



a million
voices for
nature

The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects **FIELD OF VIEW**

ISSUE 10 NOVEMBER 2011



Seamus Burns (RSPB)

Habitat restoration at Lough Beg – part of Futurescapes programme funded by HELP. Read more about it on page 9

Welcome to the Northern Ireland issue

As many of the opportunities for farmers to help wildlife vary between the four countries of the UK, we are now producing different newsletters for each country, so welcome to the Northern Ireland issue.

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

We profile our local winner and highly commended farmers of this year's Nature of Farming Award, who represent some of the best examples of farmers here who are stepping up for nature.

We have worked closely with thousands of farmers to develop practical advice that can make a real difference to the wildlife value of farmland and other habitats. Inside, we discuss work that is being done to help critically threatened species like the chough and corncrake and two major projects being implemented to help save our biodiversity – Futurescapes and HELP. We couldn't

do this work without the ongoing support of farmers. There is also news of an idea to help wildlife in silage fields.

Last, but not least, we have feedback from you on the advice and support we offer. We are keen to hear from farmers and supporters about how we can best help wildlife-friendly farming in the future. You can follow and comment on our agricultural work online through the new RSPB farming blog.

For more information and a link to the farming blog, visit the project website at www.rpsb.org.uk/farming



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

- In this issue:**
- **The Nature of Farming Award results**
 - **Woodland life**
 - **Stepping Up For Nature**
 - **CAP reform**
 - **V&FA results**
 - **Big Garden Birdwatch**

**NORTHERN
IRELAND**



Woodland management, such as coppicing, helps woodland wildlife

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Woodland life

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

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

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

Several bird species that rely on woodland, including the hawfinch and wood warbler, have declined markedly since 1970. Although we don't fully understand why, we know the features they need – coppice, sunny glades and rides, and mature trees with spreading crowns – are disappearing.

The cost of heating fuels is high, and likely to stay so, and this is driving a new demand for wood fuel (logs and woodchip) that is unlikely to be just a passing fad. Harvesting to provide

things such as wood fuel or fencing stakes also provides the woodland structure that wildlife needs, even in small copses.

Forest Service can provide grant aid and advice to help you create and manage woodland. There are two schemes available – the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme and the Woodland Grant Scheme, the latter of which provides funding to create new or replant existing woodlands.

For more information, contact Nigel Symes on 01767 680551 or e-mail nigel.symes@rspb.org.uk

Stepping Up For Nature



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.

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

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

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

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

Nature is amazing. Nature is in trouble. Let's step up and save it – together. For more information, visit www.rspb.org.uk/steppingup



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

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

V&FA highlights in 2011

Northern Ireland has seen yet another year with a wealth of interest from farmers and volunteers wanting to participate in the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) project.

Over 70 dedicated volunteers were busy conducting farmland bird surveys between the months of May and July. Thanks to their help over 60 interested farmers now know more about the birds on their farms or in their local area and what they can do to help them.

The table below summarises some of this year's most interesting results. As farming systems, landscapes and habitats vary so much throughout the counties, so too do the types of bird you would expect to see in certain areas. This table provides a general snapshot of the birds found on

farmland throughout all of Northern Ireland. The average number of bird species per farm this year was 30, and the largest number of species recorded on a single farm was 50.

Percentage of farms where birds were found in Northern Ireland

Cuckoo	10%
Curlew	8%
Kestrel	12%
Lapwing	4%
Linnet	37%
Skylark	17%
Snipe	6%
Starling	88%
Tree sparrow	37%
Yellowhammer	19%

Besides the results there were some other exciting finds. For example, after hundreds of years of being extinct in

Northern Ireland and following its reintroduction back in 2008, a red kite was recorded on a farm survey – a V&FA first! A handful of surveyors were also lucky enough to glimpse the sight of a barn owl whilst doing their surveys, this is great news as these birds are now so rare here.

With little more than one year of LIFE+ funding currently remaining for the project, we are likely to see a rush of interest from farmers keen to learn more about what they have on their farms in 2012. If you or someone you know is interested in being matched with a volunteer who will carry out a bird survey please get in touch sooner rather than later to avoid disappointment.

