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The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

FIELD OF VIEW

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Ramsey Island is a working livestock farm managed by the RSPB and designated for its varied and rare wildlife



Images: Lisa Morgan (RSPB)



Border collie Dewi is a vital part of the shepherding team

An island farm

Ramsey Island's wonderful 260 hectares (ha) of maritime heath and acid grassland are just a kilometre off the north Pembrokeshire coast. Ramsey has been owned and managed by the RSPB for the last 20 years, but honorary wardens lived alongside the resident tenant farmers for much of the 20th century. It became a National Nature Reserve in 1996, and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), designated for its choughs, seabirds, grey seals, rare aquatic plants and the extensive heathland.

People have been on Ramsey for a long while. The first written records we have are of early farming in 1293, when the church inventory described the island as fertile with a wide range of mixed farming.

There is little doubt that farming in such a remote and challenging location took its toll on many tenant farmers. Many came, but didn't stay.

Unusually for RSPB landholdings, we own and manage our livestock here. We maintain a breeding flock of several hundred Welsh mountain ewes. They are hardy enough to stay out all year, and lambing is relatively easy for them. An experienced shepherd is one of our nearest mainland neighbours, and he helps us with the flock. We have our own trained border collie, Dewi, who is a vital part of the shepherding team.

Transporting livestock requires military planning, and is dependant on sea conditions. We've developed a

reliable system that allows us to move up to 60 lambs at a time. The journey involves a couple of sheep dogs, several people and an aluminium workboat. Our animals are often bought by local farmers for finishing, which might mean just a 10-minute boat trip and a quick walk along the coast path to their new home – from island to mainland in half an hour.

Our conservation grazing scheme keeps the cliff-top vegetation short, which choughs prefer for feeding, and leaves a tussocky sward inland, which supports skylarks and linnets. We are proud to continue the long tradition of keeping livestock on this challenging and beautiful Welsh farm. Visit www.rspb.org.uk/ramseyisland for more information.



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

In this issue: Calls for Glastir to be simplified • Farmers and RSPB boost agri-environment at EU parliament • CAP reform • Dairy farming and wildlife • NoFA Wales winner



Farmers visit Brussels to tell their side of the story

RSPB

Green Common Agricultural Policy reform – or just the *status quo*?

During 2012, EU governments and MEPs have been developing their negotiating positions on the reforms to the CAP. This includes alternative approaches to those suggested in the Commission's 2011 proposals.

The focus for many, and by far the most contentious issue, is Pillar I "greening". The RSPB views greening as a vital step to improve the environmental performance of EU farming. It is crucial if the natural resources that farmers need for food production are to be protected.

But this depends on well-designed measures in our policy. So it's imperative that things like Ecological Focus Areas are implemented in a way that raises the bar and doesn't undermine the great work already done by many farmers through agri-environment schemes.

However, despite the rhetoric, there is no guarantee that this round of reform will deliver a CAP that is equipped with the tools, and funding, to drive more sustainable and wildlife-friendly farming. There have been calls from

governments and MEPs for more flexibility on greening. This could mean that any steps forward are reduced to a shuffle. There's a risk that we'll just repackage our current CAP. Agri-environment funding could be cut in Pillar II. The parallel EU Budget process (which will be decided in late 2012 or early 2013) is likely to cut the money available for CAP, potentially falling most heavily on Pillar II. This will further undermine the more targeted environmental expenditure.

A famous frog once said: "It's not easy being green" and he wasn't wrong, but the alternative is simply not an option.

Decision makers will need to take some bold steps when they finalise the next CAP during 2013. They need to make sure the policy meets the needs of farming, the environment and society. And that means strong greening measures and adequate funding for agri-environment.

For more information, contact Jenna Hegarty at jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk

Championing agri-environment at the European Parliament

Wildlife-friendly farmers from across the EU met in Brussels in March to call for greater support for environmental measures in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform.

The RSPB (as part of BirdLife International) supported eight farmers from the UK, Ireland, Portugal and Latvia to visit their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on the Agriculture Committee. They told their stories about the importance of Pillar II agri-environment schemes on their farms.

The farmers explained to MEPs how these schemes allow them to step up for nature, as well as producing agricultural commodities. They also

provide benefits for the environment, their businesses and society. They urged MEPs to increase funding for agri-environment in the 2014–2020 CAP and invited them to visit their farms to see these amazing schemes in action. We also highlighted the urgent need to channel CAP funding towards vulnerable High Nature Value farming systems.

