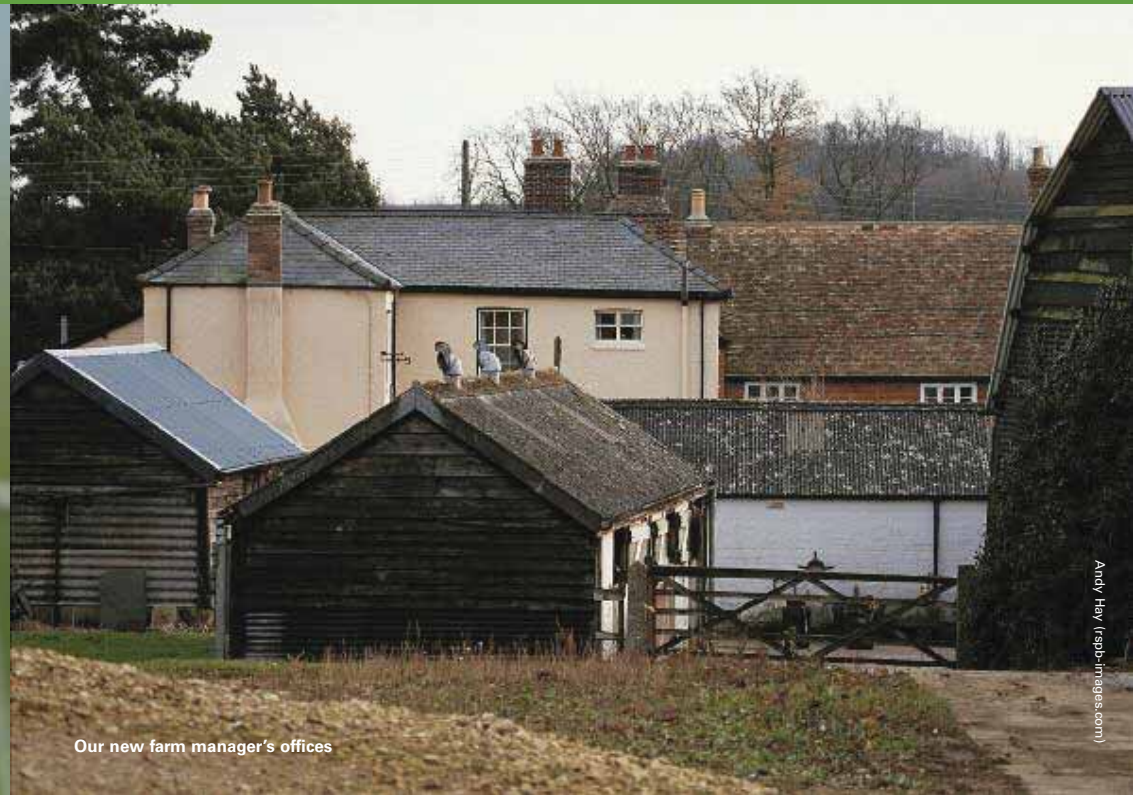
It's not yet known how spending cuts will alter the face of our countryside

Andy Hay (rspbimages.com)



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Corn buntings bred on the farm for the second year



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Our new farm manager's offices

## A difficult year at Hope Farm – but the birds are OK!

**There have been challenging times at Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire recently, mostly because we carelessly lost our Farm Manager, Chris Bailey.**

Chris is now responsible for our Advisory Team in Scotland, but before he left, he somehow managed to engineer a third consecutive harsh winter and the driest spring in a century. Yields have been hit, and the weather caused all kinds of problems establishing some of the environmental features. We could only sow wild bird seed mixtures in June, when it finally rained. As we go to press, we have a contingency plan in place, in case they fail to seed in time; we'll use supplementary feeding with grain held over, and leave one strip of unharvested wheat and another of rape.

Natural England has issued a notice to reassure farmers in Cambridgeshire that derogations for problems such as spring crop establishment in drought conditions will be readily available if contingency plans are discussed with them.

