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The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

FIELD OF VIEW

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Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Yellowhammers have been given a helping hand



Hayley Sherrin (RSPB)

Northern Ireland's Nature of Farming Award winner, Jack Kelly

Welcome to the Northern Ireland issue

Welcome to the second issue of *Field of View* for Northern Ireland. This issue is packed full of information on our past, present and future projects. It has been an exciting year for wildlife!

You can catch up with the Yellowhammer Recovery Project on pages 6 and 7. It ran for five years and produced very promising results.

You can find out about the team of RSPB volunteers who have been hard at work on Rathlin Island, creating suitable habitat for corncrakes as part of our Stepping Up For Corncrake project on page 14. This has involved harvesting nettle roots, replanting them on Rathlin and removing brambles to create corncrake corridors.

On page 8, you can read the profile of the winning and highly commended farmers from this year's Nature of Farming Award (NoFA), which celebrates the fantastic work farmers are doing on their farms to support farmland wildlife.

There's the latest on the re-introduced red kite population on page 13, and the work that is being done in partnership with farmers and landowners as part of the HELP project is on pages 10 and 11. It is "all systems go" at Lagan Valley Regional Park, where we have been working in partnership with local farmers and planting giant bird tables to provide additional food sources for seed-eating birds. Read all about it on page 9.

During the summer months, RSPB staff and volunteers surveyed twites along the North Antrim coast, finding out how many of these rare finches still survive. Read about their efforts and findings on page 15. There's also an update on the progress of Northern Ireland's only chough population.

Last but not least, we have feedback from you on the advice and support we offer. As always, we are keen to hear from farmers and supporters about how we can help deliver wildlife-friendly farming.

You can keep up-to-date with our work through the RSPB farming blog. For more information and a link to the blog, visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming



The EU LIFE+ Programme funds RSPB work which supports wildlife-friendly farming that furthers sustainable development in the European Union.

In this issue: Yellowhammer Recovery Project • Red kite update • NoFA 2012 • Giant bird tables at Lagan Valley Regional Park • HELP project update • Stepping up for corncrakes • Twites and choughs

NORTHERN
IRELAND

Farmers visit Brussels to tell their side of the story

RSPB



Championing agri-environment at the European Parliament

Wildlife-friendly farmers from across the EU met in Brussels in March to call for greater support for environmental measures in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform.

The RSPB (as part of BirdLife International) supported eight farmers from the UK, Ireland, Portugal and Latvia to visit their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on the Agriculture Committee. They told their stories about the importance of Pillar II agri-environment schemes on their farms.

The farmers explained to MEPs how these schemes allow them to step up for nature, as well as producing agricultural commodities. They also

provide benefits for the environment, their businesses and society. They urged MEPs to increase funding for agri-environment in the 2014–2020 CAP and invited them to visit their farms to see these amazing schemes in action. We also highlighted the urgent need to channel CAP funding towards vulnerable High Nature Value farming systems.

Dan Skinner, one of the participating farmers, said: "I was really pleased to represent UK farmers involved in agri-environment schemes. MEPs often get told about the shortcomings of these schemes, so it was really important to tell them how fantastic the benefits of a well-run scheme can be and why

they should protect Pillar II funding in the CAP reform."

As the European Parliament plays a significant role in determining the design and funding of the next CAP, this visit was a great opportunity. It shows how farmers and the RSPB are joining forces on key issues.

We hope that these powerful messages from farmers will make sure that Parliament's negotiating position on CAP calls for adequate funding for valuable agri-environment schemes and vulnerable High Nature Value systems.

For more information, contact Jenna Hegarty at jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk

Lapwings behind bars



Amy Burns (RSPB)

You'll usually find lapwings in wet meadows and tillage fields – but in this case, they're "inside" HMP Maghaberry, near Lisburn. Lapwings used to breed all over Northern Ireland, but they have declined considerably during the last 40 years. Maghaberry Prison holds a nationally important population of up to 30 breeding pairs.

The habitat at HMP Maghaberry is ideal for lapwings. There is species-rich grassland around the prison, which has not been re-seeded or drained. There are suitable nest sites and an abundant supply of insects for young chicks (above) to eat. The impenetrable security fence means that mammal predators, such as badgers and foxes, are unable to get in.

The prison's groundskeeper, Denis Smith, got in touch with the RSPB. He keeps an eye on the birds during the breeding season and, with assistance from RSPB staff, monitors breeding success and manages the habitat. The grass is kept short by an ever-increasing population of rabbits, and 15 shallow ponds, known as scrapes, were dug. These allow insects to thrive even during dry spells, so there's always food available for the chicks.

