a million voices for nature

The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

FIELD OF VIEW

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Daniel Brown (RSPB)

Somerset and Carolyne Charrington accepting their certificate from Stuart Housden, Director, RSPB Scotland

Scotland's farmers' conservation work recognised and applauded

RSPB Scotland is delighted that a farming couple from the Isle of Mull, Somerset and Carolyne Charrington of Treshnish Farm, beat stiff competition from farmers across the UK to win the 2011 Nature of Farming Award.

The annual Nature of Farming Award is run by the RSPB, Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation and *The Telegraph* with funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme. The award aims to celebrate the actions of farmers who successfully incorporate conservation management into their day-to-day commercial operations. This is achieved by highlighting the excellent conservation work they carry out to the UK public through a public vote, and by spreading conservation messages across the farming sector.

After regional finals, four farms from across the UK vied for top prize in a public vote. In just a few weeks, more than 22,000 members of the public voted, demonstrating strong public support for farmers' conservation work, with the Charrington's coming out on top! Inside, the couple are profiled, along with two other Scottish farmers who were awarded Highly Commended prizes.

The Charringtons were delighted: "It is a privilege for us to live here and be custodians of this farm. Our cattle and sheep are the key to maintaining the rich mosaic of habitats on the farm, and underlines, to us, the importance of keeping sheep and cattle on the hills of Scotland. We have a popular coastal path that brings locals and visitors onto the farm daily, and it's great to share their enjoyment of the wildlife they encounter.

"We are extremely proud to have been chosen as the winners of the Nature of Farming Award. It's a huge boost to our confidence and proves that what we are doing in terms of farming, conservation and sustainability is working."

For more information, visit the project website at 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: Nature of Farming Award results

• Stepping Up For Nature • Wader-Friendly Farming Initiative
• Dates for your 2012 diary • Woodland Management

SCOTLAND

Desmond Duggan (rspb-images.com)

Capercaillie benefit from woodland management

Scotland's special woodland species

Two of Scotland's rarest and most important species – capercaillie and black grouse – are found in forests. They're found in both commercial and native woodlands. Managing woods in a sustainable and practical way is key to their conservation.

The capercaillie is often associated with open-canopy Caledonian pine forests, with abundant blaeberry field layer, but they are equally at home in closed canopy conifer plantations with little or no blaeberry. Adult capercaillie are herbivorous, but chicks eat large amounts of insects, particularly ground beetles, ants, caterpillars, and spiders. Providing key elements of capercaillie habitat, while avoiding fragmentation of the forests, is the main objective.

The black grouse loves woodland edges, bogs, open moorland, and open areas within forests. They breed well in new woodlands, which can be improved for black grouse by sensitive planting of specific tree species. In mature plantations, creating or enlarging open ground and rides, feathering the edges of compartments and encouraging broadleaves will help. Delaying restocking for 4–5 years, to give the field layer a chance to recover will also benefit grouse. Managing heather by burning, cutting or cattle grazing provides cover, mobility and food for chicks. Blocking drainage ditches improves wetland areas, important for both special species. Other positive management options include marking deer fences and legal predator control. Long-term, the creation of new forests is key for conservation. Larger woods are more robust habitats for species battling the effects of climate change and increasing predator populations.

For more information contact Chris Bailey on 0131 3174130 or at chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk

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.

All around Scotland, on 79 reserves, we will continue to protect, restore and re-create some of our most threatened habitats for the many creatures that thrive there. We have been delivering large-scale habitat re-creation at sites including Abernethy and Forsinard Flows National Nature Reserve. This is at the heart of our Futurescapes programme. Through Futurescapes, we will work with farmers, landowners and mangers to restore and re-create wildlife habitats and to bring more wildlife-friendly features into farms and forests.

