

Chalk Country



RSPB (rspb-images.com)

Barn owl - does your farm have feeding habitat and nest sites for this beautiful bird?

Welcome to the *Chalk Country*, the annual newsletter for landowners, farmers and land managers about RSPB partnership work in Wessex. *Our vision is for a sustainable environment, rich in wildlife, bringing benefits to all who live in or visit the area.* This issue features some of the species that make the *Chalk Country* so special and highlights some of the actions underway to conserve them.

Barn owls

Gliding silently across pastures at dusk, barn owls are one of the most iconic sights in our countryside. You never forget the first time you see one weaving across a field hunting for small mammals, or perched on a fence post looking straight at you. Sadly barn owls have had a tough few winters which have affected their numbers. So, what can we do to help them? Barn owls feed mainly on small mammals such as mice and voles, and they hunt over rough pastures and grassland. They roost and nest in large tree holes, in quiet barns and in boxes.

Leaving wide (6-12 m) strips of rank grassland next to arable fields and watercourses, and areas of rough pasture or field corners provides habitat for the barn owls' main food, voles. Allowing a layer of thatch to develop is important, and so the use of tussocky grasses such as Yorkshire fog is helpful. Provision of nesting habitat is equally important, but avoid siting boxes within 1 km of

major roads. You can do this relatively easily by placing pairs of barn owl boxes in quiet barns, or in larger single trees in field hedges or on a fence line (even if the boxes are at opposite sides of the barn or field). If the boxes are sited in barns they should allow space for the barn owl to fly into the barn and then into the box. Open sided barns are particularly good for barn owls. Boxes sited in pairs can work very well, as it allows space for the male barn owl to roost separately to the female. Please remember that barn owls are vulnerable to traffic as they fly low to the ground when they hunt, so create any habitat away from busy roads.

For more information, please visit the RSPB's website (www.rspb.org.uk) or the Barn Owl Trust's website (www.barnowltrust.org.uk) or alternatively you can contact your local farmland bird project officer for more information.

Wiltshire Chalk Country

a coalition for biodiversity?

We introduced the RSPB's Futurescapes programme – restoring landscapes that sustain our wildlife and wild places – in previous editions of *Chalk Country*. Our vision for the Wiltshire Chalk Country is founded on the 'ecosystem services' approach to conservation – focusing on the link between ecological processes and human wellbeing, and aiming to balance the competing demands on our natural environment. This theme is expected to be central to the forthcoming white paper on the natural environment - in fact, on taking office, Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to make the UK Coalition Government the "greenest government ever" and committed to "protect wildlife...and restore biodiversity".

At a local level we are pleased to be part of a 'coalition for biodiversity', working with a range of organisations in the Wiltshire Biodiversity Partnership. This partnership delivers the local Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), the document that drives conservation work in Wiltshire. Recently the framework of the BAP has been reviewed so that, rather than focusing conservation effort towards particular species and habitats, it now promotes contiguous areas of the county, setting biodiversity in a multi-functional landscape. One such 'biodiversity delivery area' is the Wiltshire Chalk Country.

The diversity of the organisations represented in this partnership demonstrates a truly 'ecosystem service' based approach to conservation of our natural environment: Wessex Water, National Trust, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Forestry Commission, FWAG, Wiltshire Council, Ministry of Defence, Dstl Porton Down, Butterfly Conservation, NFU, Plantlife, Natural England; the list goes on, protecting our most vulnerable species, restoring habitats, preserving ancient sites, providing fresh water, managing our soils, and encouraging locals and tourists alike to get out and enjoy the Wiltshire countryside.

A couple of examples illustrate the impressive nature of the work:

- At Martin Down National Nature Reserve, Natural England reports a significant improvement in chalk grassland species richness over the past 10 years - with over 60 species being recorded in some 2x2 metre quadrats. Sustained grazing and scrub management have enabled species such as the elusive silver-spotted skipper butterfly to extend its range on the Down.
- Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's New Life for Chalk Grasslands Project enables grazing on a number of sites across the county, including the RSPB's Winterbourne Downs Reserve. Last autumn the Project helped revert 26 ha of arable to chalk grassland and restore a further 9 ha on neighbouring farmland near Morgan's Hill Nature Reserve. Volunteers helped sow wildflower seed by hand, using seed brush-harvested from Morgan's Hill. Wiltshire's chalk grassland is of vital importance for the conservation of butterflies and moths, including some specialist species dependent upon this habitat. Butterfly Conservation volunteers monitor many locations within the Chalk Country and carry out practical habitat management work to halt the continuing decline in numbers.

