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The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

# FIELD OF VIEW

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Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The V&FA links enthusiastic farmers with keen birdwatchers

## EU supports wildlife-friendly farming across the UK

The RSPB is now able to offer a comprehensive range of support for wildlife-friendly farmers across the whole of the UK, thanks to funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme. The project offers farmers a free bird survey of their land, follow-up conservation advice and the opportunity to enter a competition, which raises the public profile of wildlife-friendly farming.

The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) links farmers who want a bird survey with volunteer birdwatchers who can carry out the survey. These surveys are available in every region of the UK, and are most useful for farmers

who want to use agri-environment schemes, and so need to know which birds they have on their farms. They can then choose the right conservation options. The survey gives them a list of the birds on the farm and a map showing the location of key species. Farmers are also given advice on how to help species where populations have declined markedly.

Some farms are home to birds that need special management. In this case, farmers are offered a free advisory visit to help them with agri-environment schemes, or to advise them about conservation measures they could use without being part of the schemes.

The Nature of Farming Award recognises the efforts of wildlife-friendly farmers across the UK. The winner is identified by a public vote, which promotes the good work farmers are doing for conservation to the general public.

In addition, the funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme will support the development of demonstration farms for RSPB farm events and case studies, and the RSPB's attendance at agricultural shows.

For more information, visit the project website at [www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)



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

**In this issue: The Nature of Farming Award results • Farmland bird research round-up • What the papers said this year • Dates for your 2011 diary • V&FA back in NI and Wales**



Turtle doves are scarce but they've returned in numbers to Hope Farm this year

David Morris (rspb)



## A decade of success at Hope Farm

**It was quite an adventure when the RSPB bought a farm in Cambridgeshire 10 years ago. As the second decade at Hope Farm starts, we've been reflecting on how far we've got with this project. It's fair to say buying a conventional arable farm was a radical departure for the RSPB, especially as we always planned to manage it as a farm, not a nature reserve. So what have we learnt from the experience?**

Firstly, we have shown that farmland bird numbers will increase if you create a range of habitats. At Hope Farm, we've used sown options designed to provide the "Big 3", which are summer insect food, winter seed food and safe nesting sites. And it's worked. We've recorded increases in linnets, reed buntings, skylarks and yellowhammers and we've seen the return of grey partridges, lapwings, turtle doves and yellow wagtails.

In 2010, surveys produced another record with our farmland bird index now 200% above our baseline year of 2000. Staff are particularly excited by three pairs of turtle doves, because they are so scarce. They are migrants, and are a focus for research because they are continuing to decline nationally.

Providing habitats for these birds helps other wildlife too, and we have been extremely fortunate to have staff and volunteers who are able to monitor all sorts of wildlife. This programme has included butterflies, moths, dragonflies, surface and crop-dwelling insects, small mammals and bats.

Secondly, owning and managing our own arable farm has been a very valuable experience for the RSPB. We've learnt a lot about growing crops, their pests and diseases and how to manage our environmental options. A key partner in this is our contractor who is a neighbouring farmer.

Thirdly, whilst food production is essential, with careful planning, we've shown it's possible to increase farmland bird populations without affecting the economic return to the farmer.

Our philosophy is that the cropping and environmental decisions are given equal weight to maximise the economic return to the farm.

During the past decade, the farm has attracted a huge number of visitors including farmers, farm advisors, policy-makers and farming organisations as well as our members. We'll continue to use the site to help demonstrate our position.

But we won't sit back on our past success. We want to expand the capacity of the site, examining new challenges such as climate change and diffuse pollution. We'll continue to build on the biodiversity successes and maintain agricultural productivity and economic returns.

**If you are interested in learning more about Hope Farm then please visit [www.rspb.org.uk/farming/hopefarm](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming/hopefarm) or e-mail [chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk](mailto:chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk)**

## A round-up of the latest research on farmland birds

**Many farmers have agreed to help the RSPB test potential solutions to help turtle doves and corn buntings on farmland this year.**

Research by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust indicated that turtle doves fail to raise enough young due to the loss of suitable weed seed on arable farmland. A number of farmers in East Anglia have agreed to provide seed-rich habitats next summer to see if this improves their breeding success. A problem for corn buntings is their very late nesting season. Nests are lost during harvest, or late summer nesting habitat may be lacking. Again, a number of farmers have offered to create trial plots to provide safe nesting habitat.

In Wales, V&FA farms with starlings are being included in a research project. It will identify areas for starling nest boxes, and then study the birds' diet and breeding success. Worryingly, the breeding population of starlings has declined by 58% in Wales since 1995, and the cause of the decline remains unknown.

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) published the results of its monitoring of the effects of Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) on farmland bird populations this year. Unfortunately, it does not make for happy reading.

Very few benefits were detected between the baseline surveys of 2005 and the follow-up surveys of 2008. The study concludes that the success of the scheme might depend on a more balanced choice of options, with more in-field measures being taken up. However, they also stated that there might be a time-lag between habitats being established and maturing, and the response of farmland bird populations to this.

The Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) is promoting

exactly the right suite of measures to boost insect and seed food for birds, which should make a positive difference to farmland bird populations in England.

The BTO also led an important study, using national bird and mammal monitoring data, to test whether declines in some songbird populations were related to the number of predators present. Twenty-nine prey species were studied in relation to numbers of predators, including sparrowhawks, kestrels, buzzards, crows, magpies, jays, great spotted woodpeckers and grey squirrels. For 22 species there was no significant link between the increase of predators and the decline of prey species. Indeed, there were many positive associations.