Some of our nectar flower mixtures are on their last legs. The fourth year is often touch and go with mixtures predominantly made up of agricultural legumes developed primarily for use in short-term grass-clover leys. Even where there was still a good amount of legume leaf area in the strip, flowering was very poor. We do not know whether this is a consequence of the drought conditions. If you know, please get in touch.

We are still analysing survey data but initial indications suggest that farmland bird numbers have held up well,

despite the conditions. It has been a particularly good year for starlings, which is surprising given the combination of the drought and importance of soil invertebrates in their diet. Corn buntings bred on the farm for the second year.

Many of the more familiar farmland birds took a slight dip following the exceptional counts in 2010. There weren't any lapwings this year. The spring beans were on an enclosed area of the farm, and they prefer more open fields, so that may have put them off.

Although crop yields will be down, they did fairly well, given the conditions. The only real issue was that 2 hectares (ha) of oilseed rape in one field was devoured by rabbits, and the prolonged snow cover didn't help.

**For more information, contact Richard Winspear at [richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk](mailto:richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk) or call 01767 680551.**

## Would you like to visit Hope Farm?

**We are keen to invite more groups to visit Hope Farm to look at what we have done to combine productive arable farming and boost wildlife populations. These visits are fully interactive: we are as keen to find out what farmers think they could do on their own land, as well as showing them what we have done on ours.**

We think this is a good way for us to find out why farmers don't take up the measures that are beneficial for wildlife. Once we've identified the problems, we might be able to work out the best ways to address the issues that stop the uptake.

**If you are a member of a farmer's club, why not find out if they would be interested in a group visit? To arrange a visit, please e-mail Ian Dillon our Farm Manager at [ian.dillon@rspb.org.uk](mailto:ian.dillon@rspb.org.uk) or call 01954 267438.**

# NATURE OF FARMING AWARD 2011

This year, the Nature of Farming Award proved to be the UK's largest farmland wildlife award, with a staggering 10,000 votes cast in just a fortnight. This is more than a passing acknowledgement of the efforts of wildlife-friendly farmers.

The award is run by the RSPB, Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation, with sponsorship from The Telegraph and funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme. It recognises the hard work and dedication that many farmers put into helping wildlife. The farmers involved reflect the passion and commitment of wildlife-friendly farmers across the UK.

Here are our finalists from England, who have set a new standard. With voting in progress at the time of print, please check the RSPB website for details of the overall winner.

## Andrew Jackson, Lincolnshire



Chris Tomson (RSPB)

**Practical conservation work can benefit wildlife on mixed farms – and Andrew has the proof. When he needed expert advice, he sought help locally, and the result is that, across 330 ha of farmland, he has integrated floristically-enhanced grass margins, fallow plots for ground-nesting birds, rotational wild bird seed mix and nectar mix, with former set aside maintained. An area of the farm currently in production is being reverted to heathland under Higher Level Scheme (HLS).**

These options have been sited to benefit target species and more than 100 species of bird,

15 species of butterfly and 11 species

of mammal have been recorded on the farm. The lists of species include grey partridges, lapwings, tree sparrows; brown argus, common blues, speckled woods; brown hares, roe deer and water voles.

Andrew has successfully diversified his business. By developing a farm shop, restaurant and nature trail, he has pulled off an economic masterstroke. He recognised the difficulties of his farm's urban fringe setting, and turned this to his advantage. The farm also provides an educational role and showcases wildlife. Above all, money is not the main consideration, and he is a good farmer.

He is an ambassador for farming with wildlife, and demonstrates that producing food to a high standard, as required by supermarkets and his own customers, need not be at the expense of wildlife.