The landscape scale approach is fundamental if we are to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Stuart Corbett, Conservation Officer at Dstl Porton Down has, through ongoing monitoring, recorded changes in populations of a number of species aligned with changing weather patterns, indicating potentially harmful effects on our designated areas. Further examination of these phenomena is now required so that any future mitigation measures are based on sound evidence. However, if we ensure that our ecosystems are in good health, then habitats and wildlife will be more resilient to the negative impacts of climate change.

So, a coalition for biodiversity? There's a lot of jargon involved in the plans and processes but the essence is a wide and diverse range of organisations and hundreds of volunteers working locally to protect and enhance Wiltshire's special landscape. This is a *Big Society* approach to nature conservation.



Silver-spotted skipper on field scabious



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Stone-curlew adult (left) and chick (right) – well-managed plots are the key to successful nesting

Stone-curlew update

Thank you!

We would like to thank all the landowners, farmers, farm workers, contractors and everyone else who have worked with us to help the Wessex stone-curlews have such a successful 2010. Many thanks to the SITA Trust who have assisted us financially over the last three years.

The 2010 breeding season

Despite the cold winter and spring, stone-curlew breeding success was not affected, in fact quite the opposite. It was a record year with 136 pairs confirmed breeding, some 13 pairs more than the previous highest in 2009. It was also a productive year; a minimum of 97 chicks being confirmed as fledged. This gives a productivity rate of 0.71 fledged chicks per breeding pair, above the all important level of 0.7 required to sustain the population. It is likely that the actual productivity rate for the year is closer to one chick fledged per pair, as it is not always possible to prove fledging at every site.

The known UK population is now 370 pairs, an increase of 12 pairs on 2009, so continuing a steady increase, which is again excellent news.

The future

The ultimate success of a species recovery project such as this one is eventually to achieve a self-sustainable population - effectively working yourself out of a job! We have made great progress to that point, but we're not quite there yet. We are changing the focus of our work away from monitoring nesting attempts as we now have a very good understanding of the reasons for breeding success or failure. We are now focusing on ensuring that the safe habitat provided through fallow plots is managed effectively to give each nesting attempt on plots every chance of success. We will also continue to do our utmost to protect nesting attempts in crops, working with farmers to minimise the impact on their farming operations.

This will result in some changes to the data we are able to report and it is less likely that we will be able to tell you the outcome of nesting attempts on your land. As previously mentioned, the main objective now for us is to ensure that the habitat is suitable



throughout the breeding season, giving the birds the best chance of successfully fledging their chicks from each nesting attempt.

The way to think about it is that in future the number of chicks reported as fledged will be an absolute minimum; the actual number will probably be higher.

Management of safe habitat

The key to providing safe habitat that requires low-level intervention is to manage fallow plots as two distinct halves. Prepare just one half at the end of February/early March and leave the other half unmanaged, allowing any plants that have survived the winter to continue growing. In a normal spring by the end of April/early May the unmanaged half will be unattractive to nesting birds due to weed growth and should then be managed. Most nesting stone-curlews should be on eggs at this point and most likely be on the previously managed half, thus reducing further the chances of chicks getting in the way of the management.

But, as we all know, stone-curlews have not read the books so we will be available to check the plot before the management takes place to ensure there are no mishaps. To do this, we will need your help. Wherever possible we will need to plan for this work in advance, but you can help by keeping an eye on plot condition and letting us know if you think it needs managing - the more notice the better, but even 24 hours will make a massive difference.

In 2011 we will be reducing our staffing levels from four to three fieldworkers. This will allow the RSPB to use its resources to start work on other species in decline eg cuckoo and turtle dove. We will, however, endeavour to be available for advice whenever necessary and will continue to target areas where stone-curlews traditionally have nested away from safe habitat in crops and provide protection for these birds.

Finally

We are pleased to announce that we have funding from Biffaward for the next two years to help with this period of change. Many thanks to Biffaward for their assistance and we look forward to working with them in the future.

News from RSPB's Wessex reserves 2010

We are delighted to report another good stone-curlew nesting season at Winterbourne Downs nature reserve with four nesting pairs resulting in three chicks proven to have fledged. Notably one pair nested for the first time on newly created chalk grassland.

The chalk grassland restoration plans made great progress as a further 27 ha of arable fields were sown with a chalk grassland and wildflower mix in autumn. This brings the total to 132 ha of arable land being reverted here. The arable reversion works are now part of a new HLS agreement with Natural England, which includes a wide range of other wildlife friendly measures, including over 12 ha of wild bird seed mixture plots. This winter we had hundreds of finches attracted into these plots to feed, with one flock of over 200 bramblings.