There were a few negative associations, but some were

ecologically improbable. In a study that makes so many statistical comparisons, these will occur due to chance. However, a few associations are worthy of further investigation, as they are ecologically plausible.

Simultaneously, other studies have suggested that songbird population changes have been influenced by a range of other factors, most notably changes in farmland and woodland management. However, farmland bird numbers have responded well to positive management under agri-environment schemes where the three main impacts of conventional farming have been addressed: the provision of seeds, insects and in-field nesting habitat.

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

**More in-field options such as skylark plots are needed**



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



# THE NATURE OF FARMING AWARD

The Nature of Farming Award mobilised the public this year, with nearly 6,500 votes. The award is run by the RSPB, Plantlife, Butterfly Conservation and BBC *Countryfile* Magazine with funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme. The calibre of farmers involved shows that they really care about the health of our countryside.

## UK winners John & James Davison

*County Antrim, Northern Ireland*

The Davison Brothers are a shining example of how upland farming can be managed for business and for nature. Their family farm lies in the Antrim Hills. Here, the brothers strive to increase numbers of threatened breeding curlews and lapwings as well as other species including red grouse and Irish hares. Their love of nature, conservation successes on their own farm, and their respected position in the local community, makes them perfect for promoting key conservation messages to the wider farming community.



## James Bucher

*Suffolk, Eastern England*

James demonstrates a good practical knowledge of biodiversity and conservation land management. The impressive management of his farm in the Brecks supports range-restricted farmland bird species such as the corn bunting, grey partridge, lapwing, snipe, turtle dove and yellow wagtail as well as water voles and otters on the River Ouse. Arable options cover 18% of the farm and plants such as flixweed, vipers bugloss and pearlwort provide food for species such as the grey carpet moth.



## Michael Dugdale

*Worcestershire, Midlands*

Michaels' mixed farm is on the edge of the Wyre Forest. Thirty years of conservation have seen lapwings, white letter hairstreak butterflies and early purple orchids all increase due to his enthusiasm and hard work. Simple measures such as creating fallow plots for nest sites, nectar flower mixtures for insects and restoring flower-rich grassland in the valleys, have made this possible. As well as the stunning wooded valleys managed for bluebells, wild garlic and butterflies, Michael integrates conservation work with a modern and diverse agricultural business.



## Colin Strang Steel

*Selkirkshire, Scotland*

Colin has integrated many conservation measures into his mixed farming enterprise. Seed-eating birds such as linnets and yellowhammers have benefited from plots of wild bird cover, over-winter stubbles and hedgerow creation, while the habitat for breeding waders has improved by reducing stock densities and the creation of insect-rich wader scrapes. Wildflower meadows, native woodland planting and wetland creation have all increased the diversity of habitats on the farm. This has resulted in an increase in wildflowers such as ox-eye daisies and field pansies, and associated invertebrates such as small pearl-bordered fritillaries.

# REGIONAL AND UK WINNERS

## John Harrison & Ruth Russell

*North Yorkshire, Northern England*

John and daughter Ruth run their mixed farm with tremendous enthusiasm for wildlife. They have gone above and beyond the requirements of their agri-environment schemes and have dramatically increased numbers of barn owls, corn buntings, grey partridges, lapwings and tree sparrows on their farm. Through careful management of chalk grassland, they have maintained populations of marbled white butterflies and scarce flowers including clustered bellflowers and bloody cranesbills. Dozens of school children visit the farm every year to enjoy the abundance of wildlife and to learn about farming and conservation.



## Ian Boyd

*Gloucestershire, South West England*

In the last decade, Ian's farm has changed from being production-led to working in harmony with wildlife. This process is supported by agri-environment schemes, but is largely down to Ian's change of approach. Species attracted to the farm include corn buntings, lapwings, small toadflax, Venus's looking-glass, brown hares, greater and lesser horseshoe bats, great crested newts, dingy skippers, Adonis and small blue butterflies. This abundance of wildlife sits alongside an educational programme and a well-run commercial farm.

## Jonathan Capes

*Hampshire, Southern England*

Jonathan manages a commercial arable farm and has successfully combined crop production and wildlife management. The creation and management of a range of habitats including in-field measures, field boundaries, pasture and woodland benefit a range of birds, butterflies, insects, plants and mammals. Public access and interpretation are important, because they explain what's being done, and why. Continual development through research and practical experience means there is maximum efficiency for nature and crop production.



## Alun Wyn Evans

*Gwynedd, Wales*

Alun manages his livestock farm in a wildlife-friendly manner because he feels a responsibility towards future generations. He has adopted some of the less attractive elements of Tir Gofal and been rewarded for his efforts. Marshland has been restored by gating drainage ditches, and the plant life reflects the quality of this reinstated habitat. While lapwings have declined across Wales, this farm has seen an increase in the last few years. Alun considers the traditional boundaries of soil and stone walls as habitats in their own right, in addition to their agricultural purpose.

To enter your farm in 2011 call 01767 680551

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





Cereal-based mixtures are essential for corn buntings

Hywel Maggs (rspb)

## Bunting cover crop trials in East Scotland

In 2001, the RSPB launched a project aimed at providing year-round benefits for farmland birds, with particular focus on corn buntings. Here we report on the initial findings of this study in East Scotland, funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, and the subsequent trials to benefit corn buntings in Scotland.

