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LAPWING LANDSCAPES

ISSUE 3 WINTER 2009/2010



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Welcome to the third Lapwing Landscapes newsletter! 2009 has been another positive year for breeding waders across the Upper Thames Tributaries. Farmers and landowners are continuing to work with the Lapwing Landscapes project, improving habitats for breeding waders and other farmland wildlife.

The Upper Thames Tributaries encompass 27,000 hectares of river floodplain, which flows south towards Oxford. This area has historically supported breeding waders such as lapwings, snipe, redshanks and curlews. In 2010, we will be surveying sites across the Upper Thames for breeding waders. This will be the first major survey of the area since 2005 and should tell us how these birds are faring.

The **Lapwing Landscapes** project is continuing to work with farmers and landowners across the Upper Thames Tributaries, providing specialist advice on wet grassland restoration. We have worked with over 200 farmers and landowners since the project started in 2006. In this time, farmers and landowners have restored more than 600 hectares of wetland habitat across the area.

Restoring and creating habitats needs the right kit. In 2009, we joined forces with award-winning agricultural contractors RC Baker Ltd. The company, based in North Oxfordshire, operates the RSPB's Rotary Ditcher — a machine many farmers have hired to create wetland habitats across the Upper Thames. This year we are also trialling a new piece of kit — a Spoil Spreader, which is used to clean out and restore old scrapes. See the centre pages for more information.

Lapwing Landscapes draws together the skills, experience and knowledge of farmers and landowners, the RSPB, Natural England and organisations such as the Environment Agency. Creating and managing wetland habitats needs time and support to get things right. Through working in partnership, we have shown that we can do this.

The Upper Thames Tributaries are not just important for breeding waders. We have key populations of other farmland birds, particularly tree sparrows and corn buntings, which are all benefiting from the work of farmers. Its not just birds either, a whole range of wildlife from brown hares to corncockles are taking advantage of beneficial land management across the area.

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© Mike Shummer (RSPB)

Digging for wildlife on the Cherwell

On the ground 2009

The **Lapwing Landscapes** project has continued to work with land managers over the last year, creating and restoring 180 hectares of wetland habitats across the Upper Thames Tributaries in 2009.

Practical restoration work has continued across most of the catchments on the Upper Thames Tributaries. Shallow scrapes have been created, sluices installed, willows pollarded and special grassland mixes sown. The results of this work have been immediate in some instances — on one farm on the Thames, curlews nested in a field where scrapes had been created just a few weeks before.

We have also been able to catch up where wet conditions led to work being delayed in 2008. Work was completed with the Rotary Ditcher on one site on the Ray, and several farms have been able to push ahead with scrape creation. It has not been all plain sailing. Persistent rain in July

and August caused real problems with taking hay, and meant that some fields were too wet to manage and carry out practical work.

Several new projects are now planned for 2010, with management plans drawn up for more than 200 hectares of land. This work will take place with capital funding from

with the Rotary Ditcher working to widen scrapes.

Land managers have worked with the Lapwing Landscapes project and organisations such as Natural England to create and restore over 600 hectares of wet grassland across the Upper Thames Tributaries since 2006. This both shows the



© Kirsty Brannan (RSPB)

Wet features created by the Rotary Ditcher

schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship. As well as on farms, work has progressed on other sites. The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) hired the Rotary Ditcher to work on their reserves at Chimney Meadows and Gallows Bridge. Here we created over 5,000 metres of shallow ditches and pools for waders and chicks to feed in. Work on RSPB Otmoor continued,

commitment to manage land for wildlife, but also that this can be successfully done within the remit of a profitable farm business.

Don't forget that if you farm in the Upper Thames, the Lapwing Landscapes project can provide free advice on managing wet grassland for breeding waders. Get in touch if you want to arrange a visit.

Wading bird numbers are up, up and away

218 pairs of breeding waders were recorded across the Upper Thames Tributaries in 2005. Since then, farmers and landowners have created and restored more than 600 hectares of wet grassland, and continued to manage many more. We want to see how birds have responded.

