



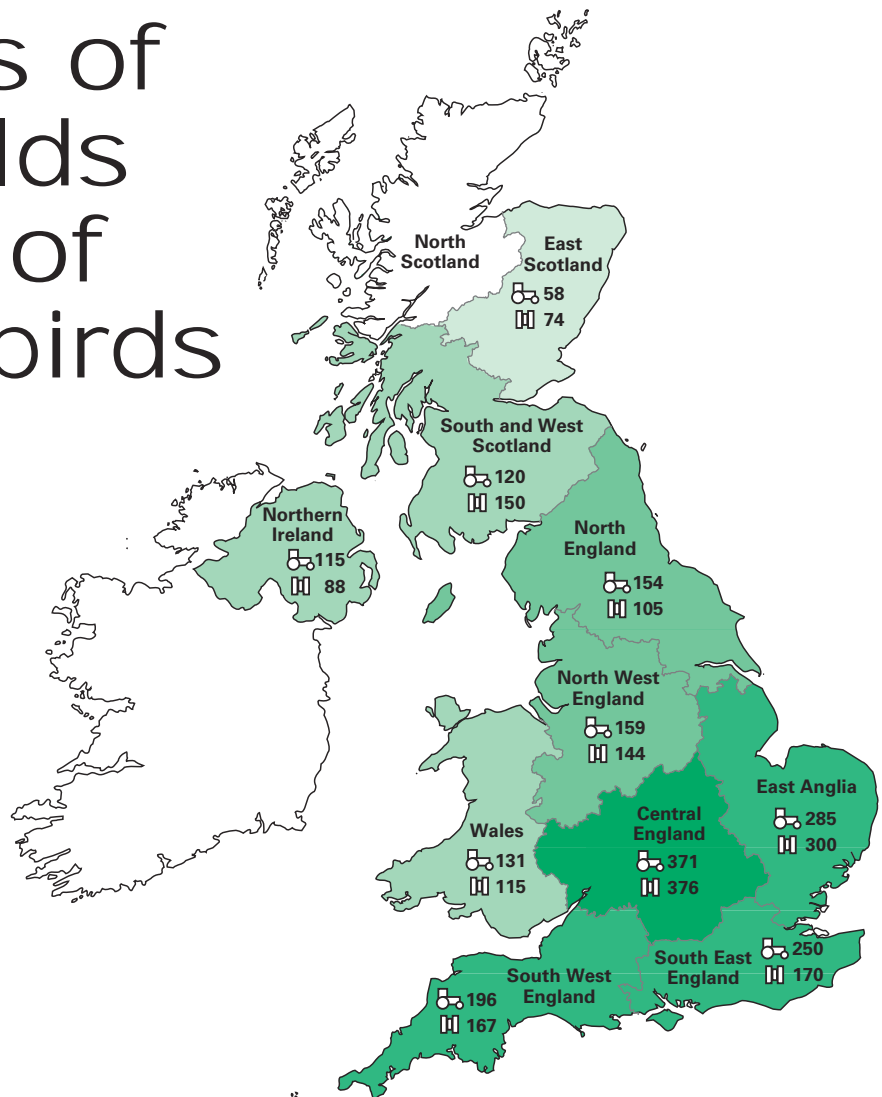
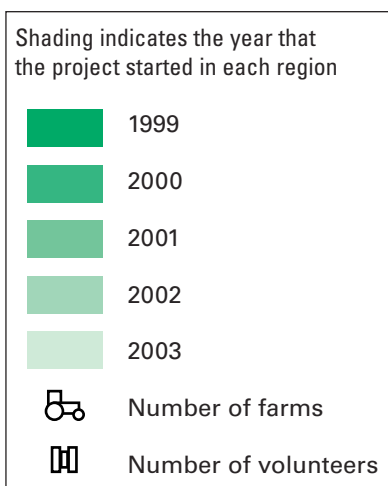
for birds  
for people  
for ever

The RSPB newsletter for the  
Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project

# FIELD OF VIEW

ISSUE 2 NOVEMBER 2003

## Five years of V&FA yields a quarter of a million birds



### The participation level of the V&FA Project

Numbers indicate the total number of farms and volunteers that have been involved in the project over the last five years.

It is astonishing to think that it was only in 1999 that we began asking farmers if they would like our volunteers to survey the birds on their land. From a mere 40 farms in that first year of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project, some 1,839 farms have now been surveyed by 1,689 volunteers. That's over 20,000 hours of surveying and 250,000 records analysed – all improving conservation management for declining farmland birds.

The V&FA project is a celebration of the relationship between the RSPB and the farming community, which has come a long way in a short time. We have a strong

commitment to building bridges and trust; we believe that a strong partnership between conservation and farming has benefits for all.

We sincerely thank the volunteers and farmers who are essential to this process and look forward to working alongside you for many years to come. I hope that you enjoy reading about the V&FA and the RSPB's range of other work involving farmland birds.

