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Cirl Bunting Bulletin



Welcome to *Cirl Bunting Bulletin*, the annual newsletter for owners and managers of farmland within the range of the cirl bunting, the UK's rarest resident farmland bird.



Male cirl bunting. To help your local birds, or encourage them to move onto your farm, please see enclosed new management guidelines for tips.

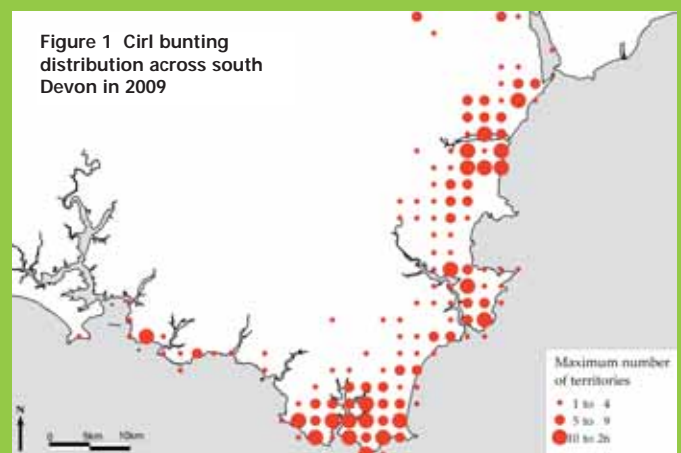
Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Buntings continue to bounce back

Two RSPB researchers, assisted by 44 volunteers, spent the spring and summer of 2009 walking footpaths and roads* searching for cirl buntings in all areas of known or possible occupation. This national survey, funded by RSPB and Natural England, showed a 24% increase in population to 862 territories (back in 1989, there were only 118 pairs left in the UK).

The birds were, as expected, largely confined to south Devon, with concentrations around the Kingsbridge, Dart and Teign Estuaries. The overall picture was very positive, with encouraging increases around the upper Kingsbridge Estuary, west of Salcombe, inland from Dawlish and the isolated population in the upper Teign Valley. The survey also showed that the range has increased by 15% over the last six years. This is very encouraging – as cirl buntings are such a sedentary species, range expansion is always going to be slow and any movement away from core areas is good news. However, there had been declines in several areas and the RSPB will be investigating to discover the reasons. Analysis of habitat data collected during the survey may help us understand why the birds are doing better in some areas.

Away from south Devon, a small population of over 30 birds now exists in Cornwall as a result of the reintroduction project. Cirl buntings have also re-colonised some areas under their own steam



– the survey found one pair in east Devon, the first successful breeding in this area for over 20 years, and a pair just across the Devon border at Rame Head in Cornwall.

Unfortunately, no birds were found elsewhere in the country despite searches, so the species continues to be vulnerable and reliant on the habitat management undertaken by Devon and Cornwall farmers.

*The footsore RSPB surveyors walked a total of over 3,000 kilometres (1,865 miles)!

Labrador Bay:

update from John White, RSPB volunteer warden

Labrador Bay RSPB nature reserve is usually a serene and tranquil place of stunning views, beautiful flowers, butterflies and a cast of birds with the circl bunting taking the starring role, but early this winter it resembled a 'war zone'! Extensive management work took place to restore some of the hedgerows to their former glory (cirls are very particular in their requirements) and open up some of the scrubby fields. The car park hedge was cut and laid, as were other hedges around the reserve. The contractors did a wonderful job and with nature's healing touch we will all reap the benefits.

Waterfield was overgrown with scrub and particularly self-seeded ash and sycamore. An RSPB team tackled this wet, and very sloping site; creating open spaces and allowing other plants to rear their heads once again. Nature has started the healing process and it is obvious that the work has been worthwhile and beneficial.

Kissing gates have replaced many stiles to aid access and, apart from some 'spring fitment' problems, they have been most successful.

In January we had an exciting addition to the reserve – three, four-legged conservation tools: Dartmoor ponies. These settled in immediately, enjoying their first view of the sea and quickly got to work doing what they do best – eating! Ponies create a mosaic habitat whilst grazing and browsing at different heights on scrub as well as grass - fresh bramble leaves being a favourite. It will be interesting to see how their presence will impact on the whole ecosystem.