## David White, Wiltshire



Felicity Clarke (RSPB)

**David's farm is a perfect example of how farming and wildlife can co-exist. David manages his farm and another 3,500 ha of countryside with an ethos and philosophy of working with nature. His interest was initially generated through a passion for wildlife photography, and some of his images are truly outstanding.**

With a 15th century farmhouse and a Norman church in the farmyard (with bats in the belfry as well as house martins, swallows and swifts) the setting is idyllic. The farming system is predominantly arable, but David manages areas of chalk downland for birds of prey, including owls. Last year, nine species of raptor were recorded, with both barn and short-eared owls visiting regularly. The Downs are managed by native red Devon cattle which provide the varied habitat required for a wide range of species including dotted bee-flies, brown hares and marbled white butterflies.

The extensive arable fields are managed without insecticides and integrated with fallow plots, nectar-rich flower plots and wild bird seed mixes. These are carefully targeted and managed for a range of species present on the farm including all of the arable specialists: corn buntings, grey partridges, lapwings, tree sparrows, turtle doves and yellow wagtails. In addition, rare arable plants such as Venus's-looking-glass, narrow-fruited cornsalad and small toadflax thrive on the light chalky soils.

This abundance of wildlife sits neatly alongside the business of food production as an integral part of a large well-run commercial farm.

## Andrew Hughes, Hampshire

**Andrew manages a successful and profitable farm that has conservation at its core. Although primarily an arable unit, Andrew is developing a small herd of native white park cattle which are destined to graze the species-rich grassland. He sees this more as a management tool than an economic business decision.**



Andrew Hughes

The farm uses the latest technology and equipment to ensure maximum productivity over its 728 ha, but fallow plots, beetle banks, hedgerow management, conservation headlands, cultivated margins, pollen and nectar strips, wild flower meadows and blocks

of winter seed are also used. They benefit a diverse range of species including dormice, grey partridges and white admiral butterflies.

Within the woodlands, coppice and ride management has created open areas that allow sunlight in, creating good conditions for woodland butterflies. Records include marbled whites, silver washed fritillaries and white admirals. These same rides have allowed bluebells, early purple orchids, foxgloves and snowdrops to flourish.

With 150 nest boxes of varying shapes and sizes put up, a monitoring programme is currently in place to assess the species using the boxes and their success.

By working in partnerships with many individuals and organisations, Andrew tailors his management practices to suit local conditions and target species. Promotion and education for all are key aspects of this farmer's commitment to connecting people to the natural environment.

## Robert Kynaston, Shropshire



Anna Brozshewicz (RSPB)

**Robert is a keen, passionate and committed farmer who takes great pride in what he has achieved on his mixed farm. Robert demonstrates a huge interest in farming and wildlife, and is enthusiastic for other farmers to get involved in agri-environment schemes. He actively encourages visits and holds demonstration events on the farm. He incorporates his own ideas into the management of the farm and considers wildlife when choosing the options available to him. He believes that wild bird mixes are a crop and should be treated like one. He is very reactive and willing to adapt his methods as circumstances change.**

He aims to increase the pollen and nectar cover, install wet scrapes and replant native woodland in the next few years. He strongly believes that there is room for wildlife on a farm as well as profitable production.

The 97 ha farm has permissive access and people are encouraged to visit. Robert works closely with a project designed to encourage disadvantaged visitors, local schools, field centres and university students who learn about, monitor and survey the wildlife on the farm. He is the regional co-ordinator for Open Farm Sunday.

The farm supports many species including curlews, grey partridges and lapwings, with 14 species of water boatmen

and more than 20 species of moss and lichen recorded, of which three are red listed. The field sizes haven't changed much over the last 100 years and the hedgerows, woodlands and ponds are rich and varied in character.

The farm has been audited for its CO<sub>2</sub> production and Robert is keen to reduce his energy and resource usage in the future, by improving breeding of his cattle and investigating new methods of water abstraction, such as a borehole or harvesting from farm buildings.

The farm has been nutrient mapped leading to an 80% decrease in fertiliser applications and Robert has installed a reed bed to clean water running from the yard.