The perimeter grass became an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) in 2011, thanks to co-operative work between the RSPB, the Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). The designation gives considerable protection for a struggling species.

Lapwings seem to have bold black and white plumage, but close-up, they sport oily green and white feathers and a head crest. They have a tumbling aerial courtship display and a "pee-wit" call, even if they are behind bars. **For more information, call Amy Burns on 028 92651936, or e-mail amy.burns@rspb.org.uk**

Green Common Agricultural Policy reform – or just the status quo?

During 2012, EU governments and MEPs have been developing their negotiating positions on the reforms to the CAP. This includes alternative approaches to those suggested in the Commission's 2011 proposals.

The focus for many, and by far the most contentious issue, is Pillar I "greening". The RSPB views greening as a vital step to improve the environmental performance of EU farming. It is crucial if the natural resources that farmers need for food production are to be protected.

But this depends on well-designed measures in our policy. So it's imperative that things like Ecological Focus Areas are implemented in a way that raises the bar and doesn't undermine the great work already done by many farmers through agri-environment schemes.

However, despite the rhetoric, there is no guarantee that this round of reform will deliver a CAP that is equipped with the tools, and funding, to drive more sustainable and wildlife-friendly farming. There have been calls from governments and MEPs for more flexibility on greening. This could mean that any steps forward are reduced to a shuffle. There's a risk that we'll just repackage our current CAP. Agri-environment funding could be cut in Pillar II. The parallel EU Budget process (which will be decided in late 2012 or early 2013) is likely to cut the money available for CAP, potentially falling most heavily on Pillar II. This will further undermine the more targeted environmental expenditure.

A famous frog once said: "It's not easy being green" and he wasn't wrong, but the alternative is simply not an option.

Decision makers will need to take some bold steps when they finalise the next CAP during 2013. They need to make sure the policy meets the needs of farming, the environment and society. And that means strong greening measures and adequate funding for agri-environment.

For more information, contact Jenna Hegarty at jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk

Volunteers survey farms across Northern Ireland, hoping to identify farmland birds, including linnets, skylarks and lapwings



RSPB (rspb-images.com)

V&FA highlights in 2012

The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) project enjoyed another successful year in NI. We provided bird surveys to even more farmers across the country. With declines in the numbers of farmland birds in the UK, finding out which bird species are breeding on our farmland is a vital first step to aiding their recovery.

This project, which runs across the whole of the UK, offers free bird surveys to farmers who wish to find out more about the birds on their farms. As always, we had an enthusiastic team of volunteers. They scanned the countryside with binoculars – usually very early in the morning – between April and July. Thanks to their hard work, many farmers now know what birds are on their land and in their local area, and they also know what they can do on the farms to help them.

The table on the right summarises the key results from this year's surveys so far. These birds are the red and amber-listed birds of conservation concern that can be found on farmland across NI. Some species are more common in

different counties and farming systems, but as the surveys were conducted across the whole of NI, the results provide an important snapshot of our threatened farmland birds.

This year, the average number of bird species per farm was 30, and the highest number of species recorded on a single farm was 54.

Percentage of farms where farmland birds were found in NI

Cuckoo	9
Curlew	15
Kestrel	6
Lapwing	12
Linnet	29
Skylark	15
Snipe	12
Starling	91
Tree sparrow	35
Yellowhammer	12
Song thrush	65
Swallow	97
Goldfinch	68

As well as the priority species listed in the table, the results highlighted some interesting finds. The graceful swallow, which migrates from Africa

to breed in NI every year, was recorded on 97% of farms. Goldfinches, now a very common garden bird, were found on 68% of farms.

Although the recording of common species is particularly important to monitor how well populations are doing, volunteers and farmers alike would agree that it is exciting to identify a less familiar species. For example, similar to last year, a red kite was once again observed flying over a County Down farm. This year a kingfisher was also recorded during a farm survey – perhaps not a typical farmland bird, but what a stunning sight! Other relatively rare species, spotted flycatchers and grey wagtails, were recorded on a handful of farms.

We would like to thank all the volunteers and farmers who have participated in the V&FA project over the years. Without your support, interest and enthusiasm, this project would not have been the success it has. Thank you!

For further information on farmland birds and wildlife-friendly farming, contact the RSPB on 028 90491547.

Protecting farmland birds through the Birds Directive

The Birds Directive 1979 provides protection for all wild birds in the EU. All the elements of the EU LIFE+ funded project have contributed to improving the conservation status of farmland birds, the fastest declining group of birds in the EU.

Bird surveys by volunteers have enabled farmers to know what special birds they have on their farms so that they can target their conservation efforts towards them.