Gethin Owen, one of the participating farmers, said: "I was really pleased to represent UK farmers involved in agri-environment schemes. MEPs often get told about the shortcomings of these schemes, so it was really important to tell them how fantastic the benefits of a well-run scheme can be and why

they should protect Pillar II funding in the CAP reform."

As the European Parliament plays a significant role in determining the design and funding of the next CAP, this visit was a great opportunity. It shows how farmers and the RSPB are joining forces on key issues.

We hope that these powerful messages from farmers will make sure that Parliament's negotiating position on CAP calls for adequate funding for valuable agri-environment schemes and vulnerable High Nature Value systems.

For more information, contact Jenna Hegarty at jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk

Glastir needs to be simplified

Methods to improve the uptake of agri-environment scheme Glastir are being considered by Alun Davies, Deputy Minister for Agriculture. The RSPB agrees with him: there is a need to simplify and streamline the application and management process, and Glastir needs a period of stability to build confidence within the farming community.

We also applaud the unequivocal message that the purpose of agri-environment is to provide wider Welsh society with environmental benefits. This includes halting the declines of Welsh wildlife by rewarding farmers who already manage their land in ways that benefit scarce species such as lapwings, water voles and rare arable plants, and by encouraging others to do the same.

The Deputy Minister must ensure that increased popularity does not compromise effectiveness and we urge the Government to continue working towards improving the balance and content of scheme prescriptions so that they fully deliver against stated environmental objectives. In response to recent criticism regarding amendments to the Welsh agri-environment budget, Alun Davies said: "I would like to make it absolutely clear that the 60%

allocation of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) budget to Axis 2 is a re-adjustment to ensure that the available European funding is spent.

"It would not be in anybody's interest here in Wales for this funding to remain unspent and have to be returned to Brussels. This change to the minimum spend of the Axis 2 budget certainly does not represent the introduction of a cap on expenditure through the Glastir scheme, but instead reflects the budget situation based on uptake so far. The government takes its obligations towards biodiversity and other environmental objectives very seriously and if, as I very much hope, demand for the Glastir scheme increases then I would certainly re-consider this allocation of RDP funding again in the future."

RSPB Cymru recognises the constraints caused by the current level of participation in Glastir and urges Government to use the agri-environment money released by the re-adjustment to secure environmental enhancements by other means until the time when scheme uptake fully utilises the original agri-environment budget. **For more information contact Arfon Williams at arfon.williams@rspb.org.uk or call 029 2035 3000.**

Curlew

David Morris



Protecting farmland birds through the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive 1979 provides protection for all wild birds in the EU. All the elements of the EU LIFE+ funded project have contributed to improving the conservation status of farmland birds, the fastest declining group of birds in the EU.

Bird surveys by volunteers have enabled farmers to know what special birds they have on their farms so that they can target their conservation efforts towards them.

The follow-up advice has encouraged many farmers to enter agri-environment schemes targeted specifically at improving the quality of wildlife habitats on the farm. The NoFA, demonstration farm visits and case studies of wildlife-friendly farmers have raised awareness of what farmers can do, why they do

it and how to get the best from their efforts. The feedback from farmers and volunteers is helping us to determine how best to take this work forward into the future.

The RSPB believes that the Birds Directive is key to ensuring the UK and the EU play their part in halting biodiversity loss by 2020.

So what exactly does it do?

- Member States are required to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for threatened species and all migratory bird species.
- The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 consolidated and amended existing legislation to implement the Birds Directive in Great Britain. This banned activities that directly threatened birds, such as deliberate killing, destruction of their nests

- Rules were established to limit the number of species that can be hunted and the periods during which they can be hunted in order to protect them during periods when they are particularly vulnerable, such as migration and during the breeding season. It also defined rules on hunting methods.
- EU Species Action Plans were established to help the most threatened species recover.

The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment. Our agricultural projects and advisory work are currently funded by LIFE+, which raises awareness of the needs of farmland birds and the implementation of the Birds Directive among farmers and the public. For more information, go to the RSPB website and search for Birds Directive.

V&FA highlights in 2012

Well, what a year it has been! Here in Wales we have had to face similar conditions to much of the UK – very wet, windy and cold. None of these are ideal for farmland bird surveys – and no doubt not much good for farming, either. Thankfully, skin is waterproof and the superb team of Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) volunteers managed to dodge the worst of the Welsh weather and complete nearly 40 farm surveys.