In 2009 the reserve recorded seven breeding pairs of circl bunting. Although the winter management affected the size of the wintering flocks on the stubble, 15+ being the largest flock, by early spring they were back. It was interesting that the disturbed ground attracted large flocks of redwings and fieldfares for a short time. We had cirls singing on a sunny January day and now breeding is in full swing. I am hopeful that the conservation work – and the forecast good weather – will mean a good year for circl buntings.

Linnetts, green woodpeckers, great spotted woodpeckers, peregrines, fulmars, sparrowhawks, kestrels, buzzards, blackcaps, whitethroats, chiffchaffs, ravens, etc are all feeling the 'spring effect' too and we look forward to an excellent breeding season.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

If you are keen to see the reserve and learn more about circl buntings and the work we are doing at Labrador Bay, we are running a guided walk on Sunday 27 June. **Please contact the RSPB Regional Office on 01392 432691 to find out more.**

The RSPB, the Data Protection Act and you

We are updating our systems and processes. 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 prefer us not to use your details in this way, please contact Helene Jessop on 01392 453763 or e-mail helene.jessop@rspb.org.uk**



Spring, Teal and Frost taking a break from nature reserve management

Farmers' View:

Philip and Paul White, Wonwell Court Farm, Devon



Philip and Paul White

RSPB

Situated within the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Wonwell Court Farm spans 172 ha along the eastern edge of the Erme Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Philip and Eve White, along with son Paul, daughter in law Alice and daughter Ann, have managed this Flete Estate owned farm for the last 28 years. Philip and Eve have lived in the area for almost 50 years, managing a farm at Orcheton before moving to Wonwell in 1982.

Although the farm is predominantly a dairy enterprise, running the Erme herd of just under 300 Holstein/Friesians (100 milkers with followers and beef), it is not all grass. Philip has 48 ha of arable - spring barley, oats and peas are grown for cattle feed. It is this retention of a mixed farming system within the landscape, combined with the woodland and valley with stream, which helps support the abundance of wildlife at Wonwell.

Philip and Paul have farmed within a Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) agreement since 1999, and this year entered into a Higher Level and Entry Level Stewardship agreement when their CSS agreement expired. Philip said: "The financial benefits of Countryside Stewardship were attractive to us. We were never really an intensive farm anyway, and the management that the scheme required made no significant difference to the way we farmed. Instead we have benefited by

help to get fencing and hedge laying done that we wouldn't have done, areas of steep grassland are now managed extensively otherwise we would have had to make these more productive and even the public have commented about the wildlife and hedgerow plants. Altogether we feel positive about Stewardship as it has enhanced our farm."

Philip and Paul are determined to continue the work of the past 10 years to provide the right habitat to encourage curlew buntings to move onto the farm. Growing spring barley and leaving a winter stubble, rather than sowing winter cereals, fits into their farming system and they are happy to do this particularly as it helps farmland birds. They say if they weren't receiving support through the scheme to grow spring barley then they would be growing grass instead. Wildlife recorded includes at least one pair of skylark on every arable field, breeding yellowhammers and linnets and arable plants such as weasel's snout, corn spurrey, field madder and field woundwort.

Higher Level Stewardship attracted them as it enables them to carry on this work. They are hoping to put back some old hedgerows, re-instate an orchard and have added 6m buffers around the woodlands. They found the results of the Farm Environment Plan interesting as the RSPB supplied a list of the species found. Paul says "The Scheme works and it is good to know what wildlife and plants we have. It

is not too onerous to combine the ELS options; in fact this whole farm approach is something that we have to do for Cross Compliance anyway."

The Catchment Sensitive Farming scheme has supported the building of a new barn, fencing off streams, creating a cow track and arable reversion on steep fields to reduce any run off risk. Combining the two schemes has helped with farm improvements and allowed Philip and Paul to plan for the long term.

Their farm is an average size dairy enterprise producing 700,000 litres in 2009, however with milk prices low and to cover their investment on the barn, to make it economically viable they hope to increase their stock numbers over time and aim for 850,000 litres in 2010. Philip says "If this farm was an intensive dairy farm then the schemes probably wouldn't work, farmers have to have a farm that suits and be prepared to accept putting their unproductive areas into the scheme."

Philip, Eve, Paul, Alice and Ann are enthusiastic and interested in their historic landscape and the environment around them. By managing Wonwell sustainably they can ensure that Paul and Alice's 11 month old son, George, can grow up to appreciate and maybe manage the farm in the future.