The follow-up advice has encouraged many farmers to enter agri-environment schemes targeted specifically at improving the quality of wildlife habitats on the farm. The NoFA, demonstration farm visits and case studies of wildlife-friendly farmers have raised awareness of what farmers can do, why they do

it and how to get the best from their efforts. The feedback from farmers and volunteers is helping us to determine how best to take this work forward into the future.

The RSPB believes that the Birds Directive is key to ensuring the UK and the EU play their part in halting biodiversity loss by 2020.

So what exactly does it do?

- Member States are required to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for threatened species and all migratory bird species.
- The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 consolidated and amended existing legislation to implement the Birds Directive in Great Britain. This banned activities that directly threatened birds, such as deliberate killing, destruction of their nests

- or taking of their eggs.
- Rules were established to limit the number of species that can be hunted and the periods during which they can be hunted in order to protect them during periods when they are particularly vulnerable, such as migration and during the breeding season. It also defined rules on hunting methods.
- EU Species Action Plans were established to help the most threatened species recover.

The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment. Our agricultural projects and advisory work are currently funded by LIFE+, which raises awareness of the needs of farmland birds and the implementation of the Birds Directive among farmers and the public. For more information, go to the RSPB website and search for Birds Directive.



All wild birds, including skylarks, are protected under the Birds Directive

Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit www.farmwildlife.info

Yellowhammers increased by over 50% on farms under the Countryside Management Scheme



Tom Marshall (rspb-images.com)

Yellowhammers fly back from the brink

Farmers in County Down have been doing all they can to save yellowhammers – and they've had some excellent results.

Yellowhammers have been in steep decline for 30 years, so farmers' help is much needed. It's estimated that just 5,000 pairs of yellowhammers remain in NI, and they've disappeared from County Fermanagh altogether. Many other farmland seed-eating birds, including linnets, tree sparrows and skylarks, have followed a similar downward spiral. So we set up the Yellowhammer Recovery Project in 2006, to try to tackle this issue,

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) agri-environment scheme, the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS), is considered one of the key mechanisms to help get our birds and other wildlife back in the countryside. There are several options in the scheme that provide summer insect sources for chicks, and winter seed sources for the adults and other seed-eating farmland birds. Together, these are known as arable options.

None of the options in the scheme were tested to see if they worked in NI, so the first aim of the project was to see whether the birds preferred other available habitats, or the areas in the scheme. The birds were using arable options, such as wild bird cover, in preference to grassland habitats.

The next step was seeing whether breeding numbers of the birds were increased by the arable options at "farm-scale". County Down was chosen as the test site, as it is one of the last remaining strongholds for the yellowhammer in NI. Twenty-two farms in the NICMS were asked to add specific arable options to their agreements, including wild bird cover, rough grass margins, conservation cereal and the retention of winter stubble. A further 22 farms not in NICMS were included as control farms, to compare with those taking up the options. The NIEA funded surveys on all 44 farms, so we knew what birds were on each farm at the beginning of the project.

For the following five years, the 22 NICMS farmers received advice about which arable options to choose, and training and advice on how to establish and manage them. During spring/summer 2011 the Agri-Food and Bioscience's Institute (AFBI) funded the follow-up survey on all 44 farms, which allowed us to compare data with that collected in the baseline survey in 2006.

The trials showed that, for the majority of seed-eating farmland birds, trends differed significantly between NICMS and non-NICMS farms. On average, populations increased by 18% at sites managed to help the birds and declined by 11% at unmanaged sites.

Yellowhammer populations increased by more than 50% at NICMS farms, and they also went up 21% on unmanaged farms. It might be that the well-managed farms were pulling in birds from other areas and benefitting wildlife in the wider countryside, too. A more detailed examination revealed that increases at NICMS sites were most evident at sites established after 2006, where the greatest levels of management advice was provided. At these sites yellowhammers increased by a remarkable 79%.

Robert Maxwell, one of the option scale farmers involved in the project, saw "his" yellowhammers increase from 10 to 18 pairs. Robert said: "With advice from the RSPB, I swapped the area of two-year wild bird cover I had sown previously to a one-year mix to ensure cereal grain was available for the yellowhammer every winter. I also took part in some trial management of the rough grass margin option I had around one of my cereal fields, which meant lightly grazing it over the winter period to help open it up for foraging birds in the summer. I am delighted that these simple measures have been able to make such an enormous difference on my farm, and help secure the yellowhammer in County Down for future generations."

Cecil Nelson from Annadorn took part in the farm-scale element of the project by adding one-year wild bird cover and rough grass margins to his NICMS agreement in 2006. In five years, yellowhammers increased by more than 100%, from five to 11 pairs. Cecil didn't stop there. He has been helping Cumran Primary School in Clough, which his children attend, to put in a giant bird table (a smaller version of wild bird cover) in their school grounds every year. The school's Eco-Club has been able to hear yellowhammers singing and feeding in their own playground!