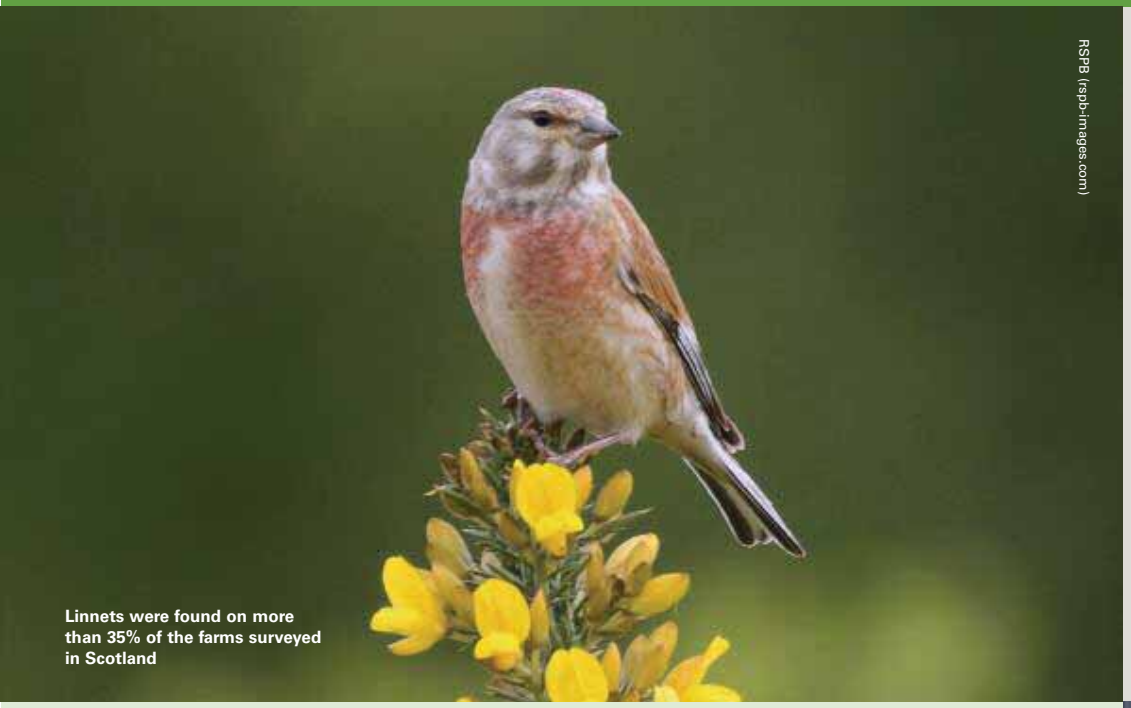
Some of the best examples of stepping up for nature are from our Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) volunteers. Not everyone has to take such direct or such large steps for nature to feel the benefit, but their contribution is greatly appreciated.

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.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

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



RSPB (rspb-images.com)

Linnets were found on more than 35% of the farms surveyed in Scotland

RSPB Scotland fights cuts

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

In response to this, the RSPB stepped up its direct advocacy to politicians, asking them to continue to fund agri-environment schemes and wildlife-friendly farming. As well as encouraging our members and supporters to e-mail EU decision makers, 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. Our members' voices and those of farmers were most certainly heard; future Pillar II funding (for 2014–2020) is likely to receive a much smaller cut than expected.

Having partly won the argument in Brussels, RSPB Scotland reacted with dismay at the Scottish Government's recent proposals to cut the domestic agri-environment budget by £10 million between 2011 and 2015, on top of last year's £10 million cut. It would be a disproportionate cut of 34% over a five-year period, while other areas of the Government's budget remain static or decrease only slightly. Farmland birds including corncrakes and corn buntings, as well as lapwings and curlews, depend on the wildlife-friendly farming practices that agri-environment schemes support. Schemes such as Rural Priorities and Land Manager's Options, also represent an important income stream for some of the most hard-pressed farmers and crofters in Scotland.

The Scottish Government budget is not yet a done deal. It must be approved by Parliament in the New Year. RSPB Scotland is calling on all farmers and crofters to write to their MSPs to ask them to help protect the agri-environment budget. Without this, farmers and crofters are likely to find it difficult to renew existing agreements when they expire and the number of agreements that can be signed with new entrants to schemes will be very limited in years to come.

You can find out who your MSPs are by visiting http://www.writetothem.com/ and entering your postcode. You can send them a direct e-mail through that website, or write to them individually at The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP.

For more information, contact Amy Corrigan on 0131 317 4100 or e-mail amy.corrigan@rspb.org.uk

V&FA results for Scotland 2011

Volunteers have been busy conducting V&FA surveys all over Scotland with 150 volunteers visiting more than 140 farms. The average number of bird species per farm was 30, with the largest number of species recorded on a single farm this year being 59.

The table below summarises some of the most interesting results. As farming systems, landscape and habitats are incredibly variable across Scotland, these results are not a comparison between regions, but a snapshot of what was recorded in each.