## Robert Law, Hertfordshire

**With his professional and credible approach to sustainable farming, Robert has successfully grown the farm into a shining example of wildlife-friendly farming within a commercial arable business, supplying cereals to many familiar brands.**

Thrift Farm is an inspiring 1,500 ha Conservation Grade farm, which takes in archaeological features, a chalk grassland Site of Special Scientific Interest, county wildlife sites and woodlands, as well as 1,200 ha of arable production.

He now takes great delight in hearing farmland birds, such as corn buntings, grey partridges, lapwings, and yellow wagtails in abundance on the habitats he has created. Following careful scrub clearance and grazing, he can see chalkhill blue butterflies and pasque flowers flourishing on the heath he manages.

Robert was the very first Conservation Grade farmer for Jordan's. He has been a keen supporter and was fully involved in its development. He writes a regular column in *Farmers Weekly*, gives talks to many audiences and is also known as a host of Cereals, the largest agricultural show in Europe.

He has taken part in almost every scheme available, as well as trials and research to improve habitat on the farm. Robert is very aware of the barriers for others in the industry, and strives to not only understand these issues, but also overcome them through his own advocacy.

His message is very clear: it is possible to balance the needs of wildlife with the needs of a farm business and food production.



Richard Wainwright (RSPB)

To enter your farm in 2012 call 01767 680551

or visit [www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)

## Selling beef from special places

Livestock grazing is essential if we are to maintain the special wildlife interest on some RSPB reserves. An age-old relationship has developed between grazing livestock and birds such as curlews, skylarks, snipe and yellow wagtails, to name but a few. About 60 of our reserves are farmed mostly by tenant farmers, and cattle are often the favourite site managers, with 10,500 head on reserves during the summer. But 17,000 sheep and 200 ponies also help to look after a host of important wildlife across the UK.

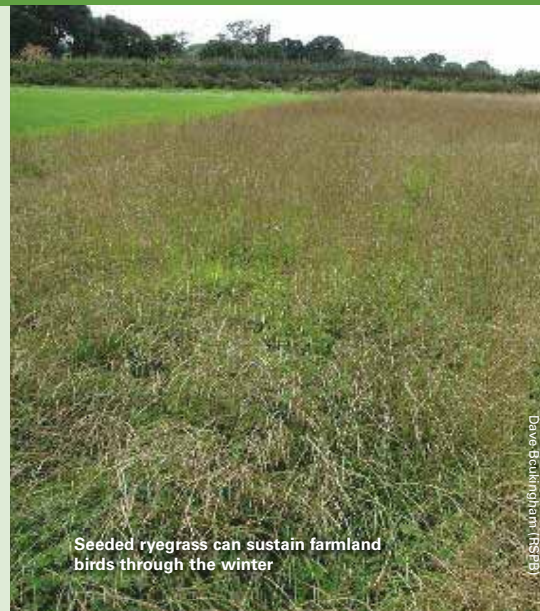
A great example of what can be achieved when grazing is balanced with wildlife needs can be found at the Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire. More than 2,500 cattle belonging to several farmers graze this RSPB reserve. They have created a home which attracts wonderful wildlife, including black-tailed godwits and snipe.

The public is increasingly interested in food production and its impact on the environment, so there is great potential for

products coming from wild places and reserves to be regarded as special. This is exactly what Jon Reeves, who has a background in farming and manages the Ouse Washes, is trying to achieve. Jon has set up a marketing initiative called Riverside Beef. He wants people to know the great story of what cattle can do for wildlife at the Ouse Washes and other similar sites – it will add value to his product.

The company was established two years ago and has gone from strength to strength with 10 farmers signed up, and a growing number of clients including local butchers, restaurants and farm shops. There has already been fantastic feedback from customers, including one of last year's Masterchef finalists. Jon hopes his business will inspire others to follow suit in adding value to products coming from land that is doing so much more alongside food production.

