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for people
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The RSPB newsletter for the
Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project

FIELD OF VIEW

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Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



V&FA enthusiast wins award for helping lapwings

Inset: Martin Hole, right, receives an award for conservation on his farm from the RSPB's Director of Conservation, Mark Avery.

In the early years of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA), a farm in Sussex was surveyed and the farmer's enthusiasm led to a feature in the project's regional newsletter. Earlier this year, we were delighted to present the Operation Lapwing: 2004 Lapwing Champion award to the same farmer for his achievements in conservation.

Martin Hole, who farms near Pevensey Levels in Sussex, (above) faced strong competition from 122 farmers from across the UK. However, Martin won the hearts of the judges with his efforts in managing areas of his farm specifically for lapwings, and in doing so, increasing the population from two pairs to 40 pairs in just five years.

Martin restored an area of wet grassland, which is now used by 20 pairs of lapwings and large numbers of wintering wildfowl. Another area was turned from arable to grassland under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and has attracted large numbers of skylarks and yellow wagtails, as well as a further 20 pairs of lapwings.

At the award presentation, Mark Avery, RSPB Director of Conservation, said, 'For too long farmers who have wanted to improve the fortunes of birds, such as the lapwing, have been swimming against the tide of production-driven, environmentally damaging subsidies.'

'Following the recent mid-term review, the Government's new Entry and Higher Level Schemes for England, to be launched next year, mean that every hectare of the farm can contribute to the farm business. This will enable more farmers to follow Mr Hole's excellent example.'

The regional Lapwing Champion winners were: Steve Green and Paul Harvey, Warwickshire (Midlands), Mr and Mrs Gardner, Lancashire (Northern), George and Robert McMullan, Co Antrim (Northern Ireland) and Hywel Williams, Gwynedd (Wales).

For the next three years, Operation Lapwing will be sponsored by Jordans Cereals. Both the RSPB and Jordans are delighted to be working together to promote wildlife-friendly farming techniques, an interest that lies at the heart of both organisations.

If you are a farmer and would like to enter the 2005 Lapwing Champion competition, the closing date is 18 March 2005. The winner will receive £1,000 and the runner-up £500. The RSPB has also produced a lapwing management pack for farmers who would like to help lapwings on their farms. For more information, e-mail the project manager at lapwings@rspb.org.uk or telephone 01767 680551.

Susan Sutton (RSPB)

In this issue:

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Will complying make you cross?

As the reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) agreed last year finally start to make their presence felt, what changes will we see for farmers and birds?

This depends on where you are and how you farm. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all taken a slightly different approach to applying the reforms. While England is phasing in area-based payments, which means subsidy payments will be based on the area of land farmed by 2012, Wales and Scotland have opted for payments based on what farmers have received in the past. Although this may seem fairer in the short-term, in the long-term it will lead to some farms receiving much more than others, regardless of their current operation. Northern Ireland has opted for a system half way between the two.

In order to receive the new single payment from January, farmers will have to ensure that their farm meets new conditions known as cross-compliance. These are made up of existing legislation such as the Birds Directive and the Nitrates Directives, known as statutory management requirements, and a number of new standards, known as Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition.

These standards differ between the countries but include measures such as protecting vulnerable soils, not trimming hedges during the breeding season and ensuring land is not overgrazed.

All four countries are also looking to introduce a new agri-environment scheme that will be open to all farmers and requiring a variety of simple conservation measures to be carried out on the farm. This approach relies on each farmer making small changes that add up to big benefits for wildlife. These schemes will be funded mainly through increased modulation – money transferred from subsidies to rural development and matched by the Government. The transfer of money to support environmental benefits is a welcome move and good news for the environment and birds. We believe these developments will hearten those already farming with the environment in mind and serve as a wake up call to those whose standards are not as high. In the future, farmers will be supported not for what they produce but for the way that they produce it.

All of the new agri-environment schemes are still under development. If you would like information on these, please contact the appropriate office on the back page.

Your bird records wanted



What is an important bird record? Is it the black-tailed godwit that visited a fragmented wetland or the pair of willow tits that bred in that scrubby woodland?

The one most likely to be recorded in a county bird report is the black-tailed godwit. The willow tits may be noted in a diary but no permanent record will exist. BirdTrack gives us the chance to remedy this.