For more information, contact Patsy Harbinson on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail patsy.harbinson@rspb.org.uk

CAP reform – devil in the detail

As we move closer to 2013, the CAP reform debate is picking up pace. In June, the European Commission released a draft proposal of the EU budget for 2014-2020. This budget dictates what the EU will spend on agriculture and rural development over the seven-year period.

The lead-up to the budget announcement was a worrying time, as rumours suggested that rural development, and therefore agri-environment, was going to face a significant cut. In response to this, the RSPB, along with BirdLife International conducted an e-action campaign that asked President Barroso to continue to fund agri-environment schemes and wildlife-friendly farming.

The voice of our supporters was heard and rural development funding is not being cut to the extent we expected. Without agri-environment schemes in the UK and EU, wildlife-friendly farming would become extremely difficult, and the outstanding work that many farmers have been doing would have been all but lost.

The legislative proposals for the CAP were released on the 12th of October 2011, outlining a range of measures for the period 2014-2020. At this stage the RSPB believes the proposals are inadequate to meet the needs of both the agriculture industry and civil society. Our response to the challenges of biodiversity decline, food security, climate change and water quality will define this generation.

The RSPB will continue to play a valuable role in defending the need for agricultural funding in Northern Ireland to pay for the delivery of safe, healthy and sustainable supplies of food. This should be done by paying farmers for the delivery of valuable public goods such as maintaining the productive capacity of the land by conserving biodiversity, contributing to climate adaptation and playing a greater role in maintaining good water quality.

For more information, contact John Martin on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail john.martin@rspb.org.uk



Finding out what birds are using the farm is the first step when it comes to helping them

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Retention of winter stubbles – one of the wildlife-friendly farming options supported by agri-environment schemes

Claire Barnett (RSPB)

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD 2011

The Nature of Farming Award, the UK's largest farmland wildlife award, is run by the RSPB each year, supported by Ulster Farmers Union, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife, with sponsorship from *The Telegraph*. It is a great way to congratulate farmers who are going that extra mile to help the wildlife on their farm.

The judging panel visited some amazing places across the province and met some truly inspirational farmers. After much deliberation by the judging panel, we whittled this year's applications down to four strong contenders for the award. The results of the winning and highly commended farmers were announced at the Balmoral Show. Here they are:

Winner Martin Hamilton and Gary Adams

Comber, Co. Down

Martin's farms are spread over two different sites. One is an intensive mixed arable/vegetable farm near Comber, where they grow a range of vegetables that are used for mashed potato and cabbage products, cooked on-site and sold under the Mash Direct brand. The other site is his home farm on the shores of Strangford Lough. It is sensitively managed to benefit the wildlife in the area. Cereals are sown during the spring and when cut the remaining stubble is left untouched over the winter, so seed-eating birds can feed amongst it for spilt grain and weed seed. Mammals thrive on this farm, including shrews, field mice and Irish hares, which can be seen feeding near the shore. Gary, the farm manager, stole the judges' hearts when he spoke about both these areas and how sustainability is one of their main business objectives. We were delighted to see how quite an intensive and economically successful operation can be managed whilst keeping wildlife and the environment in mind. Congratulations!



Highly commended Brendan Tumelty

Downpatrick, Co. Down

Brendan's mixed farm is in the heart of Northern Ireland's main arable region and has a lot of critically endangered species such as yellowhammer, tree sparrow and linnets using it year-round. For these reasons, Brendan has enjoyed a long involvement working with the RSPB as part of the yellowhammer project. Like the other farmers involved, he has wild bird cover but he also has fields of barley unsprayed so insects and weeds can thrive, benefiting the birds that feed their young insects in the summer and that also eat the seeds of the weeds. After hearing about the plight of the barn owl in Northern Ireland (NI), Brendan constructed and erected a barn owl nest box on his farm. It is well placed and we hope one day there will be owls in residence.



