for birds
for people
for ever

Field of view

The RSPB newsletter for the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project

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It's great: and it's growing

Thanks to your enthusiasm and willingness to participate, the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) Project has grown from an idea to a productive collaboration between farmers and volunteers. The map shows how many farms have been surveyed since 1999.

We would like to thank all the farmers who have invited volunteers onto their land. More than a thousand volunteers have given their time to survey birds on farms – thank you, too.

The staggering amount of interest shown by farmers and volunteers is an inspiration to RSPB staff and reinforces our belief that by working together with the farming community we can reverse the decline of farmland birds.

Jenny Atkins
V&FA Project Manager
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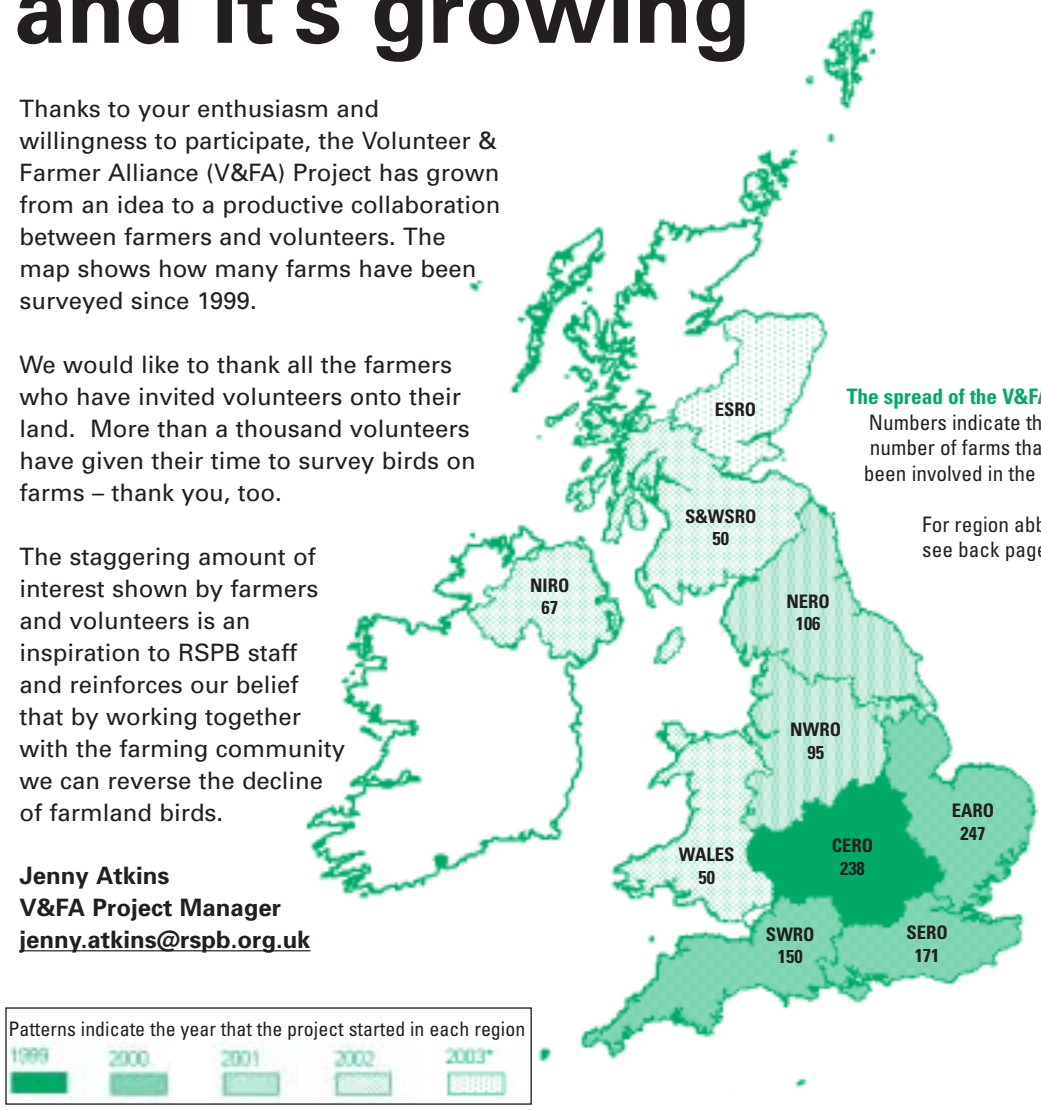