Follow-up visits of the 2011 surveys were carried out in spring 2012.

These were very positive and provided staff with great opportunities to see some of the great work farmers are doing across Wales. They also discussed options that may be beneficial to the farm business via the agri-environment scheme, Glastir.

Upland, lowland, organic, commercial, beef, sheep and arable – every farm was different, and some of the ways in which nature conservation measures were integrated into the farm business were very innovative.

On average, 38 species were recorded per farm. The highest species count on a single farm was 60, and included curlews, lapwings, cuckoos, skylarks, spotted and pied flycatchers, redstarts, reed buntings and song thrushes. Other highlights included a bar-headed goose among a flock of Canada geese and one volunteer completed three separate farm surveys.

If you would like to know more about this project or farmland wildlife advice please e-mail v&fa@rspb.org.uk or call 01248 672850.

All wild birds, including yellowhammers, are protected under the Birds Directive



Tom Marshall (rspb-images.com)

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



Dave Bateson

Our shepherd, working with two trained sheep dogs, can manage up to 200 sheep on the mountain

Close shepherded grazing on Mynydd Twr

With a need to reduce the vegetation on Mynydd Twr or Holyhead Mountain for conservation reasons, the RSPB decided to use the most natural way to do it – and drafted in a flock of sheep.

Mynydd Twr is the highest peak on Holy Island, Anglesey. It slopes steeply down to the Irish Sea and lies 3 km west of Holyhead and forms part of the RSPB's South Stack Cliffs nature reserve.

It is a 200 ha heathland, designated as a SSSI. After decades without grazing, the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) classified it as being in unfavourable condition. This is because, as grazing stopped, the vegetation grew uniformly (a single age structure) and litter had accumulated. This build-up of vegetation and litter increases the risk of widespread fire, and several major fires have caused damage to the site and its wildlife.

The idea

Close shepherded grazing has been used at a handful of sites in the UK where the boundaries are not stock proof and there is no hefted flock. The RSPB and the CCW set up a working group with the Anglesey Grazing Animals Partnership and the site owners, the Isle of Anglesey County Council (IOACC). The group investigated whether close shepherded sheep on Holyhead Mountain would be a sensible strategy. The idea was to deliver the grazing management without the need for unsightly and expensive fencing. We had to consider other issues: stray animals, conflicts between visitors and road users, and the possibility of loss of stock off the steep cliffs. All parties felt that this approach was feasible and funding was secured from the CCW by the IOACC and RSPB via a S15 agreement. The agreement aims were to improve the condition of the dry heath and the diversity of the

plants and insects, and reduce the fire risk by removing excessive vegetation and installing fire breaks, as well as improving feeding habitat for choughs and basking areas for reptiles by the creation of open areas of short sward.

The sheep

When the five-year project began back in 2009, a flock of 55 Hebridean and Welsh Torddu ewes was brought in. These breeds were selected as they are hardy and thrive on the less nutritious heathland vegetation. Also, the nimble Hebrideans tend to form a tight flock and the heavier Torddu slow them down. The flock size has grown, to about 200 ewes, including Scottish black face, Welsh mountain, Manx loghtan and Torwen ewes.

The ewes graze for 40 days over eight weeks, usually starting in September, when disturbance will be minimal and weather conditions favourable. The sheep graze the mountain for about eight hours a day. They are kept in small enclosures overnight and in paddocks at weekends. The small

traditional walled enclosures, known as quilletts, are found at the edge of the mountain land. They have less in the way of grazing, so encourage the sheep to graze the less palatable mountain flora during the day.

The shepherd

One of the most integral elements of the project is the shepherd. One appointed shepherd working two trained sheep dogs can manage up to 200 sheep on the mountain. Each morning the sheep are moved up the mountain from the quilletts or paddock. The shepherd follows the animals, allowing them, within reason, to graze where they choose.

Keeping them in a tight flock, grazing in about one or two ha at any one time, they are moved slowly across the heathland. This is to avoid overgrazing the more palatable areas and to keep them away from cliff edges and roads. Quite a few of the many visitors to the island are intrigued by the shepherd's activities on the mountain,

which gives a perfect opportunity to tell people about the project.

The results ... so far!

The 40 days' grazing have been successfully completed each year with very few complications. The initial flock of 55 ewes had little impact on the vegetation, which is why we've steadily increased the flock size. It looks like the larger flock is starting to have a positive impact.