A small herd of the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust's Dexter cattle was brought in to graze our fourth year reversion. This is part of the Trust's "New life for chalk grasslands" project. The Dexters' job was to do some extensive late summer grazing, and this keeps the coarser grasses under control, while their hoof prints provide small germination sites for the annual wildflowers.

International Biodiversity Day in May 2010 was celebrated by an 'Introduction to Butterflies' event led by Nick Wynne of Butterfly Conservation when 15 members of public, including four children, enjoyed seeing and hearing about the eight species encountered. In June we hosted a demonstration day on arable plants and bumblebees in partnership with Plantlife and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. This was well attended by farm advisors from across the southern counties of England, and ensured some good arable plant and bumblebee records, including a colony of tree bumblebees nesting in our Kuhn topper!



Patrick Cashman (RSPB)

Dexter cattle arrive to graze on RSPB Winterbourne Downs last summer

On all reserves 2010 was another busy year for guided tours, and we were pleased to help the children of Newton Tony Primary School explore their local surroundings. A dead hedgehog provided the star turn during an expedition to explore a wildflower meadow, and pirates were on board (crow's nest and flintlocks) as they joined us for their autumnal wildlife foray.

Normanton Down had a 'full house' on its two fallow plots in 2010 with one pair of stone-curlews nesting on one plot and fledging two chicks, and a pair that nested nearby walking their chick onto the other plot to fledge. The 'fake' dead rooks (black neoprene cut-outs) were a great success, as we fledged 24 lapwings in 2010. Vegetation monitoring of the Iron Age barrows showed promising progress, with a number of chalk plants previously unrecorded, such as wild thyme. Chalk plants have also started to spread from barrows to the surrounding reversion grassland.

The second year of 'green hay' applications at Suddern Hill is showing good results already with many chalk grassland plants recorded last year, including a fragrant orchid. This was supplemented by adding brush-harvested seed from Salisbury Plain in autumn to help establish a rich chalk grassland community. We hope that this will establish quickly given the suitability of the thin chalky soils here.



Patrick Cashman (RSPB)

Dexters taking a break from reserve management



Sarah Blyth (RSPB)

From left, Simon Smart, Ben and Robin Butler

Farmers' view: Robin and Ben Butler, Manor Farm

Nestled into the heart of the Avebury World Heritage Site at Avebury Trusloe is the Butlers' farm, a mixture of permanent pasture, species-rich grassland and arable cropping. The 476 ha farm has been in the family for 76 years and is a haven for wildlife, particularly farmland birds. Species such as skylark, corn bunting, tree sparrow, grey partridge and yellow wagtail thrive in the mixed habitat and rotation, and the elusive turtle dove can be heard purring from the tall dense hedgerows that surround the grassland here. During the spring the farm hosts an impressive number of breeding birds, including lapwing, and during the colder months it provides a fantastic pit stop for wintering species like golden plover and brambling.

Conservation plays an important part in the farming here, with a new Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) replacing the Countryside Stewardship last October. The new HLS agreement includes species-rich grassland management, historic environment options and arable options for farmland birds. Ben says "Under CSS we had some management problems with the summer fallow and wild bird seed mixtures, particularly with the weed burden. We're hoping that HLS will give us the flexibility to manage the options more effectively giving us better crops for the birds." Indeed environmental stewardship has come a long way in the last few years, with HLS widely regarded as a more flexible and farmer-friendly scheme. It gives farmers the opportunity to use their

knowledge and experience to get the very best out of the options, whether it's for rare flora or farmland birds like the corn bunting.

Farmland birds have been declining nationally for over 40 years, but here in the North Wessex Downs important populations of most of our rarest farmland birds can be found, and the Butlers' farm is no exception. As part of the South West Farmland Birds Initiative (SWFBI) Robin has signed up to have the populations of farmland birds on his farm monitored – in November last year more than 100 corn buntings and 100 skylarks were seen – an impressive number and a remarkable sight when they took off from the stubbles. Robin said "It's really exciting to find out how many corn buntings and grey partridge are on the farm and we're looking forward to seeing the populations increase under the HLS."

