



for birds
for people
for ever

The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects **FIELD OF VIEW**

ISSUE 6 NOVEMBER 2007



We are working with farmers to help increase the tree sparrow population

An alliance which continues to deliver

The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA) continues to provide farmers with valuable information regarding the birds on their land, with a particular focus on how to help the birds of greatest conservation concern. With more than 500 farms surveyed during 2007, the total number of farms surveyed across the UK through the V&FA has almost reached 4,000.

The project remains committed to providing free surveys for farmers, and our volunteers are central to this, even though the weather in 2007 made getting surveys done more difficult. The effort and commitment that our volunteers make cannot be overestimated – they provide a valuable service to both the RSPB and the farming community. Since 1999, more than 57,500 hours have been given as a gift of time to survey farms. While we value this far more than in mere monetary terms, it is worth noting that had the beneficiaries had to pay for these surveys, it would have cost a massive £331,000.

Given such efforts, it is particularly uplifting to hear reports of farmers improving the fortunes of farmland birds identified on their land through V&FA surveys. We applaud all those whose work has supported the recent increases in populations of species such as reed bunting, song thrush and tree sparrow.

Each year, there are new challenges and opportunities in farming, but there is strong public support for the conservation work undertaken by farmers, increasingly backed by a willingness to pay more for premium quality products. An important part of this is ensuring that there is space for birds and wildlife in the farmed environment. The V&FA remains a free service, and is available whenever we can match a farm to a suitable, local volunteer, to help maximise this opportunity.

In this issue: V&FA helps target action for birds • The benefits of ryegrass grassland • The fat birds of the barley are back • Hope Farm Special • Welsh black grouse • Yellowhammers in Northern Ireland



Tom Marshall (rspb-images.com)

The BCTP will help to focus conservation measures for the benefit of farmland birds such as the curlew

V&FA helps target action for birds

The fortunes of scarce and declining birds across the UK are set to improve thanks to the development of the Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP). The surveys undertaken through the V&FA are central to the success of the project, which collates bird records to target advice on conservation action.

Bird records from a wide range of sources including local recorders, national datasets and V&FA surveys are feeding into targeting maps which are verified using local expert bird knowledge. The targeting maps have already been successful in guiding management for farmland and woodland birds across England, and the BCTP now plans to expand to cover the UK.

Many of you have helped the BCTP by volunteering to survey farms or by allowing us to use V&FA bird records collected on your farm. This is great information because it means we can be sure that, in the places where these birds are still known to breed, conservation advice can be tailored to the species' exact requirements. This targeted approach maximises breeding success to start to turn around declines.

The BCTP can be used to target measures funded by government grant schemes across the UK to benefit a suite of target species such as curlew, lapwing and tree sparrow. In England, the government's Higher Level Scheme is already adopting a targeted approach. The project partners cover a range of organisations, government departments

and government agencies which currently include the British Trust for Ornithology, the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording in Northern Ireland, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Environment and Heritage Service both in Northern Ireland, Forestry Commission England, Forestry Commission Wales, Forestry Service in Northern Ireland, Natural England and the RSPB.

The BCTP influences the spend of hundreds of millions of pounds to benefit birds through government grant schemes in England and with new UK partners on board the benefits to birds are set to rise.

More information about the BCTP and the targeting maps for England are available at www.rspb.org.uk/targeting where you can also find species-specific management advice and information on the target birds' habitat requirements. We hope to make targeting maps for the rest of the UK available early next year.

We have written to many V&FA farmers asking for permission to use their farm surveys for the BCTP. This is a great conservation use of these surveys, so thanks to all those farmers who returned the consent form.

If you would like us to use the results of your farm survey and for more information about the Bird Conservation Targeting Project, please e-mail v&fa@rspb.org.uk or telephone 01767 680551

In a paddy

Last November I was given the opportunity of a lifetime to swap the pastures of South West England for the rice paddies of Southern Nepal to work alongside our BirdLife partner, Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN). I worked in an area around Lumbini (Lord Buddha's birthplace) where agriculture is still the main land use (68%). It was really encouraging to see that these farmed areas support a diverse range of farmland birds and have been identified as an Important Bird Area (IBA). The aim of my sabbatical was to help BCN develop an action plan for farmland bird conservation in this area.

Spending three weeks walking and cycling the fields of Lumbini gave me a chance to talk with local farmers working their land and to interview village chairmen to gain an understanding of their farming system and how it has changed, and their knowledge of farmland birds. We also visited schools in the area to talk with teachers and took several groups of schoolchildren into the fields to show them farmland birds. These children are mostly from farming families and will be farmers themselves in the near future, so education about birds is essential for the future conservation of these species.