The different breeds all graze in different ways. For example the Scottish black face sheep graze happily in the rank heath, while the Hebrideans prefer regenerating burnt areas. The impact of the grazing will be assessed at the end of the project. But if we are to make sure we achieve and maintain a favourable condition classification for this site, we will need to continue with management well into the future.

If you would like to know more about the close shepherded grazing, please e-mail dave.bateson@rspb.org.uk



Dave Bateson

The sheep are moved slowly across the heath, to avoid overgrazing any patches

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

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD WALES 2012

Winner 2012 John and Tegwen Burns

Penlan farm, Kidwelly

Penlan farm is a 180 ha mixed lowland farm overlooking the town of Kidwelly in Carmarthen Bay. A NoFA Highly Commended farm in 2011, Penlan farm proves commercial farming and conservation can co-exist.

Owners John and Tegwen Burns and their team grow crops for the Penlan farm pet food range by sister organisation Burns Pet Nutrition Ltd. Growing the ingredients ensures quality, saves cost of import, and reduces food miles. They are trying to take this a step further. For example, the starch content of the food is derived from rice which has to be imported. So at Penlan they are growing and analysing potato varieties to try to find a suitable starch source they can grow themselves. Even the hay from species rich meadows, a haven for all manner of birds and bees, is sold as premium rabbit hay.

The woodlands and hedgerows are sensitively managed to benefit a variety of flora and fauna. The re-introduction of arable crops has given rare arable plants a chance to germinate. Hazel and willow coppices are used to produce 'chew-sticks' for pet rodents, but as they mature they will be managed to provide an additional habitat for flowering plants, butterflies and birds.

Those at Penlan farm seek advice from a number of different organisations. They are always thinking of ways to incorporate wildlife-friendly elements in their management system. Following advice during the 2011 NoFA judging process, efforts are now being made to graze the permanent pastures extensively. A small herd of Welsh white cows has been drafted in to help, and as these cattle are very rare, it has given a boost to the breed, too.



Recognition also needs to be given to two other farms which, although pipped to the post by Penlan farm, so impressed the judging panel that they have been awarded the Highly Commended status as runners-up.

Troedrhiwdrain farm Brian and Sorcha Lewis

Troedrhiwdrain farm is an upland sheep farm in the picturesque Elan Valley. The sensitive management of habitats, such as species rich upland hay meadows, ffridd, and rhos pasture are integrated into the farming practice.

Monitoring the Welsh clearwing population on the farm and managing areas for the benefit of globeflowers are examples of work done beyond the daily farm management.



Glyn-Coch farm Huw and Thelma Jones

Glyn-Coch is a small farm on the outskirts of St Clears, Carmarthenshire.

The tenants have incorporated the farm produce and wildlife into a craft centre enterprise. The fleeces from a flock of Norfolk Horns are used in the craft products and wildlife trails have been created to meander through a variety of habitats.

They are also managing areas to benefit the rare county plant, whorled caraway, on the farm.



To enter your farm in 2013 call 01767 680551

Golden plover conservation on Elenydd & Ruabon 2011 & 2012

Golden plovers are an iconic upland species in Wales. There's an estimated population of 37 breeding pairs, based on the findings of the 2007 All Wales survey. Elenydd holds about a third of the Welsh golden plover breeding population, and so is an important site. It has benefited from restoration work, such as Molinia management and follow-up grazing using a variety of livestock. This work has been initiated and managed by the key partners: the National Trust (NT), the CCW and the Elan Valley Trust.

The golden plover project aims to combine peat restoration, Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and SSSI habitat restoration. This will be favourable management for golden plover. The RSPB has provided management guidance and support and has undertaken bird and vegetation monitoring. This has shown that birds are using the managed areas for nest sites and feeding grounds for adults and chicks. Early results suggest that golden plovers have responded favourably to the habitat management. Following the signs that golden plover appear to be responding to habitat

management on the Elenydd, we promoted favourable management on Ruabon Moor in north east Wales. This area was chosen because golden plover used to breed here. In 2012 we started the new regime, working closely with the Wynnstay Estate and the CCW, cutting large blocks of heather to create the vegetation structure that golden plovers need.

At least one breeding pair used the area in 2012, and it is thought that they fledged chicks successfully. We expect to carry out further management work in 2013.

Surveys suggest that golden plovers use the managed areas. The habitat management appears to have attracted the plovers and has the potential to boost the population numbers. We will continue to survey both the Elenydd and Ruabon, and it is hoped this early success continues to benefit one of Wales most charismatic upland birds.

