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The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

FIELD OF VIEW

ISSUE 7 NOVEMBER 2008



Mike Lane (rspb-images.com)

Amongst other key species, choughs benefit from sensitive management on Slade Farm

Farmer in Wales wins award

For three months during the summer, the public voted in their thousands to identify the UK's most wildlife-friendly farm in this year's RSPB Nature of Farming Award.

Congratulations to Peter Davies of Slade Farm, in the Vale of Glamorgan, who won the competition.

This award is run by the RSPB and BBC *Countryfile* magazine to celebrate the fantastic work that UK farmers are doing to give wildlife space to thrive and it is supported by Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife.

Four finalists were selected from eight regional and country winners across the UK. The judges were impressed by the efforts made on all the farms, proof that productivity and biodiversity can go hand in hand.

Peter's farm is a 324-hectare mixed organic farm, which entered Tir Gofal in 2000. Since then, Peter has developed ways to benefit wildlife within a viable farm business.

Hedgerows and streamside corridors have been created, and sensitive grazing helps the wildlife on the cliffs and semi-improved grassland where bee orchids and tuberous thistles grow. Other species to benefit include the chalk carpet moth, dingy skipper and white letter hairstreak butterflies while lesser horseshoe bats and great crested newts are also resident. Wild bird cover and over winter stubbles provide food for linnets, tree sparrows and yellowhammers. A pair of choughs nest on the sea cliffs and barn owls, buzzards and peregrines breed on the farm too.

Local groups benefit from educational visits to the farm and nearly 3,000 metres of public access paths cross the farm, including a wheelchair friendly route.

The dedication shown by all of this year's finalists was truly inspiring. You can read more (and how to enter) inside this newsletter.

**In this issue: The Nature of Farming Award • Farming for the future on the Nene Washes
• Birdwatchers help target action for birds • Set-aside update • The benefits of cereal silage**



Gwyn Thomas has re-instated century old management on Blaen y Nant

Mandi Robins (RSPB)

Using past practices for a better future

A farm shortlisted for the Nature of Farming Award in Wales was Blaen y Nant in the Ogwen Valley. Gwyn Thomas has been a National Trust tenant for 12 years and has been dedicated to borrowing from the past to farm for the future on the hill farm's 321 hectares.

Committed to using the same systems that have been used for hundreds of years, Gwyn decided to farm organically ten years ago. He reintroduced Welsh black cattle after an absence of 64 years and now leaves three quarters of the farm free of stock during the winter. He has also reduced sheep numbers from 1,200 to 300; a similar number to that of 1754. With all this in place, Gwyn has noticed flora flourishing – especially the heather on the mountains – and an increase in wildlife, benefiting from the increased cover and food.

Combining conservation with farming practice, Gwyn makes traditional silage and grows fodder and cereal crops for organic winter feed. He combines a couple of pounds of herbs into the latter, inspired by times when a herbalist planted in the area in the 1700s. In the eighth year of his Tir Gofal agreement, Gwyn has used the scheme to restore and recreate landscape features and habitat – dry stone walls have been rebuilt, wildlife corridors planted alongside the river, woodland areas enclosed and approximately 3,000 saplings planted each year. In addition, otter holts have been built and barn owl boxes erected.

When asked about future changes, Gwyn is happy with the way things have turned out, believing a balance between farming and wildlife has now been achieved.

For more details, e-mail amanda.robins@rspb.org.uk

Farming for the future on the Nene Washes

Having tried for 14 years, we are now in possession of March Farmers on the Nene Washes in Cambridgeshire. This is not a conventional land acquisition because we have bought the company that owns the tenancy to 313 hectares of the Childers Estate on the Nene Washes.

The farm is unusual too as it lies within the flood storage area of the Washes but has private banks that exclude all but the highest floods. These banks have allowed 50 years of arable farming and associated peat shrinkage to take place. For the immediate future we will continue to farm the land, but the long-term aim is to restore it to wet grassland.