Besides these results, there were some other exciting finds. For example crested tit and quail were spotted in Easter Ross. Golden eagles and red-throated divers were seen on Lewis. Black grouse were recorded on a farm in East Scotland and red kites on another. Hen harriers were seen on a couple of farms in South West Scotland as well as on Orkney.

Visit the project website at www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa or contact the V&FA Project Officer at your regional RSPB office.

Percentage of farms where birds were found

	East Scotland	Orkney & Shetland	North Scotland	South & West Scotland
Corn bunting	4	0	0	0
Cuckoo	8	5	16	19
Grey partridge	29	0	4	16
Kestrel	21	0	12	24
Lapwing	38	71	48	49
Linnet	46	43	36	49
Skylark	88	81	56	59
Starling	88	95	84	84
Tree sparrow	38	0	0	22
Yellowhammer	83	0	36	51

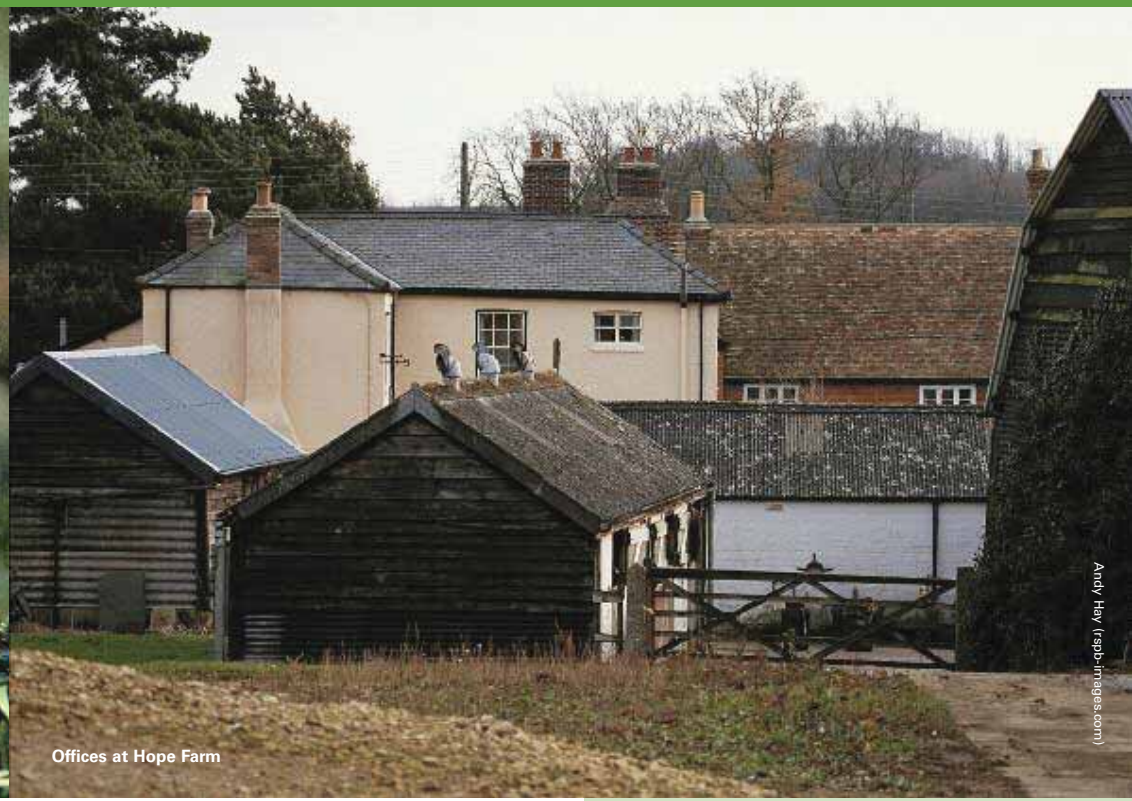
It's not yet known how spending cuts will alter the face of our countryside

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Visit www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa for information or contact the V&A Officer at your regional RSPB office

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Yellowhammers have increased at Hope Farm through our management



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Offices at Hope Farm

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.

Our analysis of this year's survey data has shown a further rise in the overall farmland bird numbers recorded at Hope Farm. 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 a 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 ha of oilseed rape in one field was devoured by rabbits, and the prolonged snow cover didn't help.

Would you like to visit Hope Farm?