Please e-mail Amy Vanstone at amy.vanstone@rspb.org.uk for more information.

or visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming

Arable weeds – or loved icons of our culture?

Many arable plants are part of our cultural history. For instance, most of us would miss the red flush of poppies or the bright mix of colours along country road verges in mid-summer if they were to disappear. Some plants may be viewed as weeds, but others are special and threatened. The distinctive plants of Welsh cornfields that developed under our mild, wet climate have become internationally important and are increasingly scarce.

Cornfield flowers have declined as land has been taken out of arable production. Now, only 11% of Welsh farmland is cultivated, a loss of 106,400 ha since 1970. The increased use of herbicides to control weeds, together with fertilisers to boost cereals, has restricted the growth of arable plants. In small, hidden fields, corn marigolds and poppies still put on magnificent displays while Welsh rarities such as small-flowered catchflies, corn buttercups, broad-fruited cornsalads and cornflowers are just hanging on.

All is not lost. There are simple management techniques that allow arable plants to grow either within cereal headlands, across whole fields or in annually-cultivated

fallow margins. These measures can be taken up voluntarily by not spraying cereal field margins and corners with herbicide and leaving them uncropped. This is financially supported through the Glastir Scheme.

Cornfield flowers are important for a wide range of other farmland wildlife. Their nectar and pollen is used by bumblebees, butterflies, hoverflies and other pollinators, while their seeds are food for farmland birds such as skylarks and yellowhammers.

Farms in Monmouthshire, the Vale of Glamorgan and Gower Peninsular, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Lleyn Peninsular have particularly rich communities of arable plants.

A new leaflet with details of management for arable plants including the relevant options in Glastir by Plantlife is available for download at www.plantlife.org.uk/wales or contact cath.shellswell@plantlife.org.uk for a copy.

Twites given a helping hand

You're not supposed to notice twites. These small, streaky-brown finches with a nasal call are designed to blend into the background. And they are difficult to spot. It's not surprising, really. As well as their camouflage, it's estimated that there are only 14 to 17 pairs in Wales, and they are confined to the Nant Ffrancon and Ogwen valleys of northern Snowdonia, so you really have to go looking for them.

Twites are summer visitors to their breeding grounds in Welsh uplands. It's not known for certain, but research suggests they spend the winter on the saltmarsh and shoreline habitats of the north Wales coast and Dee estuary.

Twites have been slowly slipping into obscurity in Wales as numbers have dwindled. The decline is probably due to the loss of their food – which is seeds – through changes in land

management. There's been a loss of traditional hay meadows and arable cropping, and fewer cattle being overwintered outdoors, which has resulted in less seed food being available throughout the year. Unusually in finches, the adults and chicks feed exclusively on small seeds, so they rely on a good supply, especially of seeds from dandelions, hawkbits, sorrels and annual meadow grass.

During the past three years, a partnership between the RSPB, the NT and their tenant farmers, Snowdonia National Park Authority, CCW and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has been working in the two main valleys where twites remain. The partnership aims to provide supplementary seed food, especially nyjer seed, as well as establishing seed-rich habitat such as traditionally-managed hay meadows and weedy root crops.

The nyjer seed is particularly important as it helps the twites get into breeding condition when they return to Snowdonia at the beginning of April. That's when natural sources of seed are at their lowest.

Early indications this spring suggest these birds may be responding well to the management, as more twites than usual arrived back at the breeding grounds and fed on the nyjer seed and the remains of a weedy root crop managed especially for them.

Monitoring continues, and hopefully a full breeding survey in 2013 should provide us with more data about their current status. Watch this space!

For more information contact Lesley Fletcher at lesley.fletcher@rspb.org.uk

Cornfield flowers have declined in Wales



Making space for nature alongside producing milk

This spring we started a project with some of the dairy farmers who supply milk to Tesco. We want to find practical methods that farmers can integrate into their systems to help wildlife.

We started with bird surveys of farms through the V&FA. Once we know what birds are on a farm, we can follow up with a visit to the farmer, so we can work out potential land management options.

This will be a two-way process: we generate ideas based on the needs of the wildlife living there, and listen to farmers' thoughts on the pros and cons of fitting the ideas into their system.

Dairying is a challenging sector for integrating measures to help wildlife. Making space for nature within the

farmed area, especially within grassland, is particularly tricky: the focus on high productivity and efficiency invariably means leaving less behind for wildlife.