**Mark Avery**  
Director of Conservation and V&FA volunteer

### In this issue:

- Corncrakes return to England
- Farming Berney Marshes
- Winter food for farmland songbirds
- What is happening to our yellow wagtails?
- Aren't Welsh birds brilliant!
- CAP reform

## Work placement thanks

Thanks go to Gareth Blockley, an HND student from Moreton Morrell Agricultural College in Warwickshire, who completed a month's work placement at the Central England Regional Office working on the V&FA. His help and enthusiasm were greatly appreciated, and he has now decided to pursue a career in conservation. We hope that more students show an interest in taking up work placements in the future.

## FarmBird\_UK: a discussion group for farmers

If you have ideas or questions about farmland bird conservation, you'll welcome a new way to discuss them with the experts. FarmBird\_UK is an internet discussion group that lets you talk to members of RDS, FWAG, the Game Conservancy Trust and the RSPB. Subjects raised so far include:

- the benefits of desiccating oilseed rape by spraying rather than swath
- using grain waste to feed farmland birds
- bird use of conservation headlands
- management of rush infestations.

To join the discussions, log onto [www.forwardfarming.org.uk/forum](http://www.forwardfarming.org.uk/forum), select 'FarmBird\_UK' and register using the link at the top of the page. Membership is free; you just need an e-mail address.

**For further information, please contact Richard Winspear on 01767 680551 or [richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk](mailto:richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk)**

# The corncrake returns to England

The corncrake was once a familiar part of our countryside. Although almost impossible to see, its rasping call could be heard in hayfields and cereal crops on summer nights. Mechanical mowing and the earlier harvesting of crops, however, were its downfall. By the late 20th century, the only corncrakes left in the UK were on Scottish islands. A similar picture has been repeated all over Europe, and the corncrake is now a globally threatened species.

In 1999, some young birds escaped from a large, captive-bred population in Germany. They migrated south to Africa for the winter, but returned the following spring.

With this in mind, English Nature and the RSPB decided to breed large numbers of corncrakes in captivity and release them on a grassland nature reserve in England, where many of the fields could be left uncut during the breeding season. We chose the RSPB's Nene Washes nature reserve in Cambridgeshire, where we manage several hundred hectares of grassland for birds and other wildlife.

In February 2001, we imported young captive-bred corncrakes from Germany, and they spent the spring indoors, at Chester Zoo. In June, we transferred them to outdoor pens at Whipsnade Wild Animal Park. Disappointingly, no breeding took place and we moved them to an indoor enclosure for the winter.

In April 2002, we returned the birds to outdoor pens, where the first brood of chicks hatched in June. We kept some of the chicks for further breeding, but released the majority onto the Nene Washes. We hoped that they would migrate to Africa and return to the reserve in spring. Unfortunately, no calling males were heard in 2003 – although this was not unexpected, given the small number of birds released.

In December 2002, we brought more young corncrakes from Germany to

join the flock. In April 2003, calling began and, during the summer, over 100 eggs were laid. We released the first six chicks in June and, by the end of August, we had released 52 birds.

We hope to breed and release well over 100 corncrakes each year, so that enough birds return from migration to establish a wild breeding population. If this experiment works, it could be followed by similar projects elsewhere in the UK. The corncrake is unlikely to return to all its former habitats, but there are enough protected areas of grassland for its call to be a familiar sound again.

**For further information, please contact Peter Newbery on 01767 680551 or [peter.newbery@rspb.org.uk](mailto:peter.newbery@rspb.org.uk)**



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

**Corncrakes are being released at the Nene Washes**

# Berney Marshes – a farmed RSPB reserve



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

## Grazing maintains ideal conditions for wildlife at Berney Marshes

The RSPB's Berney Marshes nature reserve in Norfolk covers 364 ha and is part of the 1,430 ha Halvergate Marshes. It lies on the southern edge of Halvergate, bordered by Breydon Water estuary.

Over the years, Halvergate Marshes has alternated between arable and grassland management as the agricultural climate has changed. The most recent move has been towards grassland management, with Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) changing the way that marshes are managed.

As one of the largest marsh landowners, the RSPB manages the land in a similar way to its neighbours, but our primary objective is birds.

There are many similarities in our management. The RSPB manages the water to provide favourable conditions for invertebrates that feed the birds, while farmers manage water levels to provide drinking water and ensure that the grass supports good animals and silage. We use livestock and tractors to ensure the right length of grass for different birds, such as redshanks

and lapwings, while farmers use the same methods to produce the right grass for summer grazing and winter silage.

These similar methods can often be carried out in tandem, meaning that both parties benefit. In order to grow our respective crops, we have to share an understanding of our different needs and how they are likely to affect each other.

**For further information, please contact Mark Smart on 01493 700645 or [mark.smart@rspb.org.uk](mailto:mark.smart@rspb.org.uk)**

## Volunteering in the 21st century

In the last year, the RSPB has developed a new computer system to provide one single point of information for all our volunteers. It is known as the Volunteer Management System and will be introduced across the RSPB by January 2004.