Agri-environment schemes on target in South Devon

Phil Stocks, Lead Adviser, South Devon Team explains what Natural England is doing to get 70% of farmland into an agri-environment scheme by the end of March

We've already achieved 68% so the chances are that your neighbours are in a scheme even if you're not yet. The first Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) agreements expire this year; we don't want to lose you so we look forward to receiving your new applications.

We're offering free one-to-one advice and demonstration events, call 0300 060 1695 or take a look at www.naturalengland.org.uk/farmevents if you'd like some extra help with your ELS application.

For those thinking of a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement, we've made improvements here too. Last year we doubled the number of new agreements offered compared to 2008 and we're trying for more in 2010 with a new pro-active approach to applications. We've compiled all the available environmental information on every farm in the country and graded their potential for HLS. If you're an 'A-grade' farm, we'll probably be contacting you. If you're a lower grade, we may ask you for more information (the system doesn't know everything!). Take a look at our Targeting Statements at: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/funding/es/hls/targeting/>

to get an idea about what we're looking for. If we haven't contacted you and you think you could offer something for HLS, you can contact us for an informal assessment, please call Natural England on 0845 600 3078 and ask to speak to an Adviser in the South Devon Team or e-mail: enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk

If you are approved for an HLS application, your next step will be to appoint an agent to prepare your Farm Environment Plan (FEP). Your Natural England Adviser will support you through the process.

For those farmers who stay with ELS, there is one important change in the ELS handbook. The management option 'reduced herbicide cereal crops followed by overwintered stubble' is particularly important to cirl buntings, particularly if it is spring barley. Formerly only available under HLS (£195/ha), it is now available as an ELS option too so please consider it!



Entry Level Stewardship now has an option to provide spring barley/winter stubble - an excellent winter food source for cirl buntings

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

If you're still in the original Countryside Stewardship Scheme with years to run, don't forget that you can have an OELS/ELS agreement at the same time, contact Natural England for advice before you apply. And if you are not in any agreement at present, you can apply for ELS/OELS regardless of the size of your farm.



Campaign for the Farmed Environment

The Campaign for the Farmed Environment is an industry-led voluntary approach to address the loss of environmental benefits previously delivered by set-aside. The NFU and CLA have been joined by other key industry partners including FWAG and GWCT. The RSPB, Natural England and the Environment Agency also support the Campaign, so this is a joint effort to find a way forward that allows farmers to produce more, but impact less on their environment.

Though targeted at predominately arable areas of the country, the Campaign encourages farmers and growers across England to adopt land management practices without the threat of regulation. Measures have been identified to keep participation as flexible as possible. This will be achieved through a combination of specifically developed voluntary options, targeted Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) options and retention of uncropped land. Farmers and landowners are asked to choose some key in-field options when renewing or entering ELS agreements. All farmers are also asked to review any existing voluntary management and aim to deliver one thing from the list of voluntary measures, whilst also retaining existing uncropped land.

For more details, please go to www.cfeonline.org.uk or ring 01985 844356

Greater horseshoe bat,
showing its distinctive
facial features



Gareth Jones/Bat Conservation Trust

Do you have horseshoes on your farm?

Julien Sclater, Natural England Lead Adviser in the South Devon Team, explains the importance of this special mammal.

The greater horseshoe bat is one of Britain's rarest bats, with a total population of perhaps only 5,000 individuals. Numbers have declined significantly throughout northern Europe during the last 100 years and, in Britain, a large proportion of the remaining population is found in south Devon. Numbers here are stable with some increases in response to targeted advice and positive land management practices, mainly achieved via agri-environment schemes.

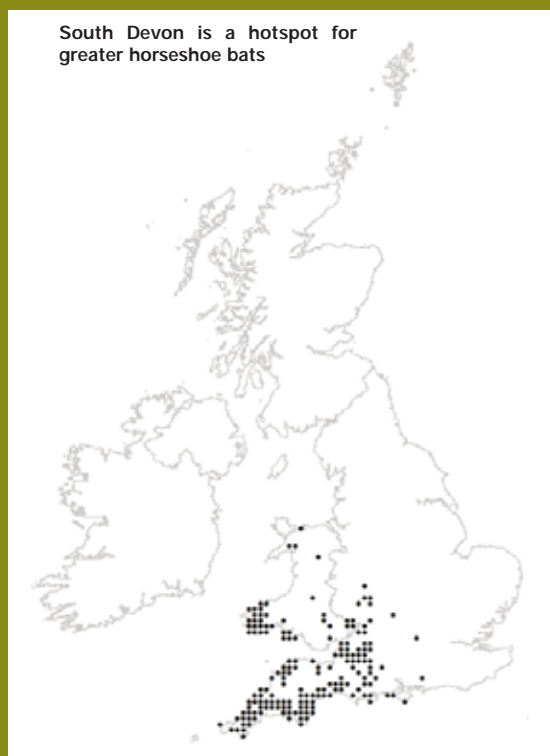
The greater horseshoe bat is one of Britain's largest with a wingspan of about 36 cm (14") and weighing up to 30 grams. (1 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz.). These bats are very long-lived compared to other small mammals and can live for up to 30 years. All breeding females from a population gather together in early summer to form a maternity colony, where they give birth and raise their single young. The maternity roosts are usually in old buildings, occasionally in caves or abandoned mines. Some of the key South Devon maternity roosts are at Buckfastleigh, River Avon valley, Chudleigh, Bulkamore Iron Mine and Berry Head.