There are fewer options available in agri-environment schemes to suit dairy farmers, and the economic pressures have been unrelenting over recent years.

Dairy farmers have been declining as fast as some of our farmland wildlife. In the past ten years alone, the number of dairy farmers has halved in England and Wales, and fallen by a third in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

But our advisory staff around the UK have worked with many dairy farmers who have gone out of their way to

help wildlife alongside running productive dairy enterprises: farmers like Robert Kynaston from Shropshire who was one of the NoFA finalists last year. We will be building on the experiences of these farmers in developing our ongoing work with the dairy sector.

This project is part of a new partnership between the RSPB and Tesco called Together For Trees. It aims to reduce the environmental footprint of commodities from tropical forests, as well as making supply chains more sustainable.

If you would like more details, please e-mail Gethin Davies at gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk

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

Advice at agricultural shows in 2013 and online

Here is a list of some of the agricultural shows and events we will be attending across the UK in 2013. As always, staff will be on hand to answer any questions you have on wildlife conservation. Do come and visit us.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please visit www.farmwildlife.info as this website hosts a discussion forum to ask questions or post ideas, case studies of farmers adopting novel management to boost wildlife on their farm and an agricultural events calendar for farmland wildlife conservation.

- Balmoral Show, Balmoral Park, Maze Long Kesh, Lisburn 15–17 May
- Cereals, Boothby Graffoe, Lincolnshire 12–13 June
- Royal Highland Show, Royal Highland Centre, Edinburgh 20–23 June
- Livestock 2013, NEC, Birmingham 3–4 July
- Royal Welsh Show, Llanellwedd, near Builth Wells 22–25 July

RSPB training events

Each year, the RSPB runs training courses on getting the maximum wildlife value out of Environmental Stewardship on arable farmland and livestock farms.

Courses on “How livestock farming can integrate the needs of farmland wildlife” will be held at these venues:

- Great Wollaston Farm, Shropshire 24 April 2013
- Duchy College, Cornwall October 2013 (to be confirmed)

For details of the courses, visit www.rspb.org.uk/conservationtraining

Testing whether wildlife-friendly farming makes a difference

Over the last 13 years, the V&FA has done a fantastic job in helping farmers recognise the birds on their farm that need the most help. Going forward, we are looking to develop the role of volunteer birdwatchers further by monitoring farms that are putting conservation management into practice to assess what difference their efforts make to the bird populations.

In 2012 we tried a new survey method on eight dairy farms. It can be repeated several years later to evaluate whether populations of key farmland species have changed.

Richard Winspear was one of the volunteers. He said: “I volunteered to survey a farm in Leicestershire and, as always, found the volunteering experience very rewarding. The survey method was slightly more onerous than usual: four visits and a walk within 100 metres of every point in the survey area. We are looking to refine the method before rolling it out further in the hope that we can get the survey time down to a maximum of four hours per visit. I had not expected the farm to be in such a farmland bird hotspot, with grey partridges, yellow wagtails, tree sparrows and

corn buntings all breeding. Corn buntings are rare in the east Midlands now, and virtually extinct in my home patch of south Derbyshire less than 10 miles away. Tree sparrows (below) were nesting in virtually every ash tree around the farm. The farmer is already in Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) but was keen to learn more about the birds on his farm to inform future agreements.”

For more information contact Richard Winspear at richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk



Big Garden Birdwatch a success

Thank you to everyone who stepped up for nature by taking part in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch. Now in its 33rd year, this was the second biggest Birdwatch ever, with an incredible 592,475 people getting involved. Over nine million birds of 73 different species were counted over the course of the Birdwatch weekend.

House sparrows top the list for the ninth consecutive year. However, their numbers are much lower than they were back when the survey began in 1979. They were seen in over 60% of gardens, with an average of four per garden, compared with 10 per garden in 1979.

Blue tits have overtaken blackbirds to take third place, with an overall increase of 21% since 1979. Goldfinches are also up one place to number seven this year. This colourful bird has been steadily increasing in UK gardens and first reached the top 10 in 2008.

This year's results have also shown that starling numbers are at an all time low since the survey began. Starlings have been on a downward trend for the past 25 years and have declined by almost 80%. In 1979, the average number

of starlings seen in UK gardens was 15. This year, that number fell to its lowest ever with an average of just three starlings seen per garden.