The spread of the V&FA Project
Numbers indicate the total number of farms that have been involved in the project

For region abbreviations, see back page

Agricultural advice now on web

New advisory sheets for farmers have been launched on the RSPB website along with our improved farming pages, accessible via **www.rspb.org.uk/farming**. There is an e-mail link for you to send questions and comments back to us.

We are also hoping to set up a web-based discussion group for farmers on conservation matters. This will be an independent website with a wide range of conservation advisers from the agricultural sector involved. Launched initially with a small group of interested farmers, it could be expanded if demand is high enough. Conservation advisers will be invited to raise ideas and answer queries posted on the site.

For further information please contact Richard Winspear on 01767 680551 or richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk

Please circulate this to interested parties

New Environmental Impact Assessment regulations

Since 1 February 2002, farmers and landowners have had to consider the potential environmental effects of land use change. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) help to inform decision-making and enable decisions on land-use change to be taken with the full knowledge of the likely environmental consequences. EIA procedures now apply to **uncultivated** land or **semi-natural** areas intended for intensive agricultural purposes.

Uncultivated or semi-natural areas of land include unimproved grassland, heath and moorland, such as:

- meadows and grazing pastures
- downland or upland grassland
- lowland and coastal heathland
- moorland and upland rough grazing.

The type of operations that may be subject to EIA on uncultivated land or semi-natural areas include:

- cultivations, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing, discing and reseeding
- spreading soil or other material, including fertiliser or lime in excess of existing routine application rates
- drainage works, except for routine maintenance and renewal of existing drainage
- modifications to watercourses, apart from routine maintenance
- introducing livestock at intensive stocking rates, or increasing stocking rates to intensive levels.

For further information on EIA regulations and procedures visit the DEFRA web site at www.defra.gov.uk/environ/eia or telephone 0800 028 2140 or write to EIA Unit, Rural Development Service, DEFRA, Coley Park, Reading RG1 6DT.

Mapping our work

To show the amount of work we carry out with the farming community we have produced *The RSPB: working with farmers* agriculture projects map. From species recovery and advisory projects to the V&FA, and from research to land management initiatives, we are working with around 2,500 farmers and crofters annually. **Copies of the map are available from project staff if you would like one.**

Birds of Conservation Concern

The Population status of birds in the UK – Birds of Conservation Concern: 2002-2007 is a list agreed by a group of the UK's statutory and non-governmental bird conservation organisations in 2002, chaired by the RSPB.

The group reviewed the status of the 247 species of birds which occur regularly in the UK, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man and divided them into Red, Amber and Green lists.

The Red List comprises 40 species whose populations or range are rapidly declining, either recently or historically, and those of global conservation concern.

The Amber List comprises 121 species whose populations are in moderate decline, rare breeders, those that are internationally important, restricted to a small number of sites, or have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe.

All other species occurring in the UK, the Channel Islands and Isle of Man are on the Green List. These are increasing, stable or have decreased only slightly and should be monitored to enable any future changes to be detected.

A previous *Birds of Conservation Concern* focused attention on a suite of widespread but rapidly declining birds of farmed land, such as the turtle dove, the skylark and the corn bunting. All the birds of farmed land that were on the Red List in earlier assessments are still there. Some other farmland birds such as the yellowhammer and house sparrow have now joined them. This shows the importance of the work we are doing for these species.

The species mapped on V&FA maps are shown in the appropriate colour to indicate which category they fall into at the time of map production.