Greater horseshoe bats feed on a variety of insects, but cockchafers, dung beetles and moths are the most important. Dung beetles are crucial for young bats. Up to 100 larvae can be found in a single cow pat with the majority of the beetles emerging in early August when the young bats begin their first feeding flights. To protect this key food source, livestock should be managed without the use of wormers based on Avermectin compounds (eg. Ivermectin) as such chemicals remain active in the dung, preventing colonisation by dung beetles. Neither breeding females nor young can fly as far as non-breeding adult bats, which range over a wide area, so a good feeding area within a radius of about 4 km around the maternity roosts is critical for the long-term survival of the population.

A landscape of cattle-grazed permanent pasture and ancient woodland, linked with an abundance of tall bushy hedges, is the ideal habitat for greater horseshoes. This provides the bats with their insect food and linear features such as woodland edges and hedges which they use as flight paths. Although the protection of important roosts and hibernation sites is important, the effective conservation of the greater horseshoe bat depends on the management of the farmed landscape around maternity roosts and other sites used by the bats.

Natural England has recently identified the key bat flyways linking the main roosts in South Devon. This research suggests that bats will cover significant distances to reach alternative roosts within the county. These key flyways are a vital element in sustaining a healthy and robust population, providing linkages between different important components of their habitats. Sustaining these habitat links between roosts and across the wider countryside will help ensure this flagship species continues to survive on South Devon farmland and Natural England's Environmental Stewardship schemes can help.

South Devon is a hotspot for greater horseshoe bats



Map: JNGCC

For more information about helping greater horseshoe bats, please contact Julien Sclater, Natural England on 0300 060 0456.

To find out more about bats, visit the Bat Conservation Trust's website www.bats.org.uk or contact the free National Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228.

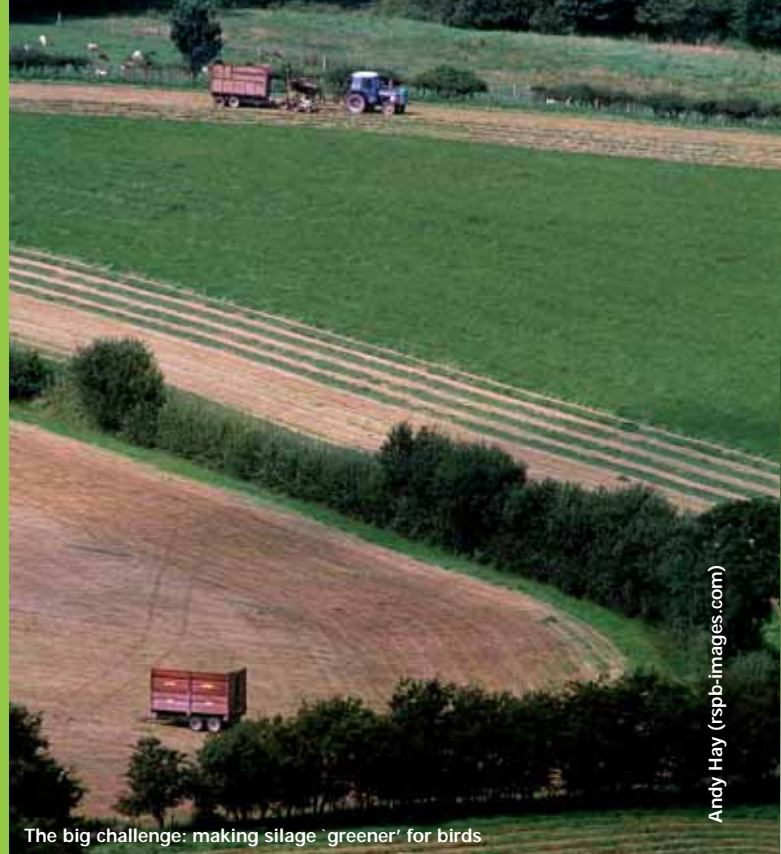
Seeds from silage

- a new way to feed farmland birds?