We are keen to invite more groups to 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 arable farmers think they could do on their own land 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 on ian.dillon@rspb.org.uk or call 01954 267438.

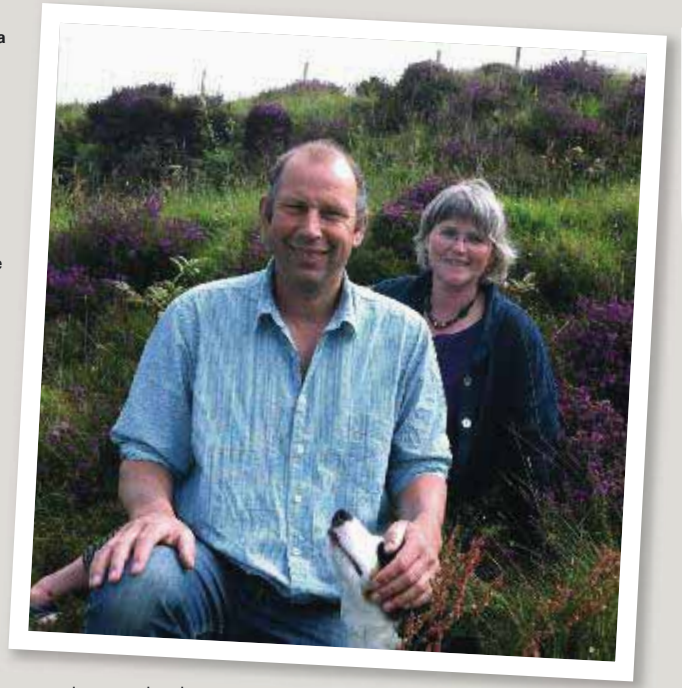
NATURE OF FARMING AWARD 2011 IN SCOTLAND

This year's Nature of Farming Awards produced a Scottish winner, but the competition was tight, with a host of high quality applications. The project partners would like to thank all of the entrants for the conservation work they are carrying out across the UK. Below is a summary of the key measures that saw the winning farms scoop up the prizes!

Winner

Somerset and Carolyne Charrington

Treshnish Farm, Argyll and Bute



Treshnish Farm is a coastal farm on the Isle of Mull. The Charrington's have owned this 750 ha mixed farm since 1994, managing it under the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme, and subsequent agri-environment schemes. Management of the different habitats on the farm has encouraged a wide range of biodiversity.

- Following an environmental audit, the sheep flock was reduced and a small cattle herd introduced. The altered grazing regime has enhanced moorland plant diversity, with increases in bog asphodel and oysterplant. Moorland birds benefit, including curlews, snipe, red grouse and short-eared owls.
- Late-cut silage fields, coupled with the creation of plots of 'early cover' have attracted corncrakes to the farm. This management has allowed rarer flowers, such as wood bitter-vetch and field gentian, to set seed and spread through the sward.
- Remnants of ancient, native woodland have been enhanced and expanded by fencing off from stock. The connected woodlands, with their regenerating understory, have attracted breeding bullfinches, lesser redpolls and siskins.
- Several wetland habitats are managed, such as ponds, coastal sedge communities and reedbeds. Otters use the ponds, and shallow pools have been created as dragonfly breeding grounds. 10 species of dragonfly have been recorded, including the rare keeled skimmer. Wetland birds such as reed buntings and sedge warblers are increasing, and moving into new areas of reedbed. Grasshopper warblers were heard reeling in 2010, for the first time.
- Pockets of gorse have been retained across the farm. This provides nesting habitat for yellowhammers and whinchats, while fenced-off patches of thistles and burdock attract large late-summer flocks of twites and goldfinches.
- Local wildlife experts have recorded a massive range of butterflies and moths at Treshnish. 17 species of butterfly, 255 species of macro moth (including the transparent burnet moth) and 94 species of micro moth have all been spotted! There is also an excellent range of orchids: 14 species have been found, including fragrant and greater butterfly orchid.

Highly commended

Ian and Tina Wightman

Clarabad Farm, Berwickshire

The Wightmans produce high-quality malting barley on their 99 ha arable unit. Due to their strong personal interest in wildlife and the environment, and aided through agri-environment schemes, they have integrated a number of measures to enhance the wildlife on their farm.

