

South West Farmland Bird Initiative Update

Winter 2012/13



Welcome to the South West Farmland Bird Initiative (SWFBI) newsletter for farmers, landowners, land managers and farm advisers across the four project areas. This publication celebrates the wealth of wildlife found in the countryside and the great efforts made to conserve and enhance farmland bird populations by those farming across the region.

Since SWFBI was established in October 2008 the four sister projects have worked with over 350 farmers, across 140,000 ha of farmland and have advised on over 200 HLS agreements. In addition nearly 2000 people have attended SWFBI events, all keen to learn how to integrate farmland bird conservation alongside commercial farming.

This success is down to the unique approach the Initiative has taken working with a wide range of conservation and farming partners to achieve a common goal. SWFBI has recognised farmers' land management skills and knowledge, working with them to get their views of what can be done to help you make the difference for farmland birds.

SWFBI, working with many specialists, came up with an evidence-based package of Environmental Stewardship options that deliver the 'Big Three' for farmland birds. When used together on farm, these options provide what farmland birds need to thrive i.e. over-winter seed food, spring/summer insect food and safe in-field nesting places.

The package was designed to be built into farming operations. Successful farm businesses are important as well as increasing farmland bird populations – building this package around a successful farm business was a key requirement.

The full detail of this Farmland Bird Package can be found inside, and has been at the heart of SWFBI. All four projects delivered the same consistent message and ask to their farming communities, working to ensure that the options were used correctly for the needs of both farmers and farmland birds.

Environmental Stewardship figures show that since SWFBI began farmers and their advisers have stepped up and there has been a five-fold increase in the area of these vital options on farms across Dorset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire – so a big thank you to you all.



Yellow wagtail – one of the arable species targeted by SWFBI

Habitats delivered by SWFBI farmers

Skylark Plots	2,642 plots
Wild Bird Seed Mixes	2,197 ha
Seed Rich Stubbles	1,745 ha
Conservation Headlands	375 ha
Cultivated Fallow	699 ha
Nectar and Flower-rich Mixes	1,171 ha

So far SWFBI farmers have delivered over **9000 ha** of key Environmental Stewardship options comprising over 750ha of nesting habitat, 4015ha of winter seed food and 4580ha of insect rich summer food habitat.

Over 2000ha of Wild Bird Seed Mix have been planted by SWFBI farmers



Corncockle to harvest mouse... using arable options to benefit broader biodiversity

By Tracy Adams and Diane White

Arable farming has been a feature of the Wiltshire countryside for at least 5000 years and it's left us with a rich legacy of archaeology and biodiversity. The chalky soils of the Wiltshire downs play host to a whole range of wildlife, including plants, mammals, reptiles, invertebrates and birds.

It's not just wildflowers in the grasslands of the downs that are important in Wiltshire. Out in the fields there's another group with shorter life cycles known as "arable plants". This group contains some of our most recognisable species - from the vibrant red poppy to the vivid blue cornflower. Many of these plants germinate in the spring and the move from spring sown crops to winter sown crops has hit them hard, along with the development of efficient herbicides and crop cleaning techniques. Plantlife, the UK plant charity, has recognised the importance of the Wessex chalk and has designated it an Important Arable Plant Area.

It's not all gloom and doom for these plants though. Thanks to the

help of the south west's farmers, these plants are getting a boost through ELS and HLS. Many of the options promoted for farmland birds by the SWFBI projects encourage rare broad leaved plants like Pheasant's-eye and Night-flowering Catchfly as well. Light chalky soils across the SWFBI project areas are ideal for options like conservation headlands and fallow plots. Both options are brilliant for rare arable plants.

Headlands and fallow plots aren't just a good starting point for rare arable plants though. Some of our most iconic wildlife, including brown hare and harvest mice, make good use of arable in field options.

Harvest mice are a shy species, not easily spotted due to their size and habitats. They benefit from a number of options, including fertiliser free un-harvested cereal headlands, reduced input crop management and hay meadow management, particularly in species rich meadows. They weave nests off the ground, usually well hidden, out of the grasses in margins and

beetle banks. These provide them with a safe place to raise young, and a warm place to over winter.

Brown hares can often be seen running across the fields of Wiltshire, their distinctive silhouette clearly visible, and their behaviour captivating people for generations. Who can resist watching the hares boxing in March? Providing fallow plots and wild bird seed mixtures can help brown hare by providing them with undisturbed areas to bask, lay and breed. The low density nature of wild bird seed mixtures gives brown hares excellent cover and habitat to forage and nest in and around.

Putting 7% of the arable area of your farm into specific arable in-field options like wild bird seed mixtures, fallow plots and floristic margins provides a whole host of benefits to the wildlife on your farm. From butterflies to birds and everything in between, they all benefit from a gentle helping hand.