"We are just incredibly delighted with the results," said the RSPB's Claire Barnett. "It is impossible to understate the importance. It demonstrates that not only do the schemes work, but that there is now a very bright future for these birds that had faced a 65% decline in our fields. In fact, in some parts of Northern Ireland, they are no longer found. But the farmers of County Down have given hope to this beautiful creature and we hope that this is a sign of good things to come."

RSPB NI will be seeking funding to roll out these options across a wider area in County Down and eventually across all arable areas in NI. We are researching a new option to provide seed in grassland areas, known as "silage setting seed". This option involves leaving a strip or portion of an area of second silage uncut to allow the ryegrass to set seed. Research carried out elsewhere in the UK shows this is an excellent seed source for seed-eating farmland birds such as yellowhammers and reed buntings. We are testing this option with three farmers in County Down to make sure it works for the birds and is practical for the farmers. If it works for the birds, we hope it will be included as an option within agri-environment schemes in the next Rural Development Plan.

Rory McKibben, a farmer from Clough who has been taking part in the Yellowhammer Recovery Project since 2006, recently represented NI

farmers as a guest of the RSPB in Brussels. Rory joined forces with other farmers working with the RSPB across the UK. Together, the farmers met MEPs to stress the importance of agri-environment schemes to farmers and wildlife in Northern Ireland. Rory said: "Farming is a part of my daily life. To be able to help reverse the decline of these special birds by managing my land in certain ways through NICMS is an absolute win-win for me, and the birds!"

An enormous thank you goes out to all the farmers who took part in the project. Without their patience and keenness, these great results would not have been possible.

For more information, contact Claire Barnett on 028 90491547 or e-mail claire.barnett@rspb.org.uk



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit www.farmwildlife.info

NATURE OF FARMING AWARD NI 2012

Winner and UK finalist 2012 Jack Kelly

Ballyalton, County Down

Congratulations to Jack Kelly (above right), who is the Northern Ireland winner of the RSPB Telegraph NoFA 2012, which is run in conjunction with Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife to celebrate the great work farmers are doing for wildlife.

Jack's mixed farm lies at the heart of County Down, outside Ballyalton. Although Jack is currently outside the DARD NICMS, he continues to use the options to benefit the wildlife on his farm.

He sows wild bird cover and retains winter stubble to supply a seed-rich habitat during the winter for birds. The species-rich grassland provides plenty of nectar for insects, which in turn feeds the chicks during the summer months. There is no wonder priority farmland bird species such as the yellowhammer, tree sparrow and linnet are thriving on his farm.

Jack was involved in the Yellowhammer Recovery Project for five years (see previous page), after which yellowhammer numbers have remained consistently high and the population of tree sparrows doubled in number.

Jack's hedges are trimmed into the classical 'A-shape' to provide thick, dense shelter for farmland birds and mammals. Not only is Jack's farm ideal for seed-eating farmland birds, but it also provides excellent habitat for breeding waders, including a pair of lapwings this year.

The farm has an orchard and river, so bats, kingfishers and even otters are frequent visitors. Jack's entire family are wildlife enthusiasts and they have put up nestboxes for barn owls, kestrels and tree sparrows. Although Jack believes they are simply doing their bit for wildlife, we believe that Jack is an excellent wildlife ambassador and rightly deserves this prestigious award.



Hayley Sherwin (RSPB)

If you are interested in taking part in the NoFA in 2013, please contact Hayley Sherwin on 028 90491547, e-mail hayley.sherwin@rspb.org.uk or visit www.rspb.org.uk/natureoffarming

Highly commended Maurice Law

Maguiresbridge, Co. Fermanagh

Maurice Law (right), who runs a mixed farm in County Fermanagh, was our highly commended winner this year. He provides excellent habitats for seed-eating birds such as the tree sparrow, linnet and skylark.

Maurice sows both one-year and two-year wild bird cover mixes, which provide food during the winter for adult seed-eating birds and insects during the summer, which feed the chicks.

He has planted large areas of native woodland under the NICMS, which provides food and shelter for farmland wildlife. He has a keen interest in birds and is a voluntary



Andy Hay (RSPB)

bird surveyor, as well as designing bird feeders of different shapes and sizes, which he keeps well stocked with food all year round. The highly commended accolade was awarded for Maurice's innovative ideas and strong desire to conserve wildlife.