In 2005, RSPB volunteer surveyors recorded an encouraging increase in the number of breeding waders on the Upper Thames Tributaries. Some species had fared better than others, with curlew showing a significant increase in numbers but snipe appearing to have declined. Since then, we have carried out 'snapshot' surveys, covering a small number of sites, to give us a flavour of how waders are faring. In 2009, we surveyed 29 sites and found 143 pairs of breeding waders. Although this is a slight fall in numbers found in the 2008 'snapshot' survey, it is probable that breeding populations are still recovering from the difficult conditions created by the recent run of wet summers.

In 2009, lapwings were found in the highest numbers, with 78 pairs found. Curlew were the second most numerous with 36 pairs located, with indications of successful breeding on several sites. The Upper Thames holds an important lowland population of these birds. Breeding snipe numbers reached double figures for the first time since 1994! Furthermore, after an absence of many years, breeding redshanks were observed for the second year in a row on sites in the Cherwell Valley and along the Upper Ray.

We need your help in 2010

In 2010, the major 2005 survey covering sites across the Upper Thames Tributaries will be repeated. By surveying more than 5,000 hectares on 90 sites, we will get a better



Curlews on the up?



Sentinel of the marshes...



understanding of the population dynamics of wading bird species across the wider area. If you farm in the Upper Thames, we may have been touch to let you know about the surveys. We are grateful to all who provide us with access to their land and support the surveys.

Finding the right level

If you are managing wet grassland and need to control water levels, it can be difficult to choose the right sluice for the job.

Sluices can be vital for wet grassland management. They allow water levels to be held high into the early summer, providing feeding habitats for waders. They also allow fields to be drained so that they can be managed effectively.

Right-angled bends, using twin-walled pipe and a collar, will often suffice and are cheap and simple. On larger ditches, it may be preferable to use a drop-board sluice. Or do you need something serious, like a penstock or a tilting weir? You need to find something that is up to the task, but that is also practical to operate.

The RSPB have produced Water management Structures for Conservation – a series of technical case studies to help you make the right choice. To download this visit www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Water_management_structures_tcm9-214636.pdf

The RSPB runs an annual programme of practical habitat management courses for farmers and their advisors, covering a range of habitats and management techniques. For information about courses near you, or to receive the full 2010 programme, please contact conservation-advice@rspb.org.uk



The Spoil Spreader – up close and personal

Getting the right kit for the job

© Mike Shurmer (RSPB)

There are a range of choices when it comes to creating and managing scrapes on wet grassland. One option is to use the Rotary Ditcher and Spoil Spreader, which are owned by the RSPB and operated by award-winning agricultural contractors RC Baker Ltd. They are available for hire for conservation projects throughout the UK.

What is the Rotary Ditcher?

Manufactured in the USA by Liebrecht, the Rotary Ditcher is a giant rotating digger pulled by a tractor and is used to create shallow ditches and pools. The RSPB imported the machine in 2002, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. Since 2004, the ditcher has worked nationwide on over 40 farms and nature reserves - including many sites in the Upper Thames Tributaries.

Why create foot drains?

The Rotary Ditcher is most efficient at creating foot drains - shallow

channels up to three metres wide and 40 cm deep. These catch and hold surface water, providing habitat for breeding waders and their chicks, which feed on invertebrates in wet mud at the edge of pools and scrapes. Recent RSPB research has shown that fields with high foot drain densities attract significantly higher densities of nesting lapwings.

Foot drains can be designed to minimise impacts on management operations, for example, spacing them to allow tractors to cut and turn between them and installing crossing points.

What can the Rotary Ditcher do?

- Create foot drains at a rate of around 200 m per hour* – ten times faster and half the cost of an excavator.
- Give an accurate depth of excavation through laser levelling, with adjustable cutting blades to create variable ditch profiles
- Create ditches up to 1.5 m deep and shallow pools 10 m wide and 30 m long*
- Throw spoil up to 30 m away*, avoiding costly collection and

removal. Spoil breaks down easily into the sward.

**Depends on soil type, topography, vegetation cover and complexity of features being created.*

What is the Spoil Spreader?