The RSPB already manages more than 500 hectares of grassland on the Nene Washes, including 80 hectares immediately west of the new site.

March Farmers is a stunning place for birds. With a shallow flood, it will be by some margin the most effective refuge we have for ducks, geese and swans on the Washes, while last winter there were 5,000 black-tailed godwits in just one field.

Numbers of wintering passerines are still good, but the record of 3,000 tree sparrows in the 1970s is likely to stand for some time. However, it is for breeding waders that the site could become especially important in the future. There are usually between 60 and 90 pairs of lapwings and we hope that black-tailed godwits and snipe will colonise from the existing RSPB reserve.

Another future target will be the return of corncrakes to the farm where they were once described as being abundant. However, the immediate concern is the preparation of the land to grow potatoes, spring wheat and linseed in 2009.

For further details, e-mail simon.tonkin@rspb.org.uk



Further land adjacent to the Nene Washes (pictured above) has been secured

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Agricultural work in Sweden

As part of the on-going relationship the RSPB has with conservation organisations in Sweden, last winter Jenny Atkins, the RSPB's Agricultural Projects Manager, spent a month with colleagues in Sweden, assisting with the development and continued success of their advocacy work.

Sweden is one of the largest countries in Europe, with half of the land covered by forest and more than a third either mountains, marshland or lakes.

The total area of arable land amounts to 3 million hectares (7.5%) and the area used as pasture amounts to 550,000 hectares (1.5%). Their agricultural policy is fully in line with the EU.

Despite its northerly geographical location, the climate in Sweden is favourable, with cold winters inhibiting infestations by many crop pests. However, the scope for agricultural activities differs a great deal between the north and south. The prospects for farming are less favourable in the north because the average temperature is lower and the growing season is shorter. But the long days and the midnight sun makes the growing period intensive and allows the production of high quality potatoes, berries and vegetables, and elsewhere, cereals and other root crops including sugar beet in the south.

Just 2% of Sweden's labour force earned their living in agriculture in 1999, compared with more than 50% at the beginning of the 20th century. Most farms are family businesses and few small farms have a successor waiting to replace the present farmer. Government policy in recent years has been to merge small unprofitable farms into larger units of 10–20 hectares of arable land with some woodland. Part-time farming, supplemented by other employment, has become increasingly common.

In densely-forested parts, farming and forestry are often combined, with 70% of the farming enterprises combination businesses.

Based at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala, the trip to Sweden involved working alongside the Swedish Ornithological Society and Sweden's Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies. Jenny's time was spent assisting with their equivalent of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA). She also contributed to the development of advisory materials (based on those that the RSPB distribute), accompanied the farm advisors on site visits, gave a presentation on RSPB agricultural work and learnt about farmland bird ecology, agricultural systems and other land uses in Sweden.

The Swedish landscape is very distinctive and almost devoid of hedgerows. There are few livestock-only farms, because farms with livestock grow cereal for animal feed and bedding over the winter. Spring sown cereals are more common because of the difference in seasonal weather. There are no rabbits on agricultural land, but an issue Sweden does have to contend with is the predation of livestock by lynx.

The range of farmland birds is very different. There are no established breeding populations of barn owls, stone-curlews or turtle doves, while bullfinches and song thrushes are almost exclusively woodland birds. The breeding birds that we lack include ortolan buntings and red-backed shrikes, but the most striking difference is the suite of bird species which over-winter in the UK from Sweden where they have bred, including fieldfares, redwings and waxwings.

Predictably, farmland birds are also in decline in Sweden with the population of corncrakes, curlews, linnets, red-backed shrikes, skylarks and wheatears experiencing the most marked of these declines. Previous issues of this newsletter have made mention of the predicament of corn buntings in Sweden where authorities are still working, in conjunction with the RSPB, to avoid its extinction as a breeding bird.

Thanks to staff at the University of Agricultural Sciences, the Swedish Ornithological Society and Sweden's Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies who supported Jenny's visit and to the farmers involved for their hospitality and willingness to speak English!