The project involved spring-sown wild bird cover (WBC) as one or two-year mixes. Initially, the typical one-year mix included a cereal (oats or barley), oil seed rape, mustard and quinoa. A two-year mix was the same, but with kale. Most WBC had around 90% cereal, as this is the key seed food for buntings. An average individual plot size was between 1 ha and 2 ha.

The RSPB began monitoring the effectiveness of different spring-sown WBC mixes during the winter of 2004/5. During monitoring, we found that two-year mixes held far fewer birds during the second winter. Buntings were encountered mainly in grain-rich one-year mixes. So, since 2006 we have only monitored one-year mixes.

Original mixes held less grain later in the winter, and fewer seed-eating bird species were seen then. We responded by increasing the amount and variety of grain sown in the WBC crops. In 2006, we started a trial using spring-sown

one-year mixes with three different grain varieties: triticale, barley and oats. This combination provides grain throughout the winter, right up until ploughing in spring.

We now recommend using all three types of grain to make sure there is grain available throughout winter. Since 2006, we have also included an annual seeding plant, such as mustard or linseed, and a small amount of red clover. This offers summer benefits in terms of an insect habitat and dense cover for ground-nesting birds.

This mix often attracts corn buntings in summer, and many nests have been successful in it. If WBC crops are to be managed as a potential breeding site as well as providing winter seeds for food, careful attention must be paid to the location and the size of plots. When looking at summer use by corn buntings and other key species, the best results usually involve managing crops in plots larger than 1 ha and sown as a whole field or block, rather than a thin strip or small corner. The location of song posts is also important. The presence of overhead telegraph wires can provide many species with a suitable lookout for predators, or a song post over a nest site.

For more information contact [hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk](mailto:hywel.maggs@rspb.org.uk)



Flower-rich margins are a key habitat promoted by the Campaign

Mark Thomas (rspb)

## An update on the Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Farmers in England are being asked to contribute to the CFE in order to replace the environmental benefits of set-aside. If farmers join in, it will hopefully avoid further regulations.

A recent report indicated that farmers have not been clear about exactly what they are being asked to do. Here is a checklist of how to do your bit:

1. When joining or renewing ELS, include some of the in-field measures, such as wild bird seed mixtures, nectar flower mixtures and skylark plots.

2. Retain any areas of uncropped land and record these on your annual Defra returns.

3. Manage land that is not in production for the benefit of the environment. Use voluntary measures, such as sown wildflower headlands, overwintered stubbles or uncropped cultivated margins. Keep a record of what you have done in the booklet *A farmer's guide to voluntary measures*, which was sent out last winter to all farmers with more than 10 ha.

We would ask any arable farmer joining ELS to consider the Farmland Bird Package. For example, you could sow 2 ha of wild bird seed mixture, 1 ha of flower-rich margins and allow 20 skylark plots per 100 ha of arable land. This would make up almost half of the points needed to get into an ELS agreement. Any farmer committed to this package should also be rewarded with a wildlife spectacle on their doorstep!

For more information about the CFE, visit [www.cfeonline.org.uk](http://www.cfeonline.org.uk)

## Swifts need help

Swifts rely on buildings and they need your help. Despite being a much-loved bird, they have declined by 29% over the past 25 years. While the cause of the decline is not known, we do know that they can be affected by loss of nest sites, which are, with a few exceptions, in buildings.

Last year the RSPB launched the National Swift Inventory. This year the inventory has grown in strength with the provision of an on-line mapping tool. People can submit records from anywhere they live or travel in the UK. This helps us to identify potential threats and opportunities to protect or increase numbers of nesting birds in development proposals.

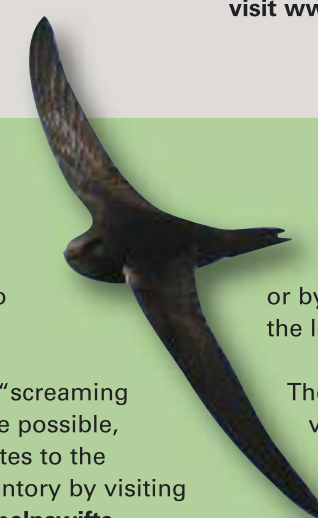
There are three easy things we can all do to help swifts.

- 1) Submit records of "screaming parties" and, where possible, locations of nest sites to the National Swift Inventory by visiting [www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts](http://www.rspb.org.uk/helpswifts)
- 2) Protect existing nest sites, either in your own home and farm buildings or by encouraging neighbours and the local authority to do so at sites you know about.
- 3) Encourage provision of new nests, particularly close to existing colonies. This again can be in your own home when undertaking

repairs or building extensions, or by encouraging neighbours and the local authority to do the same.

The RSPB works closely with voluntary groups such as Swift Conservation and Concern for Swifts (Scotland). These are run by dedicated enthusiasts who have been providing advice about protecting and creating places for swifts to nest for many years.

Please e-mail [conservationadvice@rspb.org.uk](mailto:conservationadvice@rspb.org.uk) if you want a reminder when the birds return next year, and claim a free swift information pack to download.



Mark Thomas (rspb)



# 2010, WHAT THE PAPERS SAID...

It's been an interesting year in the press, with the CFE, a new agri-environment scheme in Wales and a new UK Government. With the threat of budget cuts and less support for agri-environment schemes, we've been working hard behind the scenes to highlight the importance of the work that farmers do for wildlife and the financial support it requires. Here, we share some of the highlights with you!

