

The Bird Conservation Targeting Project Newsletter

October 2008

Welcome to the first edition of the Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP) newsletter, for bird clubs and birdwatchers across the UK. Read on to find out about how your bird records are helping guide conservation action for birds.

Targeting project update

The BCTP collates bird records from a wide range of sources to produce target maps showing the breeding distribution of a suite of scarce and declining birds. The target maps are designed to guide conservation action for birds.

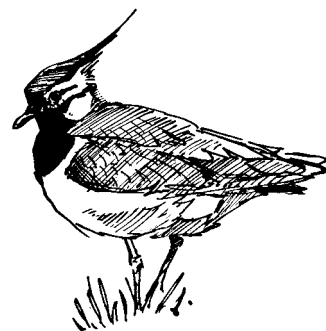
The project is already guiding the use of agri-environment schemes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and we are working towards helping to target resources and management for birds in Scotland. Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), administered by Natural England and aimed at the highest priority habitats and species, is now targeted towards hotspots for the BCTP arable and wet grassland species. In Wales, species target maps are used to guide the use of the agri-environment scheme options in Tir Gofal and the new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) is using BCTP outputs to ensure that the scheme pays landowners to put the right options in the right places. Further targeting is also planned for woodland birds including the targeting of the England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS), and the Better Woodlands for Wales (BWW) scheme, as well as providing management advice for landowners to help woodland birds across the UK.

The BCTP process has two main steps: collation of bird records and validation of the maps before the final target maps are produced. Bird records are included from as many sources as possible and make sure that the summary of all these sightings is interpreted to accurately reflect the breeding distribution of the target species. During March 2008, we tested a system designed to make the BCTP data collation and validation processes automatic, using the BirdTrack online system. This system was tested in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will be trialled in Scotland for the first time this year. County bird experts are absolutely vital

to the success of the BCTP, as they hold the best local species knowledge. Earlier this year, we asked the county bird experts who trialled this new system to provide feedback for improvements.

Following comments from local experts, we have now made several improvements to the automatic systems and the full review describing the system improvements is available on the RSPB website at (www.rspb.org.uk/targeting). One of the main improvements is a speeding up of the validation system, and we are also allowing more time for county experts to check they are happy with the target maps during December and January.

One of the problems highlighted by local experts was that there was not enough information displayed against each individual grid square to allow an accurate interpretation of likely breeding. However, as we do not show individual records for validation, but rather a summary of all records from that square from different sources, we cannot give more detail about each record. All we would like county experts to do is quickly check over the maps and remove records from grid squares where they obviously only relate to passage birds or are erroneous records, rather than go into detail over validating each record. Although some species are quite difficult to validate in this way, we just ask each county expert to do what they can.



I would like to say thank you to all the county experts that have helped provide bird records, validate the target maps and provide feedback on the new validation system. Without your expertise, we would not be able to produce target maps capable of making such a difference for bird conservation

Sally Fisher, RSPB
Mark Grantham, BTO

How you can contribute birds records to the BCTP

Your bird records are vital to the BCTP whether you are a birdwatcher or the manager of a county bird dataset.

Individual birdwatchers can contribute to the BCTP by supplying records to their local bird club, or alternatively, by logging onto www.birdtrack.net - an easy-to-use online recording package developed by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the RSPB and BirdWatch Ireland. BirdTrack allows birdwatchers to store and manage their bird records online while directly contributing to conservation. Records of the target species entered onto BirdTrack will feed directly into the BCTP.

BirdTrack has been working with the BCTP to develop a new system that enables County Bird Clubs and County Recorders to upload records from their county databases direct to the BCTP. We ask managers of county datasets to use this system, as it simplifies the process and reduces the problems associated with sending large datasets via email. A new

A Bird Club's view: Cumbria Bird Club helping the BCTP

The Cumbria Bird Club receives around 12000 bird records each year. These have been used primarily to compile the annual bird report. They are also used to fulfil various data requests from conservation organisations, commercial companies and research bodies or individuals. Since 2005, we have also contributed records annually for a suite of species of conservation concern to the Bird Conservation Targeting Project. The Club has also made available the dataset from its Breeding Bird Atlas, which took place between 1998 and 2001 and a data set of "casual" records of farmland birds from 1992 when the Club formed to 2004.