BirdTrack is a project involving the British Trust for Ornithology, BirdWatch Ireland and the RSPB. The aim is to gather incidental records of migrant birds, winter visitors and scarce birds, such as lesser spotted

woodpeckers and hawfinches, which are becoming harder to monitor through existing schemes.

BirdTrack is now live at www.birdtrack.net where you can submit bird records and see them in a national context. Not only will it be possible to use BirdTrack as a recording package for **personal** bird records, but all information can also be made available to help with conservation. For county bird clubs, this will probably put county recorders in touch with more birdwatchers. Eventually, it should be possible to use BirdTrack to build up a picture of the birds at one site throughout the year.

Possibly the most exciting feature of BirdTrack will be the ability to look at past records. It is possible that each day at least one person's bird records are discarded. Therefore, it makes sense to spend dark winter evenings entering data from the 1970s when tree sparrows were common and starlings were a public nuisance. What is to stop us going even further back, using the personal diaries held by family members, libraries, conservation organisations and bird clubs? Perhaps we can even create retrospective bird distribution maps.

BirdTrack is the direct descendant of the BTO's Migration Watch and records from the three springs of 2002–2004 can be viewed via the BirdTrack website. The funding for BirdTrack will largely be provided by the BTO and the RSPB but we are seeking further business sponsorship to help us to speed up the development of the scheme.

The black-tailed godwit is a rare breeding bird in the UK, but over-winters in important numbers.



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

The lapwings of Aberkinsey Farm

The lapwing population has fallen dramatically in Wales.

Take a highly productive, flat lowland farm and surround it on all four sides with conurbations and you might think the wildlife would disappear – but not at Aberkinsey Farm.

It lies in the Vale of Clwyd, between Rhyl, Prestatyn, Dyserth and Rhuddlan, and the tenant farmer is David Jones, who manages a mixed enterprise. He supplies Sainsbury's with its traditional beef range. The suppliers of this range are required to develop biodiversity action plans (BAPs) to help wildlife. The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) produces these on behalf of Sainsbury's.

In September 2002, FWAG adviser Richard Roberts carried out a survey for the Aberkinsey Farm BAP. The site proved interesting but not unique, until near the end of the visit. Whilst walking across a field that had been set aside for the year, the air suddenly filled with the distinctive call of lapwings. There were in excess of 60 birds gathered on their wintering grounds. 'I don't suppose too many stay all year?' asked Richard. The enquiry was casual, the answer unexpected.

'Oh yes,' said David. 'I think I have at least 20 pairs breeding on the farm. There are usually at least 12 pairs on this piece of land every year.'

Richard explained that what David had was potentially of national importance – the lapwing population is falling, owing to loss of habitat and changes in farming. The RSPB estimates that between 1987 and 1998 the population in Wales fell by 77% and is still falling.

David asked how he could help. The ideal way forward would have been through an agri-environment scheme. However, the Welsh scheme, Tir Gofal, was closed to new applicants and a stopgap was needed until the next chance to join. The RSPB was approached and FWAG prepared an application to Tir Gofal.

The RSPB advised rough ploughing and leaving the favoured lapwing habitat fallow for longer, creating a number of shallow depressions and spring cropping the surrounding fields. The RSPB offered David a payment from the Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant!* project and monitored the site.

In the meantime, Tir Gofal opened and the application succeeded with a 10-year agreement signed in spring this year. The period of fallow has been extended to July, nesting habitats have been increased across the farm through a switch to spring cropping and the stubbles are left over winter. Key ditches will also be stopped up to raise the water table and create wet grassland on certain pastures. Cattle will graze these pastures in spring to produce the short sward that lapwings need. The use of chemicals will be reduced and often not applied at all, to encourage food sources such as insects and weed seeds. The latter will have an important bearing on other species found at Aberkinsey. These include linnets, tree sparrows and yellowhammers.

Unfortunately, 2004 has not been a good year, with fewer than 10 pairs of lapwings breeding on the farm, but David is optimistic that once work to the ditches and the scrapes is complete, the numbers will soon climb.

When asked why he has changed much of his farming policy, often putting himself out, David replied, 'As I get older, I appreciate the wildlife around me more. But the lapwings here ... they're nationally important, see.'

*Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant! is co-ordinated by RSPB Cymru in partnership with Forestry Commission Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales and Enfys (part of the Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities programme of the New Opportunities Fund, administered in Wales by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action).

Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant! is part-funded by the European Union's Objective One programme through the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF).



A senior keeper from Whipsnade Wild Animal Park feeds captive-bred corncrake chicks.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The corncrake really returns to England

Following on from the article in the last issue of this newsletter, there is great news concerning corncrakes in England. We believe that successful breeding occurred between a captive-bred male and a migrant female.

A brood of three chicks was seen in August by reserve staff at the Nene Washes in Cambridgeshire. This is great encouragement for the ongoing re-introduction programme.

Hope for the future

The spring of 2005 will be the fifth anniversary of the purchase of Hope Farm, the RSPB's arable farm in Cambridgeshire. The 181 hectare (ha) arable farm allows the RSPB to test novel ways to conserve farmland birds yet ensure the farm remains profitable. More than 100 bird species have been recorded on the farm and we are delighted to have seen a steady rise in breeding bird populations, most notably those species that have found life increasingly challenging on farmland, such as linnets, reed buntings and yellowhammers. The creation of habitats that provide vital nest sites and year-round food have paid real dividends.

Having achieved such increases, 2005 will see new challenges and opportunities. The changes in the way farms receive subsidies, which are no longer linked with how much they produce, will allow farmers to take their feet off the intensity pedal. Along with new environmental schemes, farmers will be rewarded for their conservation work rather than funding it out of their own pockets.

At Hope Farm, we are looking very closely at how much it costs to produce our wheat and oilseed rape crops. This will help us to identify where it is profitable to grow a crop. Where it is not, be that whole fields or just parts



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

The linnet population in the UK has declined by more than half, but is currently stable.

of fields, we will use new agri-environment schemes to enhance the wildlife of the farm and the business.

We will still focus on finding new solutions to the challenges facing farmers and wildlife alike. These include increasing the number of wet features on the farm, which can help reduce loss of farm sprays into watercourses and create valuable insect-rich habitats. We will also focus on improving the wildlife value of oilseed rape and continue to encourage other farmers to use the techniques we have identified to reverse any declines they may have seen on their land, whilst learning from new work elsewhere. If you are a farmer and have been trying a new management technique on your farm, please contact Darren Moorcroft, RSPB Hope Farm Manager, e-mail darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk

GET INVOLVED!

If you enjoy your survey work and would like to become more involved with the RSPB, there are lots of other voluntary opportunities you could get involved in, which vary across the UK. Below are just a few of the ways in which you could help.

Map analysis and data entry

Ever wondered how we produce the final map of results for farmers? It is a lengthy process involving analysis of your original data to establish where birds of conservation concern hold territories. We then enter all this information into a computer mapping programme called MapInfo before creating the final product.

Map analysis takes a little while to learn, so several training sessions would be involved. Following training, you can analyse results from home because the skills needed are attention to detail, accuracy and some experience of the survey methodology.

Data entry can only be done at the regional offices but, providing you have good computer skills, the mapping programme can be mastered quite quickly.

Administration of farm reports and advisory material is another lengthy process and your regional office may appreciate some help with this task.

A minimum commitment of one day per week, following training, would be preferable. Please contact project staff for further details.

Share your skills

Have you been undertaking survey work with the V&FA for a couple of years and feel confident enough in your skills to help those less experienced? We are often

approached by volunteers who are less sure of their identification skills and would like the support of a more experienced volunteer to help them get started. You could help run training events, act as a mentor for your area or pair up with a new volunteer committed to a survey. There are always thank you events to organise too. Please contact project staff for more information.

Single surveys

Several regions and countries are now carrying out single surveys on farmland where V&FA is oversubscribed. As with V&FA, good identification skills are required but the survey methodology used can vary. If you would like to get involved, please contact project staff to find out if single surveys are being carried out locally.