Highly commended Davida and Niall O'Connor

Seaforde, Co. Down

This couple recently inherited their arable farm and have wasted absolutely no time in pushing wildlife high up their list of priorities of things that needed to be done. Perfectly placed at the heart of NI's arable region, they have converted a barley field to wild bird cover. When we visited, this crop was just beginning to come up and we were thrilled to see yellowhammers and tree sparrows thriving in the hedges around it. The wild bird cover will be very important for feeding these birds over the winter months. Davida and Niall have planted eight hectares (ha) of native woodland and sown a special pollen and nectar mix. The next step is to set up a bee hive nearby to do their part to counteract the steep declines in our pollinating species. To do so much in less than a year is truly incredible and Davida and Niall were commended for their persistence and dedication.



Highly commended Paul O'Hagan

Moneymore, Co. Londonderry

Paul runs a beef farm alongside his family crane hire company. He was also a founder member of the Hedge Laying Association of Ireland and his enthusiasm for hedges knows no bounds. In fact, he has been laying, planting and coppicing hedges on the farm for nearly 30 years. He understands the importance of these hedges for the survival of many of our countryside birds and mammals. He also sows wild bird cover to feed seed-eating birds like linnets and reed buntings over the winter months, and maintains wet grassland with open aspect drains to encourage dragonflies and wading birds like snipe and lapwings. The judges were delighted to see nearly every cuckoo flower in Paul's wet grassland field had a single egg of the orange tip butterfly laid on it, a great indicator that wildlife is thriving in the area.



If you know a farmer who is doing great work for wildlife, or think you might be in with a chance, contact the RSPB for more information on how to take part in the competition. The winner of the UK award receives £1,000. This award is kindly supported by the EU LIFE+ Programme, providing an opportunity to reward farmers contributing to the EU Birds and Habitats Directives through their sensitive management.

For more information, contact Patsy Harbinson on 028 9049 1547, e-mail patsy.harbinson@rspb.org.uk or go to www.rspb.org.uk/natureoffarming

To enter your farm in 2012 call 01767 680551

or visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming

Chuffed to see the chough doing well

After being declared extinct in Northern Ireland in 2001 it looks like the chough (pronounced chuff), an unusual member of the crow family, is making a gradual comeback. The past decade has seen the bird return each summer in small numbers to the north coast, where they've tried to rear young with varying success almost every year since.

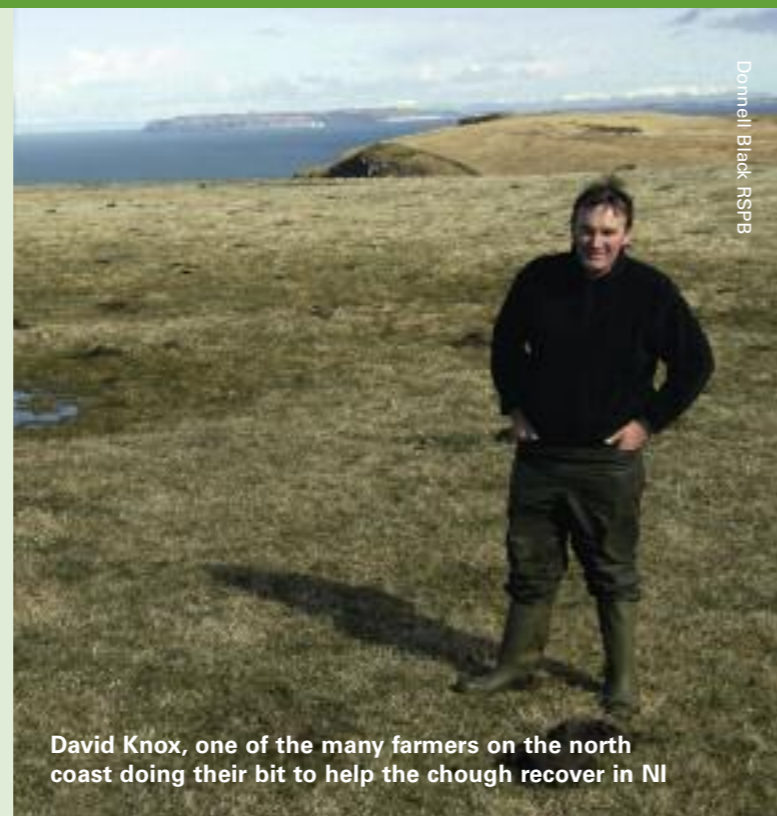
After several years of nesting and raising young near the Giant's Causeway, the birds moved their nesting efforts to Rathlin Island. For the past five years a single pair has been returning to the island's sea cliffs to nest. Since their return in 2001 the birds have fledged an incredible 19 chicks, and although sadly not all of these birds survived, they have provided hope for the future of the chough.