This trip further cements the working relationship the RSPB has with its partners and we welcome future co-operation and a visit to the UK from our colleagues in Sweden.

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

Making life rewarding

An American Express systems analyst has swapped computers for conservation after embarking on a sabbatical with the RSPB. Maggy Robinson spent the summer working in our office in Brighton under an employee reward scheme operated by American Express.

The global bank which is Brighton's largest private employer, continued to pay Maggy's salary as she turned her attention to the RSPB's farmland bird projects in the region.

Maggy delivered more than 4,000 hectares of surveys during her time with us and commented; "It's phenomenal! This is such an incredible opportunity for me. I'm a member of the RSPB and have always had a high regard for the organisation. When I found out they had an office in Brighton, I jumped at the chance.

"It's great to be able to support a conservation charity so directly. After 25 years of being office based, I have really enjoyed a complete change. I have been getting outdoors and on to farms to do surveys, and have been impressed by how closely the RSPB is working with farmers in the region."

It is encouraging that the RSPB reaches out to a wide range of people, including completely different organisations. Maggy's enthusiasm goes to show that being involved with the RSPB can be an amazing experience, not just by being a member, but by working or volunteering with us too.

For more information, e-mail eleanor.burke@rspb.org.uk

A walk in the park for black grouse

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park in Scotland was the stunning setting for two black grouse workshops organised by the RSPB earlier this summer.

With the rapid declines of black grouse in this part of Scotland, conservation action for this priority species is very much needed and raising awareness is an important part of this. The most recent analysis of black grouse populations, between 1995 and 2005, shows a 29% decline in Scotland with a 49% decline in just the south-west.

The workshops conveyed information on the ecological requirements of black grouse, the types of management they benefit from and the funding opportunities available to farmers and landowners to deliver that management. As Rural Development Contracts (RDCs) were fully launched in Scotland in the spring, it was an opportune time to discuss how the options available under RDCs could be applied to benefit black grouse.

The two workshops each had a slightly different emphasis. One of them, "Focus on Forestry", addressed forestry management for black grouse, while the "Focus on Farming" workshop discussed the management of moorland and upland farmland habitats for this species. Attendees at the workshops included land managers, advisors and staff from Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Division.

Indoor morning sessions were followed by field visits to witness first-hand existing or proposed habitat management for black grouse. Sites included an area that is managed for black grouse in the FCS Queen Elizabeth

Forest Park near Aberfoyle and Glenny Hill Farm, where Neil and Maureen Campbell, the farmers, are keen to maintain and increase numbers of black grouse while sustaining a viable farming system.

Both workshops were funded by Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority and SNH, through the Natural Heritage Grant Scheme. Lisa Webb, Advisory Officer, based in Glasgow, said, "We were delighted to organise these workshops with support from the Natural Heritage Grant Scheme. With the recent launch of RDCs, it is essential that those working with the scheme are aware of how to manage positively for black grouse so that we can help the fortunes of this species in the National Park and, indeed, elsewhere in Scotland."

For more details, e-mail lisa.webb@rspb.org.uk



Swedish farmland with typical rocky outcrops

Jenny Atkins (RSPB)



Black grouse workshop field visit in Scotland

Lisa Webb (RSPB)

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

Birdwatchers help target action for birds

Birdwatchers are helping to conserve the birds they record through the Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP). The BCTP is a UK-wide project, which brings together bird data from a wide range of sources to develop maps to target conservation action for birds.

The maps influence how hundreds of millions of pounds are spent to benefit birds through agri-environment schemes, by helping the schemes pay landowners to put the right conservation measures in the right place. From 2009 onwards, the bird data collected by the V&FA may also contribute to the Bird Atlas.

The target maps are already in use in the UK. For example, they are being used to target Natural England's agri-environment resources through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and the new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme.