Volunteers will notice improvements in the support, management and communications that they receive.

The system will make sure that we know exactly who you all are, where you live and what you are doing for the RSPB.

Don't worry if this sounds a bit like 'big brother' – we only want to use the system to ensure that we can better support you in your volunteering for the RSPB.

**For further information, please contact Alan Murray on 01767 680551 or [volunteers@rspb.org.uk](mailto:volunteers@rspb.org.uk)**

# NFU Scotland Farmland Biodiversity Award

The winner of the 2003 NFU Scotland Farmland Biodiversity Award was Norman Massie from Culsalmond in Aberdeenshire.

Norman and Alison Massie run a 100 ha farm that supports a variety of habitats. In the early 1990s, they created a wetland in a barley field, on the advice of Grampian FWAG. It quickly became an important area for wading birds, including breeding redshanks – which are rare in the area – and lapwings. The wetland also supports ducks such as the mallard and teal, while snipe are abundant in winter.

Inspired by this success, the Massies created other features – including hedges and field margins – under the Countryside Premium Scheme, and are actively seeking new opportunities in the area. They signed up for the V&FA in 2003.

This is the second year that the RSPB has sponsored the NFU Scotland Farmland Biodiversity Award, one of three awards for excellence given by the NFUS and the *Scottish Farmer* newspaper. The award recognises farmers, crofters and growers who demonstrate a commitment to the conservation of semi-natural habitats on their farm.



David Tait/indy

## Redshanks are benefiting from new wetlands in Aberdeenshire

Application forms are now available for the 2004 NFU Scotland Farmland Biodiversity Award, which is open to all NFUS members.

For further details, contact Marla Cunningham on 0131 472 4000 or at: NFUS, Rural Centre, West Mains, Ingliston, Midlothian EH28 8LT.

## Profit without loss

The question, *How can farming be profitable without losing wildlife?* has a different answer on every farm. Integrated farming – often defined as linking economic viability with environmental sensitivity using modern techniques – is one potential solution. It is increasing in popularity, and we have joined forces with Farmcare, DEFRA and the Environment Agency to see whether it can truly deliver profit to all who depend on farming.

This new initiative, called PROBE (Profit, Biodiversity and Environment) is based at a 60 ha site within Farmcare's 2,000 ha Leicestershire estate. It tests the impact of new techniques, including planting the crop into the previous stubble field (known as direct drilling), against the conventional methods of ploughing the fields first.

Preliminary results are encouraging. Crop yields from the integrated

approach look good alongside a healthy yield of insects and seeds that we know are vital for our farmland birds.

**If you are interested in seeing the results for yourself, regular demonstration events are held at the site. For further information, please contact Darren Moorcroft on 01767 680551 or [darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk](mailto:darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk)**



# What is happening to our yellow wagtails?

A bright flash of yellow and a loud insistent 'pseep!' from the middle of a field in April signals the return of a yellow wagtail from its African wintering grounds. As our only truly migratory wagtail species, it returns to the UK to breed in a variety of open farmed habitats, including wet grassland, hay meadows and crops such as wheat and potatoes.

The yellow wagtail has recently been added to the amber list of birds of conservation concern. Because the British race is almost completely endemic to our shores, it is crucial to ensure the long-term survival of the species. The RSPB has teamed up with English Nature and the BTO to fund a PhD study at the University of East Anglia. It will focus on yellow wagtails nesting on arable farmland

and will identify their feeding and nesting needs.

Nicholas Watts, a Lincolnshire farmer known for his enthusiasm for farmland bird conservation, has kindly allowed his land to be used as the project's main study site. The farm is close to the RSPB's Nene Washes nature reserve in Cambridgeshire, where we are researching yellow wagtails' nesting and foraging locations. We hope to produce land management recommendations for a range of habitats and regions, aimed at increasing the species' population.

**For further information, please contact Guy Anderson on 01767 680551 or [guy.anderson@rspb.org.uk](mailto:guy.anderson@rspb.org.uk)**

## Champions helping lapwings across the UK

In response to the decline in breeding lapwings, many farmers took up the challenge of the RSPB's Operation Lapwing – to help this enigmatic bird using a simple five-point plan. Launched in 2003, the project also set out to find the UK's most lapwing-friendly farmer.

From the 85 entrants, winners were crowned in six regions, but the extra efforts of David and Joan Brailsford, from near Ashover in Derbyshire, won the admiration of the judges and the UK title. They avoid cutting silage during the nesting season, mark individual lapwing nests to avoid damage from farm machinery and, by creating wet scrapes, they have ensured an abundance of nest sites and insect food. In just five years, their 160 ha farm has almost doubled its lapwing population to 38 pairs.

The regional winners of the 2003 Lapwing Champion competition were:

Henry Edmunds, Wiltshire (Southern), Adam Lee, Bedfordshire (Midlands), Ruradh Ormiston, Inverness-shire (Scotland), Tom Douris, County Tyrone (Northern Ireland) and Hilary Kehoe, Gwynedd (Wales).

