



giving
nature
a home

Cirl bunting

Winter 2013

bulletin



Welcome to cirl bunting bulletin, the annual newsletter for everyone who manages land to help one of the South West's most charismatic little birds.



Barn owl

Helping circl buntings benefits other important wildlife

We're pleased to say that the Circl Bunting Project is one of the most successful RSPB conservation initiatives for a single species.

Mike Ingram
RSPB circl bunting project officer

The number of circl buntings increased from 118 pairs in 1989 to 860 in the 2009 survey. We are proud to have worked alongside so many committed farmers and landowners, whose support is at the centre of the circl buntings' success.

The RSPB has been working for all nature for some time and with all the great work being done for birds, we wanted to highlight how all nature can benefit from such projects. We

will be producing a report on which Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species are likely to be benefitting from circl bunting management.

For example, the sensitive management of hedgerows and use of field margins will help BAP species, such as greater and lesser horseshoe bats, dormice and barn owls, as well as a large number of insects, such as moths.

The restoration and management of unimproved grassland through grazing and scrub clearing promotes the growth of flowering plants, providing additional nectar sources to benefit butterflies.

Grasshoppers will flourish in open grassland. Adders, common lizards and common toads will also benefit from the habitat diversity. Not a bad return from such a small bird!

Circl buntings need barley crops and stubbles as they rely on the seeds for winter food. As well as attracting other farmland birds, these arable fields are also important for rare arable plants and bryophytes (mosses and liverworts), which require disturbed ground to flourish. Another fine example of how joined-up thinking and collaborative working can benefit all nature.

We have proved that managing habitats to help circl buntings on your farm will also help many other species, and we hope that others will be inspired by the amazing results your hard work has produced.

Cirl bunting farmers in Westminster

We all know that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is being reformed and, for those of us involved in the detail of the policy, this reform process has at times seemed endless.

Tom Lancaster
RSPB agriculture policy officer

When locked in a windowless room at Defra's offices in Central London, the real-world application of a low-input spring cereal or grass margin can seem like light-years away. So, when we're wrestling with a consultation response, or working through the latest version of the "regulation" from Brussels, it helps to remember what it's all about. And for us, there's no better example of that than cirl buntings, and the farmers that have been so integral to their recovery.

The clear link between the recovery of cirl buntings and the work that farmers have done through agri-environment

schemes, such as Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), was and still is the best proof that agri-environment works. Farmers are the keystone of this success and species such as cirl buntings, lapwings, curlews and barn owls, will always need their help. That's why we have always fought hard to support farmers who want to make space for nature on their farm through providing the right tools, ensuring policy is set up for wildlife-friendly farming and making sure there is evidence to show what these species need. But we can't do this alone.

To get the right policies in place, we need the support of the farming community. And during this round of reform it has been particularly heartening to see so many farmers

stepping up and supporting agri-environment. Once again, farmers in the Cirl Bunting Project area have been in the vanguard of this, and we know that the representations that some have made to MPs and civil servants have made a real difference.

Working with the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts, we organised a lobby of 29 English farmers to Westminster on 23 October 2013. The aim was to highlight to MPs the importance of the current round of CAP implementation to the environment, and to show them that there are farmers who support our aim to maximise funding for agri-environment schemes. Two of our cirl bunting farmers travelled from Devon to offer their support.

Although there's still more than a year away until the beginning of the next scheme, in the world of CAP this qualifies as the home straight. Continued support from farmers will be crucial if agri-environment is to get over the line with enough funding to secure a bright future for cirl buntings.



RSPB and farmers at Westminster



Better support for High Nature Value farming

Farmers who choose to farm with and value nature as part of their farm business – High Nature Value (HNV) farmers – sustain many of our most iconic landscapes, valued habitats and cherished species across the UK.

Deborah Deveney
RSPB campaign leader HNV farming

The HNV farming concept has been around for some time, but poor understanding has meant little recognition. Here in the West Country we can celebrate the fact that we are at the very heart of HNV farming.

In the UK, HNV farming is predominantly associated with extensive beef and sheep systems in the uplands, commons and marginal areas where there is a high reliance on semi-natural vegetation for grazing (eg, areas of Bodmin, Dartmoor and Exmoor). In the lowlands this includes areas of coastal heathland/grassland, species-rich grassland (eg, culm and chalk grassland), wet grassland systems, saltmarsh and low-input mixed farming systems, which create a mosaic of semi-natural landscape features and habitats – hedges, stone walls, woodlands, orchards – all supporting a rich assemblage of wildlife.