Floristically Enhanced Margins (HE10)

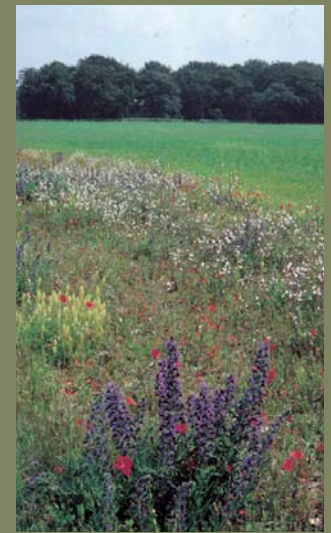
By Neil Harris

I vividly remember as a young boy driving home in the dark with my father after long days fishing in the summer. The headlights of the car illuminated so many insects that it looked as though we were driving through a blizzard. Nowadays when I drive home in the dark, there is the odd ghostly fleck shining in my headlights and the days of cleaning the splattered bugs from the windscreen and headlights seem long gone.

Farmland has lost much of the flower rich habitat which supports these insects but the floristically enhanced grass margin option available under HLS can encourage these insects back as well as providing a dramatic splash of colour to the greens and browns of the farmed landscape. When situated adjacent to roads and public footpaths, these colourful margins provide great PR for the farm as well.

Insects are key to the breeding success of many of our valued farmland birds as most species (even the seed eating ones) feed their young on protein rich insects. A lack of insects in part explains the decline of species like the grey partridge, tree sparrow and corn bunting.

Floristically enhanced margins are not as difficult to establish as you might think. A stale seed bed, warm and damp conditions in late August/early September and the right seed mixture for your soil type will give you a good start. The seed mixture should contain 80% of finer grass species (bents, meadow grasses, fescues and crested dogtail) and 20% of the more competitive wildflower species (oxeye daisy, knapweeds, field scabious, birds foot trefoil, wild carrot, yarrow, lady's bedstraw, meadow buttercup, cowslips, rough hawkbit and selfheal to name but a few). These seeds should not be drilled but broadcast on the surface and rolled to get a good soil - seed contact. Cutting several times in the first year will not only help the grasses to tiller but will also control any aggressive annual weeds that come through. After that, cutting and removing or topping with a flail mower annually in August should



keep these margins flowering for many years.

Above all, give them time. The wildflowers in the mixture are perennials and most of them won't flower in the first year. Don't rush to the conclusion that you have failed if the margin isn't ablaze with colour the year after you have sown it. Some species like oxeye daisy may flower in that first year but most will come into their own in years 2 and 3.





CORN BUNTING

Nesting habitat: On the ground in cereals, field margins (away from hedgerows) or unimproved grassland.

Winter food: Cereal grains and weed seeds. Particularly associated with barley rich wild bird seed mixtures.

Summer food: Spiders and insects like caterpillars and grasshoppers, also ripening grain in wet weather.

late nests are often caught by harvest, but will use cereal based wildlife seed mixes

TREE SPARROW

Nesting habitat: A hole nesting species, found in mature dense hedgerows, woodland edges and open barns.

Winter food: Prefers small seeds, particularly fat-hen or millet and quinoa based wild bird seed mixtures.

Summer food: Mainly invertebrates, including small flies, spiders, caterpillars and beetles.



nests in holes, including nestboxes, but must have a good supply of insects nearby

REED BUNTING

Nesting habitat: Off the ground in a variety of habitats including field margins, crops and occasionally hedges.

Winter food: A variety of insects and seeds, mainly taken from grasslands and stubbles.

Summer food: Invertebrates such as caterpillars and spiders taken from areas of semi-improved grassland.



nests in insect-rich crops and damp grassland, feeding on stubbles in winter

YELLOW WAGTAIL

Nesting habitat: On the ground in arable crops including peas and cereals.

Winter food: Yellow wagtails are migratory and over-winter in sub-Saharan Africa.

Summer food: A wide range of insects particularly taking flying insects from sparse vegetation or open ground.



nests in open crops and grasslands where there is plenty of insect food

THE FARMLAND BIRD PACKAGE

Resource	ES options	ELS (minimum per 100 ha)	HLS (minimum per 100 ha)
Winter seed food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wild bird seed mixture <i>or</i> Weed-rich stubble 	2 ha <i>or</i> 5-10 ha	2 ha <i>or</i> 5-10 ha +
Spring & summer invertebrate food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conservation headlands Low input spring cereals Field corners Beetle banks Nectar flower mix Flower-rich margins 	1 ha	2-3 ha
Places to nest in-field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skylark plots Fallow plots Extended winter stubble 	20 <i>or</i> 1 ha	20 plus 2 ha *

+ or a combination of both where this is appropriate *where the fallow plot is appropriate



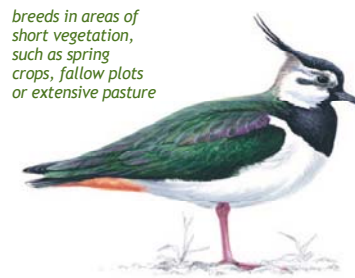
uses field margins and headlands rich in seeds and insects

GREY PARTRIDGE

Nesting habitat: Tussocky grass margins, also beetle banks, game cover and nettle beds.