Hiary Banks

Jen Banks, RSPB Education Assistant, has been creating giant bird tables with school children

Giant bird tables – an enormous help, even for little birds

Lorna Whiteside, Bird Conservation Officer from the Lagan Valley Regional Park (LVRP), tells how a partnership between the RSPB and the park has helped the breeding birds that live there.

"Park staff and the RSPB have been working together for some years now to help the birds breeding in LVRP. The work is funded through the Lagan Landscape project, supported by Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

One of the initiatives is seed plots known as "giant bird tables". They're about 500 square metres and are sown in late April or early May with cereals such as oats, barley or linseed, together with a cornfield annual mix containing corn marigolds, corn poppy and cornflower.

The idea is to have a colourful and attractive display of flowers during the summer, which will attract insects and provide food for chicks. During the winter the cereal and flower seeds provide food for many woodland and farmland birds.

We hope that the giant bird tables will benefit a number of species – both common and rare. They include chaffinches, greenfinches, goldfinches, as well as yellowhammers, linnets and tree sparrows, which have declined in recent years but are breeding here.

This year, many partner organisations have been keen to get involved. Giant bird tables are now in six locations: Drumbridge (within Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park); Clement Wilson Park; Lockkeeper's Inn; McIlroy Park; AFBI Headquarters in Newforge Lane; and NI RSPB HQ in Belvoir Forest Park. Jen Banks, Education Assistant with RSPB NI, has been working with schools to promote the tables in other areas too, so watch this space.

We'd like to thank Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and the Agri-Food and AFBI for their support."

For more information, contact Lorna Whiteside on 028 90491547 or e-mail lorna.whiteside@rspb.org.uk

To enter your farm in 2013 visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming

Discussing the benefits of early cover for corncrakes on Rathlin



Caroline Marshall (RSPB)

 **European Union**
European Regional Development Fund
Investing in your future

This project has been part-financed by the EU's INTERREG IVA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body

HELP! The Halting Environmental Loss Project takes off

The Halting Environmental Loss Project (HELP), a partnership between RSPB NI, RSPB Scotland and BirdWatch Ireland, is already delivering some impressive results.

Thanks to a grant of £1.48m from the European Regional Development Fund's INTERREG IVA Programme, delivered locally by the Special EU Programmes Body, we are:

- working with over 300 farmers
- influencing habitat management on 7,500 hectares (ha)
- welcoming 62,000 visitors to nature reserves
- managing 425 ha of land under agreements
- cutting over 100 ha of rush and over 40 ha of scrub

Northern Ireland
In Northern Ireland, HELP focuses

on improving breeding habitat for lapwings, snipe, redshanks and curlews. RSPB NI's three project officers work closely with more than 200 farmers, who have been stepping up for nature by delivering excellent habitat improvement work, including scrub removal, rush cutting, conservation grazing and creating shallow pools known as scrapes. Local farmers in Lower Lough Erne did an impressive amount of rush cutting in late summer 2011, followed by scrub clearance during winter. As a result, farmer Howard Connor had six pairs of breeding snipe on his land.

In March, local farmers visited Hare Island, one of the RSPB's islands on Lower Lough Erne, to look at habitat for breeding waders. Pat Reihill, who farms Inishroosk, welcomed the



Giles Knight

chance to chat through management issues with other farmers and said: "These birds are truly special to the Fermanagh countryside and long may they remain."

The RSPB's Fermanagh team, together with local contractors, have carried out habitat improvement works on the Lower Lough Erne islands. More than 11 ha of scrub has been cleared and the cutting will start again in winter. HELP has also established links with schools

in Fermanagh, and the next generation of farmers already seems very enthusiastic about being the future wildlife guardians.

Farmers in the Glenwherry area are stepping up for nature, following advice from the RSPB. Twenty-one farmers have controlled rush, six have re-profiled or cleared out drains, four have removed scrub and 10 scrapes for waders have been created on three farms. Bird surveys detected increased numbers of snipe and lapwings – great news.



Claire Maguire

The RSPB has provided advice to the DARD Republic of Ireland (RoI) in the form of a Management Plan for the Glenwherry Hill Farm. DARD staff have started to implement the actions, including rush control and scrape creation.



Neil Warnock

Gareth Bareham, HELP's project officer in Foyle, has been working with local farmers to test how good spring sown crops and fallow winter plots are for breeding lapwings. On the western shores of Lough Beg, winter grazing by ponies was extremely effective for one happy landowner. The resultant land was better for summer livestock and the sward created by grazing was just

right for breeding waders. In spite of prolonged winter flooding, the RSPB's



Stuart McBurney

Peter McMullen was able to cut 40 ha of rush in the triangular tracked tractor.