Branch out

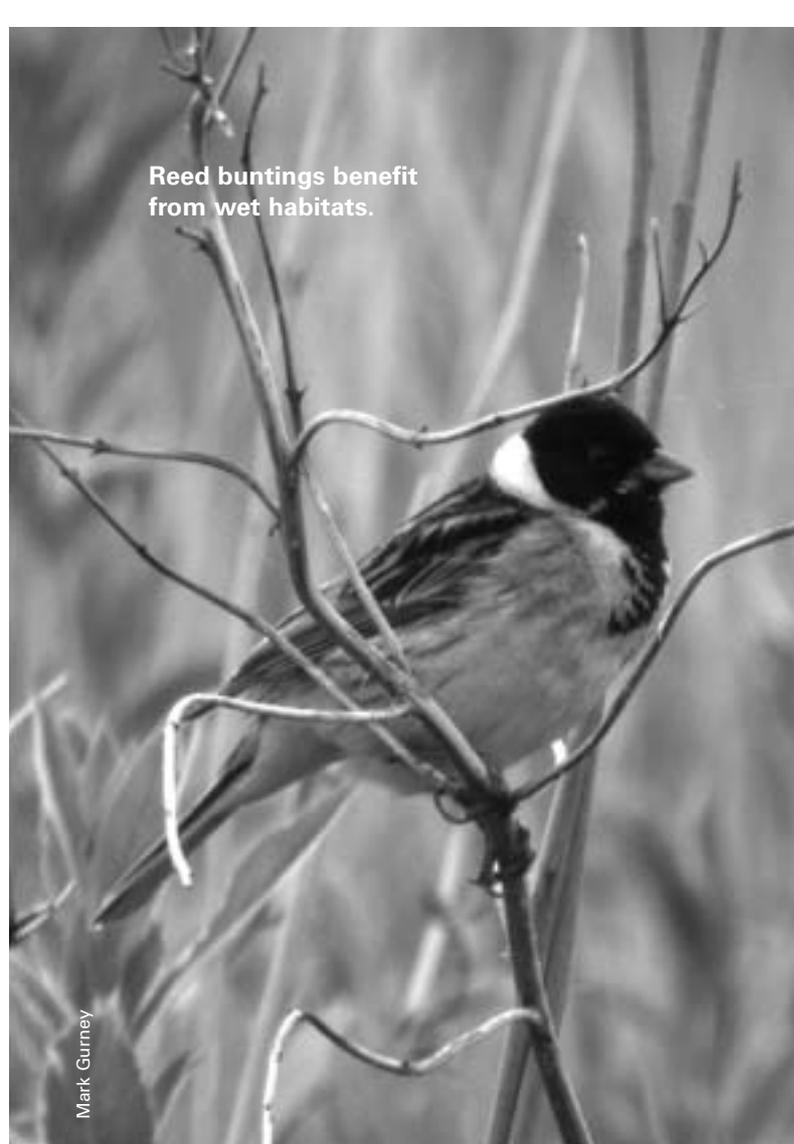
Your regional or country offices and reserves may need help in other areas. You may be able to get involved in activities as diverse as managing pin badge and collection boxes or by helping out at recruitment events. There may also be Aren't Birds Brilliant! projects planned that you could become involved with.

A full list of voluntary vacancies can be found on our website at www.rspb.org.uk/volunteering or by contacting your regional office.



Ray Barry

A thank-you event at Bewl Water, Kent, organised by Laura Hurt (third from left), the project officer in South East England.



Reed buntings benefit from wet habitats.

Mark Gurney

Is wetter better for birds?

The importance of wet grassland for breeding waders is well-established, but recent research has shown that wet habitats are also important for a wider range of farmland birds in decline. However, years of drainage mean that wet habitats are now relatively rare on farmland.

Birds such as song thrushes feed on earthworms close to the soil surface. When soils dry out, birds are unable to probe the soil as easily and earthworms go deeper in the soil. This lack of food, caused largely by field drainage, means that song thrushes in arable areas have poor breeding success. Because tree sparrows, yellow wagtails and reed buntings feed their chicks on insects such as damselflies and midges, they also benefit from permanent wet habitats where these insects are more common. Reed buntings also nest in vegetation growing out of the water.

The creation of wet habitats can help with the settlement of sediment and nutrients that run off fields. Therefore, together with other organisations, we are seeking funding to research the best ways of creating wet habitats on farmland, which will benefit wildlife and protect resources, yet minimise costs to the farmer. Creating ponds in low-yielding field corners could be one way of achieving this.