Simon Smart, who put the HLS agreement together for the Butlers, is excited to see what the arable options achieve here for farmland birds. Simon said "This was a great farm to work on, with lots of wildlife and birds. It was great to work with the Butlers, who are very keen to get the most out of the HLS." With a fantastic mixture of options such as wild bird seed mixtures and floristic margins in the HLS, the future looks bright for farmland birds at Manor Farm. North Wessex Farmland Bird project officer Sarah Blyth said "The Butlers' farm is an exciting example of how HLS can work with a farm rotation to provide a brilliant habitat for farmland birds and wildlife, and I'm looking forward to seeing the results as the HLS really takes off".

If you'd like more information on the North Wessex Farmland Bird initiative please contact Sarah on 01722 427251.



Jodie Randall (rspb-images.com)

Manor Farm provides habitat for breeding lapwing

Top options for birds: skylark plots

Skylark plots are a great option for farmland birds because they provide landing strips for species like skylark and yellow wagtail. They were originally designed to provide nesting habitat for skylarks in autumn-sown cereals which grow up too fast and become too dense for skylarks to gain access to the majority of the crop, so the birds were nesting on the edges of tramlines and either getting squashed or eaten. Putting skylark plots into 20% of the autumn-sown cereals on your farm gives skylarks a way in to much more of the field as they can land and walk into the crop and, because the plots are located between the tramlines but not attached to them, the birds are protected from any ground predators and from machinery.

At five points a plot under ELS they may not seem like much, but they deliver lots of habitat for skylarks, so why not give them a go?



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Skylark plot



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Please choose skylark plots to help this iconic farmland songster



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Corn bunting – one of the 'arable 6' birds that need your help to thrive on farms

Focus on South Wiltshire by Tracy Adams

The South West Farmland Birds Initiative (SWFBI) has been on the ground for two years, with many successes to report across Wiltshire. The project aims to improve the fortunes of six birds: tree sparrow, lapwing, yellow wagtail, grey partridge, turtle dove and corn bunting; all specialists on arable land. Through the project, farmers are asked to deliver 7% of their arable land as in-field options for birds, for example wild bird seed mixes, fallow nesting plots and nectar mixes. Most, but not all, choose to fund these through Environmental Stewardship.

In South Wiltshire, 364 ha of in-field habitat has been created for farmland birds across 5,300 ha of arable land on 21 holdings. These habitats also benefit a wider suite of farmland birds including yellowhammer and skylark, rare arable plants such as corn marigold, and mammals including brown hare and harvest mice. In total since I started in post last July, I have advised on 33 holdings covering 7,200 ha of arable land. In order to test the effectiveness of the initiative, a comprehensive monitoring project has just started, recording bird numbers on six farms in each of the four SWFBI counties over the next 10 years.

This winter I am carrying out follow up visits to existing HLS and ELS farmers to offer advice on their arable options and nip any teething troubles, such as weed infestation, in the bud. Finally, I would like to thank Wessex Water for funding from their Biodiversity Action Plan Partners' Programme, which should help secure my post for a few more years.

For more information on the *South Wiltshire Farmland Birds Project* please contact Tracy Adams on 01725 517417.

Reintroducing the Great Bustard

Tracé Williams reports on a new partnership project



Followers of the Great Bustard Reintroduction Project, the pioneering work of Dave Waters, will have heard about recent successes over the last two years; with the first great bustards nesting in Wiltshire for 170 years, and three fledged chicks. To have established healthy birds that have not only made nests but have shown that, if old enough, they can hatch eggs and rear young to fledging, was a tremendous success for the project.

Well, 2010 saw even more nesting females, with four nesting attempts in total and one fledged chick. Another exciting event was securing European funding for a new five year project which started on 1 September. This was especially exciting for me, as I gained a new position as Great Bustard LIFE+ Project Manager. Having worked with many of you in Wiltshire for the last 10 years through stone-curlew or chalk grassland work, I will now be in touch regarding great bustards instead!

The great bustard *Otis tarda* is classed as globally threatened and on Annex I of the EC Birds Directive and is identified as a priority for EU LIFE+ funding. Our new EU LIFE+ project is a partnership between the RSPB, Great Bustard Group, University of Bath and Natural England. The grant is for 2.2 million euros over a five year period. The partners will receive 75% of that but have to raise the other 25%. LIFE+ is very much about new work and does not cover all the costs of the reintroduction project, only certain aspects. Much of the existing work will need to be funded as before, relying heavily on donations, membership and visits.

The LIFE+ project is a more ambitious piece of work involving a larger delivery team. We will concentrate on several key topics; there will be more monitoring to help us answer many questions regarding habitat use, movements of birds, criteria for nest sites and causes of predation. With new equipment, an early impact of the project has been on monitoring techniques, with 15 birds released in 2010 carrying GPS satellite transmitters. Information gathered in this way will help us to improve the survival and reproduction of bustards.