Winter food: Weed seeds, cereal grains and shoots, especially from stubbles, root crops and crop margins.

Summer food: Chicks feed entirely on invertebrates, particularly sawfly larvae, caterpillars, beetles and aphids.



breeds in areas of short vegetation, such as spring crops, fallow plots or extensive pasture

LAPWING

Nesting habitat: Fallow plots, spring sown cereals and wet grassland.

Winter food: Mainly on earthworms, leatherjackets, insects and their larvae.

Summer food: Chicks need the same food as adults, they are led from the nest site to good feeding areas.



skylark plots in winter cereals will increase breeding success by 50%

SKYLARK

Nesting habitat: On the ground in grasslands and arable crops.

Winter food: Leaves and seeds of crops and weeds, showing a strong association with weedy stubbles.

Summer food: Invertebrates like beetles and spiders.



needs overwintered stubbles or wild bird mixes near to thick hedges

LINNET

Nesting habitat: Hedgerows, low dense scrub including gorse and bramble.

Winter food: Small seeds such as fat hen and chickweed. Readily takes to wild bird cover and stubbles.

Summer food: Oil-seed rape and the associated broad-leaved weeds provide ideal food for chicks.



TURTLE DOVE

Nesting habitat: Tall, dense mature hedgerows and scrub, especially with clematis and honeysuckle.

Winter food: Turtle dove are a migratory species and winter in sub-Saharan Africa.

Summer food: Seeds, especially those of fumitory, knotgrass, chickweed, oilseed rape and cereal grains.

needs areas of seed-rich habitat close to undisturbed scrub or mature hedgerows



requires overwintered stubbles, thick hedgerows and wide margins to thrive

YELLOWHAMMER

Nesting habitat: On or close to the ground at the base of thick hedgerows and scrub.

Winter food: Cereal grains and seeds from plants like chickweed and various grasses.

Summer food: Chicks need invertebrates such as grasshoppers, sawfly larvae, spiders and caterpillars.

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The skylark is an iconic farmland bird, often heard when you're out walking, or driving the tractor. Most people recognise its burbling soaring song. But what about call of the grey partridge, or the jangling song of the corn bunting? If you'd like to get to know what birds are singing in the countryside around you why not ring your local project officer for a free farmland bird CD?





Flopping Fields *By Tracy Adams*

“I have found being involved with the South Wiltshire Farmland Bird Project to be very rewarding. Working with Tracy Adams who has a practical and common sense approach and the experience to give tried and tested advice, has helped us to achieve a noticeable increase in bird numbers on our farm.”

Richard Coward, Wood Farm, Mere, Wiltshire.

My parents weren't birdwatchers but I do remember that my granddad had a big hardback copy of "Guide to British and European Birds" which I used to love looking through. My first 'bird memory' was Sunday morning riding with my dad and seeing large flocks of lapwing in the winter. It was such an arresting site especially when they all took off and the sun highlighted the green iridescence on their wings. The characteristic tumbling display

flights in the spring accompanied by that unique pee-wit call is a very evocative sound for me.

Fast forward a few decades and I've moved to Wiltshire to take up my dream job of South Wiltshire Farmland Bird Project Adviser. I feel like I have come full circle as my first professional job was as a trainee land agent for the MOD on Salisbury Plain. It was wonderful to come to Wiltshire and once again see the flocks of lapwings I remember so well from my childhood.

Did you know that the name lapwing probably comes from two Anglo-Saxon words? One means to leap and the other to reel, which certainly describes the flight of the lapwing! Lapwings have many colloquial names across England, including peewit, green plover and, my personal favourite, flopping. Lapwings are inventive and will feign broken wings and legs in order to draw away threats to their young.

My job now involves working with farmers to create habitat for not just lapwing but the five other specialist farmland birds targeted by the project. Having

a background in land agency and being used to dealing with farmers on the business of rent reviews I imagined that it would be hard to persuade farmers to take good agricultural land and manage it for birds. How wrong I was!

In partnership with the Campaign for the Farmed Environment and the project, farmers have been creating habitat across their farms to provide safe nesting areas and summer chick food for lapwings. Using Environmental Stewardship options or voluntary options like fallow plots and extended over-wintered stubbles next to areas of pasture and species rich grassland, farmers can provide nesting habitat and insect rich feeding areas close together, creating a safe haven for the birds.