- 6 m grass margins around all barley fields. The herb-rich swards provide habitat for invertebrates, small mammals and nesting habitat for birds such as grey partridges.
- 2 ha of wild bird seed mix spread over three plots. Plots have been located to straighten field edges and so save on fuel costs. The 1-year mixes contain barley, oats, wheat, linseed, mustard and sunflowers, which provide a range of seed throughout the winter.
- Creation of a wetland area has become home to a large colony of great crested newts.
- Conservation headlands are present in all barley fields, providing further nectar and insect-rich habitat.
- Old hedgerow trees have been maintained, and provide nest holes for a colony of tree sparrows, while nest boxes have been erected for barn owls.
- A hay meadow has been sown with red clover and fine grasses such as fescues, providing nutritional forage for horses and a potential nesting site for nearby corn buntings.
- These habitats were maintained without agri-environment support for a year between Rural Stewardship Scheme and Rural Priorities, with Ian and Tina recognising the long-term benefits of their conservation efforts.
- All harvesting is carried out in-house, giving control on timings of operations. Harvesting is carried out during drier spells, reducing energy consumption and costs associated with drying of grain.

Highly commended

Michael and Shirley Clarke

Williamwood, Dumfriesshire

The Clarkes run a 115 ha lowland livestock unit near Lockerbie, with a herd of Highland cattle and a flock of Yarrow Zwartbles. Their personal interest in wildlife has led them to create a variety of habitats across the farm.

- An area of wet, rush-dominated ground is now being actively managed for wading birds such as lapwings and snipe. Rushes are topped ahead of the breeding season, stock is reduced during the breeding season, and wader scrapes have been created to increase wet feeding grounds.
- A new pond has been created with several small islands to attract breeding wildfowl. Ditches around the pond provide habitat for wetland plants and amphibians.
- A wild flower meadow has been sown next to the pond to provide nectar and pollen-rich habitat for invertebrates. Creeping thistles are being removed by hand during the early years, assisting the establishment of less competitive species.
- Barn owl nest boxes have been placed across the farm.
- Numerous tree sparrow nest boxes have been erected next to the wetland area—an ideal location which attracted them initially.
- New hedgerows have been planted away from the open, wet fields — providing all the benefits of new hedgerows, but not negatively impacting on open fields that are used by waders.
- Seasonally-grazed areas have increased the number of orchids and other flowering plants.
- 4 half-hectare plots of wild bird cover have been established across the holding.
- The Clarkes have carried out this work despite an unsuccessful Rural Priorities application, believing as they do in their responsibility to integrate conservation management into their farming system. They plan to re-apply in the future.

For more information contact Katie Berry on 0131 317 4169 or e-mail katie.berry@rspb.org.uk

To enter your farm in 2012 call 01767 680551 or visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming

The V&FA in the Highlands and Western Isles

With more than ten successful years of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance project (V&FA) elsewhere in the UK, free farmland bird surveys became available to farmers and crofters in the far-flung reaches of the Highlands and Western Isles for the first time in 2010, thanks to a grant from the EU LIFE+ Programme.

Living and working in such remote areas often presents challenges. For example, farmers, crofters and volunteers have to scramble to make the most of any windows of good weather. Perhaps the greatest challenge for newly-appointed Project Officer for North Scotland, Katy Malone, has been to find suitable volunteers in the areas where farms and crofts have registered for V&FA surveys. Most agricultural land holdings are far away from population centres, so often some detective work is required to track down those elusive bird watchers who have the time to do the surveys!

"Virtually everyone I asked was happy to help," Katy is pleased to report. "There is such a strong community spirit up here, and volunteers are happy to help their farming and crofting neighbours by finding out what birds are breeding on their ground. The results can also aid and guide agri-environment applications as they can show that farmers plan to manage for species that already occur on their land.

"The best response I've had has been from the Western Isles. I sent a letter to all the RSPB members there and was overwhelmed by the number of positive replies. I was able to go over and run a training course for all the new volunteers. With a quarter of the farm/croft applications for North Scotland this year from that area, I couldn't be happier that so many volunteers have come forward to help out."

A volunteer in the Highlands described his experience last year as: "...a special experience ... over a number of visits, I began to feel a familiarity with the varied terrain (open pasture with woodland fringes and marsh) as we moved from spring into summer. I felt this was my own private nature reserve with sightings of osprey overhead, snipe drumming, other breeding waders, warblers and some wonderful views of redstarts.

"There was other wildlife around too. Deer rushing through the open wetlands – they were always present. A particular thrill was watching two badgers come out of their sett one evening. It was good to think that the data collected was of value to both the farmer and the RSPB."