Most of the farmers are small-scale subsistence farmers, using traditional farming methods (ox and plough) to grow enough food to support their families. Rice is the predominant crop grown in this area, although crops are grown throughout the year on a rice – wheat – corn rotation, and expansion into dhal, mustard and vegetable production is growing. The farmed landscape consists of very small cultivated fields bordered by grass bund banks, established to retain water in the rice paddies. It is this small field size that is possibly an important factor in the provision of feeding and nesting opportunities for farmland birds. The grass bund banks surround each field creating a large area of 'edge effect' vegetation. This provides a safe area for overwintering invertebrates, and cover for birds,

small mammals, snakes and amphibians. Such availability of food, along with spilt grain and weed seeds found in the fields, supports a range of species from the zitting cisticola to the white-rumped vulture.

In fact, Lumbini is the only area in Nepal to support breeding sarus crane, just one of the eight globally threatened bird species that have been recorded in the Lumbini IBA. While surveying the cultivated fields we were fortunate to see many pairs of sarus crane, some with juveniles, feeding on rice grain and using unharvested rice crops for cover. In total, we recorded 72 individual sarus cranes distributed throughout the area.

Although mixed farmland dominates the landscape, it is evident that it is the 'mosaic' of habitats (cultivated fields, forest, grassland, rivers and wetlands) found across the Lumbini IBA, which supports a rich and diverse assemblage of birds. In my three-week programme alone, we recorded 184 bird species, many of which are very dependent on specific habitats and therefore vulnerable to any drastic changes in land management or loss.

Climate change is having an effect on the people and wildlife in Nepal. With less and unpredictable rainfall, demand for water is only going to increase, putting pressure on the natural environment. Along with a lack of agricultural education; information and training for farmers, overgrazing, increasing and excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers, mis-management of wetlands and natural resources, and a history of political instability, could all threaten these farmland species. Recommendations have therefore been made to BCN to ensure that both people and wildlife can continue to live together, and Lumbini remains an IBA for future generations to enjoy.

Deborah manages the V&FA in South West England. For further details, please e-mail deborah.deveney@rspb.org.uk or visit www.birdlifeneal.org



A typical farming system in Lumbini

The corn bunting in Sweden

Earlier this year, the RSPB facilitated a fact finding trip to the UK by Swedish ornithologists Anders Hallengren and Kurt Ivarssons.

Both Anders and Kurt are involved in the action plan for the conservation of the corn bunting, in conjunction with the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.

In Sweden, the corn bunting is classified as endangered according to the Swedish Red List and breeds in only two isolated areas in Skåne, the most southern county. The species is resident in Sweden, and during the winter of 2002/2003, the population was only 200 birds.

The action plan for the conservation of corn buntings in Sweden for 2006–2010 outlines actions aimed at increasing the population and securing the species as a breeding bird in Sweden.

Anders and Kurt were interested in the RSPB's work to develop actions that could improve survival during the winter, which is the most critical issue for corn buntings in Sweden.

Despite the Scandinavian Airlines strike that took place immediately prior to their arrival in the UK, they successfully met with our research, policy and advisory staff at RSPB HQ and then travelled to Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire, where corn buntings have bred on occasions.

This was followed by a trip to East Yorkshire to visit farms that have created habitats for the species through Environmental Stewardship Schemes after receiving advice and support from an RSPB project officer. Following this, Anders and Kurt travelled to Aberdeenshire where they visited farms involved in the Farmland Bird Lifeline, which works with farmers to manage habitats for corn buntings.

We would like to thank all the farmers that gave up their time and welcomed our colleagues from Sweden. We have since heard from them to thank everyone involved in making their visit possible. Both Anders and Kurt believe they learnt a lot.

For further details, please e-mail jenny.atkins@rspb.org.uk



Mark Thomas (RSPB)

From left to right, Anders Hallengren, Jenny Atkins and Kurt Ivarssons

The Big Wheel rolls on

The RSPB's Big Wheel rotary ditcher has now completed five seasons' working on wetlands since its arrival in the UK in 2002, creating wader-friendly wet features on a number of RSPB reserves, private farmland, Wildlife Trust and statutory agency sites.

So far, it has undertaken nearly 2,000 hours of work which is enough time to create the equivalent of a shallow ditch from the RSPB's reserves at Northward Hill in Kent to Leighton Moss in Lancashire, a distance of over 400km!