For more information, contact Jon Reeves at [jon.reeves@rspb.org.uk](mailto:jon.reeves@rspb.org.uk) or call 01354 680212.



Seeded ryegrass can sustain farmland birds through the winter

Dave Baskinham (RSPB)

grass species, ryegrass seeds are large, plentiful, easily collected by birds and are held on the plant late into the winter.

For ryegrass to produce large seed crops it is necessary to avoid cutting or grazing from mid-summer until late winter. The exact time when cutting or grazing should stop varies, depending on the dominant ryegrass species.

It is important to avoid physical disturbance of the plots, such as grazing, once they have gone to seed, as this will dislodge seeds. Seeds on the ground are of no use to foraging birds and quickly rot. Mats of lodged stalks help to keep seeds off the ground. This means they're available to birds late into the winter. Plots can be brought back into agricultural management once soil conditions allow in March.

This management can be rotated around the farm, such as on grass leys that will be cultivated in the spring for maize or re-seeding. Unless the seeded ryegrass plot is due to be cultivated in the spring, the thatch of vegetation remaining at the end of winter will need to be removed as soon as possible to restore the field to productive farming.

For more information, contact Gethin Davies at [gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk](mailto:gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk) or call 01982 552646.

## Seeded ryegrass

Seeds are vital for farmland birds during winter. Without the food they provide, several species of bird wouldn't survive. In lowland areas where farms specialise in livestock production, this is causing a problem, because the mixed farming practices that traditionally provided winter seed food have declined.

Productive ryegrass grasslands now predominate. Under normal agricultural management, this grass offers very little for wintering birds to eat. But if ryegrass plants are allowed to set seed in summer, and are then retained into late winter, these grasslands can provide an abundant source of winter seed. Seeded ryegrass offers an alternative to arable options that provide winter seed food, such as cereal stubbles or wild bird seed mixes, and may be more practical on grassland dominated farms.

Reed buntings and yellowhammers favour seeded ryegrass and other seed-eating birds such as corn buntings and skylarks also benefit. A big benefit is that seeded ryegrass plots will continue to provide seed food into March, when seed food in other habitats has run out. Barn owls and kestrels are likely to be seen hunting over seeded ryegrass, because voles thrive here too.

It is essential that this management is targeted at grassland with high ryegrass content. Unlike most other



Meat from the grazing cattle at RSPB Ouse Washes reserve is being marketed as a speciality beef product

Jon Reeves



Seeded ryegrass can help birds such as yellowhammers on livestock farms

Andy Han (RSPB.org.uk)



Agricultural shows are one of the best means of communicating with farmers

Kathryn Smith (RSPB)

## Advice at agricultural shows in 2012 and online

As usual, we'll be out and about throughout the year at shows and events across the UK. Here are some we're going along to – please come and have a chat with us.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info)

The website hosts a discussion forum where you can ask questions or post ideas. There are case studies of farmers who have adopted novel management strategies to boost wildlife on their farm. There's also an events calendar.

- **Balmoral Show**, King's Hall, Belfast. 16–18 May
- **Beef Expo**, Three Counties Showground, Malvern. 24 May
- **Cereals**, Boothby Heath, Lincolnshire. 13/14 June
- **Royal Highland Show**, Royal Highland Centre, Edinburgh. 21–24 June
- **Sheep**, Three Counties Showground, Malvern. 4 July
- **Royal Welsh Show**, Llanelwedd, near Builth Wells. 23–26 July
- **Dairy and Livestock Event**, NEC, Birmingham. 4/5 September

## Blog planted in fertile ground



Blogging has grown from almost nothing to a worldwide phenomenon in just a few short years. There are currently more than 166 million blogs available to read on the internet. This summer, the RSPB's agricultural team joined in and planted their farming blog on the virtual landscape.