These declines are being mirrored across much of northern Europe too, and because of this drop in numbers, the species is red-listed as a bird of high conservation concern. We've been monitoring this decline and research is already underway to find out more about the disappearance of these birds. Possible reasons could include changes in their feeding habitats and changes beneath the soil reducing their insect food.

After an unseasonably warm winter across much of the UK, many people weren't seeing the levels of bird activity in their gardens they usually would at the end of January. Our garden birds are much less dependent on us for food when there are plenty of berries, insects and seeds for them out in the wider countryside.

In 2013, the Big Garden Birdwatch takes place over the weekend of the 26 and 27 January 2013. Please join in and help us make it even bigger!

Agri-environment schemes can halt farmland bird declines

We now know which common practical farmland measures have the greatest impact on increasing numbers of farmland birds, thanks to the latest research.

After working out what might be causing declines and finding practical solutions to halt them, we now have some answers. Agri-environment schemes across the UK already provide fairly comprehensive measures to tackle farmland bird declines.

Research is now looking at how effective these measures are when they are adopted on a landscape-scale by farmers through these schemes.

We have already seen clear benefits from very targeted action for rare species such as corncrakes in Scotland and curlew buntings in Devon, but not much evidence of benefits

from entry level schemes for our more widespread farmland birds. New research from the BTO has shown that seed-eating birds, such as grey partridges, are doing better in England where farmers are leaving over-winter stubbles or creating wild bird seed mixtures through Entry Level Stewardship.

Other measures that were tested included low-input grassland, buffer strips, hedgerow management and ditch management. These measures did not show clear benefits for declining birds, probably because they do not directly address the causes of the decline. These birds need seed food through the winter, insect food in the spring and safe places to nest.

For more information contact Richard Winspear at richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk

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

10 years of *The State of Birds in Wales*

This report was first published in 2002 as an annual one-stop-shop for bird conservation facts and figures for members of the National Assembly for Wales, civil servants, local government and birdwatchers. Its “birthday” coincides with the tenth anniversary of the Welsh Government’s list of Principal Biodiversity Species. There are more than 560 species of wildlife on this list, ranging from mammals to lichen. They have been selected due to their importance and status in Wales, the UK and internationally. The list features species of the highest priority for conservation action.

A decade is enough to weigh up the results of conservation measures. So the report, published in 2012, looks back at the last decade and highlights successes and failures, as well as seeing what lessons can be learned.

Surely, black grouse recovery has to be the greatest success. Conservation measures were launched via a partnership

project in 1997, when there were just 126 lekking males. Last year, there were more than 300. Other species have used habitats created by similar initiatives. For instance, yellowhammers feed on winter seed crops and and twites are feeding in areas where seed rich grass swards have been restored for them. However, we still lack evidence that population sizes have been boosted by these methods.

If we could look forward to a similar report in 2022, wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could read that lots of initiatives like these had been successful, and that declines in populations had been halted or reversed? We’ll just have to keep working towards it!

Please e-mail Ian Johnstone at ian.johnstone@rspb.org.uk for more information.

Bird basics: the chough

The red-billed chough, or “fire-crow”, is arguably one of the most charismatic birds we have in Wales. Its bright red beak and legs, its “chi-ack” call and acrobatic flight make it hard to confuse with other members of the crow family. The chough is deeply embedded in Celtic culture, as King Arthur was thought to have returned in the form of a chough.

Feeding in grazed habitats including permanent pastures, unimproved coastal grasslands, and coastal heathland, these birds will use their beaks to probe for insects and their larvae on or just below the soil surface, or in animal dung. This primarily insectivorous diet is sometimes supplemented by spilt grain from stubble fields in the winter.

Choughs build their nests in caves or crevices on cliffs or in quarries and so are mainly found around the coast in Wales. The combination of suitable nesting sites, and coastal heath and short-grazed pasture within close proximity meet all their requirements.

A typical nest will be constructed on a sheltered ledge with woody twigs and lined with sheep’s wool. A clutch of 3–5 eggs are incubated by the female, whilst the male bird will return frequently to feed his mate.

UK numbers and range declined through the 19th century, with signs of recovery in the first half of the 20th century. Systematic surveys after the 1950s, most recently in 2002, showed further recovery, such as the re-colonisation of

Anglesey and Gower. So we are very concerned to learn that there are new signs of trouble. Inland nest sites are being abandoned and it’s increasingly difficult to find the flocks of young birds that are so important – the young are the replacements of the current adult breeding pairs.

Can you help choughs?