Waders such as lapwings and redshanks like the ground soft and squidgy in order to probe for soil invertebrates to feed their hungry chicks in spring. The ditcher can provide this habitat by creating shallow wet features such as grips and scrapes on unimproved grassland.

In 2008, the RSPB hopes to roll out the ditcher to more sites across the country and will be holding a training event on 30 July 2008 at the RSPB Otmoor reserve, Oxfordshire for those interested in its use.

For further information, please e-mail conservation-advice@rspb.org.uk



The rotary ditcher creates appropriate habitat for waders

Nick Droy (RSPB)

For specialist advice at your finger

Ryegrass may provide a seed rich habitat through the winter

The benefits of ryegrass grassland

Agriculturally improved ryegrass grassland does not get a very good name amongst conservationists. It has replaced much wildlife-rich, semi-natural grassland, and is a poor source of key food resources for farmland birds, notably seeds and insects. This wholly negative image may be about to change, as RSPB researchers try to find out if such grassland can be used to fill an important gap in the year-round food requirements of several farmland birds.

A high proportion of our lowland farmland bird species eat seeds during the winter – in fact 12 out of 14 red-listed birds. Species such as the yellowhammer, reed bunting and skylark have traditionally relied on grain and the seeds of broad-leaved plants in cereal stubbles, fodder crops and livestock feed to help them survive the winter. The farming practices that created these seed-rich areas have declined generally, but particularly in regions that have become specialised in livestock production. Although agri-environment schemes are helping to maintain and even re-introduce some of these seed-rich habitats, sometimes suitable options simply do not fit in with the farming system or make sense from a financial point of view. Building on initial observations that several seed-eating birds feed on the large seeds of ryegrass when it has gone to seed, the RSPB is trying to develop alternative ways for livestock farmers to provide seed-rich habitats through the winter.

An initial trial was carried out in the West Midlands, where 1ha plots on fairly intensively managed silage fields were left to set seed after either one or two silage cuts. All plots produced abundant ryegrass seed and were heavily used by buntings throughout the winter.

Further trials are looking at agronomic issues such as the effects of different ryegrass varieties, cutting dates, and different ways of re-establishing a productive sward. If management is suitable, seed falling from the grass may germinate to regenerate the sward, but if this cannot be done reliably, an alternative approach to fitting seeding ryegrass into a farming system could be in the last year of a short or medium-term ley that is to be ploughed up in the spring. This would require some compensation, potentially through an agri-environment scheme.

We hope to have the answers to some of these questions next year, when we can start demonstrating this novel system of management more widely.

For further details, please e-mail gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk

The reed bunting relies on grain and seeds to survive the winter

The fat birds of the barley are back

The local press in Berwickshire and beyond were wowed this year with the discovery of a small population of corn buntings in the Scottish Borders. With fewer than 800 territorial males in Scotland, this chunky farmland bird, once abundant on even the remotest of Scottish islands, is now scarcer than the corncrake, itself the focus of a conservation success story that farmers should take much credit for.

The corn bunting is almost certainly the rarest breeding bird in southern Scotland. Indeed, concern had been expressed as recently as 1998 that the survival into the 21st century of the 'fat bird of the barley' in this part of the world was 'very much in doubt'. Nevertheless, the species has managed to cling on in the Borders. The number of birds is certainly very small, however, with the only records during the last decade or so being of a solitary, but persistent singing male at one site and up to two birds at a couple of other locations, including one farm involved in a V&FA survey.

In spring this year, regional staff, a local landowner and RSPB volunteer Jim Sim found three singing males at a site in the eastern Borders. The birds were active within fields of barley, silage and hay, and we were able to pin down the location of at least one nest. We are working to ensure the survival of this small population by, for example, delaying grass cutting to reduce the risk to unfledged chicks, and options to improve the birds' winter survival are also being explored, including sowing one-year cereal-rich mixes of wild bird cover and providing supplementary food.

There is also a wonderful opportunity for cross-border work in Scotland and England for staff and volunteers, which we hope will reveal the true extent of the corn bunting's range in this part of Scotland, and give an indication of the prospects for their continued presence in the landscape.

For further information, please e-mail lisa.webb@rspb.org.uk



A small population of corn buntings has been found in the Scottish Borders

HOPE FARM SPECIAL



There were 36 pairs of whitethroats breeding at Hope Farm in 2007

Bird numbers

This year has been the best so far for birds at Hope Farm. Following this summer's surveys, the final bird numbers have been calculated and overall, the Hope Farm Farmland Bird Index (FBI) is up by 89% compared with our first season in 2000.