We will concentrate on developing bustard friendly habitat, providing advice in key areas which great bustards frequent, seeking bustard management areas important for lekking or breeding and offering to source funding for landowners who wish to take part. We will also look at the possibility of a second release site. The old adage of 'all your eggs in one basket' has a serious meaning. Providing a second site as a focus and meeting place for bustards will increase their ability to spread and establish in other areas. In order to achieve all this, there will be a further three new members of staff.

Other project actions include development of a national Species Action Plan and the addition of the great bustard to Schedule I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. This is essential to provide the same protection as is afforded to most other rare UK breeding birds.

Finally, over the coming months we will be trawling through our old satellite transmissions and records of great bustard sightings, so if you have had a bustard on your farm in the past, we may be in touch with you to gather retrospective information on crop type, crop height etc. Please keep a look out for great bustards and report any sightings to us in the usual way below.



You can follow progress of the project by going to the Great Bustard Group website (www.greatbustard.org) and clicking on the LIFE logo which will lead you through to the official LIFE webpage. This is due to be launched in spring 2011.

For further information regarding LIFE+, please contact Tracé Williams on 07715 371747 or email: trace.williams@rspb.org.uk

To report a sighting of a great bustard, please contact GBG on 01980 671466.



David Klaer

Please keep a lookout for great bustards – this is 'green 6' and chick in 2010

Days in the life of Andrew Taylor, RSPB field worker

Every day you spend working outside, wherever you may be, you will see things that surprise you, that make you smile. Having been lucky enough to spend three years out and about in the Chalk Country, I have experienced many special moments.

Up at dawn for a farmland bird survey, into a hostile environment shrouded in freezing fog

As the fog clears, a landscape of unbelievable beauty emerges, with every bush, every tree, every blade of grass coated in a thick layer of rime - white as far as the eye can see. From a plot of HLS wild bird cover, a swirling flock of hundreds of finches emerges, but disturbed by what? Along the hedge a hen harrier approaches, dangling its bright yellow legs as it passes at point-blank range. The finches survive, for now.

Scanning a broad expanse of arable fields with a telescope, in hope rather than expectation of stone-curlew sightings

Then, on a likely-looking patch of bare ground, you see one. Sitting unobtrusively amongst low vegetation, it could so easily have been missed. Soon afterwards a second emerges from behind a patch of long grass, carrying a fat, juicy worm in its bill. As it approaches, the first adult stands, and two balls of fluff run eagerly towards the offered worm. This is quickly disposed of, and the family move off together.

Walking across a stone-curlew plot to check there are no breeding birds present before it is cultivated

A huge bird takes off from further down the plot, as if from nowhere. After a moment of bewilderment, the realisation - great bustard!

Midsummer, Salisbury Plain, dusk approaching, bird sounds everywhere
To one side a grasshopper warbler, reeling from the base of a small bush. To the other a quail, singing from the middle of a spring



Andrew Taylor and Louise Jane working on Salisbury Plain

barley field. In front, a small group of stone-curlews, posturing and calling loudly at one another. One is a youngster, and after a while its colour ring combination can be pieced together. It was raised several miles away, and this is the first confirmation that it has fledged. Another small but satisfying piece of good news. A barn owl floats across the long grass in the distance, as the light fails and home beckons.

Nature of Farming Award will you enter in 2011?

The Nature of Farming Award, run by RSPB in partnership with The Telegraph, Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation, celebrates the fantastic work farmers are already doing for wildlife. There's a top prize of £1,000 for the very best, so why not enter your farm this year? The deadline for entries is 30 April.

For full details go to www.rspb.org.uk/nofa

Contacts and sources of advice:

RSPB Wessex office
Tel: 01722 427230

RSPB Wessex Stone-curlew Project
Tel: 01722 427232

RSPB Wessex Reserves office
Tel: 01980 629835 / 845

North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Project
Tel: 01722 427251

www.rspb.org.uk/farming
www.farmwildlife.info



a million voices for nature



The RSPB thanks:

RSPB projects to help farmland birds in south west England are part of *Action for Birds in England*, a conservation partnership between Natural England and the RSPB.

The Wessex Stone-curlew Project has received funding from SITA Trust, through the Landfill Communities Fund, and is receiving funding from Biffaward for 2011 and 2012.

The RSPB also thanks the Dever Society for donating to the costs of the Wessex Stone-curlew Project since 1989. The Dever Society works to conserve, protect and celebrate the countryside of the Hampshire Downs and the Dever Valley.

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

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