Manufactured in Holland by Bos, the Spoil Spreader is owned by the RSPB Berney Marshes reserve in Norfolk. It is being operated by RC Baker Ltd. in 2010 and is available for hire. The machine has a series of flat blades on a helical rotor, which sits at 45 degrees to the back of the tractor. This means that the machine can spread the spoil up to 15 metres behind and to the side of the tractor.

As with all wet features, scrapes and foot drains eventually fill in with sediment and vegetation. To re-establish this important habitat, it is often necessary to 'clean out' scrapes approximately every five years. This recreates the wet muddy habitat that is so important for breeding waders.

The Spoil Spreader is the ideal machine to clean out this soil and vegetation. The machine is cheap to transport and cost effective to operate.



Creating a foot drain with the Rotary Ditcher

© Mike Shurmer (RSPB)

Funding

Use of the Rotary Ditcher and Spoil Spreader should be eligible for capital funding through Higher Level Stewardship.

Licensing and consenting requirements

It is essential to obtain site-specific information and advice, and procure all necessary licenses, permits and consents, from the appropriate public and statutory bodies before undertaking works in the floodplain.

The RSPB can provide support with this.

For further information:

The RSPB can provide free advice and support on the deployment and use of both machines. Site managers should be aware that advance booking is essential. If you are interested, contact the RSPB's Lapwing Landscapes project or go to:

www.rspb.org.uk/rotaryditcher

Photos on right:

Cleaning a foot drain with the Spoil Spreader.

Rotary Ditcher working on the Thames. Foot drain on the Cherwell.



© RSPB



© Mike Shurmer (RSPB)



© RSPB



Applying for HLS just got easier!

Natural England's Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, launched in 2005, has so far attracted over 700 agreements in the South East covering 130,000 hectares of land. Of this, 8,800 hectares are managed specifically for wading birds.

However, the complex application process has certainly put a few people off applying too. This may be about to change as Natural England launches the new simplified **Farm Environment Plan** this month! Often simply called the **FEP**, this is a detailed survey of the environmental features present on the farm at the time of application, which is a pre-requisite for any HLS application.

In order to encourage more applications, and deliver more for wildlife, Natural England has made it shorter and easier to use (and therefore cheaper to produce), whilst still capturing the most important information about the wildlife on the holding. If you are interested in benefiting from the improved process and applying for the scheme give your local Natural England office a call and talk to an adviser today.

The value of a traditional hay meadow

Once a common sight along the Thames, the curlew has been making something of a comeback in recent years but needs your help if populations are to recover fully!

This large and striking bird, with its long curved beak and wonderful bubbling call, relies on the long grass of a hay meadow to hide and raise its chicks. The trend towards silage-making and earlier hay cutting has meant that the cover is often removed just when the chicks need it most.

Natural England's HLS scheme offers funding to farmers for making a late cut of hay each year in order to allow the curlew chicks sufficient time to fledge.

Funding can range from £130 per hectare per year to as much as £275 per hectare per year, depending on the quality of the site and how late the owner is willing to leave the hay.



Curlew chicks benefit from later hay cutting

If you have curlew on your farm, or want to know how you can attract them, the RSPB and Natural England can offer free advice and guide you towards the best scheme and options for your farm.

For more information on Environmental Stewardship please contact Anne Newson at Natural England on: 0300 060 1928

Landscapes for tree sparrows too

The Upper Thames area is not just good for waders — it is important for a whole range of farmland birds. In particular it is a stronghold for the tree sparrow, whose numbers have decreased by about 97% in England over the last 40 years.

A few small tree sparrow colonies have hung on in the Upper Thames, and a group of farmers and Oxford Ornithological Society members have decided to give them a helping hand. Nest boxes and feeding stations have been provided at a series of sites along the Thames between Buscot and Farmoor and these have been well used - 206 tree sparrows fledged from our boxes during the 2009 breeding season. They are not easy birds to count but at the longest established site south of Bampton, it is estimated that the tree sparrow population reached between 400 and 1000 birds by the end of 2009.

The challenge has been to try to get as many as possible of these birds through the harsh weather of early 2010. As well as tree sparrows, there have been good numbers of other species, including yellowhammers and reed buntings, using the feeding stations.