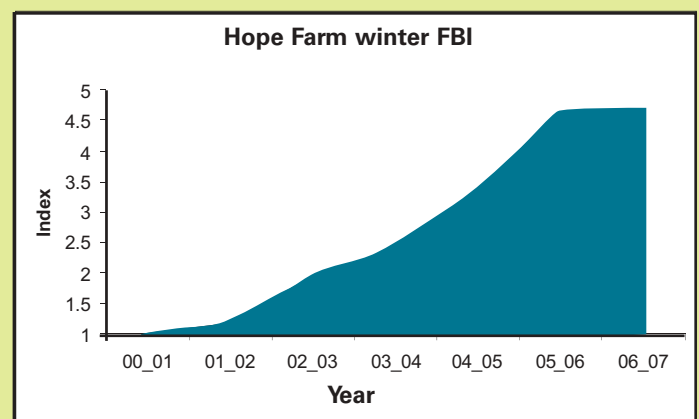
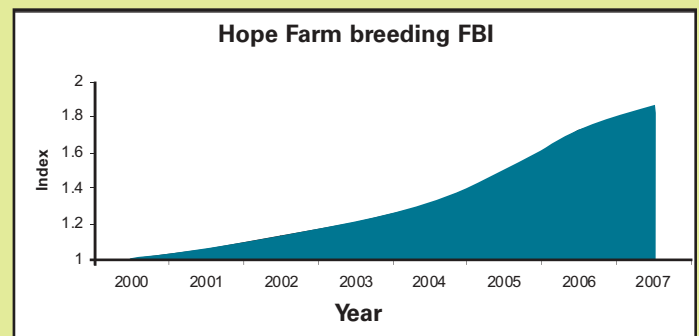
The FBI is a measurement of the collective population trend of the 19 bird species that are most dependent on farmland in the UK. This year's star was the yellowhammer but whitethroat (36 pairs), skylark (30 pairs) and goldfinch (7 pairs) had a good year too. We also recorded breeding grey partridge, lapwing and several pairs of yellow wagtail. The overall bird population has risen steadily over recent years, helped by our sympathetic management of hedgerows, increased winter food through wild bird cover and two-year set-aside and summer food through the provision of pollen and nectar mixtures.

Birds are flourishing at Hope Farm through the winter as well as the summer. During the past few years, we have regularly recorded a mixed flock of over 200 yellowhammers, reed buntings and linnets using the wild bird cover and set-aside, while other regular visitors include fieldfares and redwings, and barn owls at dusk over our stubble fields.

The graphs opposite illustrate the Hope Farm breeding and winter FBI.

The species that contribute to the breeding and winter FBI include the corn bunting, goldfinch, greenfinch, grey

partridge, jackdaw, kestrel, lapwing, linnet, reed bunting, rook, skylark, starling, stock dove, tree sparrow, turtle dove, whitethroat, woodpigeon, yellowhammer and yellow wagtail.



HOPE FARM SPECIAL



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The oilseed rape yields were approximately 2.5t/ha this year

Harvest

It was a frustrating year with heavy showers hindering the start of the oilseed rape and wheat harvest. The oilseed rape was harvested at the end of July and wheat over the August bank holiday. Unfortunately, both crops had a high moisture content resulting in additional drying costs. Yields for the oilseed rape were approximately 2.5t/ha with the fields established by either minimum tillage or broadcast methods achieving similar results.

Post harvest cultivations started immediately after the oilseed rape harvest in preparation for the sowing of the wheat at the end of September. The spring beans were harvested at the start of September although the yields were extremely poor. Wheat yields were 8.6t/ha which is down from last year. Next years cropping will include 82ha of winter wheat, 43ha of oilseed rape and 14ha of spring beans.

It has been an interesting couple of months trying to assess what effect the 0% set-aside requirement for next year will have on the farm management and subsequent effects on bird populations. However, at Hope Farm, we will be keeping approximately 6% out of production in 2008, irrespective of this EU decision because of our long-term research commitments.

Wet features

Last year we summarised how we had established three new wet features on Hope Farm. They were created by simply broadening some of the ditches and putting a bund at one end of each, in the hope that these features would hold water during the summer months, providing more feeding opportunities for a variety of species including yellow wagtail, linnet, yellowhammer and reed bunting.