- Minimise disturbance around suitable nest sites (quarries, mines and old buildings) and keep entrances free of vegetation.
- Maintain insect-rich pastures, keep the sward open and short through suitable grazing regimes, reduce fertiliser inputs and leave ant-hills undamaged.
- Maintain heath in a fairly open condition, with any grassier areas within the heath kept short.
- Manage bracken and scrub where it has encroached on suitable feeding sites and maintain cover at less than 10%.
- Retain winter stubbles of spring-sown cereals if they are within 1 km of a known roost or nest site.
- Establish, maintain or repair traditional stone and earth field boundaries. Use a single top fence; do not double fence to allow these features to be grazed.
- Send any records of nesting, feeding or wintering choughs to adrienne.stratford@rspb.org.uk

Management options that can benefit choughs are available through the agri-environment scheme Glastir. For more information on how you can help choughs, please e-mail lesley.fletcher@rspb.org.uk



Thinking big for nature – the RSPB’s Futurescapes project aims to save wildlife across whole landscapes, such as the Gwent Levels

Futurescapes: conservation beyond boundaries

Futurescapes is the RSPB’s answer to a growing conservation method known as “landscape-scale conservation”. As the name suggests, this is a shift towards nature conservation on a large scale, across the landscape, rather than being confined by the boundaries of small protected areas such as nature reserves. It’s about getting nature into large “landscape-scale” chunks of the UK. It’s a big concept.

For this huge challenge the RSPB needs to work in partnership with lots of land owners and other organisations towards a shared vision. We all need to aim for a sustainable future for the Welsh countryside. RSPB Cymru is currently working with many national and local partners, developing a portfolio of landscape-scale projects across the country. At the moment, we have three rapidly-developing Futurescapes in Wales.

The North Wales Moors Futurescape

This extensive upland stretches from Blaenau Ffestiniog in the west to Wrexham in the east. It’s big, at around 5% of Wales. It is a spectacular farmed landscape: a mosaic of upland heath, woodland, grassland and blanket bog. It supports priority bird species as well as many other animals and plants. That’s why so much of the area is designated as a SSSI, a SAC and a SPA.

The Gwent Levels Futurescape

This low-lying coastal floodplain, saltmarsh and intertidal mudflats fringes the Severn estuary, which is of international importance for wildlife. The patchwork pattern of fields is ancient, and was established in Roman times.

We are working with partners to improve wildlife habitats as well as the quality of life for the people of Newport and visitors to the area. We’re using biodiversity as a driver for regeneration and improved ecosystem services, such as creating a more natural coastline and wetland environment.

The Three Rivers Futurescape

This is a beautiful area of Carmarthenshire, where the mouths of the rivers Tywi, Taf and Gwendraeth join and flow into Carmarthen Bay. The landscape has varied habitats, including coastal lowlands, intertidal sand bars, wet woodlands, dairy farming and low-lying, tidal saltmarsh.

Working closely with landowners and tenant farmers is at the heart of the Futurescapes programme. Previous and current RSPB projects are often a good basis for new schemes, especially where we have worked with those who have rare or declining bird species on their land.

We’re working to build new partnerships with major landowners, local farmers, community groups, the private sector, other organisations and charities, as well as relevant government authorities. We need to develop a shared vision for a countryside fit for people and wildlife. We could easily lose more rare and declining species from Wales, so a change in conservation management from just “biodiversity hotspot” areas towards wildlife-friendly landscapes is essential. If you would like to be involved in Futurescapes, then please get in touch.

For more information, please contact John Clark at john.clark1@rspb.org.uk or call 029 2035 3000.

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

What do farmers think of the V&FA?

Feedback from farmers about the V&FA allows us to review and make improvements so it continues to be beneficial for all involved.

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

The questionnaires from farmers who replied in 2011 show that:

- 98% found the laminated map useful
- 97% felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience
- 88% have put the farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map into practice
- 84% had species on their farms that they had not previously noticed
- 65% reported they were more aware of policies such as the Birds Directive.

And what do volunteers think?

The questionnaires completed by volunteers who took part in the V&FA in 2011 show that:

- 97% enjoyed participating in the V&FA
- 97% felt the training they received was either good or excellent
- 97% were satisfied with the level of support they received
- 82% felt their understanding of farmland birds and conservation had improved
- 75% reported that no problems were encountered during the surveys
- 70% reported that they were more aware of policies like the 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 Birds Directive

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

Please contact project staff at the following RSPB offices

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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.

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