RSPB work on show

For the third year, the RSPB was present at the Royal Highland Show in Edinburgh. The focus of the stand was the wide range of work carried out by the RSPB with farmers and crofters across Scotland. This includes the Farmland Bird Lifeline in Aberdeenshire, Angus and Fife, and Neaps for Linties in Shetland.

We are involved in management agreements for waders and work to help capercaillie and corncrakes. Along with many other agreements covering cropping and grazing on and off reserves and the increasingly popular V&FA, we were able to demonstrate the many positive examples of co-operation between agricultural and conservation interests in Scotland.

Ross Finnie, Minister for the Environment and Rural Development for the Scottish Parliament, visited the stand as part of his tour of the showground and spent some time discussing these issues with RSPB staff.

Ross Finnie, second from left, visited the RSPB stand at the Royal Highland Show this year.



Andy Wight (RSPB)

Male yellowhammer feeding on grain at the RSPB's Hope Farm.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



FarmBird_UK: a farmland bird discussion group for farmers

FarmBird_UK was set up in 2003 to enable farmers and advisers to discuss ways of conserving farmland birds.

In the first year, there were discussions on 24 topics including:

- putting out grain tailings on farm tracks to provide food for seed-eating birds through the winter
- the pros and cons of ripening oilseed rape by spraying versus swathing
- the benefits and problems of trimming hedgerows on a two or three year rotation
- the best mixes for wild bird seed mixtures or wild bird cover

- how to manage rush infestations on grassland with breeding waders
- the research findings and practical management of skylark plots in winter cereal fields
- field margin management for barn owls and the issue of casualties along roadside verges
- the issues surrounding the cross-compliance rules on field margins abutting hedgerows.

If you are interested in joining FarmBird_UK then log onto www.forwardfarming.org.uk, click on 'Farm Bird Forum' and register. If you are interested in receiving a quarterly newsletter from the group, please e-mail farm-advice@rspb.org.uk

Preparing for the Entry Level Scheme

In England, the Entry Level Scheme (ELS) is due to be launched in early 2005. There are big advantages for farmers taking part in the ELS compared with any scheme that has gone before. Firstly, existing features are worth money, if the management prescription can be adopted. Secondly, there will not be competition between applicants. The payment of £30 per hectare over the whole holding will be awarded to every farmer who is able to score 30 points per hectare. Thirdly, farmers have a free choice of over 60 options, and should be able to draw up an agreement without the need for detailed advice.

The RSPB, together with the University of Hertfordshire, Defra, English Nature, the Game Conservancy Trust and FWAG, is compiling a CD-ROM that will allow farmers and advisers to select options and see how the points build up. It will also allow farmers to see how wildlife will benefit from the work they plan to do, and which options would best complement existing management.

If you farm in England and are interested in receiving the CD when it is available, please send your request, along with your name and address, to Richard Winspear, The RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL or e-mail farm-advice@rspb.org.uk

V&FA round-up: news from

UK Headquarters

Jenny Atkins has been in post since 1999 when the project began. Jenny is now project manager and supports the project staff across the UK. She is also involved with Operation Lapwing and Hope Farm.

Central England

Anna Broszkiewicz, based in Banbury, has been in post since 2002. She covers Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Rutland, Warwickshire, West Midlands and Worcestershire. There were 78 farms surveyed this year and 80 are planned for 2005. During most years, approximately 12 one-off surveys are carried out in addition to V&FA surveys.

Following V&FA surveys, the region provides nestboxes to farms with tree sparrows. A network of trained staff and volunteers also offers farmers free advice about lapwings and visits farms to move vulnerable nests during mechanical operations.

In the early years, farmers were offered re-surveys but as the project has increased in popularity, this has become impossible. Anna's priority is to make the V&FA available to as many farmers in the region as possible.

Eastern England

Shelley Gentle, based in Norwich, has been with the project since 2002 and until now the project has covered Cambridgeshire, Essex, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. However, in 2006 the region may prioritise the areas targeted by the Higher Level Scheme (HLS). There were 60 farms surveyed this year and another 60 are planned for 2005 but the project is oversubscribed with a waiting list already in place for 2006. The region is taking contact details for those interested in having surveys in 2006 and will contact farmers nearer the time when details of the HLS have been confirmed.