As part of the monitoring, the RSPB employed the Pond Conservation Trust this year to evaluate what invertebrate and plant species had colonised the ponds. Results showed that all three ponds had a good ecological status with up to 11 plant species and 27 invertebrate families recorded. We have also been collecting water samples to assess if the vegetation within the wet features has the ability to clean fertilisers and pesticides from water. Results from this work will be available once the analysis is complete.



Chris Comersall (rspb-images.com)

The hairy dragonfly is one species that uses the wet features

Open days in 2008

We will be running a number of open days during the summer. If you would like to visit Hope Farm then please contact Chris Bailey c/o RSPB Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL.

If you would like further information about the farm, our open days or more detailed farm accounts, please e-mail chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk

BASIS points available for RSPB

If you are a BASIS-trained agronomist then why not sign up for the RSPB's farming e-newsletter or come and visit Hope Farm? BASIS have awarded two environmental points for each.

For topical farming news and practical advice, sign up to the RSPB's farming e-newsletter at www.rspb.org.uk/farming

For topical farming news and practical advice, sign up to th

HOPE FARM SPECIAL

Darren Moorcroft (RSPB)

Hope Farm is contract farmed

Economics

Helping wildlife while making a profit is the cornerstone of our work at Hope Farm.

Because the land is contract-farmed, we pay realistic commercial rates for all our on-farm work. We are currently in an agreement with a neighbouring farmer (our contractor) who provides this service, managing c.2,500ha in total. Under our contract farm agreement, the income from the farm is divided between us. We receive a set payment as the landowner (fixed return). This and the cost of producing the crops (for example the seed, sprays and operations) is deducted from the total income from cropping (the sale of the crops, farm subsidy payments and lost income from undertaking our trials work).

This leaves the divisible surplus. This figure is then split between us (the landowner) and our contractor on a 23:77% basis. The contractor, who bears the cost of owning and maintaining the farm machinery, receives the greater proportion.

In 2006, the cost of producing all our crops; 88.2ha of wheat, 39ha of oilseed rape and 20.3ha of spring beans, was just under £71,000.

These provided a good yield and sold for just over £79,000. In addition, the farm received a single payment of £37,297.42. This gave a total of £116,605.33 income.

Subtracting the cost of production from the income received leaves a balance of £45,644.98. Further subtraction of the £35,607.60 fixed return to us (the landowner) leaves a divisible surplus of £10,037.38. This is then split in accordance with our contract farming agreement, providing us with 23% or £2,308.60.

When added to our fixed return, the income in 2006 from our arable operations was £37,916.20

This income is then subject to management labour costs and tax liability.

Cost	Amount (£)
Seed	8,288.50
Fertiliser	10,935.00
Sprays	21,987.85
Contractor's fee	29,673.00
Misc	76.00
TOTAL	70,960.35

Income Amount	Amount (£)
Wheat sales	54,717.06
Rape sales	16,569.79
Spring bean sales	8,021.06
Total from crops	79,307.91
Single payment	37,297.42
TOTAL Income from farm	116,605.33

	Amount (£)
Landowner's fixed return	35,607.60
Divisible surplus	10,037.38
Share of surplus	
RSPB	2,308.60
Contractor	7,728.78
RSPB Income (harvest 2006)	37,916.20

HOPE FARM SPECIAL



Tony Morris (RSPB)

Pollen and nectar mixtures provide habitat for insects

Yellowhammers at Hope Farm

The yellowhammer is one of the species that has responded positively to our management at Hope Farm, with 36 pairs recorded this year compared with 14 in 2000 when the farm was first purchased – see diagrams below. Nationally, this species has continued to decline by 16% over the last 12 years.

So how have we managed to increase the number against the national trend? The answer is we aim to provide each of the 'Big 3' essential requirements: nesting habitat, summer food and winter food.

Nesting habitat: Yellowhammers nest on, or close to, the ground in ditch vegetation or at the base of short thick hedgerows. At Hope Farm, we cut our hedges and ditches in rotation, once in three years, to produce improved nesting habitat. In addition, these hedges will produce 14

times the weight of berries compared with those trimmed annually, providing vital food for many birds, such as blackbirds and starlings.

Summer food: Insects are required to feed both chicks and adults throughout the summer. Pollen and nectar mixtures, beetle banks and field margins provide perfect habitats for many species of insects.

Winter food: This is essential if the yellowhammers are to survive during the winter. The over-winter stubbles, wild seed mixtures and our two-year set-aside have provided valuable seed resources, especially cereal grain.

At Hope Farm, we have been able to provide all these habitats around the farm through careful use of our Entry Level Agreement, which is part of the government's agri-environment scheme.