Copies of this document are available on our website or from V&FA project staff in your region/country.

V&FA facts and figures

Between 1999 and 2001, the results of the V&FA surveys undertaken across England indicated that:

- 62% of the farms surveyed across the country had house sparrows
- surveys in the south west have never recorded tree sparrows
- 65% of the farms surveyed in East Anglia had turtle doves
- surveys in the south east have never recorded quails
- more farms had bullfinches in Central England than elsewhere
- lapwings were found on more farms in the north and north west
- surveys in the north west have never recorded corn buntings
- in the north, skylarks were found on 100% of the farms during 2001
- the starling is the most common bird on any farm, closely followed by the blackbird and then the skylark.

During 2002, in the absence of any analysis, we know that:

- more than 65,000 hectares of farmland were surveyed
- approximately 850 farms were surveyed across the UK
- more than 1,000 volunteers took part, in both the field and in offices.

Personal thanks

Dear RSPB

Would you please pass my very grateful thanks on to your three volunteers for their work here. It has been so interesting to see which birds are here; some expected and some not. I do hope the scheme has been a success.

Yours

Susanna Gorst – Farmer

Hope for farmland birds

Government, conservation bodies and the farming community have taken on a very demanding challenge – reversing the declines of many once common birds in the countryside. To do so requires solutions that are well thought out, backed up with evidence of their success and have the support of the farming community. The RSPB bought an arable farm in Cambridgeshire, publicising it as Hope Farm, to develop and trial some new techniques that were practical and relevant to modern farming and would provide some of the solutions to farmland bird declines.

Our first full-scale trial is in winter wheat, exploring the relationship between crop structure and skylark nesting success. RSPB research has identified that skylarks are more productive in spring-sown wheat compared with autumn-sown wheat. This is thought to be due to differences in the density and height of the crop in late spring and early summer. Providing more openings in the autumn-sown wheat, either by leaving small areas unsown or widening the space between the rows, may be the way to increase skylark productivity without reducing profits. We are halfway through a two year trial and at this stage are not in a position to make firm recommendations about managing winter wheat for skylarks.
Pre-arranged visits to the farm for groups of farmers and their advisers are possible and anyone wishing to bring a group should contact Roger Buisson. More information can be obtained from the RSPB web site (under the name Hope Farm) or directly from Roger Buisson.

Dr Roger Buisson
Manager, Lowland Farm Project
roger.buisson@rspb.org.uk

Skylark

C Gomersall (RSPB Images)

House sparrows

C Gomersall (RSPB Images)

House sparrow

Thank you to all of you who helped with the Oxford University House Sparrow questionnaire. Designed to give a snapshot of how these familiar birds are faring on farms, unsurprisingly it has confirmed recent reports that life for house sparrows is much more challenging now. Across England, more than a third of farms (39%) have seen their sparrow numbers fall with 10% reporting complete loss. This trend is worrying as these birds do not move far in their life – so restoring populations in areas from which they have disappeared is difficult. Grain store regulations and building improvements are both believed to contribute to reductions in the availability of food supplies and nest-sites on farms. Farmers across the UK have already been responding by putting up house sparrow nest boxes and feeding tailings through the winter.

If you would like more information, please contact your local V&FA project staff: see back page.

Birdwatching with a purpose

Thousands of people go into the countryside, many to visit reserves owned by the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust and others for the pleasure of being out and about: no problem, it is enjoyable.

I go out on occasions as an RSPB ambassador working as a volunteer in the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance scheme.

Why? You may or may not see an unusual species, but you will have the privilege and pleasure of being allowed to survey private land (keeping to the boundaries and avoiding potential hazards of course).

First, you meet the farmer who will show you around and tell you which crops are growing in various fields. This is followed by three or four visits (April to June) to do a survey and record on a map the birds (and other wildlife) that you see. Surveys last from three to five hours, preferably starting at about 7am when you should see most activity, but it's good to have an alternative date in mind in case it is wet or windy when the birds will be hiding.