## RSPB hails farming's environment heroes

The RSPB has identified ten of England's 'most inspirational' wildlife friendly farmers as its 'agri-environment heroes'.

The farmers chosen by the charity were set to be formally unveiled at this week's Oxford Farming Conference. The RSPB said that as well as creating habitats for threatened farmland birds, these 'heroes' have proven that agri environment measures can be great for business as well as wildlife.

See [www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/spotlight/index.asp](http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/spotlight/index.asp) to read about them.

*Farmers Guardian, 4 January 2010*

## Environmentalists' plea to Elin Jones

Environmentalists from a wide range of NGOs met Rural Affairs Minister Elin Jones yesterday to urge her to follow through on plans to introduce the new Glastir agri-environment scheme in 2012. Members of the Wales Environment Link network, reminded the minister of the urgent environmental problems facing the Welsh countryside and the importance of implementing the new scheme to tackle issues such as flooding, habitat degradation, wildlife loss and climate change.

Katie-jo Luxton, Director of RSPB Cymru said "Government targets to address wildlife loss in the Welsh countryside have already been missed, making the task to reverse the decline more urgent than ever. In the last ten years we have lost birds such as corn bunting and turtle dove from Wales – we must act now if we are to keep once common birds like lapwing and curlew, breeding on the farmed land of Wales."

*Welsh Country, 15 January 2010*

The RSPB is working with farmers to bring corn buntings back to Wales



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

## RSPB thanks farmers for return of rare bird

Farmers have been praised by the RSPB for helping one of Britain's most threatened songbirds return to the countryside.

Two decades ago the ciril bunting was on the brink of extinction but latest figures show numbers have increased by 7-fold since 1989, reaching 862 breeding pairs in 2009.

*Farmers Guardian, 16 February 2010*

## A letter to Farmers Weekly

A letter from the RSPB appeared in Farmers Weekly, highlighting the importance of upland farming and the policy reforms required to protect it.

'Upland farming is vitally important for the maintenance of wildlife habitats, beautiful landscapes upon which tourism often depends and of course sustainable food production.

The RSPB and the CLA are calling for a full scale reform of the whole (CAP) system so that all farmers are rewarded for the environmental services they provide.'

*Farmers Weekly, 26 February 2010*

## Grants for crofters to help save rare species

Crofters are set to receive £800,000 in grants over the next five years to look after their land in a way that supports wildlife.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the north of Scotland has worked in partnership with crofters to secure the funding from the Scottish Rural Development Programme.

*The Scotsman, 21 April 2010*

## Spelman urged to spare farmed environment from budget cuts

Leading conservation, countryside and farming groups have joined forces to protest against potential Government cuts which could undermine environmental measures in our countryside. Sixteen groups have signed a letter to Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman calling for the protection of agri-environment schemes in England which bring in money to the British economy from European funds, support farm and other rural businesses, and help farmers protect water supplies, carbon stores, wildlife, landscapes and historical sites.

*RSPB press release, 21 June 2010*

## Volunteer catches the early birds to map farm wildlife

Of the many environmental interventions in farming, Graham Thurlow represents one of the most pleasant and least bureaucratic. You call up the RSPB and he pops along to your farm and draws a map of the birds he finds on it.

The benefits to the farmer are also described, with the farmer having £15,000 of income depending on his efforts to be wildlife friendly over about 70 acres, including margins. "In many ways this farm is a showcase for high productivity – up to the margins and the land we have left untouched since set-aside. I like to think we can do our job and still live alongside lots of interesting wildlife."

*Yorkshire Post, 28 June 2010*



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Thanks to farmers, the ciril bunting population continues to increase

## RSPB are countryside champions

Successfully upping the number of winged visitors to your land is not just a matter of putting out more birdseed and trousering the grant. Indeed, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds runs an entire 450-acre farm just outside Cambridge, showing landowners and soil-tillers how best to boost their bird population.

"We demonstrate how it's possible to grow a good wildlife crop alongside a good arable crop," says Chris Bailey, the RSPB's project manager at Hope Farm.

*Sunday Telegraph, 28 June 2010*

(see also the *Farmers Guardian*, 1 July 2010)



## Minister hails V&FA return to Northern Ireland

Everyone is delighted this popular farmland bird project is back in Northern Ireland after a three-year break. It has been missed by many of the volunteers and farmers who were previously involved. Now with funding from the EU LIFE+ Programme, the V&FA is bigger and better than it was before, with 68 farms surveyed by 71 enthusiastic volunteers.

To mark the importance of the project, the Minister of Agriculture Michelle Gildernew re-launched it at Michael Devlin's farm in May. The farm belongs to an agri-environment scheme, and because it is near Lough Neagh, it is a stronghold for tree sparrows involved in the Lough Neagh Wetlands Tree Sparrow Project.

Thanks to the support of a volunteer, we will be able to record some of the species of birds that are present on the farm. The results of the survey will be analysed and passed back to Michael on a map, together with advice about how best to manage his land to look after the species that are there.

Michael's farm was surveyed by Cliff Henry. Cliff is one of the many volunteers that returned to the V&FA, and with



Volunteer Colin Henry, farmer Michael Devlin, Patsy Harbinson (RSPB), and the Minister of Agriculture Michelle Gildernew

invaluable experience, he was more than happy to get involved again this year. He located chiffchaffs, sedge warblers, skylarks, wheatears, and willow warblers, and last, but certainly not least, tree sparrows.