The club was happy to provide records to the BCTP because we could see that Cumbria's birds would really benefit from the information and local species knowledge held by the club. Our club data could provide the guidance to ensure that the right options in the government's agri-environment scheme are put where the species really needed them. The club's records have been used by the BCTP to map areas of primary importance for

"BCTP upload" icon is added to the dataset manager's options in BirdTrack. It is then simply a case of logging on and clicking to upload the dataset.



All records are most useful if they include the 1km grid square, the date of the record, the number of birds and the breeding status.

Sally Fisher, RSPB
Mark Grantham, BTO

each species and identify geographically where conservation effort would be best spent to benefit each species. The species concerned are generally widely distributed and not rare but are in decline as determined by national monitoring projects. Being distributed within the wider countryside, the most effective mechanism to conserve them is through the Defra Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme administered by Natural England (NE).



Photo by Sally Fisher

NE now target HLS to specific areas where key objectives can be met, and the BCTP ensures that Cumbria Bird Clubs' records are on their target maps. Farmers within the farmland bird target areas identified by the BCTP, are invited to apply for HLS funding to undertake conservation work.

In Cumbria, the species targeted for conservation include snipe, curlew, black grouse, tree sparrow and twite. A landowner in the Cumbria High Fells with breeding snipe, curlew and lapwing in the area, would be eligible for HLS funds to improve habitats for these species. Equally, a landowner in the North Pennines with black grouse on or near his land, could use an HLS grant to improve black grouse nesting habitat, and provide food resources during the summer and winter. These are just a couple of examples of the way that HLS can ensure that Cumbria's birds have the best chance of success. Without the breeding distribution information held by Cumbria Bird Club, it would be almost impossible for the agri-environment schemes to effectively turn around the declines in these species.

The Cumbria Bird Club plans to supply the BCTP with its latest bird data every year, so that the maps continue to show the most up-to-date and comprehensive information, ensuring that the schemes make a real difference for these vulnerable birds.

Dave Shackleton, Cumbria Bird Club

Targeting helps birds on a Lincolnshire farm

At Hall Farm in Lincolnshire, our conservation management has been remarkably successful at improving species' breeding success. We have focused our conservation management on three key species found on the estate: grey partridge, lapwing and barn owl; and used agri-environment options to provide nesting opportunities and improve the availability of summer and winter food. Many other farmland birds, such as turtle doves, yellowhammers and skylarks, have also benefited from this conservation work.

We have used buffer strips along the edge of cultivated land and beetle banks dividing larger fields to provide nesting habitat for grey partridges. These features, funded through agri-environment schemes, contain tussocky grasses such as cocksfoot, which is attractive as grey partridge nesting cover. Breeding grey partridges do particularly well when there is dead tussocky grass left over from the previous year. Beetle banks are good at harbouring insects over-winter, providing plenty of insect food for chicks in the spring and summer. At Hall farm, we also use wild bird seed mixes, providing food and cover for

grey partridges over-winter in addition to the seed available to them in our winter stubbles. Proof of the success of these options is a marked recovery in our grey partridge population.

Conservation headlands, up to 12 metres wide, are practiced on some of the farm's spring barley crops. We do not apply herbicides, which control broad-leaved weeds to these headlands. The result is a mix of weeds, which do not excessively compete with the crop, yet act as important food plants for our threatened farmland birds. For example, turtle doves feed on the fumitory, while skylarks feed on the annual meadow grass.

Perhaps one of the best success stories on our farm is the increasing breeding population of barn owl. We placed barn owl nest boxes in the rough grass margin buffer strips, as this is ideal barn owl hunting habitat. Approximately half of the nest boxes are now occupied, and we often see these magnificent birds hunting for small mammals in the field margins.



Photo by Richard Winspear

We are keen for the birds at Hall Farm to be monitored and mapped, and for these data to help guide our conservation management. We've seen population increases on our farm, of species which are still declining nationally. Notably, we now have more than six times the number of pairs of grey partridges that we started with. I think this proves that the options available through agri-environment schemes can really work if we put them in the right places and if they are properly managed.