HNV farming relies upon the sympathetic land-management practices of farmers. These practices are often influenced by the finely-tuned relationship that individual land managers have with their land. The local skills and knowledge farmers have retained are intrinsic to the survival of species such as cirl buntings, choughs, curlews, marsh fritillary butterflies, greater horseshoe bats, oil beetles and rare arable plants in the South West.

Harsh climatic conditions, poor land quality, and even distance from markets can make these areas difficult to farm. But farmers rise to the challenge, producing high-quality food or stock for the food chain alongside the delivery of wider public services, such as carbon storage, water quality and flood alleviation. They are a unique part of our cultural heritage, maintaining historic landscapes and supporting fragile rural communities and economies.

Despite all this, many receive inadequate recognition. Existing support mechanisms, such as

agri-environment schemes, are an important income stream for many HNV farmers, but alone are often insufficient to make HNV farms commercially viable against market pressures. Farmers who want to farm sustainably are often left with a stark choice between intensifying or abandoning parts of their farms and, in some cases, ceasing to farm altogether!

Without a better package of public support, how can HNV farmers survive? As we approach a crucial time in the CAP debate, we want to see that farmers who deliver the most for our society receive better recognition and a long-term solution.

As a new coalition of 16 farming and conservation organisations, we are calling on Government to support these vulnerable farming systems, ensure HNV farming is a viable economic option for future generations and keep people on the land to maintain a vibrant rural community and protect our special wildlife and landscapes.

We work alongside farmers and stakeholders to raise awareness and collate farming stories to ensure that the HNV farming voice is heard loud and clear by policymakers. Visit highnaturevaluefarming.org.uk to find out more about the campaign and how you can add your voice.

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The jewels of the fields

Arable plants are essential for the survival of all kinds of special farmland birds, including cirl buntings.

Mike Ingram
RSPB cirl bunting project officer

Birds feed on the seeds of a number of different species associated with disturbed and cultivated land, and the flowers are, of course, attractive to insects. Winter stubbles and cultivated

margins provide the right conditions for these annual plants to thrive. But increased use of herbicides, a prevalence for autumn sowing and the consequent lack of over-wintered stubbles have together caused a serious decline in many of these plants.

Here are a few of the most important arable plants.



Weasel snout

(Lesser Snapdragon)
Misopates orontium



Red dead nettle

(Badman)
Lamium purpureum

This brightly-coloured member of the figwort family is a spring-germinating annual plant which flowers from July to October and reproduces by seed. It has declined by up to 40% in some areas. Factors include the increase in autumn sowing and use of herbicides. Sadly, cold wet summers also inhibit seed germination.

A common and widespread arable plant, red dead nettle prefers nutrient-rich loamy or sandy soils. Flowering from March to October, seed germination occurs throughout the year. It is great for insects and can both self- and insect-pollinate. Seeds are a lifeline for cirl buntings and other farmland birds.



Common chickweed

(Chickenwort, Maruns, Winterweed, Craches)
Stellaria media

Chickweed is one of the most common and widespread arable plants. It has dainty white flowers and can produce large numbers of seeds throughout the year. These can remain viable for up to 30 years in the ground and are a brilliant food source for many farmland birds, including cirl buntings and house sparrows. Chickweed grows on nutrient-rich soil and can germinate in spring and autumn, completing its life cycle in just 5–6 weeks. It is a rich source of vitamin C and has many medicinal and therapeutic uses. Geese and hens are particularly fond of chickweed and sheep can be used to suppress its growth.



Corn spurrey

(Beggar Weed)
Spergula arvensis

Corn spurrey, a pretty white flower with delicate leaves, is a widespread and sometimes locally-common annual. But it is decreasing. It germinates in spring and flowers from May to September, preferring light, well-drained, slightly acidic, sandy soils. The plant is a great source of natural sodium. Seeds can remain viable for up to five years in the soil, so if you used to see it locally, chances are it could come back under the right conditions.

Saving our bees

Mike Ingram
RSPB cirl bunting project officer

Bees are an integral part of our countryside and the sights and sounds of their industrious activity have created iconic memories for generations. Bumblebees are very important pollinators for many species of wild flowers and a large range of commercial crops.



Buff-tailed bumblebee

But bees are in big trouble. Many species have declined and two UK species have become extinct since World War 2. The reasons for the decline are largely due to agricultural intensification and, in particular, the loss of species-rich unimproved grasslands, which provide the nectar and pollen needed by adults and larvae respectively.