Meanwhile, V&FA volunteer Barry Hancock has recently developed his role to become a volunteer farmland bird adviser in Lincolnshire. We hope that with Barry's help we will be able to do even more to help farmland birds in the county.

Shelley has also co-ordinated several 'flying squad' surveys, which have supported farmers entering agri-environment schemes and occasionally where V&FA is unavailable. The farmers involved received a list of species present, but no map.

'Due to demand for surveys, we are currently not able to offer re-surveys (or surveys of additional land),' Shelley said, 'although there may be some capacity to offer a flying squad visit instead.'

Shelley is currently on maternity leave, but plans to return to work in May. In the meantime, Jim Jones has replaced Shelley.

North England

Simon Tonkin (below) is based in East Yorkshire. He joined the team earlier this year. Building on the success of the V&FA, the region has launched V&FA PLUS in Yorkshire. Historically there were good populations of tree sparrows, corn buntings and lapwings in the county, but these species are showing some of the biggest declines.

By carrying out surveys on local farms, we will be able to gain information of bird numbers on a farm-by-farm basis and, with advice from Simon, specific measures can be implemented through the new agri-environment schemes. The project will run for three years and Simon plans at least 180 surveys to encourage sustainable farming over at least 10,000 ha within the project area. The project is funded by the East Riding of Yorkshire LEADER+ Programme and supported by Bishop Burton College.



Simon Tonkin is encouraging sustainable farming across East Yorkshire.

North West England

Janet Fairclough, based in Lancashire, had been in post since 2000. She left the project in the autumn to work as an agricultural adviser for the RSPB. We welcome her replacement, Carol Coupe, who will also work from Lancashire.

Since the project started in the region, it has targeted different counties in different years. This spring, 40 farms were surveyed in Lancashire and Cheshire. Next year there will be another 40 surveys carried out in the region but these will mostly be in areas with tree sparrows. A tree sparrow recovery project is being introduced, which will link with V&FA work. There are no re-surveys planned, as the priority in the region is to reach new farmers and to concentrate on providing advice to those already involved.

om across the UK

South West England

Deborah Hanlon is based in Exeter and has been the project officer in the south-west since 2003, although she has worked for the RSPB for six years. Deborah covers Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and the former counties of Avon and Wiltshire. There were 69 surveys carried out this year and at least 50 farmers are interested in having surveys done in 2005.

Deborah says, 'We also have farmland bird project officers covering various projects across the region, working with farmers and landowners to conserve species such as the chough, curlew, corn bunting, lapwing, stone-curlew and tree sparrow. They also offer land management advice and co-ordinate winter feeding stations and nestbox provision.'

South East England

Laura Hurt, based in Brighton, has been in post since 2002. She covers Greater London, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Surrey and Sussex. There were 41 full surveys and 11 Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) surveys carried out this year. A further 50 full and 10 RRF surveys are planned for 2005. There is also an innovative project in operation that provides post-survey advice.

'I am currently working with FWAG to provide advice to a number of farmers in the south-east because we have found priority farmland bird species on their farms,' says Laura. 'I will be visiting the farms with a FWAG adviser and suggesting opportunities for habitat management or creation, which will benefit these birds. We have received funding to continue this project for three years.'

Laura is also involved in other agricultural work in the region, including a tree sparrow project and Operation Lapwing.

Northern Ireland

Catherine Kelly is based in Belfast and joined the project in the autumn. She covers the whole of Northern Ireland. There have been 60 farms surveyed this year and the same number is planned for next year. Because Catherine comes from a farming background, she hopes to bring an advisory remit to the role.

Catherine says, 'I believe that both farming and wildlife can co-exist healthily and happily with each other and this job is a great opportunity to be able to do something for both.'

With farming going through great change, Catherine believes that farmers are quite open to seeing what their options are and diversifying. She hopes that by getting out and talking to farmers, she will be able to explore some of these options with them.

East Scotland

Karen Cunningham is based in Perth and has been in post since 2002. She covers Aberdeenshire, Angus, Fife, Moray and Perth and Kinross. There were 32 farms surveyed this year, and another 35 are planned for next year.

'We have offered advisory visits to a number of selected farms where priority farmland bird species have been recorded during the surveys,' says Karen. 'The aim of the visits will be to identify simple, low-cost or no-cost measures that may help these farms retain their important bird species. All of the farmers approached have responded positively to the offer and we hope to extend this to a larger number of farmers.'