During a HELP training event, 21 NIEA and DARD representatives visited Lough Beg to see the results of the winter flood plain management programme for wet grassland. This winter, Gareth will work closely with the Beg and Foyle landowners again to create more benefits for the local bird and plant life.

RoI
HELP partner, BirdWatch Ireland, has continued its work to protect breeding curlews in the border counties of Ireland by carrying out baseline surveys and improving habitats at key sites. Curlews are the second Irish breeding bird to appear on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Globally Threatened species. It is estimated that curlews have declined by 80% since the 1970s, and there might be fewer than 200 pairs left in the country.

In 2011, only four pairs were recorded in County Donegal. This year, HELP's project manager in the RoI Anita Donaghy, curlew fieldworker Daniel Maloney and a team of volunteers extended survey work to Cavan, Leitrim and Monaghan. The results confirmed that curlews are extremely scarce in the RoI. At one site in Inishowen, farmers signed

management agreements with BirdWatch Ireland and carried out habitat management work including 20 ha of scrub removal.

A programme of rush control also took place, with seven ha cleared before the birds arrived back in March. These rushes will be cut again over the coming winter and lime will be added to increase the pH of the soil. About 10 ha of scrub was removed at a second site on Inishowen and a hydrologist from Natural England surveyed and made recommendations on the management of water features and wet areas, which are critical if ideal feeding conditions are to be created. These will be implemented over the coming winter months to encourage nesting birds next year.

Scotland
A key cough nest and roost site has been renovated on Islay and a new bird hide at Loch Gruinart and footpath at The Oa have proved very popular with locals and visitors alike.

Partnership working
HELP aims to share best practice, so representatives from RSPB Scotland and BirdWatch Ireland joined RSPB NI staff on Rathlin Island in May to review management for coughts and corncrakes.

As well as confirming there is sufficient early cover for corncrakes, the event highlighted potential management options for the autumn and winter months.

The whole HELP team got together for a review meeting in September. Everyone closely involved with HELP is extremely pleased with the progress made, and all fully appreciate that the vast majority of the results are down to the enthusiasm and determination of local farmers. Local farmers provide critical pieces of the land management puzzle.

For more information, contact Caroline Marshall on 028 90491547 or e-mail caroline.marshall@rspb.org.uk

Advice at agricultural shows in 2013 and online

Here are a list of some of the agricultural shows and events we will be attending across the UK in 2013. As always, staff will be on hand to answer any questions you have on wildlife conservation. Do come and visit us.

In the meantime, if you have any questions, please visit www.farmwildlife.info as this website hosts a discussion forum to ask questions or post ideas, case studies of farmers adopting novel management to boost wildlife on their farm and an agricultural events calendar for farmland wildlife conservation.

- Balmoral Show, Balmoral Park, Maze Long Kesh, Lisburn 15–17 May
- Cereals, Boothby Graffoe, Lincolnshire 12–13 June
- Royal Highland Show, Royal Highland Centre, Edinburgh 20–23 June
- Livestock 2013, NEC, Birmingham 3–4 July
- Royal Welsh Show, Llanellwedd, near Builth Wells 22–25 July

RSPB training events

Each year, the RSPB runs training courses on getting the maximum wildlife value out of Environmental Stewardship on arable farmland and livestock farms.

Courses on “How livestock farming can integrate the needs of farmland wildlife” will be held at these venues:

- Great Wollaston Farm, Shropshire 24 April 2013
- Duchy College, Cornwall October 2013 (to be confirmed)

For details of the courses, visit www.rspb.org.uk/conservationtraining

NI red kites – a soaring success

Red kites are majestic birds of prey. They used to be common across the whole of the UK and Ireland, but 200 years ago, it was wrongly thought they threatened livestock and game. They were persecuted to extinction in Ireland, Scotland and England.

In 2008, the RSPB, in partnership with the Welsh Kite Trust and Golden Eagle Trust, began a re-introduction project. Now we have red kites soaring in the skies of NI again. Between 2008 and 2010, 80 red kite chicks from wild kites in Wales were released in Castlewellan Forest Park, County Down.

Although a large, impressive-looking species, kites lack the power, speed and strength to kill anything larger than a young rabbit. They are not a threat to game birds or livestock. Their diet is largely dead animals (carrion), worms, frogs, rats and mice, though

in the spring they'll sometimes take chicks from open nests, such as crows' nests, high in the trees.

They rarely pass up an easy meal, and follow tractors when farmers are cutting for silage, ploughing or spreading slurry. They'll swoop down to lift small animals which have been killed by the mowers or brought to the surface.

In 2010, the first wild red kite chicks to hatch in NI for more than two centuries took to the skies, as five chicks fledged from four nests in County Down. In 2011, eight chicks fledged. 2012 was a particularly successful year – 15 chicks fledged.

