Supporting wildlife-friendly farmers and delivering the Birds Directive
Why conserve farmland birds?

Birds that are dependent on farmland are the fastest declining group of birds in the European Union (EU). This is mirrored by other farmland wildlife, such as arable plants, butterflies, bumblebees and bats. Some groups are important for the sustainability of agricultural production, especially soil invertebrates, pollinator insects and predators of crop pests.

Bird populations are effectively monitored across the EU, and are a reliable indicator of the health of the farmed environment. The main drivers of farmland bird declines have been identified as changes in farming practices that have reduced the abundance and diversity of plants and insects in the farmed environment. By undertaking conservation management to restore functional farmland ecosystems, we will fulfil the objectives of the Birds Directive on farmland, as well as achieving more sustainable farming.

The management solution

Research into restoration of farmland bird populations identified three main requirements for conservation management:

1. **Seed food through the winter.**
2. **Insect food through the summer.**
3. **Safe nesting habitat for in-field nesting species.**

The Farmland Bird Package was developed from these requirements by a partnership of environmental and agricultural organisations to advise farmers about how to restore farmland bird populations on arable farmland in the UK. This package outlines what habitats, and how much of them, are required. This has subsequently been developed to make sure wider biodiversity, as well as the protection of soils and water, are incorporated in the package. As evidence is gained, we are developing packages for other farming systems, too.

A fresh approach

Effective conservation requires farmers to have access to high-quality environmental advice tailored to the issues and opportunities on their farm. This project piloted a targeted approach. Volunteer bird surveyors identified the priority bird species present on a particular farm, which allowed the RSPB Farm Conservation Advisors to give farmers advice specific to the needs of the wildlife on their farm.

Through this project, we identified a network of wildlife-friendly farmers who could inspire and inform other farmers. They also raised awareness and support of the general public to the benefits of wildlife-friendly farming to the health of the countryside around them.

A review of the outcome of this project showed the success achieved. Conservation delivery could be improved further by enabling volunteers to monitor the response of bird populations to conservation management, allowing our farmer advocates to be the public voice of wildlife-friendly farming, and working together with other organisations.
The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance

The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) was the cornerstone of our work with farmers for three years. It provided farmers with a survey of the birds breeding on their land, undertaken by RSPB volunteers. Any farmer who requested a survey was matched by RSPB project staff with a fully-trained volunteer surveyor. The volunteer visited the farmer in spring and followed this with three or four early morning surveys, recording every bird they saw or heard. Farmers and volunteers often kept in touch during the survey period. It could be very exciting sharing initial findings, especially when farmers found out they had species on the farm they never knew were there! Once the survey was complete, the records were collated and farmers were given a detailed map showing where the birds of conservation concern were found on the farm, a list of all the species identified and a pack of advisory information tailored to their farm. The volunteer also received a copy of the final map. After this, our Farm Conservation Advisors were on hand to help.

Feedback from volunteers involved in the project showed that 99% enjoyed the surveys, 97% felt the training they received was good or excellent and 96% were satisfied with the support they received. 81% felt that their understanding of farmland birds and conservation had improved, 76% reported that no problems were encountered during the surveys and 70% reported that they were now more aware of policies like the EU Birds Directive.

Impact of volunteering

Katy Malone: V&FA on the Isle of Lewis

One of the strengths of the V&FA has been the community working aspect. Local volunteers have shared their birding skills with farmers in the same community, and acted as ambassadors for conservation. They facilitated positive management for birds and other wildlife in their own area. However, Project Officers often had difficulty in matching farms with local volunteers, because the farms were usually in rural areas, away from population centres where volunteers are easier to find. This problem loomed larger on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides than anywhere else.

In January 2011, I started as the V&FA Project Officer for the north Scotland region. I quickly realised that almost a third of the target numbers of farmers registered for surveys were from the Outer Hebrides, where there was no record of any volunteers. I contacted the Conservation Officer on Lewis, who confirmed that he had no knowledge of any existing volunteers.