Chris Dowse, Hall Farm Estate Manager

Targeting Biodiversity Conservation in Wales

To be effective in halting or reversing biodiversity decline, land must be managed in such a way as to provide the critical resources currently missing in the landscape, both in places where they can be used and in sufficient quantities and at the right time to improve breeding success and survival. Such geographic targeting aims to ensure limited resources deliver best value for money in restoring functioning ecosystems and meeting the Welsh Assembly Governments' biodiversity conservation targets. Many of the declining species identified as of principal importance for biodiversity conservation in Wales (s42 NERC Act 2006¹) have limited dispersal abilities and now occupy restricted geographic distributions within fragmented and impoverished landscapes. Nevertheless, many of these species, particularly birds, remain widespread despite these declines. Therefore, it is essential that conservation management be targeted to these places, or within close proximity to allow them to find it given likely movement patterns.

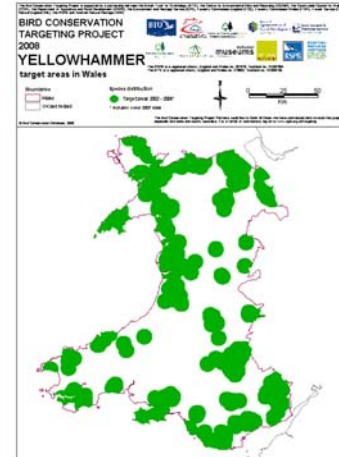


Tom Marshall (rsps-images.com)

In 2006, members of the Wales Environment Link partnership collectively developed a geographically enabled guidance tool to encourage the adoption of species packages (combinations of particular prescriptions that create a favourable environment for particular species on a particular site) to benefit a range of principal biodiversity species through Tir Gofal agreements. The guidance developed by the Tir Gofal targeting and species package working group integrated 26 species including, for example, yellowhammer, marsh fritillary, welsh clearwing, arable plants, water vole, red squirrel and great-crested newt. Potential conflicts between management for different priority species were considered by a sub-group of specialists, very few areas of conflict

were identified and in all cases, it was agreed these could be addressed with appropriate guidance.

Targeting or, 'key area' maps were produced and made available to Tir Gofal project officers through the Welsh Assembly Governments online viewer, along with best practice guidance notes highlighting the Tir Gofal prescriptions most likely to benefit each species (based on providing critical resources at the right time).



A series of training events was also provided to agri-environment staff on the use of the maps and the species packages.

The current Tir Gofal application and guidance pack outlines the concept of targeting and the use of the maps and species guidance. Furthermore, a recent report undertaken by the National Assembly for Wales audit committee highlights the need for tailoring of the scheme using species packages and local solutions to deliver on its potential as an exemplar agri-environment scheme. The maps and supporting information are now available to Tir Gofal Officers to allow them the confidence and authority to negotiate good agreements for farmers and biodiversity. The practise of geographic targeting is not restricted to agri-environment and woodland grant schemes and can be used to inform other land management initiatives for the benefit of wildlife.

The data collation and validation process developed by the BCTP will work to enable this ongoing practise to operate more efficiently in future revisions, which will occur every two years (the next is due in March 2009; BCTP collates and validates bird data annually). These regular revisions are essential to accommodate new information as it becomes available to ensure effort is always focused on the most beneficial areas for biodiversity.

Stephen Bladwell, RSPB Wales

¹ S42 NERC Act 2006 – section 42 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 refers to the list maintained by the Welsh Assembly Government of the species and habitats of principal importance for conservation of biological diversity in Wales.

Natural England targeting action for birds

Farmland birds in England are about to benefit from a new mapping approach to target conservation action through the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme. Natural England, partners in the Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP), have worked with the RSPB to ensure that farmland birds benefit from the resources available for high priority situations and areas, through HLS.

HLS is suited to the conservation of localised species, with specific breeding habitat