The RSPB applauds their commitment and efforts, which have undoubtedly enhanced their farms for all wildlife.

**For further information or to find out how to enter the 2004 Lapwing Champion competition, please contact Darren Moorcroft on 01767 680551 or [darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk](mailto:darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk)**



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

**Yellow wagtails are now amber-listed birds of conservation concern**



**The corn bunting is one of Scotland's fastest declining birds, but careful land management can help to improve its fortunes**

## Farmland Bird Lifeline in East Scotland

Farmland Bird Lifeline began in 2001 and aims to provide nesting habitat and food for some rapidly declining farmland birds, particularly the corn bunting. It operates in the remaining corn bunting hotspots in mainland Scotland, where probably fewer than 800 territorial males remain. We hope that the results of this direct land management will benefit birds locally, and be used to influence future agri-environment schemes and encourage the development of a dedicated corn bunting scheme.

We have compared results from winter 2001–2002 with those from our first winter of baseline monitoring. Preliminary analysis suggests that various seed-eating species have benefited.

During the summer, we recorded corn buntings nesting and feeding in the managed habitats provided, and foraging in these areas during the winter. In some areas of Aberdeenshire, breeding productivity increased in 2002, which may have been due to the provision of these undisturbed habitats.

During the winter, flocks of up to 80 corn buntings used wild bird cover crops, and there was an impressive

flock of 1,000 finches, sparrows and buntings on one participating farm. Extensive stubbles and weedy neeps (stubble turnips) were also attractive to various species.

The 23 participating farms in Aberdeenshire, Fife and Angus are managing land covering more than 150 ha within the project.

The farms have also provided opportunities to promote the plight of corn buntings and other farmland birds to a wider audience. FWAG and the RSPB have met several of the major agricultural players, including the Scottish Executive for Environment and Rural Affairs Department, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Agricultural College.

In April 2002, we appointed a project officer to focus on conservation and research activity for corn buntings in East Scotland. The corn bunting's profile in East Scotland has never been higher and, in the short term, Farmland Bird Lifeline seems to be benefiting this species and others.

**For further information, please contact Hywel Maggs on 01224 624824 or [hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk](mailto:hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk)**

## Corn bunting and RSS research project

In winter 2002, a project began in East Scotland to investigate the impact of the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS) on the corn bunting, one of Scotland's fastest declining birds.

The RSS includes several prescriptions that should benefit corn buntings. These include sowing and leaving areas of mixed cereal and brassica crop unharvested in winter, spring cropping with over-winter stubbles, extensively managing crops with no pesticide inputs, late mowing of silage, as well as unsprayed conservation headlands, grass margins and beetle-banks in arable fields.

The project is investigating the individual and collective impact of these prescriptions since they became established in spring 2003 by monitoring corn bunting populations on RSS farms. We are also monitoring corn buntings on farms that have not entered the RSS. This will allow us to compare population changes, over a three-year period, on farms within and outside of the RSS and determine the overall benefit of the RSS on corn bunting populations in East Scotland. The surveys also count other declining farmland birds such as tree sparrows, yellowhammers and reed buntings.

Farmers have been extremely enthusiastic about the project, and 38 farms – 22 RSS and 16 control farms – in Aberdeenshire and Moray, are participating. We began baseline monitoring in January, with corn buntings seen on half of the farms during the winter. They were mostly in small flocks, feeding on cereal stubbles or newly drilled spring cereal crops. In our summer surveys from May to August, we recorded 160 corn bunting territories on and around the farms.

We resume winter surveys in December and we hope that corn buntings will be found on unharvested crops on RSS farms.

**For further information, please contact Allan Perkins on 01224 624824 or [allan.perkins@rspb.org.uk](mailto:allan.perkins@rspb.org.uk)**

# How important is winter food to farmland songbirds?

This is the question that the RSPB has been trying to answer with the help of the Bird Aid project, which we started in 2000. It seems that changes in farming practices over the last 30 years have reduced the amount of seed available to farmland birds in winter. Several agri-environment scheme options focus on replacing this food source – for example, by providing over-winter stubbles and wild bird cover crops.

Research shows that these measures attract large numbers of seed-eating birds in the winter, but this has not yet been linked to greater breeding populations in subsequent nesting seasons. Another possible solution is to put out food such as grain tailings throughout the winter. It is important to know if measures like this can help the populations of some of our



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

**Bird Aid has involved farmers across the UK**

worst affected seed-eating farmland birds to recover.

The Bird Aid project has involved farmers at 109 sites across the UK. Landowners at about half of these sites have agreed to provide winter seed for birds from October to March each year. We chose the sites to target the populations of three species that have declined particularly dramatically – the tree sparrow, yellowhammer and corn bunting. The results from the 2003 breeding season are being analysed and we will know by the end of the year if there has been an increase in local breeding density for our target species.