There are 250 species of bees in the UK, including 225 species of solitary bee, 24 species of bumblebee and one species of honey bee.

It is estimated that the role of insects, including bumblebees, as pollinators of commercial crops, such as fruit and vegetables, is worth £400 million in the UK and 14.2 billion Euros in the EU. So helping bees is good for your farm income as well as good for wildlife.

How to attract bees

Sensitive management of species-rich grassland, with a good range of herbaceous flowering plants, such as common knapweed, birds foot trefoil and tufted vetch, will be good for bees.

As well as looking after existing nectar-rich habitats, planting a nectar source containing species such as Phacelia, sunflowers and legumes like sainfoin will produce areas attractive to bees.

For Countryside Stewardship Schemes expiring this year, these are suitable options under Entry Level Stewardship (ELS):

- ▶ EK2: Permanent grassland with low inputs
- ▶ EK3: Permanent grassland with very low inputs
- ▶ EK21: Legume and herb-rich swards
- ▶ EF4: Nectar flower mixture

Suitable options under HLS:

- ▶ HK6: Maintenance of species-rich, semi-natural grassland
- ▶ HK7: Restoration of species-rich, semi-natural grassland
- ▶ HK8: Creation of species-rich, semi-natural grassland

For further information, contact the **Bumblebee Conservation Trust** bumblebeeconservationtrust.org or **Buglife** buglife.org.uk

Monsoon to heatwave – how weather affects birds

Mike Ingram
RSPB cirl bunting project officer

2012 saw the second wettest summer on record in the UK for 50 years, with the South West bearing the brunt with the wettest summer since 1912. This was followed in 2013 by the coldest spring in 50 years with average temperatures being 25% lower than normal. Aside from the chaos and cost to property, infrastructure and farming, how has this adverse weather affected bird numbers?

The cooler wetter summer of 2012 meant that breeding success for many species has been lower than normal. This was largely due to the lack of insects available for adults to feed their

young. Research by the British Trust for Ornithology has shown that resident species, such as blue tits, great tits and chaffinches, had a particularly bad breeding year in 2012 whilst it was one of the worst breeding years on record for migrants. The (in)ability to forage in rain was a contributory factor and this also negatively affected raptor populations, such as kestrels and barn owls.

The cold spring in 2013 has been a double blow for many birds with breeding delayed, migrants arriving late and many birds starving to death through lack of food. Early spring is a critical time for birds with winter seed food becoming scarce and insects failing to appear in any abundance. The breeding success of cirl buntings will have undoubtedly been affected by the weather, although winter feeding by farmers will have helped many.

Surveys of specific sites in 2013 showed breeding to have been delayed, and whilst some birds paired in the spring, they were not showing signs of nesting. It also appears, as a result of observations of birds in Cornwall, that the number of breeding females is lower this year compared to males and that there are a larger number of unmated males.

The summer of 2013 proved to be a good one with generally warmer and sunnier conditions, and good numbers of grasshoppers. This will hopefully boost the breeding success from the low of 2012. Cirl buntings do have the capacity to bounce back when conditions are right and hopefully the better summer weather will improve breeding success.

Cirl bunting reintroduction project: 2012 and 2013 updates

Stuart Croft reports on two contrasting years for the project – a joint venture between the RSPB, Paignton Zoo, the National Trust and Natural England.

Stuart Croft
RSPB cirl bunting reintroduction project officer

2012 was a milestone year, as the project target of attaining a self-sustaining population of 30–40 breeding pairs of cirl buntings was finally achieved six years after the first releases were made in 2006. The year started on a high note with the previous year's hand-reared birds having done particularly well, achieving the highest post-release survival of any previous year and the highest overall first-year survival. A lot of credit is due to our avicultural team who did another sterling job in 2011.

As the winter progressed, flocks were located at many sites and by the end of February 2012 a healthy population of 92 birds was recorded. Many of these birds favoured the areas of over-wintered stubble and patches of bird-seed mix put in place thanks to Roseland farmers. Four pairs established a breeding colony at one site after utilising the winter habitat implemented via HLS.

With the onset of spring, pair formation was well underway and as the season progressed 44 pairs were found – a 50% increase on the previous year. The geographical spread of this population was very similar to 2011, with all the known sites from that year being occupied again in 2012. However, it was encouraging to see the appearance of pioneering pairs in a few outlying locations.