It's germinating well. Many of our advisory, project and policy staff are sharing their latest news and views on the farming blog at [www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/farming/b/farming-blog/default.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/community/ourwork/farming/b/farming-blog/default.aspx)

We want to extend our blogging conversations to a wider audience, because it's a fantastic opportunity to tell people about our work. We want even more farmers and those with an interest in farming to get to know us, and to join in the conversation too.

There are two ways to join in – you can respond to posts that we put up on the blog, or you can create your own thread on the associated Farming Forum. Please join in and share your thoughts, concerns, advice and ideas.

You can always check out the latest posts directly from our farming home page at [www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)

## Big Garden Birdwatch

Thank you to everyone who took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch in 2011. A record-breaking 609,177 people counted 10.2 million birds over the weekend of 29 and 30 January.

The event revealed that some of the smaller birds that had decreased in numbers last year managed to bounce back this year. What good news! Sightings of goldcrests doubled, long-tailed tits increased by a third, and coal tits increased by a quarter.

Although smaller birds can be particularly badly affected by harsh winters, a good breeding season can help reverse declines. These results suggest that may have been the case in 2010.

House sparrows retained their top spot for the eighth year running. Starlings and blackbirds swapped positions this year, with starlings now at number two and blackbirds at number three. Starling sightings have increased by a quarter since last year, but their numbers are still down compared with the Big Garden Birdwatch when it began in 1979.

Thousands of people were lucky enough to see waxwings. These birds flood to the UK from Scandinavia every so often and this year there was an influx, known as a waxwing winter. Waxwings are bold birds. They are comfortable feeding around our towns and cities, and over 7,000 were counted in this year's survey, in almost 1,000 gardens.

Next year the Big Garden Birdwatch takes place over the weekend of 28 and 29 January 2012. Please join in and help us make it even bigger!

Visit [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch) for more information.



Stephen Blair (RSPB)

Every so often, waxwings flood to the UK from Scandinavia

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info)

## Bird Friendly Zone will help farmland birds

The Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone is an ambitious landscape-scale farmland bird conservation project. It aims to manage arable farmland across a large area of Cambridgeshire for the benefit of farmland birds and other wildlife.

The initiative is centred on the village of Thorney, where wildlife-friendly farmers who manage 3,424 ha of surrounding farmland have come together. To achieve the aims of the project, the farmers will balance the optimal needs of farmland birds and other wildlife with those of their farm businesses.

Creating this zone will mean there is a large area (220 km<sup>2</sup>) of wildlife-friendly habitat that will allow the population and range of farmland birds to increase. In particular, six range-restricted farmland bird species will benefit: corn bunting, grey partridge, lapwing, tree sparrow, turtle dove, and yellow wagtail.

Land management options for farmland birds within Environmental Stewardship Schemes are being used, resulting in 3-10% of arable land being managed for the year-round benefit of birds and other wildlife.

Farmers are stepping up for nature by selecting Entry Level Scheme and HLS land management options, such as

Population declines in many long-distance migrants, such as yellow wagtails, remain apparent



Stephen Blair (RSPB)

unharvested crops to feed birds over the winter, fallow and skylark plots providing in-field nesting habitat and nectar-rich plots supplying insect rich areas.

The Bird Friendly Zone is part of the RSPB Fens Futurescape initiative, which is a landscape-scale approach to deliver special places for wildlife and people in a changing climate.

For more information, contact Simon Tonkin at [simon.tonkin@rspb.org.uk](mailto:simon.tonkin@rspb.org.uk) or call 01603 661662.

## College syllabus to include farming with wildlife in mind

During the last few years, the RSPB has worked with several agricultural colleges across the UK. Farming has an increasing number of demands being placed upon it – food production needs to be balanced with the long-term protection of the environment.

Safeguarding the future of wildlife that has become entwined with farming is proving a particular challenge. Agricultural colleges have a key role to play in equipping their students with the knowledge and skills to become responsible and sustainable land managers in the future.