**For further information, please contact Richard Winspear on 01767 680551 or [richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk](mailto:richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk)**

## Take up the challenge

'I grew up on a farm near Lincoln. My formative years were spent watching farmland birds and my identification skills were honed on all the species that inhabit fields and hedgerows. When I visit my parents on the farm, I cannot resist having a wander, listening to the skylarks' continuous yodel, the little owls' screeching from the nearby oaks and watching the tree sparrows feeding in the garden.

'Contrary to popular belief, there are still birds to be found on farmland. But it is also true that millions have been lost as farming has intensified. I feel saddened that, when I see grey partridges these days, they are worthy of a special mention in my diary because of their scarcity. When I was a child, I regularly saw coveys of 15 to 20 birds. Lapwings were a common sight. Their tumbling displays always made me stand in awe. I used to wonder how they

never hit the ground. Sadly, this is now an all too rare sight.

'It is easy for us to complain at what the farmers have done – but they have suffered both the carrot and the stick, used equally efficiently by the government and the EU to produce today's farming methods. The majority of farmers love to hear the skylarks, watch the tumbling lapwings and enjoy the cheeky nature of the sparrows.

'The RSPB's agricultural campaign is being fought on many fronts and at every level. Thousands of hours are spent reversing the declines in farmland birds. Staff do most of the work, but there is a simple and enjoyable way for volunteers to get involved – by taking part in the V&FA.

'It is a simple project that involves volunteers surveying birds on farms with the help of an instruction pack

and the opportunity to attend a local training day. The results are used to produce maps and species lists for farmers.

'I have done three surveys since 2000, all on local farms. It has been very enjoyable, and made all the more worthwhile by the responses I got from farmers. They were all friendly, helpful and enthusiastic about the results. Most recently, an owner was overjoyed with the birds that I found – particularly the tree sparrows and reed buntings – because he was not aware of either species. It gives a wonderful sense of satisfaction to know that I am contributing something towards the birds that I love.

'If you would like more information, please contact V&FA project staff.'

**Mike Cottingham, V&FA volunteer and Lincoln RSPB Local Group member**

# Aren't Welsh birds brilliant!

The RSPB recently gained an EU grant of over £1 m for its *Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant!* (AWBB) project. A conservation-led partnership, it aims to unite communities, landowners, farmers, partnership organisations and the RSPB, to benefit the local environment, rural and urban communities and local birds in Wales's Objective One area.

The project targets seven key farmland bird species – the black grouse, chough, lapwing, grey partridge, bullfinch, tree sparrow and yellowhammer – all birds of conservation concern in Wales. While black grouse and choughs have vulnerable and isolated populations, the other five species have had population declines of between 50 and 95% in the last 25 years.

We are planning conservation projects in Ruthin, Anglesey, the Llyn Peninsula, Dolgellau, Aberystwyth, Fishguard and Swansea and the Gower. The AWBB project has created 15 jobs, including six out-posted community project officers.

While retaining its identity, the V&FA in Wales will be absorbed into AWBB, which we hope will develop the work of the V&FA and achieve more for farmland birds.

**For further information, please contact Debbie Scott on 01248 363800 or [debbie.scott@rspb.org.uk](mailto:debbie.scott@rspb.org.uk)**



Mike Richards (rspb-images.com)

**The new *Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant!* project celebrates the beauty of birds such as the chough**

## Volunteers fly in to safeguard key species

The Flying Squad is a group of V&FA volunteers in East Anglia, able to carry out one-off rapid response bird surveys to support farmers' applications for agri-environment schemes. This year, volunteers carried out 35 of these surveys. Many were conducted to support applications for Countryside Stewardship Scheme

(CSS) arable options, which need evidence of one of six target bird species. With only a few exceptions, all surveys found at least one of the target species.

**For further information, please contact Shelley Gentle on 01603 660066 or [shelley.gentle@rspb.org.uk](mailto:shelley.gentle@rspb.org.uk)**

## Thanks to DEFRA

The RSPB would like to thank Laura Workman, who joined our SWRO V&FA team from DEFRA's cartography unit in Bristol. Laura helped project staff with the year's data entry and map production, and got to grips with our new volunteer database. We would also like to thank DEFRA for agreeing to the three-month secondment.



# CAP reform: threat or opportunity for wildlife?

They say you can only be certain of two things in life – death and taxes – but another certainty is continual change in agriculture. The nature and speed of these changes determine our farmland wildlife's future. So, how will the recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) affect the UK's wildlife?

The demands of 10 new countries joining the European Union, the requirements of global trade agreements and the need for greater sustainability have driven major changes in the policy. The new-look CAP is framed around three themes – decoupling, cross-compliance and modulation. The main product of the agreement so far is uncertainty, but we can predict some outcomes for farmland and wildlife.

Decoupling – removing the link between subsidies and production – is the biggest change. Production-linked subsidies have encouraged intensification of farming and made life more challenging for wildlife. Their removal is likely to be positive for wildlife – but impacts will vary and there are concerns about marginal farming systems, such as many of Scotland's crofts. These can be wildlife havens and the loss of farming here could be as damaging as more intensive farming.