What good does it do? The RSPB local office will analyse the information you supply, highlighting species in serious decline. The farmer is notified of these birds and may be able to delay mowing or hedge cutting to avoid nests. Advice can be given on how to encourage species in decline. For example, spring sown crops help skylarks and winter stubble provides food and habitat. We also hope that less powerful chemicals can be encouraged.

If good numbers of some key species are listed, it might possibly help with grant aid of some kind (such as the Countryside Stewardship Scheme).

Many farmers have been criticised for the way in which land is managed but most changes in recent years have been through the Common Agriculture Policy and EU funding. Farmers have to make a living in spite of swine fever, BSE, Foot & Mouth etc. If we help them, it will also help the ecosystem.

All you do is look for and map birds. No canvassing. Whatever happens you will have seen areas not open to others and know that you have done something to help our feathered friends and a local farmer.

Peter Clayton, V&FA volunteer and Lowestoft RSPB local group member

Does conservation pay?

In the current climate of financial pressures on the farming industry, there has been concern about the true costs of integrating wildlife conservation into commercial farming. The RSPB contracted a Rural Business Consultancy to look at eight farms across England that had undertaken conservation management for farmland birds. Seven were in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme while one was within an Environmentally Sensitive Area agreement. In total, conservation work had a positive impact on the farm budget on six of the eight farms. The two exceptions were where additional conservation work was conducted outside agri-environment schemes. Agri-environment schemes are not set up to make big profits, but these case studies show that schemes that balance the needs of wildlife and the farm can make a modest profit and certainly should not make a net loss.

For further information please contact Richard Winspear on 01767 680551 or richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk

Operation Lapwing

Many farmers are at the forefront of the fight to save lapwings. There has been a dramatic fall in the total number breeding in the UK – by around half in the last 10 years. Whilst in Scotland lapwings are doing well, in some other areas, particularly in the south and west of the UK, declines are very severe. The move away from mixed farming systems, the shift from spring to winter cropping and the intensification of grassland management are known to be key causes of these declines.

To help farmers, in late summer the RSPB launched *Operation Lapwing*. Simple five-point plans for different farming systems (arable, livestock and uplands) have been designed to help farmers provide the sparse vegetation for nesting and good supplies of earthworms and insects that these birds need.

Farmers can obtain a copy of the five-point plan, request a *Lapwing management pack* (providing detailed advice) and can enter our regional and national Lapwing Champion Competition via **lapwings@rspb.org.uk.**

A number of local lapwing projects also exist. Lapwing Lifeline Schemes have been established in the Dee Estuary, Cheshire, Shropshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Dorset and other parts of the south west. Through these, farmers receive help from RSPB staff and volunteers who:

- locate lapwing nests in crops so that they can be avoided during agricultural operations
- provide farm-specific advice on management for lapwings
- help farmers look into agri-environment schemes, as a means of funding management to help lapwings.

Farmers on the South Downs, whose land was thought to support lapwings, have also been offered on-farm advice. The South Downs Lapwing Project located breeding lapwings using information from farmers, RSPB volunteers and members of the public.

The Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) includes a breeding lapwing option for farmers in the Countryside Management Scheme. The RSPB/DARD Agri-Environment Officer works to develop the advice DARD gives to farmers on positive management for lapwings and associated payment rates.

If you would like more information on Operation Lapwing or any of the local initiatives, because you are a farmer or a prospective volunteer, please contact V&FA project staff at your local office: see the back page of this newsletter.

C Gomersall (RSPB Images)

Lapwing

Homes for tree sparrows

Tree sparrows are benefiting from help from farmers and volunteers alike this winter, as many projects continue to build on the good work which began in 2001. These farmland birds have undergone a serious decline of 95% since 1970 and the tree sparrow has now disappeared from many areas in Scotland, Wales and South West England. It is on the Red List and the RSPB is involved in an active programme to halt and reverse its dramatic decline.