For more information, contact Katy Malone on 01463 715000 or e-mail katy.malone@rspb.org.uk

Deer can be spotted by lucky volunteers on their early morning surveys

Grahame Madge (rspb-images.com)

It's official – grant schemes can work well for birds

New research has revealed that if agricultural grant schemes are targeted effectively, they can transform the fortunes of one of Scotland's fastest declining birds. The value of agri-environment schemes for corn bunting conservation was examined in an in-depth study. The research has been recently published in *The Journal of Applied Ecology*.

Corn bunting numbers have plummeted in recent years, despite being a once-common bird in many parts of the UK. Gradual changes in farming methods have made safe nesting sites and food sources less common. The corn bunting, sometimes known as the 'fat bird of the barley', prefers nesting in growing crops, making it vulnerable to harvesting operations. It eats large insects in summer, and grain and weed seeds in winter. The Scottish population is now restricted to East Scotland and the Western Isles, with perhaps only 850 breeding pairs remaining.

Agri-environment grants offer financial incentives to farmers to adopt methods which are sympathetic to wildlife, and can be managed as part of some conventional farm systems. It is hoped these methods will boost corn bunting populations. There is a national scheme to benefit wildlife in general, including farmland birds, and, led by RSPB Scotland with support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), there is also a bespoke targeted management scheme specifically for corn buntings. This is backed by face-to-face advisory support.

The study by RSPB Scotland, which looked at more than 70 farms in East Scotland over seven years, found that corn bunting populations continued to decline rapidly on farms outside agri-environment schemes, but remained roughly stable in numbers on farms in the main national agri-environment scheme. There was a marked increase where targeted corn bunting management with advisory support was provided, but only a quarter of the corn bunting population currently benefits from this management. Halting the decline would need this approach to be extended to almost three-quarters of the population. The cost of this would be £120,000 each year, or just 0.02% of the total subsidy for farming in Scotland.

This study highlights the vital importance of tailored schemes in halting farmland bird declines and the need to deliver management to a sufficient proportion of the population. Ensuring sufficient funds are devoted to targeted agri-environment schemes is critical. The study also highlights the importance of monitoring the effects of agri-environment spending, to assess its effectiveness, allow adaptive improvement of schemes, and help inform future spending decisions.

For more information contact Hywel Maggs on 01224 624824 or e-mail hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk

An RSPB study found that corn buntings can benefit from agri-environment scheme

Tom Marshall (rspb-images.com)

The Wader-Friendly Farming Initiative

Last year we launched the Wader-Friendly Farming Initiative (WFFI) which is a partnership project between RSPB Scotland, the National Farmers Union of Scotland (NFUS), Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF) and the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC). It was set up to encourage the uptake of management techniques to help breeding waders on farmland. Central to the project is the recognition that these charismatic species depend on active farming, and that numerous farmers across Scotland are already carrying out management to benefit these birds.

By signing up to the initiative, farmers get free advice about the best choice of management techniques for their land. Waders are found across a wide range of farming systems, so advice is tailored to different farming set-ups. All participants are offered free advisory visits to provide individual face-to-face advice on management options for these birds, to discuss issues that farmers feel may be having an impact in their local area, and to provide information on funding options available through the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP).

Some of the management advice is low cost or no cost, such as avoiding rolling wet areas during the breeding season, creating a wader scrape, and details on how to assess whether birds are breeding in fields prior to operations. There are costs associated with other techniques, such as reducing rush cover in key fields, although support is available through the Land Managers Options scheme.

The initiative builds on some strong partnership projects between RSPB Scotland, other agencies and farmers in some key wader hotspots. We provide free advice and support, draw up habitat management plans, and submit SRDP applications. These projects aim to direct SRDP funding to regions where the species are known to be at high densities.

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Lapwings can benefit from targeted management

This scheme has been set up in response to some recent declines, and with the knowledge that targeted management for these birds can be made by tweaking farming operations, as opposed to wholesale changes – as long as the desire is there.

Nigel Miller, President of NFUS agrees: *"Farmers pilot their way round nests in our fields with machinery, but we must go a step further. Outlining management which starts to increase the number of waders on farms is of real value and will have our support."*

There are a number of schemes within the main initiative, tailored to particular areas.