The RSPB has been working hard to monitor the birds' progress and to make the recovery of this fascinating species run as smoothly as possible. It is hoped that with the ongoing support of local farmers, plus the work on our reserves, they will breed here for many years to come.

Research elsewhere on stable populations has shown an essential factor for the survival of the bird is the forming of large social groups where adults can interact and the young are 'schooled' by more experienced elders. It seems this schooling is very important for the survival of young choughs over the winter, and also prepares them for social interactions with other choughs when they reach maturity.

The chough has a red bill and legs, unlike any other member of the crow family

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Donnell Black RSPB

David Knox, one of the many farmers on the north coast doing their bit to help the chough recover in NI

As there are not enough choughs in Northern Ireland to establish a large social group, it is thought that each year our pair of choughs (along with that year's young) travel to join another colony. This could be on the Isle of Man, Donegal or Islay – where choughs exist in good numbers.

But what makes these birds leave the social group they spend the winter with and come back here each year to breed? The truth is that we simply don't know! It could be instinct bringing them back, or perhaps the habitat on the north coast suits their requirements. Either way, we want to ensure that the habitat they rely on – short grazed pasture near the sea cliffs where they breed – remains.

Choughs feed by probing their long, curved red bill into the ground or into dung, foraging mainly for invertebrates such as beetles, snails or larvae. RSPB Agri-environment Officer Donnell Black works with farmers along the north coast and on Rathlin Island, letting them know what choughs need. Our aim is to ensure the sward is short at the right time of year, when the birds are likely to be passing through. Donnell has been thrilled with the results so far and thinks the ground is in better condition for the birds than ever. On Rathlin, we are managing RSPB land in the same way, using sheep to graze several cliff areas.

We shall have to wait and see how many choughs return to Northern Ireland next spring and if there will one day be enough to encourage them to stay here year-round.

For more information, contact Donnell Black on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail donnell.black@rspb.org.uk

Futurescapes in Northern Ireland

Farmers are at the heart of an ambitious programme to restore and manage large parts of Northern Ireland, in partnership with the RSPB and others. The programme is called Futurescapes, and is a landscape-scale approach to conservation. It aims to join up the management of one part of the countryside with another, and make habitats bigger and more resilient to climate change.

Much of our threatened wildlife lives within the boundaries of nature reserves or protected areas. Farmers play a significant role in managing protected areas as farmland so that nature can thrive there. This includes farming the upland peatlands in places like the Antrim Hills and the lowland wetlands around Lough Neagh.

Lough Beg is a wetland that thrives because it is a farmed landscape. It lies along the Lower Bann just north of Lough Neagh. Lough Neagh receives its water from six major rivers but only the Lower Bann drains the Lough to the sea. Therefore all of the water that leaves Lough Neagh must flow through

Lough Beg. This area contains 500 ha of wet grassland, one of the largest and most important areas of its type in Northern Ireland. Farmers who own and manage the land here are working closely with the RSPB and others to control rushes and scrub. Large-scale rush control will help wetland birds such as curlews, lapwings, redshanks and snipe. Farmers also benefit from this work as areas are opened up for grazing cattle following rush control.

It is important to have a balance of rush cover in these wetland habitats, but where rushes begin to invade and form a dense cover, birds and plants lose out. So too do cattle as it becomes increasingly difficult to find grazing.

To restore and manage landscapes like this requires the knowledge and expertise of local farmers. This is then combined with the expertise that comes from the RSPB, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and others. By working together we can overcome problems and find practical solutions.

For example, at Lough Beg the land can be difficult for farmers to manage due to high water levels in spring and summer when cattle should be grazing, and in autumn when rush control can be undertaken using farm machinery. To overcome this problem, the RSPB and local farmers are working together to introduce a machine fitted with special tracks; these wider Soucy tracks will provide access onto the soft wet surfaces.