I sent a letter to the RSPB members on the islands, appealing for suitable volunteers to come forward. From the 160 letters sent out, 10 replies resulted in six new volunteers, so I organised a training day on Lewis. We met on a croft belonging to one of the volunteers, who also provided lunch. The volunteers were delighted to be helping birds in their area, especially as many of the registered farms and crofts were applying for agri-environment grants.
All the volunteers got on very well, new friendships were cemented, and the whole day was very positive. After the end of the season, every volunteer said they would like to participate again, and many took registration forms for their crofting neighbours. This previously untapped resource has proved to be a major asset. The V&FA has left a lasting legacy in this area.

**V&FA Project Officer**

Mark Vercoe, Wales

I am one of 11 V&FA Project Officers across the UK. I have been responsible for the successful delivery of the V&FA as well as the Nature of Farming Award (NoFA) across Wales. I have interacted with at least 150 land owners and 100 volunteers since funding began in 2010.

Taking the time to carry out advisory follow-up visits to some of the V&FA participating farms gave us the opportunity to learn the finer details of their management systems. It also allowed more effective conservation management to be integrated into the farm businesses. Ensuring that farming and conservation can co-exist has been vital in establishing cost effective wildlife-friendly measures. The scheme has also proved to be an effective way to explain the aims of the Birds Directive.

The survey maps and reports were extremely useful. But beyond that, the results of the V&FA have been wide ranging and positive. To name a few: we’ve been able to assist with agri-environment scheme applications, establish farming contacts for local species recovery projects as well as establishing and maintaining relationships with farmers willing to take an active role in influencing policy decisions.

Managing a team of enthusiastic volunteers has been key to the project’s success. Including them in the follow-up process and involving them with farmland conservation advice has proven beneficial for increasing advisory capacity, and shows great potential for future conservation projects.
V&FA farmer case study

Michael Sly, Cambridgeshire

RSPB volunteers found several Birds of Conservation Concern through V&FA surveys on my 1,600 hectare (ha) arable farm here in the Cambridgeshire Fens.

The surveyors saw corn buntings, lapwings, skylarks, yellow wagtails and turtle doves among others. Having received help already from RSPB Farm Conservation Advisor Simon Tonkin for my Entry Level Stewardship, I was enthused to do more, especially following the survey.

Using the information in the survey, Simon and I put our heads together and developed an application for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). We planned specific and positive land management determined by what – and where – species were recorded.

The survey provided a good yardstick to target our land management options and provide further evidence to support our application for the scheme to Natural England. Following the survey, our HLS started in 2011, and even in that short time, all the staff here have noticed a visible and audible difference in the numbers of birds and other wildlife.

Flowering plots of nectar-producing flowers are proving a great attraction to buzzing insects. Unharvested seed crops are providing food for birds over the winter. Including skylark plots in winter cereals and managing fallow plots are providing important in-field nesting habitats. The fallows have been productive for wildlife this year with lapwings breeding successfully and in good numbers. We have not seen this at Park Farm for decades. We have also noticed oil beetles using these plots which are on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

In conjunction with neighbouring farmers, we run an Open Farm Sunday event here during the summer. I open my farm gates for the visiting public and more than 4,000 visitors come along. People are very keen to understand how we are producing food and wildlife simultaneously. This gives me as a farmer an opportunity to demonstrate how public investment can provide real public benefits. Everybody loves hearing the skylarks and watching tumbling lapwings and sprinting brown hares, including myself.
The Nature of Farming Awards

The Nature of Farming Award (NoFA) was the biggest wildlife-friendly farming award in the UK, celebrating the fantastic work by farmers to help wildlife. Interest in the award from farmers and the voting public grew each year. To enter, farmers completed a form explaining the measures they had undertaken on their farm to benefit wildlife.

The RSPB’s Farm Conservation Advisors then had the difficult task of identifying a winner in their region or country. The best of the runners-up were celebrated as Highly Commended. From then, it was up to the general public to vote for their favourite finalist. The huge number of votes generated in 2011, more than 22,000, showed how much support there is for the efforts of NoFA farmers and others like them. Every vote demonstrated to farmers how much wildlife-friendly farming is appreciated.