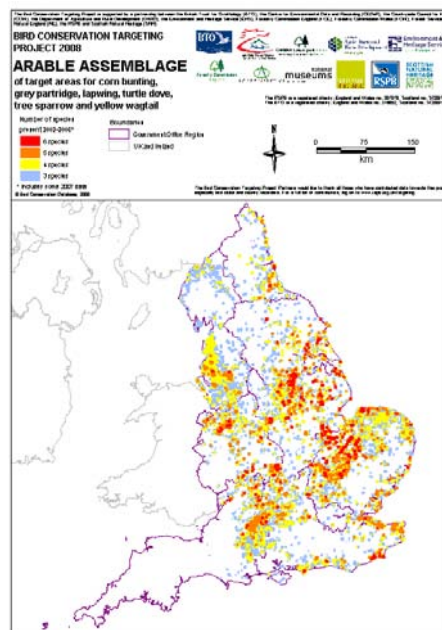
requirements such as lapwing, tree sparrow and corn bunting, and rarer species such as black grouse. HLS will only be able to fund management over 10% of England in the long-term, so it is important to identify the areas that will give best value for money. The new spatial approach helps target areas where assemblages of species that will benefit from same conservation measures are found together, as well as areas where particularly rare species still occur. The maps also enable HLS to maintain species range, by targeting outlying populations.

The BCTP has mapped target areas, based on a collation of records from a range of sources. New data will also be accepted as evidence of the presence of species and any new data should be provided to the BCTP for inclusion in annual updates to the target maps. We know that HLS can help farmland birds if the management options are guided by spatial targeting to provide the right nesting habitat and year-round food resources.

Targeting species assemblages

Any area, which is home to four or more birds from a suite of six arable farmland birds (lapwing, grey partridge, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow, corn bunting), will be targeted for HLS resources. Farmers and land managers in target areas, where three or more

birds from a suite of five wet grassland birds (lapwing, curlew, redshank, snipe, yellow wagtail) are known to breed, will also be eligible for HLS.



Targeting single species

The rarest species targeted by the BCTP are black grouse, stone curlew, curlew, twite and chough. Where these birds are present, landowners will be encouraged to use HLS resources to provide appropriate breeding habitat and year-round food resources.

Important regional populations of the BCTP farmland species are also prioritised through the new spatial targeting of HLS. Isolated populations are important to maintain species range. RSPB and NE specialists have used the maps produced by the BCTP to identify priority populations.

Summary

We know that this new approach for targeting HLS will help to maintain and re-establish nationally important but historically declining populations of farmland birds in England. HLS options can be costly, but they deliver species recovery when deployed effectively. We are grateful to the birdwatchers that have provided the BCTP with their data. The bird records provided are fundamental to the successful targeting of HLS, and the continued contribution of data to the BCTP will ensure that these species stand a real chance of recovery.

James Phillips, Natural England

Targeting corncrake conservation in Scotland

The Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP) will be producing target maps for Scotland by March 2009. These maps will help guide the targeting of resources for the benefit of a suite of Scotland's birds. However, although agri-environment schemes are often quoted as being a viable means of delivering conservation benefits for a range of farmland birds, the hard evidence that this has actually been achieved is rather few and far between. Successful examples are associated with a combination of considerable understanding about the reasons for decline and solutions to reverse this decline together with a rigorous process to ensure that the management is effectively targeted at the threatened population. One example of how this process can be successful is illustrated by the changing fortunes of the corncrake population in Scotland. The BCTP will help us to mirror the corncrake success to other declining species in Scotland.

Corncrakes were a common bird across farmed land throughout the UK in the late 19th Century – being recorded breeding in every single Vice County.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



The population declined throughout the 20th century such that the population became restricted to the far north and west of the country with a total population of only some 480 pairs in 1993 – the vast majority being present on the Hebrides off the West Coast of Scotland.

This massive, large-scale decline triggered a substantial effort to understand the causes

and to identify methods that might be trialled to turn around the population declines. Research pointed to two key features of sites that continued to hold corncrakes. Firstly, the hay meadows present tended to be cut late (after late July), and secondly, a certain area of vegetation, providing cover early in the season, was required. Corncrakes arrive in the UK around late April. Cover at this time of year is often at a premium within the outer isles due to slow growth rates in the spring combined with continual grazing either through the winter or from early spring.

Initial conservation measures, in 1992, concentrated on delaying the cutting of particular fields. The RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) started a new scheme called the Corncrake Initiative. The scheme provided funding for farmers to delay the cutting of their grass crop until the 1st August or later, and to cut the grass in a manner such that any birds in the crop were pushed coaxed from the centre of the field to the edge and/or to an area of tall vegetation cover. This funding was only available for fields within 1.5 km of a singing corncrake (most female corncrakes had been shown to nest within 1.5 km of the site where a male sings at night). RSPB staff listened for singing corncrake at night and then visited all the land managers within 1.5 km of the bird, with a grass field due to be mowed.