Seed-eating birds struggle to survive the winter in livestock rearing areas because few habitats provide enough seed for them. Nowadays, grasslands and maize dominate these areas: the grasslands are rarely allowed to set seed and the maize stubbles are too weed-free to produce new seeds, particularly in the critical late winter 'hungry gap'.

One idea for a solution came from the early cirl bunting research in Devon. Patches of ordinary ryegrass inadvertently left to set seed near Salcombe fed a flock of cirls for a whole winter. Recently completed studies worked out how ryegrass silage fields can be used to achieve the same effect. Seeded ryegrass patches are now being considered for inclusion in Environmental Stewardship.

The idea was to take the first cut of silage as normal, close up the field to set seed and then leave the seed undisturbed through the following winter. This worked well on improved perennial ryegrass fields. Large numbers of yellowhammers and reed buntings spent the winter on the trial plots and, critically, continued to use the plots well into the difficult late winter period. Italian and hybrid ryegrass swards were even better, because two silage cuts could be taken without compromising seed production. Leaving grass on the fields did cause temporary sward damage, reducing silage yields in the following spring, but the costs were within the range that could be offset by Environmental Stewardship payments. After this, the leftover seed naturally regenerated the sward if the waste grass was cleared away early enough (birds continued to use the fallen seed until the grass started to grow again).



The big challenge: making silage 'greener' for birds

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

There is still scope for improving the management of seeded ryegrass plots. Silage yields did increase on some of our trial plots, but we don't yet understand how to make this happen every time - there's a challenge for an interested farmer.

For more information, please contact David Buckingham, RSPB on 01767 693561 or e-mail david.buckingham@rspb.org.uk



David Buckingham

Pasture - getting the grazing right provides insects for birds as well as grass for cattle

Managing grassland for breeding birds

An experiment studying extensive grazing techniques in Devon has been completed. The RSPB compared the effects of reducing grazing pressure (defined by target sward heights: lenient grazing 12-15 cm and moderate grazing 7-9 cm) and early closure (removing cattle in July, rather than October).

Lenient grazing was particularly good at increasing insect prey and was particularly attractive to skylarks. Early closure was less effective at increasing insects, but was preferred by yellowhammers and cirl buntings. The ideal feeding and nesting conditions for skylarks were leniently grazed plots with early-closure. However, our choice of lenient grazing appeared to be too extreme for cirl buntings, resulting in swards that became too dense. The agricultural costs also became increasingly high: particularly for early closure, which rapidly became too expensive for whole fields, though it could be done more cheaply on field corners or margins. The most practical solution is likely to be continuous grazing (intermediate grazing pressure for buntings; lenient for skylarks) plus early-closure margins/corners for buntings. Retaining numerous old grass tussocks is clearly beneficial for these birds, but further work is needed to develop more effective and economical grazing methods to produce them.

For more information, please contact David Buckingham, RSPB on 01767 693561 or e-mail david.buckingham@rspb.org.uk

The RSPB is grateful to the farmers who participated in this study.

Would you like to know what birds you have on your farm?

The RSPB's Volunteer & Farmer Alliance scheme has been running for 10 years and, thanks to a grant from the EU LIFE+ fund, is now available to farmers throughout the UK. It provides lowland farmers with a one-off, free, non-obligatory bird survey of their land, which can help Higher Level Stewardship applications.

Over the last decade the RSPB has surveyed 575 farms in SW England, with a further 93 underway in 2010. To discover what's breeding on your land, please contact Felicity Clarke on 01392 453774 or e-mail felicity.clarke@rspb.org.uk

Cornish Cirl Bulletin – 2009 update



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

A ringed cirl bunting, born in Devon and now living in Cornwall

2009 marked the fourth year of this project to reintroduce cirl buntings to Cornwall through a partnership of the RSPB, Natural England, Paignton Zoo, National Trust and the Zoological Society of London.