Yellowhammer territories in 2000



Yellowhammer territories in 2007

Cities Revealed® Copyright by The GeoInformation® Group, 2001 and Crown Copyright® All rights reserved



The Welsh Black Grouse Project has halted a decline in the population

Welsh black grouse faring better than the rest

It's now ten years since the joint RSPB, Forestry Commission Wales and Countryside Council for Wales, Welsh Black Grouse Recovery Project first began. Through targeted conservation habitat management, the project has brought about a halt in the decline of the Welsh population and the beginnings of a turn around in their fortunes.

Black grouse were formerly widespread across much of upland Wales, with the species' geographical range probably most extensive between the end of the 19th century and the 1950s. The population declined slowly from the 1960s and rapidly in the early 1990s. These declines are thought to be attributable, as in other parts of Britain, to large-scale habitat degradation and fragmentation.

Based on the distribution of the black grouse population in Wales, six key areas were identified, which in 1997 held 80% of the Welsh population. As part of the Welsh Black Grouse Recovery Project, intensive conservation

management took place between 1997 and 2006. This management created favourable habitat for black grouse by reducing conifer densities, particularly along the forest edge and moorland interface, cutting heather to create nesting and foraging habitat and reinstating wet areas for chick foraging. In the winter of 2005/06, 230ha of habitat management was carried out for black grouse. There is also currently a joint RSPB/Forestry Commission Wales project trialling cattle and pony grazing to assess whether grazing in some areas can supplement or even replace mechanical management to create habitat for black grouse.

A repeat survey in 2005, showed there were 213 lekking males, this represented a 39% increase since the last British survey in 1995. This population recovery coincides with conservation management targeted at key areas.

For more details, please e-mail patrick.lindley@rspb.org.uk

Open Farm Sunday

Open Farm Sunday was held this year on 10 June. It is a day, organised by Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), when farmers can open their farm gates to their neighbours and the public and show them how their food is grown.

This was the second year that Open Farm Sunday was held but the first year of RSPB involvement. We wanted to help farmers show people the birds on their farm and the work they do to provide the habitats needed by farmland birds.

More than 400 farms opened their gates, with 150,000 people pulling on their wellies for a day in the countryside. The RSPB's free *Birds on your farm* resource pack was available to farmers. This pack contained information to help their visitors identify farmland birds and help the

farmer explain the work they do for wildlife. The RSPB's Hope Farm, in Cambridgeshire, was open on the day and RSPB staff helped out on other farms, showing people birds during farm walks.

We want next year's event to be even bigger. There are further opportunities to make our resources available and hold wildlife events on farms. Next year's Open Farm Sunday will be held on 1 June.

For more information on Open Farm Sunday go to www.farmsunday.org. For more details, please e-mail jim.densham@rspb.org.uk

Operation Lapwing

Operation Lapwing was established to support the conservation work of many farmers and encourage others to take action for lapwings on farmland across the UK. This has involved an annual competition to reward the very best examples of lapwing-friendly management and identify a lapwing champion.

During 2007, there were 300 participants and more than 135 pairs of lapwings bred on the seven farms that progressed to the final. However, Steve Mumford, who farms near Kings Lynn in Norfolk, won the title of Lapwing Champion for 2007 and received £1,000 for his efforts.

The farm is managed to provide nesting and feeding sites for lapwings and all the cropping decisions are based on the birds as well as economics. Steve harvests all year round so has fields suitable for nesting throughout the breeding season. Some fields can be left fallow for longer if they attract high numbers of nesting lapwings. Three fields have been converted back to pasture where Steve is trialling the most appropriate grazing and wetting regimes to benefit lapwings. Chemicals are used sparingly, allowing high numbers of lapwing prey items, while nest sites are marked and avoided during cultivation operations. Through this work, lapwing numbers on the farm have increased from 30 pairs in 2002 to 54 pairs this year.

Rob Wainwright who farms on Coll came second, and won £500. Rob, who farms organically, has re-introduced spring-cropped oats and barley, and switched from just sheep to a mixture of sheep and cattle which graze the 1,200ha farm in Argyll. With spring crops adjacent to wet grassland, the farm proves very popular with nesting lapwings. Rob has successfully combined lapwing habitat management (requiring short swards) with corncrake management (requiring tall swards).



Steve Mumford (left) and Bill Jordan

Jim Densham (RSPB)

Henry Edmunds came third, and won £250. Henry has a mixed organic estate in Hampshire where lapwings nest in spring crops and on fallow plots. The spring crops are adjacent to areas of grazed chalk downland, providing an ideal combination of nesting and feeding habitat.