By 1995 a suite of new Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) were designated in Scotland, two of which, the Uist machairs and the Argyll Islands ESAs, included the delayed grazing option to benefit corncrakes. These ESAs covered a substantial proportion of the total corncrake population in Scotland and outside these areas, the Corncrake Initiative continued to provide funding for corncrake conservation measures. By 1998, agri-environment schemes for the whole of Scotland were in place. Management options specifically for corncrakes were available in these schemes, but were restricted to regions where corncrakes were known to breed regularly. These schemes were competitive, and some managers were unsuccessful in applying for funds for their corncrake management. However, the Corncrake Initiative remained an option for these managers.

Recent analysis of the effectiveness of the agri-environment schemes to deliver conservation benefits for corncrake considered the proportion of birds that were associated

with the schemes. An average of 72% of corncrakes in the core areas within the UK occurred in 1 km squares within which there were at least some meadows where mowing was delayed until 1st August due to agri-environment schemes. We know that delaying mowing has been shown to improve corncrake productivity. Simple measures, which benefits corncrake, need to be applied in locations where corncrakes are present.

The example of the corncrake shows that the need for good knowledge of species

Targeting conservation action for birds in Northern Ireland

It is generally accepted that if we are to see a positive trend in populations of declining farmland birds then we must understand the needs of species, put tried and tested solutions in place where the birds are, ensure that they are delivered appropriately on the ground and monitor these options to test if they are actually delivering. For many of our priority farmland birds we can say that several of these elements are being addressed. One element lacking up until most recently has been knowledge of the recent distribution of these species to enable us to put the right options in the right place.

In 2007, the Bird Conservation Targeting Project, which had just covered England, expanded to include Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. In Northern Ireland, this was the chance we had been waiting for, to gather up-to-date information on a range of priority bird species to target the RSPB's own conservation work and work being carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) through agri-environment schemes. Given the importance of the project in delivering targeted conservation for priority species, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) stepped in to offer part-funding for this UK-wide project, and in NI they are one of the project partners alongside DARD Countryside Management Branch - who deliver agri-environment schemes, Forest Service (FS) and the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR). CMB have been very receptive to the maps, seeing them as a way of maximising the chances of schemes delivering positive benefits and representing effective use of agri-environment funds. Maps have been produced for 23 species, 8 of which are farmland

distribution is required to locate the management options appropriately. Corncrake numbers have increased from the low of 480 in 1993 to over 1200 birds in 2007. Research has already determined conservation management options, which can benefit other scarce and declining birds in Scotland, and the BCTP provide a means of ensuring that the right management options are targeted to the sites where these species are still known to breed.

Mark O'Brien, RSPB Scotland

species that are suitable for targeting through agri-environment schemes. These include – yellowhammer, tree sparrow, lapwing, redshank, curlew, snipe, red grouse and barn owl.

The production of the first maps in 2008 has been timely, coinciding with the launch of the new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS). All 50 of the

CMB staff, drawing up NICMS scheme agreements, receive a farm features report, which includes information on the priority bird species present on the farm. This, coupled with information from the Agri-environment



Officer on the recommended management for these species, allows them to make sure that each agreement has the capacity to deliver benefits for priority species.

In NI, there is still work to be done with the maps – they show a recent picture of where our priority species are, but there are gaps. These gaps don't always mean a priority species is not present in that area, it can simply be that there is a lack of records coming in for that species or that area. Our plan then over the next few years is to encourage more people to input their bird records via Birdtrack and provide feedback to those inputting data to show them that how their records are being used.

Anne-Marie McDevitt, RSPB Northern Ireland

BCTP working in partnership:



The Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP) is supported by a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR), the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), Forestry Commission England (FCE), Forestry Commission Wales (FCW), Forest Service (FS), Natural England (NE), the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).

A special thanks to:

- All the birdwatchers and organisations that have contributed bird records to the BCTP. For a full list of contributing organisations, please go to www.rspb.org.uk/targeting.
- The Scottish Ornithologist's Club (SOC) for their help in coordinating the collation of data for Scotland

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 216652) and in Scotland (SC039193).

For more information about the BCTP, please visit
www.rspb.org.uk/targeting