Many landowners in counties that still support tree sparrows have been contacted and are working together with volunteers in a number of ways:

- building, erecting and monitoring nest boxes on more than 30 new sites in 2002, in addition to the 150 nest boxes installed on 12 farms in 2001 in Central England
- supplementary feeding of wheat tailings and weed seeds at six known tree sparrow wintering areas in East Anglia, which has resulted in over 180 individual birds being observed at one site. More than 100 nest boxes are due to be installed on new sites this autumn
- farmers in South East England are to be offered advisory information, and a visit by an RSPB staff member to discuss ways in which they can increase and protect their colonies of tree sparrows
- winter feeding and nest boxes have been established at a reserve and a museum in Northern Ireland, with more sites to be established over the next three years. Local schools and community groups will also become involved in this initiative
- emergency winter feeding on two sites in Wales has led to more than 40 birds being recorded on one of these sites. Volunteers and staff are now looking to work more closely with local groups undertaking tree sparrow recovery work
- a partnership project between the RSPB and Severn Trent Water has led to the erection of feeding stations and nest box schemes on sewage works, reservoirs and farms across Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands, Warwickshire, Worcester and Wales.

We know from long term data sets held by the British Trust for Ornithology that measures of individual nest success have actually increased during the period of decline. This suggests that the causes of decline lie either in survival rates or the inability of females to nest several times during the breeding season. By providing a nest box and/or a food supply over the winter period, we hope to reverse the decline and save this charming farmland bird.

If you would like more information, please contact your local V&FA project staff: see back page of the newsletter for contact details.

Andy Hay (RSPB Images)

Tree sparrow

Research results on wild bird cover for seed-eating birds

The Game Conservancy Trust and British Trust for Ornithology have just completed a three-year study on the use of wild bird cover by birds through the winter. Their main findings were:

- kale, cereals, quinoa, linseed, rape and turnips were the most popular crops for a wide range of birds
- good two-year mixes are kale and cereal (if sown in March or early April to get a good cereal yield) or kale and quinoa (if sown in late April or early May because quinoa is not frost hardy)
- cereal and linseed provides a good annual seed mix (rape can be used instead of linseed, but can be difficult to establish if there is a problem with woodpigeons)
- triticale is a better cereal to use than wheat or barley because it sheds the grain later in the winter and so is available for longer
- plots of less than one hectare generally ran out of seed before the winter was over
- plots next to hedges were more popular with most species, but skylarks and corn buntings preferred crops away from trees and tall hedges
- grey partridges, tree sparrows and reed buntings preferred weedy cover crops
- bird numbers using the plots generally increased from October to December and then declined through to March.

Achieving the vision

The RSPB has launched a report setting out steps to put Northern Ireland's vision for sustainable farming into practice. The report *Achieving the vision,* recommends action to reinvigorate Northern Ireland's countryside, including:

- environmental standards
- increased payments for the public services agriculture provides
- a broad and shallow agri-environment scheme for all farmers.

Agriculture has unique economic, social and environmental importance in the province. The RSPB has been invited to participate in the Rural Stakeholders' Forum and will call on government to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the mid-term review proposals.

For more information contact Giles Knight at the RSPB Northern Ireland HQ or giles.knight@rspb.org.uk

Welsh black grouse boost

The RSPB's Welsh black grouse recovery project ended its first phase on a high note with a population increase of more than a third.

This year's survey counted 202 displaying males on the project's six key sites, compared with 143 pairs in 1998 at the start of the project, when black grouse numbers were dangerously low.

The project has helped pull the black grouse back from the brink of extinction in Wales. The key to its success has been a co-operative effort between conservationists, farmers, landowners and foresters.

The recovery project was funded by the European Agriculture Guidance and Guarantee Fund with investment from the RSPB and the National Assembly for Wales.

For more information contact Patrick Lindley at the RSPB North Wales Office or patrick.lindley@rspb.org.uk

Steve Knell (RSPB Images)

Black grouse.