If you farm on the Upper Thames, have tree sparrows, and would like to know more about the project, please contact Alan Larkman, Conservation Officer for the Oxford Ornithological Society, on:
alan.larkman@btinternet.com



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A new three-year initiative encouraging land managers to boost farmland wildlife through positive land management is gathering momentum.

The **Campaign for the Farmed Environment** (CFE) was launched in November 2009 by Defra, who agreed on a voluntary approach to environmental management rather than imposing a compulsory set aside measure. If compulsory set



Farming groups join with conservationists to deliver wildlife campaign

aside were introduced, it would affect up to 6% of croppable land, bringing financial costs to farmers.

Key bodies including the NFU and CLA, are working in partnership with Defra, Natural England and the Environment Agency, alongside conservation organisations including the RSPB and BBOWT. Local liaison groups are driving forward the Campaign in target counties, including Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, where farmers are already protecting soil, water and farmland wildlife. Farmers are being asked to join Environmental Stewardship (ES) or to

renew their agreements and choose some in-field options. A broad menu of voluntary options is open to those who choose not to enter ES.

The Local Liaison Group chairman in the three counties is Ian Waller, who has a LEAF demonstration farm in Buckinghamshire. The CFE coordinator is Laura Francis from the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group.

Look out for events in the three counties this spring. Visit www.cfeonline.org.uk to find out more about the Campaign targets, themes and voluntary measures.

On the Thames

For three generations the Florey family has farmed at Rectory Farm. Robert Florey tells us how he integrates managing for wildlife into the farm business:

Rectory Farm is a 170 hectare mixed farm in the heart of the Upper Thames Valley. The whole farm entered Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) in 2007. In addition to the farm business, we offer bed & breakfast and self-catering cottages.

We have 80 hectares devoted to arable production, growing milling wheat, beans and grass leys. Ten hectares are in the HLS scheme, including grass margins, floristically enhanced margins, field corners, wild bird seed plots, nectar flower plots and over wintered stubbles. The remaining 80 hectares are in permanent grass, including 25 hectares of river meadows. The grassland is grazed by 150 Pedigree North Devon cattle and we fatten Aberdeen Angus cattle for Waitrose.

The RSPB's Rotary Ditcher has created 2,000 m² of scrapes in our river meadows. Through incorporating crossing points and sensible design, we manage to work around the scrapes without too many problems. Summer fallow is located next to the meadows, so lapwings



Pedigree North Devons

© Robert Florey

can move their chicks to feed around the scrapes. We also pollard willows to reduce perching sites for crows and magpies.

Some of the meadows are shut up for hay in the spring, taking a late cut to avoid nests. We then aftermath graze until the end of November. In the autumn, cattle tread in the damp scrapes, creating the muddy effect that encourages the different insects that attract wading birds. However, the scrapes do not become overly boggy from poaching, as long as the cattle are removed before the meadows become too wet. Curlews, lapwings, snipe and redshanks have all been found here. The HLS options and the permanent pasture are creating the right balance for English partridge. We currently have just a

few but are hopeful that they will increase. We are also aiming to get better control of magpies and crows this spring. Other birds benefiting include barn owls, yellow wagtails and reed buntings. The farm is home to plenty of other wildlife, including hares and a host of butterflies. Moth surveys have shown a diverse range of species on the farm, though numbers have been down during the wet summers.

The HLS scheme has fitted in well with the different enterprises and has not interfered with the day-to-day farm management. This shows that not just those people farming in the Thames Valley, but further afield as well, can produce food whilst integrating different options to encourage a wide variety of wildlife.

CONTACT US:



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Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

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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.

www.rspb.org.uk

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

The RSPB would like to thank the following funding partners who are supporting this project: the Environment Agency, Biffaward and Cherwell District Council.

Printed on 100% recycled paper made from waste paper collected from consumers.



The Environment Agency is the leading public body protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales.



Biffaward, a multi-million pound environmental fund, which utilises landfill tax credits donated by Biffa Waste Services, has given the RSPB partnership funding towards Lapwing Landscapes to help restore floodplain grazing marsh.