Winners and Highly Commended farmers are fantastic advocates. These farmers have helped to spread the word by holding on-farm events with RSPB staff to show other farmers how to mix farming for food with farming for wildlife. Some farmers who have maintained or created high quality habitats have erected information boards. These illustrate a variety of the agri-environment options adopted on the farm. They have helped other farmers and members of the public visiting on farm walks, open days or events, to see how these habitat management measures work.

Winners of the NoFA came from anywhere in the UK: any farmer who took up options which protect and enhance the habitats and help the wildlife on their farm could enter. The award raised the profile of the work of wildlife-friendly farmers with the general public through its open voting system.
NoFA 2012

Hayley Sherwin, V&FA Project Officer

The NoFA winner from Northern Ireland in 2012 was Jack Kelly. After winning the regional NoFA award, Jack made it through to the UK final – the only finalist from outside England. Jack’s farm lies in the heart of County Down, Northern Ireland’s main arable region. As a result, most of the measures taken have been directed towards seed-eating farmland birds.

Key measures include sowing wild bird cover and retaining winter stubbles to provide spilt grain and seeds as an additional food source during the winter. The hedges have been trimmed in the classic ‘A’ shape for more than 20 years, so provide a thick, dense cover for nesting birds, including yellowhammers. Grassy field margins provide an overwintering site for insects and a commuting route for farmland mammals such as mice and shrews. Although Jack’s options are directed towards seed-eaters, a pair of lapwings nested and fledged chicks on his land recently.

His V&FA survey results highlighted that linnets, reed buntings, yellowhammers and tree sparrows are all thriving on the farm. Jack makes a conscious effort to reduce the input of chemicals on his land, and has constructed nest boxes for kestrels, barn owls and tree sparrows. We are extremely proud of the work Jack has carried out to conserve wildlife on his farm and believe that he is a wildlife ambassador for not only Northern Ireland, but for the whole of the UK.
RSPB advice

Effective methods vs cost
Face-to-face on-farm advice is the most effective form of helping farmers conserve priority species. However, it is also the most expensive.

Before any visit, the possible presence of key species is researched, along with land designation status, and BAP priority habitats information. During the visit there will be a discussion with the land manager, and ideally any other stakeholders, about the land and the farming business. The site assessment identifies existing priority features, habitats and species, as well as potential enhancements. A short report is issued later, confirming the findings and identifying relevant sources of funding.

In some circumstances it is appropriate to give site-specific advice remotely. Here, advice is focused on providing the farmer and their advisor with information about priority species on their farm, and the combination of habitats and management practices needed to conserve them.

Delivering conservation advice to a group can be particularly effective. Local farmers’ clubs organise programmes of regular evening talks for members and these can be useful.

Alternatively, on-farm demonstration events are often used to explain and advocate new concepts or techniques. A typical farm demonstration event will include a short explanatory talk before the group is led around the farm, punctuated with stops at features of interest. Each feature is explained by a technical expert and the host farmer, with an invitation for the attendees to share their own experiences and ask questions.

Iain Hurst farms 365 ha of arable and chalk grassland in the Yorkshire Wolds. I met him when he entered the NoFA and I was judging his farm. He didn’t win that year, but I kept in touch and in 2010 a V&FA survey found 45 species on his farm including corn buntings, yellow wagtails, tree sparrows, grey partridges, lapwings and, interestingly for a dry chalk farm, breeding curlews.

My involvement with the farm increased when Iain’s Countryside Stewardship Scheme agreement was about to expire and he asked for my advice in putting his HLS application together. Crops on the farm include winter and spring cereals, oilseed rape, vining peas, seed potatoes, a substantial area of former set-aside and a chalk dale, so we had lots of potential for farmland birds including curlews, not to mention marbled white butterflies which were already present.

Iain’s new HLS agreement includes 100 skylark plots, wild bird seed mix to benefit the corn buntings in particular, fallow plots, cultivated margins and nectar mix for the bees as well as game crops for the small family shoot.