The RSPB can play a part in helping colleges achieve these aims. A three-year project with Duchy College in Cornwall

has shown what can be achieved in partnership. This project promotes the practical steps farming can take to help the region's farmland birds. We have helped the college to make best use of its agri-environment scheme to benefit priority species identified in their V&FA survey, as well as holding a range of events at the college and developing new learning resources.

We are keen to work with other colleges around the UK and are seeking partnerships with other organisations to develop this important role.

For more information contact Gethin Davies at [gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk](mailto:gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk) or call 01982 552646.

## Nuffield Bursaries a success

For a second year, students from around the UK have gained vital experience in conservation, thanks to a bursary from Nuffield.

Henry Bailey, from Oxfordshire, worked with the RSPB at our Banbury offices "When I got my placement, there was an initial degree of excitement," he says. "This however was crushed by the terrifying realisation that I had applied to work with a team of conservation and bird experts. To most this sounds great. However, my bird identification skills spanned from the ability to spot red kites outside my window to a blue tit on the bird feeder – hence my nervousness.

"But I quickly realised how lovely everyone in the office was. Their willingness to help me learn and develop my skills has been very much appreciated and created a really enjoyable working atmosphere.

"Carrying out this project has not only been extremely useful to put in my portfolio of work experience placements for university, but more importantly it has opened my eyes to the desperate need for conserving wildlife for the future and the importance of stepping up for nature."

Mev Ahmad, from Norfolk, worked on the V&FA project in Norwich.

"Collating this year's bird survey data and analysing it improved my problem solving skills," she said.

"I learned so much about birds! From knowing close to nothing to now knowing their habitats, bird codes, crop codes, as well as background history about the V&FA, factors causing birds' decline and hot topic issues like the Common Agricultural Policy."

For more information contact Anna Broszkiewicz at [anna.broszkiewicz@rsbp.org.uk](mailto:anna.broszkiewicz@rsbp.org.uk) or Emily Field at [emily.field@rspb.org.uk](mailto:emily.field@rspb.org.uk)



Nuffield Bursary students talk to farmer Chris Skinner

Emily Field (RSPB)

For topical farming news and practical advice, sign up to the RSPB's farming e-newsletter at [www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)

# What do farmers think of the V&FA?

**Hearing what farmers think about the V&FA means we can make improvements so we all benefit from the project as much as possible.**

Each year, questionnaires are sent to farmers who received a survey the year before last. This allows for any advice sought and management techniques to be put into practice.

The questionnaires from farmers who replied in 2010 show that:

- 96% felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience
- 96% found the laminated map useful
- 90% have put into practice the farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map
- 80% had species on their farms that they had not previously noticed.

# And what do volunteers think?

The questionnaires completed by volunteers who took part in the V&FA in 2010 show that:

- 98% enjoyed participating in the V&FA
- 96% reported that no problems were encountered during the surveys
- 95% felt that the training they received was either good or excellent
- 94% were satisfied with the level of support they received
- 82% felt their understanding of farmland birds and conservation had improved
- 69% reported that they were now more aware of policies like the EU Birds Directive.

# Keeping you informed

The RSPB is always updating its systems and processes for storing information. Farm information and other details that you give us will be held by the RSPB on paper and electronically. All details will be kept confidential. We will not make your name, address or any other information available to external

organisations without your permission. The RSPB is continually finding new ways to help farmers conserve wildlife. We may wish to contact you from time to time with such information. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way, please contact project staff in your area – contact details below.

# The EU Birds Directive

The EU Birds Directive aims to protect biodiversity in Europe. The work described in this newsletter promotes the importance of the EU Birds Directive in conservation

management on farmland, creating a positive profile through promotional activities. [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm)

**GET MORE INFO** [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk) or e-mail: [v&fa@rspb.org.uk](mailto:v&fa@rspb.org.uk)

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- South East England Regional Office** 2nd Floor, Frederick House, 42 Frederick Place, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 4EA Tel: 01273 775333
- South West England Regional Office** Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter, Devon EX1 1NT Tel: 01392 432691



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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