Another example of this partnership is the way that farmers, the RSPB and the Rivers Agency are working together to monitor water levels. This work can help look at ways to ensure water levels do not increase during periods when birds are nesting, cattle are grazing and farmers are managing rushes. High water levels at the right time of year (in late autumn and winter) make this wetland one of the best in Europe for wintering wildfowl.

For more information, contact Seamus Burns, RSPB Restoration Officer, on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail seamus.burns@rspb.org.uk



Rush control underway at Lough Beg using Soucy tractor and flail. Results will benefit both farmers and birds

Seamus Burns RSPB

Halting Environmental Loss Project (HELP)

The RSPB in both NI and Scotland, in partnership with BirdWatch Ireland, are working to improve breeding habitats for birds and tourism in remote areas. The species in question, which are all experiencing particular difficulties, are curlews in County Donegal, choughs and corncrakes on the Scottish Islands of Islay, Mull and Colonsay as well as curlews, lapwings, redshanks and snipe in Northern Ireland.

The £1.57m needed for the Halting Environmental Loss Project (HELP) was secured from the European Regional Development Fund's INTERREG IVA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body. The project was officially launched at the RSPB/BWI All Ireland Conference in March. The first practical steps towards improving bird and visitor numbers took place in 2011

and involved the completion of baseline bird surveys and events.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, HELP focuses on Lough Erne, Glenwherry, Lough Foyle and Lough Beg, as these areas are renowned for breeding wading birds.

1,000 ha of wet grasslands were surveyed in Lough Erne in 2011 and, encouragingly, most sites were still being used by breeding waders, including curlews, lapwings and snipe. Factors such as predation and unseasonal weather patterns contributed to a drop in bird survival. In addition, current land management practices, including intensification, resulted in a decline in the quality and quantity of habitat suitable for breeding waders. Giles Knight, the

Lough Erne HELP Project Officer, has already worked with over 60 farmers in the area with a view to making the wet grassland habitat more attractive for breeding waders in 2012. If you are interested in hearing more about the project in Fermanagh, give Giles a ring on 07703 716839.

Also in Fermanagh, work has just started to clear scrub on islands on Lower Lough Erne, so we can create more breeding habitat for waders.

Neal Warnock, the Glenwherry HELP Project Officer surveyed 1,590 ha owned by more than 35 different landowners in 2011. The results were patchy, with some areas maintaining historic high numbers of breeding waders and others showing severe declines or near abandonment. The counts resulted in pairs in the high twenties for lapwings, curlews and snipe. The excellent weather in the spring led to very early breeding which meant that most lapwings had hatched by May, but the later onset of heavy rain and cooler than normal temperatures was detrimental to chick survival. Neal has provided support to more than 40 farmers by drawing up land management options. If you farm in Glenwherry and are interested in hearing more, or becoming involved, contact Neal on 07703 716840.

Gareth Bareham, the HELP Project Officer for Lough Foyle and Beg, recorded 20 pairs of lapwings across 1,173 ha at Donnybrewer and Longfield in the Lough Foyle polders. In this area, lapwings preferred to nest on brown ground, such as potato ridges and spring-sown arable crops, and fed in unimproved pasture with shallow-edged ditches and wet scrapes. Winter-sown arable and improved grassland, which suit lapwings less well, have become more prevalent and may be contributing to the decreasing lapwing numbers.

Gareth has been discussing field management options with farmers to improve conditions for lapwings. Give him a ring on 07702 237355 if you farm in the area and wish to find out more.

The RSPB has been working closely with landowners on the western shore of Lough Beg. This land is the species-rich purple moor grass and rush pasture that regularly floods. Historically, this land has been one of the most important breeding wader sites in NI and remains internationally important for a range of flora and fauna. Previous work set the scene for Gareth's discussions with eight key local landowners in 2011. Compared to records from the early 1980s, having just two lapwing pairs hatching chicks in 2011 seems poor, but it's a significant improvement on recent years when little or no successful lapwing breeding was recorded. With two pairs of curlews seen over the grasslands and 24 pairs of both redshanks and snipe, this was reasonably consistent with previous years. During the winter months, the RSPB will be working with landowners and managing their wet grasslands to make sure enough rushes are cut to provide a mosaic habitat that will benefit lapwings while maintaining stable numbers of redshanks and snipe.