Iain is keen to restore the grey partridge numbers to what they were in his father’s day and is very interested in bumblebees – he’s already planted 1,500 wild flower plugs for Buglife. He is also managing the scarce arable plants he has found on the farm.

In 2012 Iain deservedly won the Northern region NoFA title and received his prize at the RSPB’s Bempton Cliffs reserve, just down the road from his farm!

Agricultural communications

Promoting the importance of wildlife-friendly farming to the agricultural community and general public was a major part of this project. The project newsletter, Field of View, was sent to as many as 8,500 participants annually, including all the volunteers and farmers who have been key to the project’s success. A quarterly e-newsletter containing news items, technical advice and farmer case studies is sent to an ever-growing audience, and now reaches approximately 3,500 recipients.

The project has attracted excellent media coverage, with television and radio coverage, and stories appearing regularly in printed and electronic press. Highlights include a mention for the NoFA on BBC Radio 2’s Chris Evans’ Breakfast Show, and appearances by Gethin Owen, the winner of the 2011 NoFA in Wales, appearing on S4C’s Ffermio in 2011 and 2012.

Industry contacts have promoted aspects of the project, notably Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) and Conservation Grade, both
of which have had members and growers as finalists in the NoFA. As media partner in the NoFA, The Telegraph newspaper has printed editorial copy, voting forms and adverts to encourage voting.

Our attendance at agricultural shows has given us opportunities to meet farmers and other agricultural advice providers. Key events in the calendar include the Balmoral Show, Royal Highland Show, Royal Welsh, Cereals and we also host a breakfast event at the Oxford Farming Conference each year to celebrate the winners of the NoFA.

As well as offering visitors to our stands advice and project information, we have conducted market research to better understand the barriers farmers face in delivering wildlife-friendly farming. Signing visitors up to receive our farming newsletters is often a core focus of activity on our show stands. This provides us with opportunities to reach a wide number of people on a regular basis and keep them informed with the latest research, updates and conservation tips.

Presentations to the winners of the NoFA have been a feature of Balmoral, Royal Highland and Royal Welsh shows, which meant we could celebrate with the winners and promote entries for the following year. We sponsored the Arable Conference element at Cereals for three years, as it tends to reach a policy-focussed audience. The RSPB had an important presence on the debating panel at the event in 2011 and 2012.

Farmers’ attitudes to environmental advice

Feedback from farmers who participated in the project was very positive: 99% felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience, 93% took up management based on the advice that accompanied their results and 85% had species on their farm that they had not previously noticed.

However, we were also keen to understand the views of farmers not engaged with the project, so undertook a number of surveys of farmers attitudes outside the programme.

A survey we conducted on many environmental and agricultural stands at Cereals 2011 showed that most farmers believed environmental management and wildlife conservation are important parts of their farm management (86% agree, 4% disagree). But more than half also believed that wildlife had increased in their area, and so do not perceive an urgent need for wildlife conservation.

Only 10% thought that birds such as lapwings and skylarks had declined, of which half thought this was due to changes in farming, while the other
Turtle dove
half thought that it was due to predation, human disturbance or development.

Farmers are either not aware of, or not convinced by, the body of scientific evidence in this area. The responses did not vary significantly depending on whether the questionnaire was completed on environmental stands or agricultural stands.

When asked what would encourage farmers to do more for wildlife, 44% said better advice on how to do it, 39% said better payment rates and 17% said that they did not need to do more for wildlife.

Market research by Reed Business Insight (RBI) showed that the main deterrent to undertaking environmental management was financial, with others including paperwork, time pressures and lack of information on what is involved. When planning environmental management, a Defra study found that 53% of farmers focus on their business needs, 21% on a sustainable family income, 14% on a mix of environmental and economic incentives, 7% primarily on environmental objectives, and 4% on struggling to keep farming. This suggests that 21% could be persuaded to do the right thing by clarifying the environmental benefits, whereas economic and business benefits need to be clear to persuade the other 79%.