All three farmers supplement their habitat management with some form of predator control, depending on the circumstances on their farm.

The project has been sponsored by Jordans Cereals.

As we work with a large number of farmers annually, we have decided to expand the competition to involve more farmers. Final details are still being planned and further information will be available soon.

Be part of the UK's largest farmland biodiversity

Some form of mitigation is required for the loss of set-aside

Is there life after set-aside?

Along with many farmers, the RSPB has anxiously awaited news of the future of set-aside this summer in light of its importance for farmland wildlife and resource protection.

The RSPB agrees that the rationale for set-aside as a market management tool will disappear following the decoupling of farm supports, but had anticipated a phased approach to its removal through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check next year and a replacement tool specifically for wildlife and the environment. With the sudden reduction in requirement to 0% for 2008, hopes of such a managed approach have been dealt a blow, at both the European and domestic level. The need to put some sort of environmental mitigation in place for the loss of this valuable habitat is clear; many UK farmers are currently using set-aside to provide vital nesting and feeding habitats for species such as stone-curlew and linnet. The Secretary of State has

challenged farmers to consider the environment when responding to the end of set-aside. To help meet this challenge, the RSPB has set up a **Hotline on 01767 693690** for farmers wishing to get more information on caring for their farm's birds as they adjust their management. Alternatively, visit www.farmwildlife.info for our 5-point plan for set-aside.

As part of the CAP Health Check next year, the RSPB will be highlighting the environmental importance of set-aside to decision makers in the UK and Europe. We will be proposing that set-aside be replaced by a combination of cross-compliance, to secure the general benefits of set-aside across the farming landscape, and agri-environment, to deliver the more targeted benefits to individual species.

For further details, please e-mail harry.huyton@rspb.org.uk

Big Garden Birdwatch

Thank you to everyone who took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch in January 2007. Yet again, there was amazing support for the count, with over 400,000 people involved.

This year's results were made up of more than six and a half million birds, counted in 236,000 gardens!

The house sparrow once again retained its position as the most common garden bird, closely followed by the starling. However, despite their position in the top 10, both species have declined over the last 25 years.

There was a drop in the number of birds seen in gardens compared to the same time in previous years. This is possibly because January was one of the mildest on record. There was a bumper crop of fruits in woodlands and hedgerows, which may have kept birds well fed and contributed to their absence in gardens.

The weather also changed the behaviour of some migratory songbirds. The most notable drop was seen in birds whose numbers are usually swelled by immigrants from the continent. Whilst starlings, blackbirds and robins can be seen year-round, in winter they are usually joined by continental birds. This year, however, because of above-average temperatures across Europe, most birds stayed put and simply did not make their annual migration.

These results show how changes in the climate can create changes in bird behaviour and trends.

The 2008 Bird Garden Birdwatch will take place over the weekend of 26–27 January. Everyone who has previously taken part will be sent a form automatically.

Take part online by visiting www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The yellowhammer population in Northern Ireland is the focus of much attention

Yellowhammers in Northern Ireland

In January 2006, the RSPB in Northern Ireland set up a Yellowhammer Recovery Project to determine if Northern Ireland's agri-environment scheme, the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS), is really benefiting yellowhammers and other seed-eating farmland birds.

Firstly, arable options providing summer insect and winter seed food were monitored to see if these are of benefit to yellowhammers. Not surprisingly, yellowhammers preferred CMS stubbles and wild bird cover compared with silage and pasture!

Summer options work was more inconclusive – yellowhammers did not appear to be using hedges next to rough grass margins or conservation cereal any more than hedges that were not next to these options. This may be because summer insect sources are not limiting in Northern Ireland, or that the options are not being managed appropriately, for example that there is not enough variety in the rough grass margins. Steps are now being put in place to address these management issues.

For the farm-scale work, a baseline survey was carried out this year on 22 CMS farms with no summer insect options (rough grass margins, conservation cereal) and 22 non-CMS farms. As the farms are in arable/mixed areas, they already have a source of winter seed. During the next few years, the 22 CMS farms will be encouraged to add summer insect options to their agreements and given management advice. At the end of the project, we will carry out a repeat survey and hope to see an increase in the number of breeding yellowhammers on the CMS farms. We will also repeat the summer options work again, to see if the revised management has meant that these options are used by yellowhammers.

The farm-scale work and advice is proving a hit with farmers, with 10 farms adding rough grass margins and 13 farms adding conservation cereals to their agreement. Two demonstration days held recently on rough grass margins had a full turnout of project farmers and a few extras!