Do you know someone who can help?

The V&FA project got under way in Wales, South and West Scotland and Northern Ireland this year after the unfortunate delay last year, brought about by Foot and Mouth disease. Next year, all three regions hope to increase the number of new farms surveyed to 80, while East Scotland is hoping to start the project with 40 farms.

To do this they will need at least 40 more volunteers across each of the regions! Do you know of anyone who would like to volunteer for the V&FA project next year? We need enthusiastic people who can identify farmland birds by sight and sound, can commit to three or four early morning surveys – that's a 7am start – and are able to walk around on uneven ground for about four hours.

Full training is available on becoming an ambassador for the RSPB and on survey techniques and of course there will be the opportunity to help the RSPB help a farmer! If you do know of anyone, please pass on the contact details of project staff and perhaps pass on this newsletter. Any of our project staff will be more than happy to provide more details.

What do the farmers think of the V&FA. . .

To determine customer satisfaction and project success, we sent questionnaires to 200 farmers in England last Christmas, of which 120 replied. The analysis of the results indicate that:

- 98% felt the experience was worthwhile
- 70% had species they had not previously known were there
- 85% implemented our farmland bird management guidelines
- 26% used the results to support Countryside Stewardship applications
- 64% are now more favourably inclined towards the RSPB
- 96% are happy to be contacted again by project staff.

Thank you for replying and for your constructive comments. It is much appreciated.

. . . and what do the volunteers have to say?

Project staff also sent volunteers a satisfaction questionnaire. With a response rate of 67%, results from 2000 and 2001 show that:

- 66% did not encounter problems whilst surveying
- 33% had never undertaken bird surveys before
- 65% had volunteered for the RSPB before
- 75% enjoyed participating in the scheme
- 67% would definitely participate in the future.

Many thanks for your thoughts and responses. They do help us to improve the project. We will continue to use both questionnaires in the future.

Getting the message out

From saving isolated populations such as stone-curlews to safeguarding skylarks across the UK, around 2,500 farmers are working together with the RSPB each year to help farmland birds.

This newsletter profiles a number of the co-operative projects that are underway and we remain committed to this work – which can create benefits for all concerned.

We are keen to let other farmers and the public know about the good work you are doing. Occasionally opportunities arise for talks or other media work in your area.

If you would like more information, please contact your local V&FA project staff: see below.

Please contact V&FA project staff at RSPB country and regional offices:
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL Tel: 01767 680551
Central England Regional Office (CERO) 46 The Green, South Bar, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9AB Tel: 01295 253330
East Anglia Regional Office (EARO) Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road, Norwich NR1 1UD Tel: 01603 661662
North England Regional Office (NERO) 4 Benton Terrace, Sandyford Road, Newcastle NE2 1QU Tel: 0191 281 3366
North West England Regional Office (NWRO) Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Denby Dale, Huddersfield HD8 8QD Tel: 01484 861148
South East England Regional Office (SERO) 2nd Floor, Frederick House, 42 Frederick Place, Brighton, E Sussex BN1 4EA Tel: 01273 775333
South West England Regional Office (SWRO) Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter, Devon EX1 1NT Tel: 01392 432691
Northern Ireland Headquarters (NIRO) Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 4QT Tel: 028 9049 1547
Scotland Headquarters Dunedin House, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP Tel: 0131 311 6500
East Scotland Regional Office (ESRO) 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP Tel: 01224 624824
S and W Scotland Regional Office (S&WSRO) Unit 3.1, West of Scotland Science Park, Kelvin Campus, Glasgow G20 0SP Tel: 0141 576 4100
North Wales Office Maes y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW Tel: 01248 363800
RSPB website: **www.rspb.org.uk**

RSPB BirdLife INTERNATIONAL

The RSPB is the charity that takes action for wild birds and the environment. It works with bird and habitat conservation organisations in a global partnership called BirdLife International.

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