For more about red kites in NI, visit www.rspb.org.uk/nireland/redkites or e-mail redkiteni@rspb.org.uk



Big Garden Birdwatch a success

Thank you to everyone who stepped up for nature by taking part in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch. Now in its 33rd year, this was the second biggest Birdwatch ever, with an incredible 592,475 people getting involved. Over nine million birds of 73 different species were counted over the course of the Birdwatch weekend.

House sparrows top the list for the ninth consecutive year. However, their numbers are much lower than they were back when the survey began in 1979. They were seen in over 60% of gardens, with an average of four per garden, compared with 10 per garden in 1979.

Blue tits have overtaken blackbirds to take third place, with an overall increase of 21% since 1979. Goldfinches are also up one place to number seven this year. This colourful bird has been steadily increasing in UK gardens and first reached the top 10 in 2008.

This year's results have also shown that starling numbers are at an all time low since the survey began. Starlings have been on a downward trend for the past 25 years and have declined by almost 80%. In 1979, the average number

of starlings seen in UK gardens was 15. This year, that number fell to its lowest ever with an average of just three starlings seen per garden.

These declines are being mirrored across much of northern Europe too, and because of this drop in numbers, the species is red-listed as a bird of high conservation concern. We've been monitoring this decline and research is already underway to find out more about the disappearance of these birds. Possible reasons could include changes in their feeding habitats and changes beneath the soil reducing their insect food.

After an unseasonably warm winter across much of the UK, many people weren't seeing the levels of bird activity in their gardens they usually would at the end of January. Our garden birds are much less dependent on us for food when there are plenty of berries, insects and seeds for them out in the wider countryside.

In 2013, the Big Garden Birdwatch takes place over the weekend of the 26 and 27 January 2013. Please join in and help us make it even bigger!

Agri-environment schemes can halt farmland bird declines

We now know which common practical farmland measures have the greatest impact on increasing numbers of farmland birds, thanks to the latest research.

After working out what might be causing declines and finding practical solutions to halt them, we now have some answers. Agri-environment schemes across the UK already provide fairly comprehensive measures to tackle farmland bird declines.

Research is now looking at how effective these measures are when they are adopted on a landscape-scale by farmers through these schemes.

We have already seen clear benefits from very targeted action for rare species such as corncrakes in Scotland and ciril buntings in Devon, but not much evidence of benefits

from entry level schemes for our more widespread farmland birds. New research from the British Trust for Ornithology has shown that seed-eating birds, such as grey partridges, are doing better in England where farmers are leaving over-winter stubbles or creating wild bird seed mixtures through Entry Level Stewardship.

Other measures that were tested included low-input grassland, buffer strips, hedgerow management and ditch management. These measures did not show clear benefits for declining birds, probably because they do not directly address the causes of the decline. These birds need seed food through the winter, insect food in the spring and safe places to nest.

For more information contact Richard Winspear at richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit www.farmwildlife.info

Stepping Up For Corncrake

As members of the older generation will tell you, the distinctive 'crex-crex' call of the corncrake was once a very familiar sound in the countryside on a still summer's evening. Although individual birds are occasionally heard, the last reported breeding pair in NI was in 1997. We think it's time for them to come back. We want their call to become familiar once again.

That rasping call can carry for long distances and is sometimes heard all night long, when a male is seeking a mate. Very few young people know what the call sounds like, which is one indication of the catastrophic decline of corncrakes over the last century. We at the RSPB want the silence to be shattered by corncrakes, and we are working hard to bring this charismatic bird back to our countryside.

Corncrakes are small brown and grey birds with a streaked crown, chestnut eyestripe and wing panels. They're members of the rail family, related to moorhens and coots. Corncrakes make a long-distance trip from Africa to the UK in April or May, and then try to find nest sites. But due to changes in farming practices, the habitat and conditions they need for successful breeding have become increasingly scarce.

Corncrakes are very shy and secretive birds, preferring vegetation at least 20 cm tall. The tall, protective cover provides them with places to find food, such as beetles, snails, slugs and worms. Usually, they arrive at breeding grounds before meadow grass is tall enough to conceal them, so they seek cover in early growing vegetation, such as nettles or cow parsley. Males sing from it to attract a mate – without the cover, they don't call – and females depend on it to conceal their first brood. Corncrakes typically raise two broods each year in their simple cup-shaped nests, which are lined with dead leaves. They nest on the ground, which heightens their vulnerability to farm machinery. Patches of irises, nettles, cow parsley and reeds are excellent early cover plants, but brambles, bracken and dense stands of grass or rushes are unsuitable, because the corncrakes can't move efficiently through them.