As a park warden at the Ecos environmental centre and a member of Butterfly Conservation, he welcomes the opportunity to practice his bird identification skills out in the field. Also, the survey work often takes the volunteers involved to a part of the countryside they don't usually get the chance to visit.

For more information contact Patsy Harbinson on 028 9049 1547 or e-mail [patsy.harbinson@rspb.org.uk](mailto:patsy.harbinson@rspb.org.uk)

The distribution of V&FA surveys carried out in Wales

## Welcome return of V&FA to Wales!

After a couple of quiet years in Wales, the V&FA is back to full strength, thanks to EU LIFE+ funding.

Between 2002 and 2008 more than 325 farms were surveyed across Wales, with many more farmers keen to know about the birds on their land. When the project returned, the interest from both farmers and volunteers was immediate!

Farmers expressed an interest from all over the country, while volunteers wishing to take part seemed to flood in from distant pockets in the north and south, unfortunately leaving many farms in mid-Wales without a survey this year.

The new Welsh agri-environment scheme, Glastir, is soon to be launched. It is hoped that the V&FA survey results will be an additional aid for farmers who have expressed an interest in the scheme. It will help them choose the best options for their farm, in both the All Wales and the Targeted Elements.

There are still opportunities for a V&FA survey in Wales and new volunteers with good farmland bird identification skills are always welcome.

For more information, contact Mark Vercoe on 01248 672850 or e-mail [mark.vercoe@rspb.org.uk](mailto:mark.vercoe@rspb.org.uk)

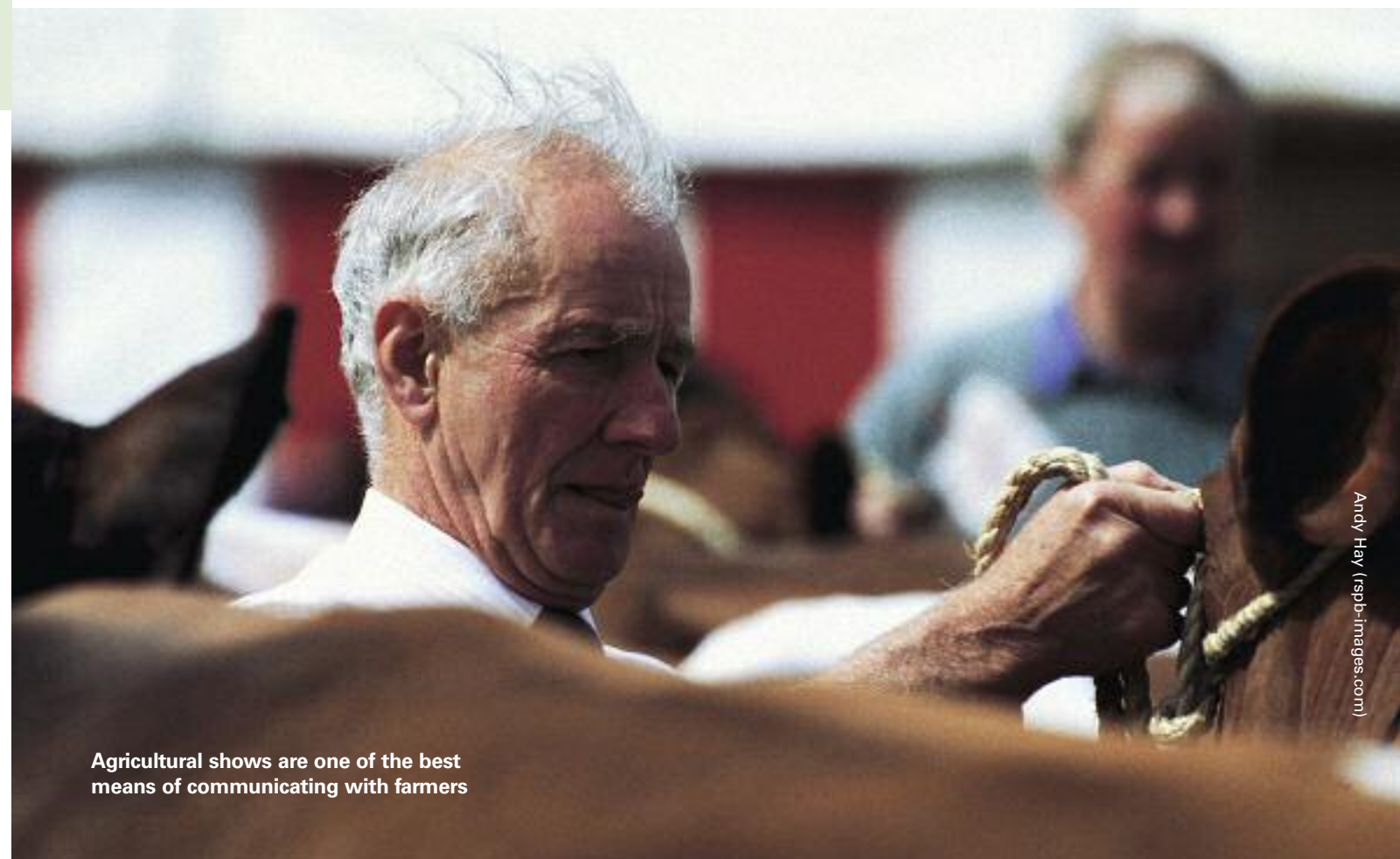
## Advice at agricultural shows in 2011 and online

We aim to be at the agricultural shows listed opposite. Please call in to see us, and discuss ways in which the RSPB can support your work. It may be through free bird surveys, farmland conservation advice or the Nature of Farming Award. Staff will be on hand to answer any questions you have on wildlife conservation.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please remember to visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info). 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.