1. Strathspey Wetlands and Waders Initiative
A partnership between RSPB Scotland, SAC, Cairngorms National Park Authority, CKD Galbraith, Smiths Gore and farms on the floodplains of the River Spey and its tributaries. Using the initiative, more than 50 farms have submitted plans for SRDP-funded management for waders. The project also covers policy, research and other land management work.

2. Clyde Valley Wader Initiative
A partnership between RSPB Scotland, SAC and farmers in the Clyde Valley and tributaries such as the Duneaton Water and the Medwin. Through the project, 37 farms have entered into SRDP-funded management for waders. Enhanced monitoring and 'aftercare' is planned for future years.

3. Caithness Wetlands and Waders Initiative
A partnership between RSPB Scotland, SAC, and farms in the wader-rich wetlands and grasslands of Caithness. This is still in its early stages, but eight SRDP plans have been submitted.

4. Grampian Wader Initiative
A partnership between RSPB Scotland, SNH, SAC, other consultants and farmers. This aims to monitor and maximise current action and make sure appropriate management is taken up and deployed on 20 farms in Buchan, Strathdon and Tomintoul.

5. Tayside Wader Survey
Aims to survey wader sites across Tayside. Key sites will be surveyed in 2012, with other suitable areas surveyed in 2013.

You can sign up to the Initiative by visiting www.rspb.org.uk/waderfriendlyfarming or for more information contact Chris Bailey on 0131 317 4100 or e-mail chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk

Scotland's farmers praised for supporting wildlife last winter

Scotland's farmland birds were thrown a valuable lifeline last winter thanks to continued use of seed-rich wild bird cover plots across the country. In the previous issue of *Field of View* we included an article on maximising the delivery of wild bird cover plots and discussed specific seed mixtures that we have trialled. Many farmers in East Scotland have been managing such seed mixes and during the winter of 2010/11 these have attracted tens of thousands of birds.

With the prolonged snow and ice, the plots acted as giant bird tables, providing a range of seed for birds struggling to find food. At the height of the bad weather, about 13,000 birds were recorded in a 2 ha plot of land on a farm in Angus. Douglas and Robin Brunton's farm near Arbroath was visited by 5,000 skylarks, 2,500 bramblings, 1,700 yellowhammers, 700 reed buntings, 600 snow buntings and 105 corn buntings, among thousands of other birds. Douglas and Robin introduced the wild bird cover last year after joining an RSPB-led project to help the corn bunting. They said the reason for the wild bird cover was to provide nesting habitat and winter food to support the corn bunting population. The winter feed had been more successful than anticipated and they had been very pleased that more than 100 corn buntings had been seen feeding in the crop. Douglas added: "The huge flocks of other birds feeding there show how necessary this type of crop is when the weather is severe. It's good that we can fit these types of crops into our arable rotation."

For several species, such as corn buntings and yellowhammers, the lack of winter food has been a significant factor in their population declines. Scotland experienced one of its worst winters for over four decades, and we believe the use of wild bird cover had never been so important.

Wild bird cover plots can be financially supported through Scotland's agri-environment scheme, for which every farmer can apply. Hywel Maggs, Conservation Officer with RSPB Scotland said: "It was a difficult time for all types of wildlife, and it is fair to say that many more farmland birds would have perished in the cold without such feeding havens.

"The plots are sown with a mixture of seed-bearing crops such as oats, barley, triticale, mustard and linseed, providing a variety of seeds for different species over the winter months. Thanks go to those farmers who have already taken the time to incorporate them into their land and we hope, with the continued support of agri-environment grants, that others will be able to follow their example."

Research suggests that between 1 and 2 ha of wild bird cover in every 100 ha of farmland can sustain the local farmland bird population over the winter months, and RSPB Scotland has been encouraging others to consider putting plots in for next winter.

For more information contact Hywel Maggs on 01224 624824 or at hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk

Hywel Maggs (RSPB)

Providing winter food for farmland birds has been more successful than we ever anticipated

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

Kathryn Smith (RSPB)

Come and visit RSPB stands at the major agricultural shows in 2012

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 are going along to – please come and have a chat with us.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please visit **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**

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 conversations 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

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're 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 for more information.

Stephen Blain (RSPB)

Every so often, waxwings flood to the UK from Scandinavia

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit www.farmwildlife.info

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

GET MORE INFO www.rspb.org.uk or e-mail: v&fa@rspb.org.uk

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South and West Scotland Regional Office
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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.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654 223-0675-10-11