When asked whether they would consider applying the options with the highest environmental value, the audience at Cereals 2011 rated buffer strips next to watercourses most highly (91%) because these help them meet regulatory requirements, followed by wild bird seed mixtures (81%), often because of benefits to their shooting interest. Nectar flower mixtures (41%) ranked much lower, despite the potential benefits for crop pollinators and some crop pest predators. Lowest ranked options included skylark plots (37%) and uncropped cultivated margins (25%), where hassle and perceived weed problems were the main deterrents.

The RBI research indicated that farmers prefer to gain environmental information from written material and the farming press rather than through websites. They attend farm events and agricultural shows, but experience of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment indicates that only farmers already engaged attend environmental events. Therefore, delivering environmental information at more agricultural events is the only means of engaging new farmers.

The contribution to farmland bird recovery: a view from Natural England

Phil Grice, Senior Environmental Specialist - Ornithology, Natural England

This project demonstrated a very effective way of supporting farmland bird populations. The bird surveys identified where our nationally-important assemblages of priority farmland birds could be found. The follow-up advice encouraged a high proportion of the farmers who managed the land where these birds were found to take up agri-environment schemes. These were tailored to meet needs of the species on their farm. The RSPB worked with Natural England (NE) to enhance some of the most important areas for farmland wildlife, and helped NE exceed its corporate target for farmland bird habitat creation in each year of the project.

The ongoing advice and support that RSPB Farm Conservation Advisors can give to farmers through the course of their agreements is also invaluable. We know aftercare has a vital role to play in delivering scheme outcomes. Farmers can struggle with the management of some of the more challenging options in agri-environment schemes, so continued advice, particularly in the early years of an agreement, is key to success.

A unique aspect of this project has been the degree to which the farmers themselves have become the advocates of how we develop wildlife-friendly farming techniques. By raising the awareness of the farmers, so they know why wildlife needs their support on farms, they have a much greater interest in the outcome of their environmental works. They need to know both why conservation techniques are important, and how to carry them out.

We look forward to working with the RSPB in the future towards even greater successes, as we further develop the ideas that have been hatched during the course of this project.
An evaluation of the RSPB agricultural advice programme

During our EU LIFE+ funded work, we supported farmers as they undertook effective management for the conservation of priority farmland birds.

Bird surveys undertaken by volunteers gave farmers a greater understanding of the birds on their farm, and the advisory pack they received with the results gave them information about how to help them.

Follow-up advice was targeted at helping farmers who had the most priority species. Enabling them to develop agri-environment scheme applications to boost populations of their farmland birds and support the other wildlife. It was crucial to fit methods into their farming business and give them a secure income from their environmental management.

In total, more than 2,000 surveys were completed and 1,000 farmers were given advice. Approximately 200,000 ha were under the management of the farmers who received advice. An estimated 50% of them went on to enter an agri-environment scheme agreement to secure a future for farmland birds.

This is a very effective means of delivering farmland bird conservation at a farm scale. But this project alone is not enough to halt the loss of biodiversity on farmland, even with the advisory resources of the RSPB and the collective efforts of the whole environmental advisory sector in the agricultural industry. Inspiring farmers to take up effective environmental management on their own initiative, or with the support of the Farm Conservation Advisors, will be essential in order to create sufficient habitat to do this.

There were 92 workshops for farmers to learn about wildlife-friendly farming, and nearly 2,500 farmers attended these events. They were held on farms that demonstrate the very best environmental management for wildlife, and the host farmer was able to explain the practical details of how to create and manage some of the more challenging measures. In general, such events tend to draw interest from farmers who are already engaged in wildlife conservation and looking to improve their management.
The NoFA showcased some of the best wildlife-friendly farming in the UK. By attracting the attention of the media, the NoFA raised awareness of wildlife-friendly farming across the industry and the general public. Case studies of farmers involved can both inspire and inform other farmers about the ways they can support wildlife as part of a viable, productive farming system.

It was particularly important to raise awareness of the benefits of farming for wildlife in the general public at a time when funding for agri-environment schemes was threatened by negotiations for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. The huge response of the public vote demonstrated the importance that is placed on support for this element of rural development.