With the help of Wessex Water, my project in South Wiltshire has funding through to 2015 so hopefully I will be around for a while yet continuing to advise farmers on how they can manage some of their farms for birds and getting the most out of existing options. Thanks to everyone involved; advisers, NE staff and of course the farmers.

Fat birds in the barley

By Diane White

'It's a great project to work with. SWFBI has given us a clear package of options to work with, and that means we can get the best habitat for birds like corn bunting on the ground. It's been great to work with such an enthusiastic group of farmers, and to see the positive results that the right options yield.'

Simon Smart,
Independent Consultant

Several years ago, I found myself volunteering in Zambia staring up into fig trees looking for Zambian Barbets, a small white bird with a 'toothed' beak. That experience opened my eyes to birds, I realised that the UK also had plenty of

different species, all interesting in their own right. I also realised that many of these birds needed help to ensure they stick around into the future.

Working across the rolling downs of Wiltshire, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and north Hampshire, I spend my days exploring an area that still supports nationally important populations of farmland birds, including a species that has become one of my favourites - the ever elusive fat bird of the barley, otherwise known as the corn bunting.

Corn buntings are your typical little brown bird, and they get their nickname from their distinctive stout shape. They're the first bird I look and listen out for when I see a field of rippling barley. I love them because of their quirky song and the dumpy shape they have sat on a post. If you get close enough to one, they have a distinctive diamond shaped patch of darker feathers on their fronts, a bit like they're wearing a medallion; and a much chunkier beak than the other LBJs you'll see on the farm.

In the spring and early summer they're easiest to spot if you look along lines of fence posts or at the edges of arable fields or at the scattered bushes across the downs, which they use as song posts. Corn

buntings are territorial and will often sing from the same song posts throughout the season. Male corn buntings are polygamous and can often have 3 or 4 females in their territories - when I shared that snippet with my better half he laughed and told me one wife was enough!

Corn buntings feed on seeds throughout the year, nest on the ground in crops and feed their chicks on insects. They prefer spring crops to winter crops for nesting habitat, and generally choose to nest in the outer area of the crop. Using stewardship options farmers can provide a complete suite of habitat for corn buntings, and a whole host of other species.

The most exciting thing about working in the North Wessex Downs for me however isn't the birds I work with. It is the enthusiasm of the farmers I get to meet and work with every day. Without their passion for the countryside and their dedication to provide habitat for farmland birds, the North Wessex Farmland Bird Project would never have gotten off the ground. It's been a privilege working with them for the last few years, and I hope that we continue to work together for the future of farmland birds for many years to come.



Skylark plots

By Clare Buckerfield

Over the past two years, farmers across the South West have signed up to provide more skylark plots. These plots act as a 'landing pad' for skylarks to enter the crop in order to forage for insects in crops which would otherwise be too thick to enter.

Skylark plots are the highest point scoring option available under ELS, earning 5 points/16m² plot, which translates to 3125 points/ha. It is also a target voluntary measure under the Campaign for the Farmed Environment, so you don't have to be in an environmental scheme to try out some plots this year.

The area chosen to put the plots should be large open fields (preferably over 5ha in size), and situated away from telegraph poles, woods and tree lines. Areas where skylarks have been heard singing in the past are a good starting point, as research has shown that putting in plots can increase the number of chicks reared by 50%.

Plots should be located in a winter cereal, and should be a minimum of 16m², so the length will vary depending on your drill width. They are very simple to put in place as you can either turn off the drill for the length of the plot, or you can go out before the end of December and spray them out. Plots can then be treated as the rest of the field, so they can be over sprayed and over fertilised, and they don't have to be kept weedy, so if you have any particular problem weeds you can control these with a knapsack sprayer, although mechanical weeding should not be used.

Research has shown that to be most effective the minimum density of plots should be 2 per ha, and they should be located away from tramlines and field edges in order to reduce predation pressure.

Plots also provide a particularly good public relations opportunity - neatly executed regular plots across a field will look very impressive, not like the 'drill miss' that many farmers fear!

Look out for skylark plots coming to a farm near you soon!

SWFBI changes

Sarah Blyth, the North Wessex Advisor, has moved to pastures new. Diane White who had been working in Hampshire and Berkshire and is now covering the entire North Wessex Downs AONB. Diane, who previously worked at the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, is enjoying working in the county again and getting to know farmers in the area.

Meanwhile in Dorset, Ruth Wilkins has taken on a teaching role at Kingston Mauraud College passing on her expertise to the farmers of tomorrow. Following the loss of FWAG UK, Tracy Adams took on the SWFBI advisory role in the north of the county working with Dorset farmers within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB. She is continuing this work alongside the FWAG SW advisor Clare Buckerfield who continues to provide conservation and farming advice across the county.

If you farm in any of these areas and would like advice on Environmental Stewardship or other ways of helping farmland wildlife on your land, please get in touch with Diane, Tracy or Clare and they will be pleased to help.

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