Cross-compliance means that farmers only receive payments if they maintain their land in good agricultural and environmental condition. Its effectiveness will depend on how the rules are implemented.

While decoupling and cross-compliance will help to protect existing wildlife, stimulating recovery depends on active conservation management. Greater availability of agri-environment schemes is key – and this depends on greater funding. The CAP agreement means that UK countries can use modulation to shift more money into new agri-environment schemes, increasing the number of farmers able to create vital habitats on their land.

The new CAP is far from perfect. European countries can choose the extent to which they decouple their subsidies and there is little new money for the environment. Overall, though, we believe that it increases recognition of the benefits that farming can deliver, which sets us on the path towards a sustainable future for all.

**For more information, please contact Sue Armstrong-Brown on 01767 680551 or [sue.armstrong-brown@rspb.org.uk](mailto:sue.armstrong-brown@rspb.org.uk)**

## Can you help?

Would you like to become more involved with the V&FA project? We are looking for volunteers to support project staff in our regional offices in three different capacities:

### MapInfo

To produce maps for farmers, we enter a large amount of data onto the computer using a Geographical Information System (GIS) called MapInfo. We need volunteers from July–October for a minimum of one day a week to help with this. There may be smaller amounts of work available during the rest of the year.

Training will be given, although knowledge of GIS would be advantageous. Good computer skills are essential.

Location: all regional offices.

### Volunteer Management System

We have set up a new database to manage our volunteer records. To maintain this system, we need volunteers to help with data entry. We will train you, although you should be computer literate.

Location: all regional offices, except EARO.

### Event co-ordination

Each year, we organise training events for volunteers and thank you events for volunteers and farmers. We would appreciate help with organising these events from January–March and August–November, depending on regional work programmes. You must enjoy dealing with people and have a planned approach to your work.

We will give you guidance and the use of computers, while not essential, would help the work.

Location: all regional offices initially; work from home also possible.

There may be other projects in which you can become involved – for instance, lapwing projects and the provision of nestboxes. These opportunities vary regionally.

**If you are interested in volunteering, please contact V&FA project staff in your region or e-mail [v&fa@rspb.org.uk](mailto:v&fa@rspb.org.uk)**



# Is farming a SAFE option?

In Yorkshire, 10 farmers are piloting a project to show that SAFE farming can benefit producers, consumers, retailers and wildlife, with the help of the RSPB, Banks Cargill Agriculture and Asda. Farmers participating in the SAFE (Safeguarding the Arable Farmed Environment) project adopt a 10-point conservation plan, chosen from a list of 15 options. The options are easy to implement on a commercial arable farm and ensure that birds are provided with key ingredients for survival.

Farmers receive a premium for

growing a spring crop as opposed to a winter cereal, and to reward their conservation work. The project hopes to show how sustainable measures can increase farm incomes and boost populations of farmland birds, insects and plants.

Peter Trickett, who farms 404 ha at Wike, near Leeds, is one of the farmers taking part. He said, 'Being involved in SAFE will enable me to help the wildlife on my farm and give me the opportunity to make a profit at the same time. I am also very interested in seeing whether we

can add value to a commodity product like cereals, something which I feel is long overdue'.

The project will be reviewed annually to assess its impact on the farms and the populations of target birds such as the skylark, lapwing and tree sparrow. If successful, the project could be made available to arable producers across the UK.

**For further information, please contact Darren Moorcroft on 01767 680551 or [darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk](mailto:darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk)**



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

## What the volunteers had to say...

We received questionnaires from 42% of volunteers in 2002, and the results show that:

- 89% of volunteers were pleased with the V&FA training that they received
- 93% thought the maps that were provided for their fieldwork were suitable

- 96% of volunteers were satisfied with the level of support they received from project staff
- 38% of volunteers had never undertaken bird surveys before
- 84% enjoyed participating in the project, either a great deal or a fair amount.

## ... and what the farmers had to say

With a 39% response rate from farmers who participated in 2001, the results indicated that:

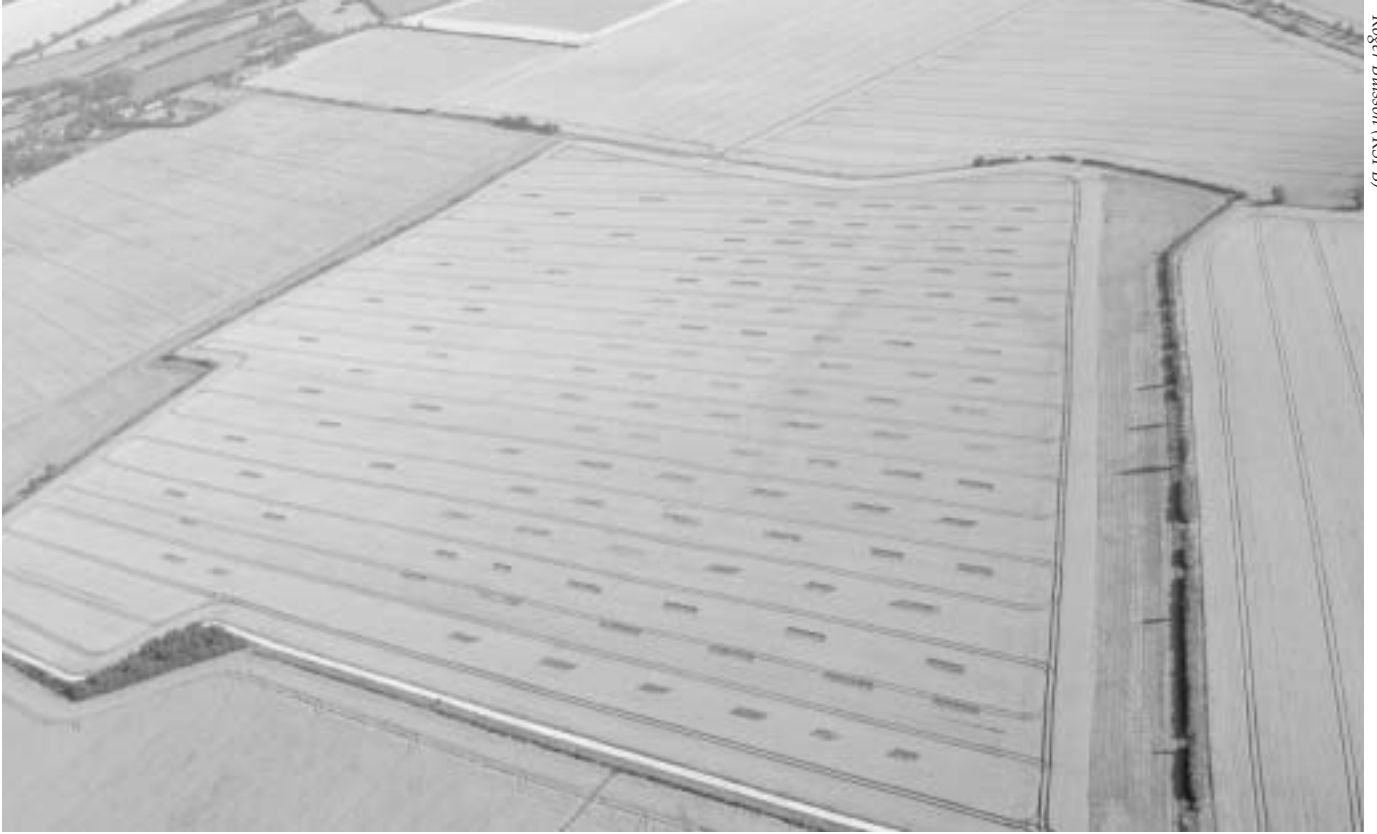
- 100% thought that taking part in the project was worthwhile
- 88% of farmers had species on their farm that they had not previously appreciated

- 85% found that the map they were given was very useful
- 81% put the farmland bird management guidelines that were issued with the map into practice
- 66% are more favourably inclined towards other RSPB initiatives following the V&FA survey.

## V&FA facts and figures

For 2002, the results of V&FA surveys indicated that:

- 76% of farms surveyed had house sparrows
- just 1% of farms had quails, with none found in Wales
- more farms had tree sparrows in the north-west and north-east of England than anywhere else
- skylarks were recorded on 79% of the farms surveyed
- just 5% of the farms surveyed in Wales recorded grey partridges
- more than 80% of the farms surveyed had song thrushes
- just over 65% of the farms surveyed had yellowhammers, but with less frequency in Northern Ireland and Wales than in East Anglia
- 42% of the farms surveyed in East Anglia had turtle doves, which is less than the previous year
- 43% of farms surveyed across the UK had lapwings, especially those in regions immediately either side of the Scottish border
- just 2% of the farms surveyed in Scotland had corn buntings
- chaffinches were recorded on more farms than any other bird, with blackbirds and wrens close behind.



At Hope Farm, we have trialled two and eight patches per ha

## Sustainable arable farming – managing crops for wildlife and profit

The structure and density of modern winter wheat crops in spring and summer make them less suitable for ground-nesting birds such as skylarks, that now only successfully raise one brood when, previously, they might have had two or three. The SAFFIE (Sustainable Arable Farming For an Improved Environment) project is testing two low-cost ways of opening up the canopy of winter wheat to increase access to food sources and nest sites:

- creating **undrilled patches (UP)** within the crop (two patches per ha established by turning off the seed drill) to provide nesting and feeding sites
- establishing the crop with **wide-spaced drill rows (WSR)** (double the normal row width with the same seed rate as normal).

This research has been conducted on 17 farms (including the RSPB's Hope Farm) over the past two years. Results suggest that both UP and WSR have benefits for skylarks and other wildlife – without significantly reducing crop yield.