### 2011 agricultural show programme

- Balmoral Show 11-13 May, King's Hall, Belfast
- Beef Expo 26 May, Newark Showground, Nottinghamshire
- Cereals 15-16 June, Leadenham, Lincolnshire
- Royal Highland Show 23-26 June, Ingliston, Edinburgh
- Scottish Game Fair 1-3 July, Scone Palace, Perthshire
- Royal Welsh 18-21 July, Royal Welsh Showground, Powys
- CLA Game Fair 22-24 July, Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire
- Sheep Event 3 August, Three Counties Showground, Malvern, Worcestershire
- Dairy Event and Livestock Show 6-7 September, NEC, Birmingham



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



# V&FA highlights in 2010

EU LIFE+ funding has allowed us to offer surveys across the whole of the UK for the first time this year. The results table below highlights the most interesting results. Far more species have been recorded, but there are just too many to list.

As the landscape varies so much across the UK, the results can't be used to compare areas. They're a snapshot, showing where farmland birds have been recorded. Some species are dependent on arable systems, while others, such as stone curlews and turtle doves, are migrants whose distributions are predominantly in the south and east of the UK.

Besides these results, in eastern England, common cranes were seen on one farm and a volunteer had a sparrowhawk perch on his head on another!

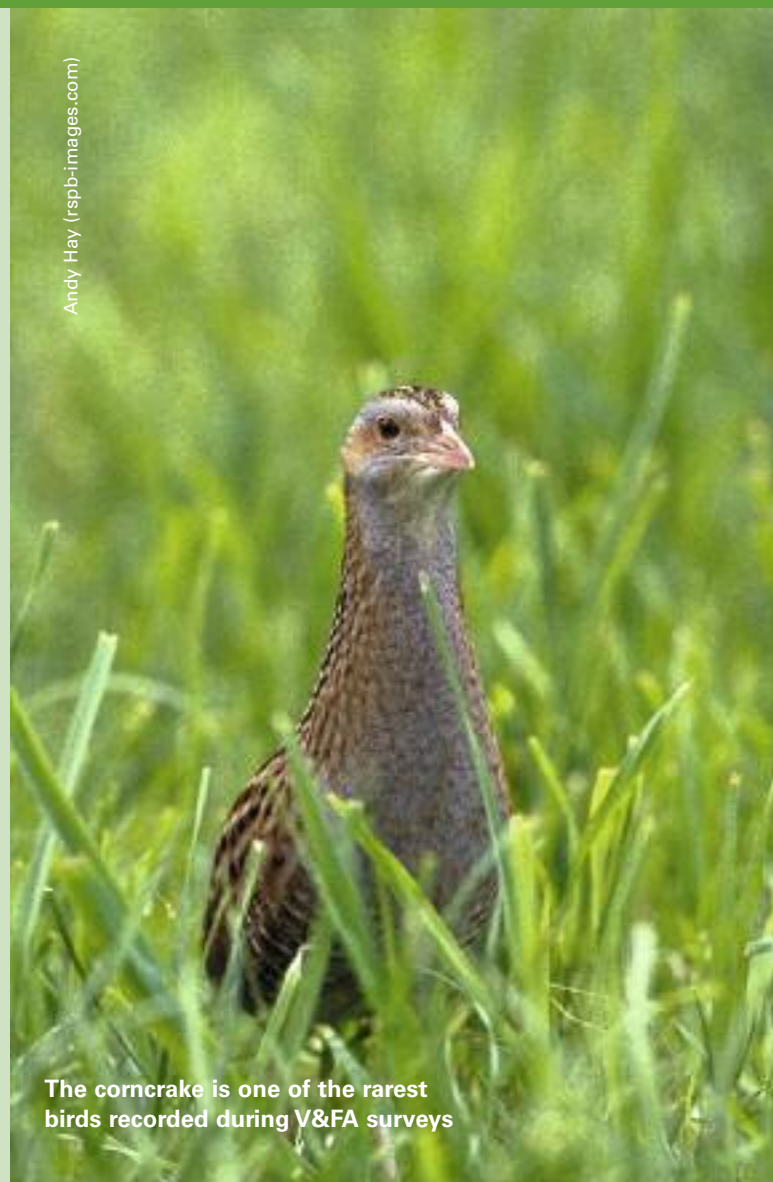
A green parrot was seen on a farm in northern England, but more significantly, six ring ouzels were found elsewhere.

In north Scotland, one farm had a corncrake, while in Northern Ireland there were seven farms with curlews.

In south west England, red kite sightings have gone up by 20% since 2008 and two farms had cirl buntings.