Republic of Ireland

Initial monitoring revealed the shocking news that with four breeding pairs in the whole of Donegal, curlews are on the verge of extinction. Anita Donaghy, of BirdWatch Ireland, says that the open moorland areas, where curlews used to breed, have been widely destroyed or fragmented by a range of land use pressures, with forestry playing a large part. Alongside Daniel Maloney, Anita has been talking to and providing advice to farmers keen to manage their land to conserve this seriously threatened iconic bird. If you live in Donegal and had curlews breeding on your land in 2011 that may have been missed in the survey, or are keen to know how you can manage your land to attract wetland

birds in the future, phone Anita on 00 353 7491 29905 or e-mail adonaghy@birdwatchireland.ie

Scotland

In Scotland, the islands of Islay, Mull and Colonsay provide the focus for work on bird monitoring and habitat management for choughs and corncrakes as well as a programme of walks and talks for locals and tourists.

Across the islands, a total of 106 calling male corncrakes were heard and 28 successful chough pairs produced 88 fledglings. Farmers not already in agricultural support schemes discussed options with Crystal Maw, the HELP Project Officer, throughout the year and nine entered into management agreements. A healthy number of choughs fledged with 38 pairs nesting on the Rhinns of Islay, the Oa and elsewhere. Research into the reason for high mortality among almost fully-grown youngsters is ongoing, as is research into the insect populations in choughs' foraging areas. The Islay Community Information and Tourism Officer, Mark Shields, has been leading walks on RSPB reserves, and with the help of the RSPB farm manager, organised a successful farm open day with many local and visiting families enjoying the event.

Across Colonsay, several farmers entered into corncrake management agreements. The initial corncrake survey indicated that there were 44 calling male corncrakes on Colonsay, with 17 on Oronsay. Colonsay had at least 12 occupied chough sites. Colonsay Community Information and Tourism Officer Craig Leitch also led walks on Oronsay.

There were only five calling corncrakes on Mull. The RSPB is discussing corncrake management agreements with farmers that will lead to improved habitats. The RSPB's Debby Thorne took over 3,000 people to the Eagle Hide at Loch Frisa by the end of June, highlighting the interest and potential in wildlife tourism.

Anyone interested in becoming involved with habitat management work or HELP in Scotland should contact Jack Fleming on 01496 850505 or e-mail jack.fleming@rspb.org.uk.

The RSPB has been working with farmers on land management projects and delivering education and information events for many years. While HELP is really only in the initial stages of implementation, it is evident that if we are to be successful in maximising biodiversity and green tourism, we need to work in partnership, at a landscape scale, get buy-in and on-going commitment from many farmers, and influence future agricultural policy makers. The considered and integrated custodianship of our wetland and coastal grazing lands can have a positive impact on birds, biodiversity, people and the rural economy.

HELP is centrally managed by Caroline Marshall, from the RSPB in Belfast. Contact Caroline on 028 9069 9090 or caroline.marshall@rspb.org.uk for further information.

For more general information on HELP, visit the RSPB's website at www.rspb.org.uk



This project has been part-financed by the EU's INTERREG IVA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.



Redshanks will benefit from HELP



Lapwing – a breeding wader that will benefit from habitat management across the UK and Ireland

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

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

Nettles provide early cover for calling males

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Corncrake in Northern Ireland

The corncrake was once an iconic bird across Northern Ireland's farmland and green spaces. Older generations have fond memories of hearing its distinctive call on a summer evening. However, younger generations may have neither seen nor heard a corncrake, as over the last century they have declined massively in the UK. The RSPB would like to turn the fortunes of this species around, so it once again becomes a familiar sound of our countryside.