### Wildlife benefits

Provisional results indicate that the number of skylark nests and chicks produced per nesting attempt were higher in the UP and WSR than in conventionally managed fields. There was also evidence that UP and WSR encouraged key invertebrates on which birds feed. More species and greater numbers of 'beneficial' weeds (those that provide food for birds and insects without impairing crop yield and profit) were found within UP. The patches seem to have been particularly successful in providing feeding sites for birds.

### The farmer's perspective

We found that crop yield was not significantly affected. Drilling wide-spaced rows was not a problem with most modern seed drills and most farmers did not experience weed problems. The potential worst-case cost of UP is about £8 per ha, depending on the price of grain. In the best case, it may be as little as £2 per ha. The level of payment currently available under the Entry Level Pilot Scheme

would cover the costs even in the worst case scenario.

### What's next?

SAFFIE will continue to research UP in wheat over the next three years on 26 farms across England and Scotland. It will again form a major part of the work programme on the RSPB's Hope Farm.

### Want to know more?

Visit Hope Farm to see the undrilled patches in the spring before deciding whether to create them on your farm. This can be arranged by contacting Roger Buisson on 01954 267438 or [roger.buisson@rspb.org.uk](mailto:roger.buisson@rspb.org.uk)

More information is available on the RSPB website at [www.rspb.org.uk/countryside/farming/hopefarm](http://www.rspb.org.uk/countryside/farming/hopefarm)

**For more details on SAFFIE, visit [www.saffie.info](http://www.saffie.info) or contact Tony Morris on 01767 680551 or [tony.morris@rspb.org.uk](mailto:tony.morris@rspb.org.uk)**



## Survey helps to promote B&B

The results of a V&FA survey on a farm in Merseyside have helped Simon and Lisa Edwards from Great Altcar to promote their new bed and breakfast business – as well as prompting their entry into the CSS.

Lisa said, 'The RSPB Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project has not only provided us with a fascinating insight into the different birds on the farm but it has helped us in planning our future farming business decisions.

'Since joining, we have entered DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship Scheme and set up a new bed and breakfast business aimed at birdwatchers. It has also enabled us to get to know the local RSPB volunteers – they now know a bit more about farming and we have been able to pick their brains about birds.

'We never realised just how big a hobby birdwatching is and, since opening the B&B in February, we have met some really interesting people. They enjoy staying on a working farm and being able to watch the birds, both out of their bedroom window and by walking the footpaths that cross the farm.'

The farm has over 60 bird species, including exceptional numbers of breeding lapwings, skylarks and grey partridges. It also attracts large flocks of pink-footed geese in winter.

**For further information, please contact Janet Fairclough on 01484 861148 or [janet.fairclough@rspb.org.uk](mailto:janet.fairclough@rspb.org.uk)**



The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all.

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## Wildlife-friendly farming at work in Northern Ireland

Philip and Barry Meeke farm with their father between Dromara and Banbridge in Co Down with consideration for wildlife...

'Our farm has grown over the years and now includes dairy and beef as well as cereals. Lately, we have moved to direct feeding to increase efficiency in the dairy herd, and have grown protein crops – peas and lupins. Triticale has replaced wheat this year in an effort to reduce the cost of growing whole-crop cereals.

'We have planted awkward and steep corners with native trees and created two ponds in a boggy area. Two years ago, the farm signed up to the Countryside Management Scheme, which gives an incentive to do more conservation work while bringing extra money into the farm.

'The two main areas we are concentrating on are providing winter stubble and growing wild bird

cover. This helps to support bird populations over the winter, as does laying and planting new hedges.

'In spring, we took the opportunity to have a bird count carried out on the farm by two RSPB volunteers. This was worthwhile, with 31 species recorded. The most significant species present was a healthy population of yellowhammers, now scarce in Northern Ireland.

'So far, the Countryside Management Scheme has made a significant impact on the wildlife value of the farm and now, that we know which birds live and breed on the land, we can try and support their populations by farming with their needs in mind. It is not hard to do and, with a bit of consideration for wildlife, we hope that the farm will be a profitable one where birds like the yellowhammer can live and breed successfully.'

## The RSPB on *The Archers*

The V&FA project was discussed on BBC Radio 4's long-running soap, *The Archers*. Phil Archer and Peggy Woolley mentioned that George Barford was interested in being trained as a volunteer birdwatcher, to identify farmland birds on local farms – for a scheme run by the RSPB. This welcome mention of the

project generated interest among farmers, and a number contacted us and took part in the project this year. Keep listening for an update on George's survey this autumn. Many thanks to Graham Harvey (the agricultural editor) and his team at the BBC.

Please contact V&FA project staff at the following RSPB offices:

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**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 212 6100

**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, East 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** Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 4QT Tel: 028 9049 1547

**East Scotland Regional Office (ESRO)** 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP Tel: 01224 624824

**S and W Scotland Regional Office (SWSRO)** 10 Park Quadrant, Glasgow G3 6BS Tel: 0141 331 0993

**North Wales Office** Maes y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW Tel: 01248 363800

[www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)