## Percentage of farms where birds were recorded

	Eastern England	South West England	Midlands	South East England	Northern England	South and West Scotland	East Scotland	North Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Corn bunting	20	19	13	17	17	3	5	23	0	0
Cuckoo	32	21	40	66	20	10	7	14	47	8
Grey partridge	42	12	28	17	44	13	22	23	0	0
Kestrel	71	43	70	62	54	46	12	18	28	14
Lapwing	61	16	49	30	75	56	80	64	25	12
Linnet	86	80	72	89	67	67	63	50	69	44
Skylark	99	81	98	87	74	85	90	59	47	24
Starling	76	41	74	77	82	87	98	73	47	86
Stone-curlew	1	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tree sparrow	14	8	36	4	49	21	15	23	9	25
Turtle dove	30	1	2	13	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yellowhammer	96	72	98	81	68	54	44	50	13	19
Yellow wagtail	45	7	32	9	13	0	0	0	3	0



The corncrake is one of the rarest birds recorded during V&FA surveys

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

# Don't cut the life from the countryside

**At the time of writing, rumours abound about the UK Government's spending review. What will the review mean? How will cuts affect farmers and the environment?**

We know that a provisional settlement to cut the budget has been agreed. What remains to be seen is where the axe will fall. The Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman, has the difficult job of deciding which areas of her department's activity to cut.

The RSPB has been campaigning hard to ensure that the comparatively small, but vital, agri-environment scheme budget is protected, especially the higher tier schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) in England. This hugely important scheme is, in many cases, the

only mechanism for protecting some of our most important natural assets. Any cuts to this budget will reduce the opportunities to provide for some of the country's rarest and most threatened wildlife, most valuable sites and unique history. Cuts to this scheme will ultimately mean cuts to everyone's heritage and the losses could prove irreversible.

We urge the minister to be prudent when wielding the axe she has been handed, and to target spending streams where loss will not cause lasting damage. The HLS scheme is the last place to look.

**For more information, contact Louise Cavender on 01767 680551 or e-mail [louise.cavender@rspb.org.uk](mailto:louise.cavender@rspb.org.uk)**



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

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



# The V&FA is more important than ever

For the last three years, V&FA records have contributed to two important conservation initiatives that benefit both farmers and farmland birds.

The first is the Bird Conservation Targeting Project, which collects bird records from the widest range of sources available. These are used to map distributions of key farmland and woodland birds as accurately as possible. The maps are used by government agencies to target a proportion of the agri-environment and woodland grant funding at the best areas for birds. For example, V&FA records of birds such as corn buntings and grey partridges might not only benefit the farmer who had the survey, but also improve the chances of his neighbours getting into an agri-environment scheme. This project is currently running in England and Scotland.

The second is the Bird Atlas. This is a huge undertaking that will culminate in the production of a new breeding and wintering atlas of birds in Britain and Ireland. This will provide a vital snapshot of bird distributions from a

comprehensive survey covering the whole of the British Isles, and will update the previous breeding atlas survey undertaken 20 years ago. The atlas produced in the early 1990's illustrated the scale to which some farmland and woodland species, such as corn crakes, grey partridges and woodcocks, had declined in range over the previous 20 years. It will be intriguing to see what the new atlas will show. Hopefully, some species such as curlew buntings, corn crakes and stone-curlews will show a range recovery thanks to the efforts of dedicated farmers. Others are likely to show a continued decline, and this project will help inform where to put the conservation effort for the greatest gains. The fieldwork has one year left to go, and the new atlas will probably be published in 2013.

The fact that V&FA records contribute to these important projects has greatly increased its value to bird conservation.

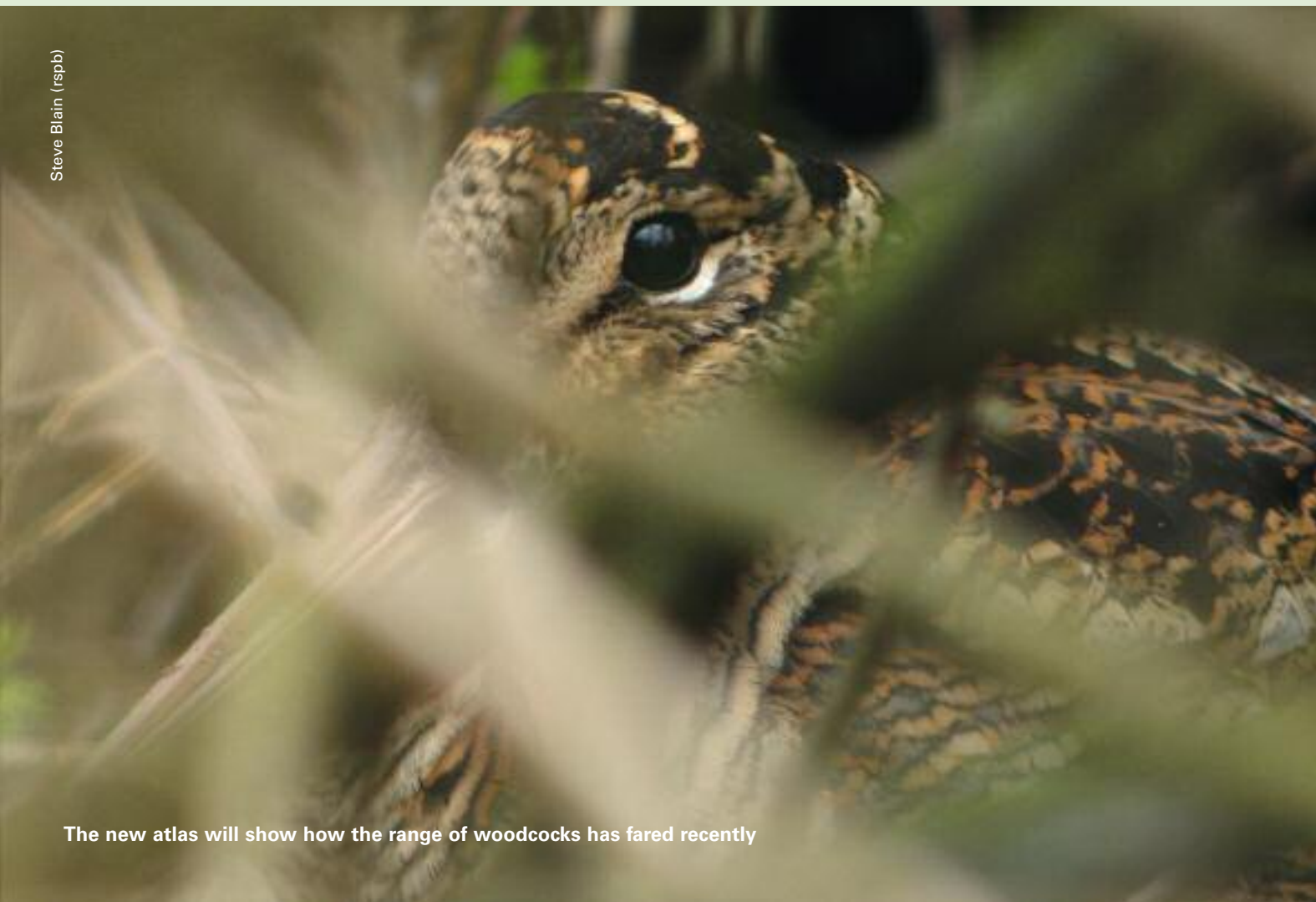
For more information, contact Richard Winspear on 01767 680551 or e-mail [richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk](mailto:richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk)