For further details, please e-mail claire.barnett@rspb.org.uk

Questionnaire results

What do farmers think of the V&FA? The questionnaire results from those farmers who participated in 2005 reveal that:

- 98% of farmers felt that taking part in the V&FA was worthwhile
- 97% of farmers found the laminated survey map useful
- 91% of farmers had species on their farm that they had not previously noticed
- 88% of farmers had put into practice farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map
- 70% of farmers are now more likely to be involved with other RSPB initiatives.

What do the volunteers think of the V&FA? The results of the questionnaires completed by volunteers in 2006 indicate that:

- 98% were satisfied with the level of support they received from project staff
- 96% thought the maps that were provided for their fieldwork were suitable
- 94% enjoyed participating in the project, either a great deal or a fair amount
- 88% of volunteers were pleased with the V&FA training that they received.

Operation Lapwing aimed to generate support to address the decline of farmland bird populations through a package of advisory, public relations and fundraising work.

During its course, more than 1,000 farmers participated in Operation Lapwing. The analysis of the questionnaires sent to participants throughout the project's duration, suggests that:

- 91% felt that taking part in the project was worthwhile
- 66% had frequently put guidelines into practice
- 48% of farms saw an increase in lapwing numbers.

The project has been sponsored by Jordans Cereals. Both the RSPB and Jordans Cereals are delighted to have worked together on Operation Lapwing to promote wildlife-friendly farming techniques. Thank you to everyone who took part.

How far can a project reach?

The concept of the V&FA is spreading far and wide. Last year we told you about the Swedish equivalent and how the work was progressing. That pilot study has now developed into a full-scale project involving approximately 90 farms across Sweden. There are various exchange trips planned during the winter, to ensure both projects continue to learn from each other.

Meanwhile in Portugal, another scheme translated as Know the Birds of your Property was modelled on our work in the UK. The BirdLife partner in Portugal (SPEA) has implemented several agricultural projects, including one that engages with landowners to evaluate the bird biodiversity present on their farming estates. It advises them on simple management practices that would benefit birds and their habitats, as well as producing a short report and strategy on the potential of that estate for nature-based tourism activities.

To promote participation and interest, a competition was launched, offering a prize to the owner of the estate that registered most bird species. Last year's prize was a visit to Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire. The winning landowners came to the UK in December with BirdLife staff and a representative from the main Portuguese farmers' union. The party also met agricultural staff to discuss current projects and practices.

A further 18 estates have been visited this year, with the help of staff involved in the V&FA in Northern Ireland and

this year's prize will be a visit to another site. The funding for the programme has now finished and alternative funding is being sought.

Elsewhere, conservation organisations in Holland, Bulgaria and Australia are enthusiastic about replicating elements of the V&FA in the UK.

For further details, please e-mail jenny.atkins@rspb.org.uk



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The V&FA in the UK is being replicated far and wide

Homes for Wildlife

This autumn saw the launch of an exciting new RSPB initiative. Homes for Wildlife does what it says on the tin – encourages wildlife-friendly management of homes and gardens anywhere in the country to make them a better place for wildlife.

We know from our nature reserves and many farms, that managing with wildlife in mind makes a difference. Wildlife doesn't recognise the garden fence or hedgerow as a boundary, so it doesn't matter how big or small your garden is, collectively you can play your part in managing the biggest nature reserve in the UK – and it is on your doorstep. So, whether your garden is big or small, urban or rural, why not take part?

Visit www.rspb.org.uk/hfw and receive tailored management advice, which is simple to follow and can make your home and garden a real home for wildlife.



The house sparrow will benefit from wildlife-friendly management

Keeping you informed

The RSPB has names and addresses of farmers and volunteers who have participated in agricultural projects. This information, and other details that you have given us in connection with each project, is held by the RSPB on paper and computer. All details will be kept confidential.

We will not make your name, address or any other information available to external organisations without your

permission. Through projects such as the V&FA and Operation Lapwing, 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 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

Midlands Regional Office 46 The Green, South Bar, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX16 9AB
Tel: 01295 253330

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

Northern England Region

1 Sirius House, Amethyst Road, Newcastle Business Park, Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 7YL
Tel: 0191 256 8200

Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Denby Dale, Huddersfield HD8 8QD Tel: 01484 861148

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

South West England Regional Office 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 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP Tel: 01224 624824

S and W Scotland Regional Office 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.

Registered charity England & Wales no 207076,
Scotland no SC037654 223-1199-07-08