This small, mainly brown bird stands no more than 30cm tall and is so secretive that it is rarely seen out in the open. However, the corncrake is not difficult to hear as the male's mechanical 'crex-crex' call blasts out across the fields from dusk until dawn. These birds are summer visitors, arriving each spring after travelling all the way from Africa! Once here they search for suitable habitat – tall vegetation where they can hide, seek a mate and eventually nest, all whilst feeding on beetles, flies, spiders, snails and worms.

The corncrake decline coincided with the intensification of agriculture, in particular the introduction of faster farming machinery and earlier mowing of hay and silage fields. So, what can be done to help these charismatic birds? We can't turn back time or halt progress, but with mowers getting bigger and more efficient we must make sure these birds have what they need to survive in our countryside.

A combination of factors will be required in NI to establish attractive breeding grounds for corncrakes. Firstly, they need areas of tall vegetation, at the right time of the year and in the right places. This is known as 'early breeding cover' and could be patches of long stemmed plants with a canopy and enough room for the birds to walk between the stems, such as nettle, cow parsley, phalaris or even docks. The male corncrake will use this cover as a territory from which he will

call loudly. A good patch of early cover beside a stone wall or large rock will help carry his call further. Adjacent grassland is also important, because when the grass is tall enough the corncrake will move between the early cover and the field.

If a male corncrake is heard calling in spring but then stops, this could be because he has found a female. If mating is successful she will nest and incubate the eggs alone. Nests are well hidden and can easily be destroyed by mowing, but there are several things that can be done to improve the chances of the chicks hatching and surviving until fledging.

If you hear a corncrake the most important thing to do is leave any mowing as late as possible (ideally August to September) to give the chicks as long as possible to develop. If that isn't possible there are still things that can be done to help, such as mowing fields from the middle out, or leaving uncut margins where the birds can find shelter during cutting.

The RSPB has established suitable plots of early breeding cover in traditional hay fields at two 15-acre sites on an area of Rathlin Island, which is historically associated with breeding corncrakes. Unfortunately, no corncrakes were reported on Rathlin this year, but we will continue to focus our recovery work on the island. Rathlin is an important site as it lies close to Scotland and the Hebrides, and also the islands and coast of Donegal, where corncrakes have bred successfully in recent years. We hope they will be back on Rathlin in the near future.

As so few corncrakes now come to Northern Ireland, we're trying to gather as much information about them as we can. **To report a corncrake sighting, or for more information, contact Donnell Black on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail donnell.black@rspb.org.uk**

Improving bird conservation on farmland

Agri-environment schemes have become useful tools to help farmers manage their land in harmony with the landscape while also helping local wildlife. In Northern Ireland, the Countryside Management Scheme provides help for a range of species, including threatened farmland birds. Special help is provided for the lapwing and the yellowhammer, both important but declining birds of our farming landscape.

The RSPB has been helping by monitoring bird populations on farms in the scheme to see if the populations respond to conservation work. This will help the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) measure the success of the scheme and influence its future development.

The yellowhammer depends on cereal and mixed farming for its survival. Surveys on arable farms in Co. Down

during the summer and winter will help determine how different conservation methods influence yellowhammer populations.

The team has also been monitoring lapwings on grassland, concentrating mainly on the Glenwherry area of Co. Antrim, a traditional stronghold for lapwings and other ground-nesting wading birds, such as curlew and snipe. This work will help with the conservation and recovery of these birds locally and across Northern Ireland.

For more information contact Kevin Mawhinney on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail kevin.mawhinney@rspb.org.uk



Agri-environment monitoring team out in the field, Co. Down

Kevin Mawhinney (RSPB)

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)

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

Advice at agricultural shows in 2012 and online

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

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please visit www.farmwildlife.info

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 they are a fantastic opportunity to tell people about our work. We want even more farmers and those with an interest in farming to get to know us, and to join in the conversation too.

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

You can always check out the latest posts directly from our farming home page at www.rspb.org.uk/farming

Big Garden Birdwatch

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

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

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

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

Thousands of people were lucky enough to see waxwings. These birds flood to the UK from Scandinavia every so often and this year there was an influx, known as a waxwing winter. Waxwings are bold birds. They are comfortable feeding around our towns and cities, and more than 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.



Steve Blain (RSPB)

Every so often, waxwings flood to the UK from Scandinavia

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