Karen also manages the Farmland Bird Lifeline in Fife and Angus. This project aims to provide nesting habitat and food for farmland birds in decline, particularly corn buntings. The RSPB provides financial encouragement to farmers to provide, for example, areas of wild bird cover and conservation headlands.

South and West Scotland

Bob Dawson is based in Glasgow and joined the project earlier this year. There have been 17 farms surveyed this year and 40 are planned for next year. Since the region covers nearly 3 million ha, there is clearly quite a bit of ground to cover and lots of potential. Initial advisory work has begun in this region, with more visits planned in the future.

Bob says, 'The feedback from farmers who have been involved in the project over the past three years is very encouraging, and already there is a lot of management for wildlife in place. We are involved with other work in the region to benefit species such as the tree sparrow and grey partridge, and we are keen to initiate other projects in different areas.' Bob will work closely with other staff and develop the role of volunteers that work for farmland birds.

Wales

Debbie Scott is based in Bangor and has been in post since 2002. She covers the whole of the country but focuses on Aren't Welsh Birds Brilliant! key areas. There have been 77 farms surveyed this year and 50 are planned for next year. Additional agricultural work in Wales includes advisory visits to farmers, corn bunting and turtle dove project work, and Operation Lapwing.

If you would like to contact project staff, you can find all the addresses and telephone numbers on the back page of this newsletter.

Machair is traditional, low-intensity agriculture on wind-blown shell sand, as seen here at RSPB Oronsay nature reserve

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Reserving the future for farmland birds

The RSPB believes that our nature reserves play an increasingly important role in safeguarding populations of some farmland birds in decline.

During 2004, the RSPB acquired 274 ha of land to restore to wet grassland and 75 ha for wet grassland to be created. This takes the total area of wet grassland managed by the RSPB to 5,858 ha, which is 1.8% of the UK total. The species that will benefit include the curlew, black-tailed godwit, lapwing, quail, redshank and snipe.

The global area of machair grassland is estimated to be about 25,000 ha with 17,500 ha in Scotland and the remainder in Ireland. The RSPB manages around 2,707 ha of machair via ownership, management agreement and tenancies. This represents approximately 11% of the global resource and 15.5% of the UK total.

The species that could benefit from the acquisition and management of machair are the corncrake, chough and corn bunting.

There are approximately 1,012 ha of arable land on RSPB reserves. Many farmland birds are in decline throughout the UK and a contributing factor towards these declines is the lack of seed availability throughout the winter. Where practical, RSPB reserves provide winter feeding habitat for widely dispersed species as an emergency measure until agricultural reform encourages a more sustainable use of the countryside. Across Scotland, we plant spring crops on 15 reserves to provide habitat for several priority species and to demonstrate good practice. The species to benefit include the chough, corncrake, corn bunting, tree sparrow and twite.

Choughs cause a stir in Co Antrim

Earlier this summer, two chough chicks successfully negotiated their emergence from a perilous crevice high above the Giant's Causeway in Co Antrim. Seven chicks have now fledged in Northern Ireland in three years. Previously, choughs had not bred successfully in Northern Ireland for six years. The birds are nesting on Environmentally Sensitive Area farmland, managed to their requirements. In Northern Ireland, the top tier 'chough option' pays farmers to provide tightly-grazed swards on clifftop fields throughout the year. The prescriptions are sward-height specific, unique within the UK, and something the Department of Agriculture and the RSPB are pleased with. We hope to be the bearers of further good news, if and when farmers herald a second breeding pair in the coming years.

For further information, e-mail giles.knight@rspb.org.uk

Conservation officer Giles Knight, left, checks dung for signs of choughs feeding on the coast in Co Antrim.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The value of volunteers

Did you know?

- The economic value of formal volunteering in the UK is estimated at £40 billion per year.
- For every £1 of public funding spent to support volunteering, volunteers give £30 of work.
- More people take part in volunteering than are employed.
- Every week, throughout the UK, there are 10 million people volunteering.*

At the RSPB...