Modern farming techniques, such as the increased use of fast efficient mowers, have impacted on corncrake populations. Between 1988 and 1991, the NI population of corncrakes declined by 80%. As elsewhere in the UK, this coincided with earlier cutting dates associated with a switch from hay to early cut silage.

The last corncrakes to breed in NI, in 1997, were on Rathlin Island. Before the island can become a suitable breeding spot once again, the habitat has to be corncrake-friendly. Rathlin has limited tall early cover vegetation that is so important for the calling males, and this is where our Stepping Up For Corncrake team has stepped up!

During the winter the hardy volunteer team dug, cleaned and bagged nettle roots (or rhizomes) from farms in Glenariff, County Antrim. They were then replanted on the edges of Rathlin's hayfields. Brambles were cleared, and 'corncrake corridors' of essential cover have connected areas of suitable nesting habitat. We hope that these steps will bring breeding corncrakes back to Rathlin.

More work still needs to be done to turn Rathlin into corncrake-central, so if you are interested in getting involved in the Stepping Up For Corncrake project please e-mail Hayley Sherwin on hayley.sherwin@rspb.org.uk or call 028 90491547.



The Stepping Up for Corncrake Team digging up nettle rhizomes



Corncrakes are shy and secretive, preferring to hide in long vegetation where possible

RSPB

A couple of rare birds

The North Antrim coast is home to two of NI's rarest and most elusive breeding birds. When only a few individual birds of a species are present in an area it makes it vulnerable to local extinction, so extra conservation work is needed to make sure they not only survive, but expand into other areas. Surveys, to find out just what we've got, and where we've got it, are an important first step.

Twites

It seems there may be as few as ten pairs of these small finches, all on the coastal slopes. They're seed-eaters, and rely solely on the seeds of wild plants. A group of RSPB staff and volunteers have teamed up with staff and volunteers from the National Trust and NIEA to survey the birds during the breeding season this year and next. The group is targeting suitable areas of the coast and on Rathlin Island, which are known strongholds.



Few twites remain in Northern Ireland

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Choughs returned to Rathlin Island this year

Mike Richards (rspb-images.com)

Choughs

NI's only breeding pair of choughs delighted us by returning to Rathlin this year, taking up residence in the same nesting site as last year. They've been feeding almost exclusively on land specifically managed for choughs under the coastal grazing option in the NICMS. It's nice to see that CMS options can be so successful. We also seem to have two more individuals hanging around the North Antrim Coast. It may well be that these are two from the 2011 brood. This is very good news, as first year survival is extremely low in these birds, and it was a harsh winter. Let's hope this is the start of a slow rise in a precariously low population.

For further information, or to report any sightings, contact Michael McLaughlin on 028 90491547 or e-mail michael.mclaughlin@rspb.org.uk

For specialist advice at your fingertips visit www.farmwildlife.info

What do farmers think of the V&FA?

Feedback from farmers about the V&FA allows us to review and make improvements so it continues to be beneficial for all involved.

Each year, questionnaires are sent to farmers who received a survey the year before last. This allows for any advice and management techniques to be put into practice.

The questionnaires from farmers who replied in 2011 show that:

- 98% found the laminated map useful
- 97% felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience
- 88% have put the farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map into practice
- 84% had species on their farms that they had not previously noticed
- 65% reported they were more aware of policies such as the Birds Directive.

And what do volunteers think?

The questionnaires completed by volunteers who took part in the V&FA in 2011 show that:

- 97% enjoyed participating in the V&FA
- 97% felt the training they received was either good or excellent
- 97% were satisfied with the level of support they received
- 82% felt their understanding of farmland birds and conservation had improved
- 75% reported that no problems were encountered during the surveys
- 70% reported that they were more aware of policies like the Birds Directive.

Keeping you informed

The RSPB is always updating its systems and processes for storing information. Farm information and other details that you give us will be held by the RSPB on paper and electronically. All details will be kept confidential. We will not make your name, address or any other information available to external

organisations without your permission. The RSPB is continually finding new ways to help farmers conserve wildlife. We may wish to contact you from time to time with such information. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way, please contact project staff in your area – contact details below.

The Birds Directive

The Birds Directive aims to protect biodiversity in Europe. The work described in this newsletter promotes the importance of the Birds Directive in conservation

management on farmland, creating a positive profile through promotional activities. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/birdsdirective/index_en.htm

GET MORE INFO www.rspb.org.uk or e-mail: v&fa@rspb.org.uk

Please contact project staff at the following RSPB offices:

Northern Ireland Headquarters

Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT
Tel: 028 90491547

UK Headquarters

The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551



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



We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

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