Providing food for birds helps during bad weather



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Steve Blain (rspb)



The new atlas will show how the range of woodcocks has fared recently

## Big Garden Birdwatch

More than half a million people took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch in 2010, counting more than 8.5 million birds across the UK during the weekend of 30 and 31 January.

It helped us establish just how the bad weather at the start of the year affected bird populations.

As predicted, small birds like coal tits, goldcrests and long-tailed tits were the worst affected. Average numbers of all three species dropped significantly compared with the year before. Small birds like long-tailed tits are particularly susceptible to the cold, having to eat almost continuously to stay alive.

The weather was also responsible for many more sightings of birds like bullfinches, fieldfares, redwings and yellowhammers in gardens. More usually found on farmland, these birds visit our gardens for food when their usual supplies are exhausted.

As well as fieldfares and redwings, blackbirds, mistle thrushes and song thrushes were seen in high numbers, also looking for food.

Some of the UK's most familiar species continue to suffer huge declines. In just the last five years alone, house sparrows have declined by 17% and starlings by 13.7%.

However, house sparrows retained their top spot for the seventh year running, with an average of 3.8 seen per garden. Blackbirds rose from third to second place with an average of 3.3 per garden. Starlings dropped to third with 3.1 per garden, the first time they have been out of the top two in more than 10 years.

Next year the Big Garden Birdwatch takes place over the weekend of 29-30 January 2011. Join in and help us make 2011 bigger still!

Visit [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch) for more information.



# What do farmers think of the V&FA?

**The feedback we receive from farmers each year helps us improve delivery and makes sure we all benefit from the project as much as possible.**

Each year, questionnaires are sent to farmers who participated the year before last, allowing for any advice sought and management techniques to be put into practice by those who wish to do so.

Results from questionnaires filled in by farmers in 2009 indicate that:

- 99% of farmers felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience
- 92% of farmers found the laminated map they received useful
- 83% of farmers had species on their farms they hadn't previously noticed
- 63% of farmers put into practice the farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map
- 49% of farmers are now more likely to get involved with other RSPB initiatives

## Keeping you informed

The RSPB is always updating its systems and processes for storing information. Farm information and other details that you give us will be held by the RSPB on paper and electronically. All details will be kept confidential. We will not make your name, address or any other information available to external

organisations without your permission. The RSPB is continually finding new ways to help farmers conserve wildlife. We may wish to contact you from time to time with such information. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way, please contact project staff in your area – contact details below.

## The EU Birds Directive

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

**management on farmland, creating a positive profile through promotional activities.**

### Please contact project staff at the following RSPB offices

**UK Headquarters** The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL Tel: 01767 680551

**Midlands Regional Office** 46 The Green, South Bar, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9AB  
Tel: 01295 253330

**Eastern England Regional Office** Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road, Norwich NR1 1UD Tel: 01603 661662

**Northern England Region** 1 Sirius House, Amethyst Road, Newcastle Business Park,  
Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 7YL Tel: 0191 256 8200

7.3.1 Cameron House, White Cross Estate, Lancaster LA1 4XQ Tel: 01524 581000

**South East England Regional Office** 2nd Floor, Frederick House, 42 Frederick Place, Brighton,  
East Sussex BN1 4EA Tel: 01273 775333

**South West England Regional Office** Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter,  
Devon EX1 1NT Tel: 01392 432691

**Northern Ireland Headquarters** Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT Tel: 028 9049 1547

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

**South and West Scotland Regional Office** 10 Park Quadrant, Glasgow G3 6BS Tel: 0141 331 0993

**North Scotland Regional Office** Etive House, Beechwood Park, Inverness IV2 3BW Tel: 01463 715000

**North Wales Office** Unit 14 Llŷs Castan, Ffordd Y Parc, Parc Menai, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 4FD  
Tel: 01248 672850

## GET MORE INFO

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The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.



We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654 223-0257-09-10