- Nearly 12,000 volunteers support and enhance the work of the RSPB annually.
- These volunteers carry out 700,000 hours of work each year.
- This is worth over £3.7 million a year to the RSPB and equates to an extra 360 full-time members of staff.
- All 24 RSPB council members are volunteers.

What farmers think of the V&FA...

The questionnaire results received from those farmers who participated in 2002 indicated that:

- 93% thought that taking part in the project was worthwhile

- 74% had species on their farm that they had not previously appreciated
- 90% found that the map they were given was very useful
- 82% had put into practice the farmland bird management guidelines issued with the map
- 53% are now more favourably inclined towards other RSPB initiatives following the survey.

...and what do the volunteers think?

In 2003, the volunteer questionnaire results showed that:

- 84% of volunteers were pleased with the V&FA training they received
- 91% thought the maps that were provided for their fieldwork were suitable
- 98% of volunteers were satisfied with the level of support they received from RSPB staff
- 34% of volunteers had never carried out bird surveys before, and an equal number had never volunteered for the RSPB
- 97% enjoyed participating in the project, either a great deal or a fair amount.

Thank you for your help.

*All statistics taken from Davis Smith J (1988). *The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering*. The National Centre for Volunteering.



The unique partnership of volunteers and farmers makes the project worthwhile.

Join in with the Big Garden Birdwatch 2005

Earlier this year, 419,000 people took part in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch and sent in records of their garden birds – 8.5 million of them! We need your help to make it even bigger next year.

The event takes place over the weekend of 29–30 January and is very simple to take part in. All you need to do is spend one hour watching birds in your garden (or a local park) and count the highest number of each species that you see at any one time and send your results to the RSPB. With such a large number of people taking part, we have been able to create an accurate snapshot of winter garden bird numbers and distributions.

Because the event has been running since 1979, we can compare the results over time to see how different birds are faring. We know from our records that the UK's commonest two garden birds, the starling and house sparrow, are both in decline. In 1979, you would have seen an average of 15 starlings and 10 house sparrows per garden. Now, the average is nearly four per garden for both species.

All RSPB members will receive a survey form in January with *Birds* magazine. For anyone who does not receive a magazine, we have set up a hotline to order a form. Please call 0870 122 2791 to receive your survey pack. However, the best way to take part is via our website at www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch The survey form will be

online from 29 January. More than 106,000 forms were received online in 2004 and this method means we save resources because there are no processing costs for these forms. However, any forms are welcome. The more we receive, the better data we collect.

So put 29–30 January in your diary and take part in the world's biggest birdwatch!

The average number of starlings is now only four per garden.



Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Keeping you informed

The RSPB has names and addresses of farmers and volunteers who have participated in the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance since the project began in 1999. This information and other details, which you have given us in connection with the project, is held by the RSPB's regional and country offices on paper and computer. All details are kept confidential.

We will **not** make your name, address or any other information available to external organisations without your permission. Through projects such as this, 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 prefer **not** to receive this newsletter and/or any other information, please contact the V&FA project staff in your area – contact details below.

Please contact V&FA project staff at the following RSPB offices:

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

Central England Regional Office (CERO) 46 The Green, South Bar, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9AB
Tel: 01295 253330

Eastern England Regional Office (EERO) Stalham House, 65 Thorpe Road, Norwich NR1 1UD
Tel: 01603 661662

North England Regional Office (NERO) 4 Benton Terrace, Sandyford Road, Newcastle NE2 1QU
Tel: 0191 212 6100

North West England Regional Office (NWRO) Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Denby Dale, Huddersfield HD8 8QD Tel: 01484 861148

South East England Regional Office (SERO) 2nd Floor, Frederick House, 42 Frederick Place, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 4EA Tel: 01273 775333

South West England Regional Office (SWRO) Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter, Devon EX1 1NT Tel: 01392 432691

Northern Ireland Headquarters Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT Tel: 028 9049 1547

East Scotland Regional Office (ESRO) 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP Tel: 01224 624824

S and W Scotland Regional Office (SWSRO) 10 Park Quadrant, Glasgow G3 6BS Tel: 0141 331 0993

North Wales Office Maes y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW Tel: 01248 363800

GET MORE INFO

www.rspb.org.uk

or e-mail: v&fa@rspb.org.uk



The RSPB is the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and wildlife, helping to create a better world for us all. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

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