Sadly, the absence of favourable weather throughout the 2012 summer made chick-rearing tremendously difficult. Being dependent on a ready supply of insects to feed their chicks, the adult birds were in a constant battle against

the all-too-frequent downpours. Though virtually all pairs made multiple breeding attempts, only half the pairs produced fledged young, totalling 60–70 juveniles. Improved conditions from August enabled a few late successes, with a few pairs persisting to produce fledglings into September. But for most pairs the damage had already been done, with many ceasing breeding activity.

With such relatively low productivity, followed by a cold long winter, it was no surprise that 2013's population took a hit. Though the number of males was similar to the previous year, the female population was much reduced. One explanation for this could be that, as the females undertake most of the parental duties during the breeding season, they were under more stress during the terrible weather of 2012, to the extent that they didn't cope as well as the males during the following cold winter.

With very cold weather persisting into April and May 2013, pair and territory

formation was delayed. Any early nesting attempts ended in failure, though as the weeks passed the weather became more settled, resulting in far greater success from the 28 identified pairs. In any year, it is the months of July and August that are the most productive for breeding cirl buntings, so a heat-wave in July was just what was required to enable the adult birds to provide their youngsters with their essential insect diet and make multiple breeding attempts. By the end of the 2013 breeding season, we had recorded a minimum of 66 juveniles – a significant number considering there were only 28 breeding pairs compared to 2012's 44 pairs.

It is hoped that if the forthcoming winter is not too harsh, then this better productivity will help the population to rise once again.

We are, as always, indebted to the help and support of local farmers and the dedicated team of staff and volunteers who keep a close eye on the birds throughout the year.

For more information or to report any sightings of cirl buntings in Cornwall, please contact Stuart Croft.

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Hand-rearing cirl buntings

A farmer's view

Adrian Glanville

With stunning views across the Carrick Roads from the west side of the Roseland Peninsula in south Cornwall, Adrian Glanville knows he lives and works in a special place.

Interview with Stuart Croft RSPB cirl bunting reintroduction project officer

Being born on the Peninsula, he has been involved in farming for most of his life, farming small parcels of land whenever the opportunity arose. So when Churchtown Farm became available in the mid-1980s he was quick to step into the tenancy and take up the challenge of bringing it back into production. Since then Adrian and his son, Tom, have built up the farmland to just over 200 acres, with a mix of grass for silage, arable and vegetables grown for the stand at the end of the road.

"It was a friend that discovered we had cirl buntings on the farm. I would sometimes hear the males singing, but didn't realise just how rare they had become in the rest of Cornwall." In fact these were some of the very last pairs to be found in the county, before they sadly all disappeared by the mid- to late-1990s. When the National Trust purchased the farm, Adrian was able to enter into Countryside Stewardship (CS), before progressing into HLS – "It was the natural next step."

Adrian was able to qualify for HLS as he was within the target zone for the 2006 project to reintroduce cirl buntings to the Roseland Peninsula. "Having seen the cirl buntings disappear from the farm, it was good news that there was a project to try to bring them back. The RSPB and Natural England were able to come up with a management plan for the farm that meant I could farm effectively and also provide a home for wildlife. It sometimes goes against the grain to see weeds growing in the corn and untrimmed hedges, but it is also good to see the birds and insects.

With the help of the HLS we have been able to complete fencing works to enable us to graze cattle to create the ideal summer feeding habitat for cirl buntings. We've also been able to keep our flexibility when it comes to growing our veg, by moving them around each year. All in all, we are happy with the HLS scheme and the way it's going."

A couple of winters ago the first cirl buntings returned to Churchtown Farm – a great success for the project and for Adrian. "When they told me that we had our cirl buntings back I couldn't believe it! It's a great feeling to know that we must be doing something right for them to come back." Since then up to four pairs have bred on the farm and contributed to the birds moving to other new sites on the Peninsula.



Adrian Glanville with Molly the dog

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The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Produced by the RSPB South West England regional office. Contributions from Adrian Glanville (farmer), Deborah Deveney, Stuart Croft, Mike Ingram and Tom Lancaster (RSPB).

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IMAGES: cirl bunting and hand-rearing cirl bunting by Andy Hay, barn owl by John Bridges and bumblebee by Grahame Madge (all rspb-images.com); RSPB and farmers at Westminster by Duncan Soar Photography; red ruby cattle by Laura Whitehead; weasel snout by Kevin Rylands, RSPB; red dead nettle, common chickweed and corn spurrey (all aphotoflora.com); Adrian Glanville with Molly the dog by Stuart Croft.

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