The market research conducted through this programme has highlighted ways forward for the delivery of effective wildlife conservation on farmland, and the following recommendations will improve the conservation delivery of the future programme.

- Work in partnership with technical experts in management for other taxa and environmental objectives to raise the general quality of environmental advice in the agricultural sector.
- Focus direct advice at priority areas of the UK with the highest abundance of key species.
- Monitor bird populations in these core areas to prove that good environmental management can halt farmland bird declines at a landscape scale.
- Use the experience gained in areas with direct advice delivery to disseminate advice to the wider agricultural audiences.
- Empower wildlife-friendly farmer advocates to be the voice of successful environmental delivery to inspire other farmers and raise awareness amongst the general public.
- Build on the market research on farmers’ needs with regard to environmental advice and preferred means of advice delivery to provide the ideal toolkit to inspire, inform and empower farmers to adopt wildlife-friendly farming on their own initiative.
- Work with other advice providers to complement each other’s delivery of farm wildlife hotspots.
A plan to halt biodiversity loss on UK farmland

Direct environmental advice to support a farmer in applying for an agri-environment scheme and ongoing advice throughout the agreement is the most effective means of ensuring conservation delivery. It is the means by which declines were successfully reversed for the corncrake population in Scotland, and the cirl bunting and stone-curlew populations in England. But with more widespread species of conservation concern, the capacity of dedicated advisors will never be enough to achieve a sufficient scale of coverage. Alternative means of influencing environmental delivery on farmland are needed. Bearing these facts in mind, our plan and successes so far are set out below.

- **Targeted advice delivery**
  The limited capacity of the RSPB to deliver advice to farmers should be focussed in areas with the highest proportion of target species. Based on farmland bird records, we have now identified a number of focus areas across the UK.

- **Full support throughout the course of agreements**
  Good environmental delivery relies as much on good management of agri-environment options as it does on the composition of agreements, and advice throughout agreements is the best way of ensuring this. Therefore, advisory support within focus areas will ensure that conservation management can make a demonstrable difference.

- **Proof that we can make a difference**
  Bird surveys should be undertaken for farmers who intend to adopt conservation management. This will set a baseline against which to measure subsequent changes in populations and assess our ability to increase bird numbers in areas with different agri-environment schemes and farming systems. In just 11 focus areas, 200 surveys have already been undertaken by volunteers.

- **Empowering farmer advocates**
  Farmers are the best advocates of wildlife-friendly farming to the rest of the industry. We have supported dozens of farmers to share their experiences of the benefits and practicalities of effective conservation management with hundreds of other farmers.

- **Partnerships**
  There are a number of organisations that can influence environmental delivery on farmland in the UK, and we can achieve more by working together. Technical partners can help us improve the advice we give to benefit more species and wider environmental objectives, and we can work with other environmental advisory organisations towards a greater scale of coverage. We have now engaged with a total of 23 other organisations in our farm wildlife work, including seven conservation NGOs dealing with specific taxonomic groups and the industry-led Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

- **Understanding the needs of the audience**
  If we are to find a means of influencing farmland management outside areas where we give direct advice, then we need to understand what drives farmers, how much information they need and what forms of advice delivery work for them. We have carried out detailed market research on this issue with arable farmers in England, and now have an excellent understanding of their needs. We plan to carry out further market research to refine our understanding of the needs of other groups.

- **Developing packages and toolkits**
  We have built a clear, simple, quantified package of measures to support priority species on arable farmland. We need to develop the evidence to achieve this for other farming systems and use these packages, plus the experiences of farmer advocates and partners, to create toolkits so farmers adopt wildlife-friendly farming under their own initiative. We have already developed a toolkit for arable farmers in England and this has been extremely well received. We are in the process of developing toolkits for other farmers.
Large skipper and white-tailed bumblebee.
This is an updated version of the report that was distributed at a conference on wildlife-friendly farming in Brussels in November 2012. The updates relate to work that was carried out between the conference and the end of LIFE+ support for our work in September 2013.

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