In the opening months of 2009, cirl buntings showed a preference for over-wintered stubbles and areas specifically sown by local farmers to produce seed-rich areas. By April most pairs had settled down on their territories. Unlike previous years, females were outnumbered by males and as a consequence, a couple of lucky males were able to take advantage by pairing with an extra female or three! Though such behaviour had been suspected before, because the birds are uniquely marked with coloured leg-rings, we now had proof. What was interesting was that these males played an active role in caring for the chicks of all the females.

An improvement in the weather during 2009 resulted in more breeding attempts than previous years, with many first broods fledged. Typically, these first broods are the most prone to failure due to the limited supplies of appropriate insect food at this time of the season. Of the 13 females monitored, each made up to three breeding attempts. One particularly productive pair, originally formed from birds released in 2006, fledged three broods totalling

nine young. This productivity highlights the importance of experienced birds within any population.

With the release of another batch of hand-reared birds by early September 2009, flocks of cirls were regularly seen as they explored their surroundings. Along with a good haul of 'wild bred' cirls, the Cornish population had reached a healthy level as the birds embarked on finding their winter haunts. Despite the very cold winter the birds that survived the post fledging period have done well.

Continued support from local farmers ensures that a good mix of habitats is available, and the right options in Stewardship schemes will provide the nest sites, chick food and winter food that cirl buntings need.

Hopefully, as the population becomes established with older birds and with a bit of luck with the weather, 2010 will be another productive and successful year.

For more information, please contact Nick Tomalin: nick.tomalin@rspb.org.uk or 01872 580279.



Simon and some of his South Devons

RSPB

A Farmer's View: Simon Taffinder, Curgurrell Farm, Cornwall

Simon and Charlotte Taffinder have farmed at Curgurrell on the Roseland peninsula for the last 14 years. The 60 hectare farm is a family enterprise. Charlotte runs the farm shop selling crabs, lobsters and fish, caught in the bay by sons Ben, William and Tom, along with home grown fruit, vegetables and produce. Simon has built up a herd of around 50 pedigree South Devons and William has his own flock of 250 Dorset ewes. The farm also has self-catering accommodation.

The RSPB's Cirl Bunting Reintroduction Project started in 2006 with the first release of young birds into the area. With RSPB staff and volunteers monitoring the released birds throughout the year, it was vital to involve the local farming community to gain access to survey areas and to discuss habitat requirements for the birds. From the outset, Simon showed a great interest in the project, and in managing his farm for the benefit of wildlife, including cirl buntings.

Although Simon had not been in Countryside Stewardship, he was interested to find out more about Environmental Stewardship. Initially he had been put off by the amount of paperwork involved and bad experiences with inspectors, but became more enthusiastic as the RSPB and Natural England provided assistance with the application and alleviated some of his concerns. Simon said: "I started to look at Higher Level Stewardship, and found that all the things I wanted to do were available to me. When the RSPB and Natural England visited, they made it clear which options I was eligible for and it became obvious that the scheme was more of a partnership than I had felt previously."

With help from the RSPB, Simon successfully applied for Higher Level Stewardship. He has found that the agreement fits with his farming system: "It was quite flexible in that I could turn down options on certain bits of land and keep

these areas for the Entry Level Scheme. That's been quite important to us, although in some ways I wish I'd gone for more Higher Level options!" It has meant some changes in his management, but he felt that these were easy to accommodate with a bit more planning. He has reinstated some arable by putting in spring sown barley, which is left as overwintered stubble for the birds, and has included areas of wild bird seed mix that will provide more food through the winter.

So has it all been worth it? Simon thinks so: "I'd set in my mind a payment that would make the agreement viable, and, when it came to it, the figure was much higher. The capital expenditure was a complete bonus! It was definitely worth going for, and I would encourage anybody else to apply. Financially it makes a considerable difference to the farm".



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The Cirl Bunting Project is part of *Action for Birds in England*, a conservation partnership between Natural England and the RSPB.

The Project has received £173,000 funding from SITA Trust, through the Landfill Communities Fund.

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

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

Produced by the RSPB South West England Regional Office, Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter, EX1 1NT. Contributions provided by Simon Taffinder and Philip and Paul White (farmers), Julien Sclater and Phil Stocks (Natural England), David Buckingham, Felicity Clarke, Stuart Croft, Deborah Deveney, Cath Jeffs, Andrew Stanbury, Nick Tomalin and John White (RSPB).

Printed on paper from a sustainable source June 2010
Designed by Freeline Graphics 01392 499455