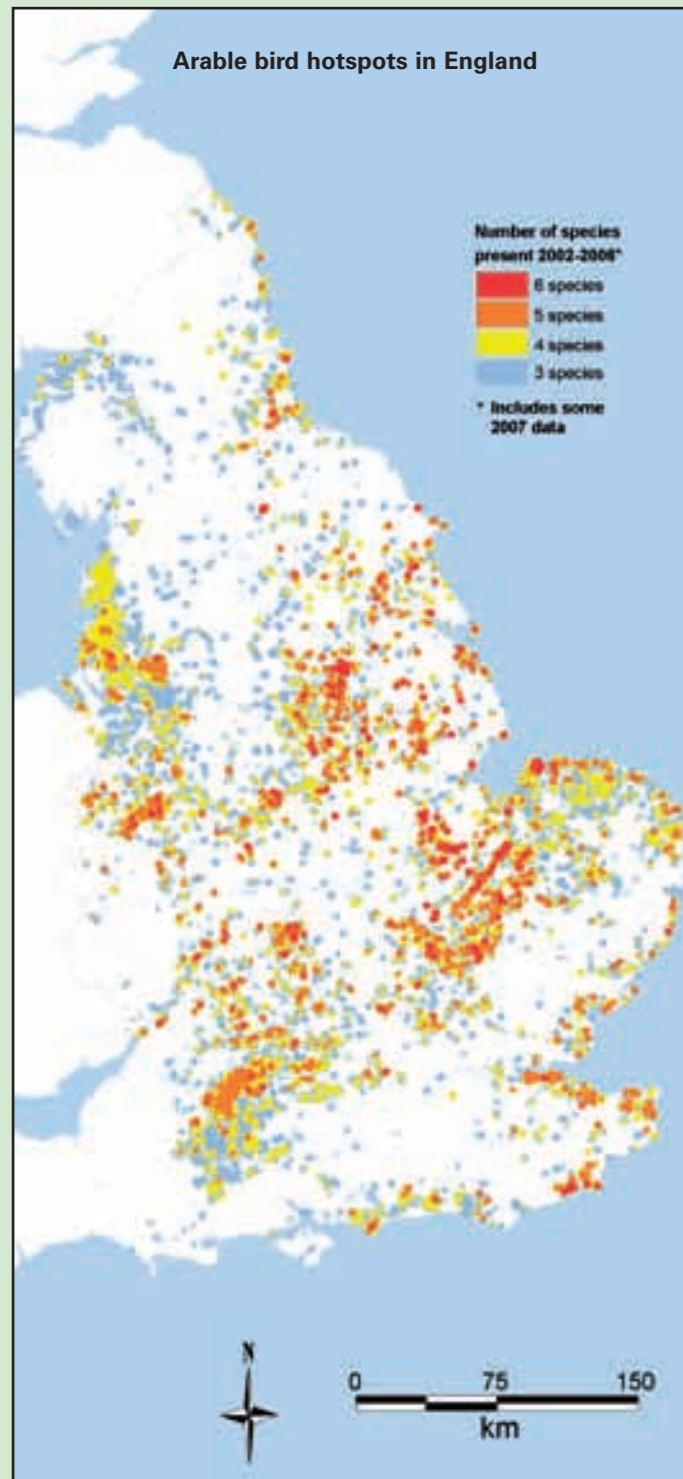
In England, landowners with three or more of the following arable bird species; corn bunting, grey partridge, lapwing, tree sparrow, turtle dove and yellow wagtail, breeding on or near their land, will be eligible for HLS to provide more nesting opportunities and improve the availability of food for these species. Similarly, landowners will also be eligible for the scheme, if they are in hotspots for birds of wet grassland, or have rare farmland species such as black grouse or stone-curlews breeding on or near their land.

Volunteers can provide records to the BCTP using BirdTrack www.birdtrack.net which is an easy to use website developed by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the RSPB and BirdWatch Ireland. The website allows birdwatchers to store and manage their records online while directly contributing to conservation. Records are most useful if they are accurate to 1 km resolution, with a date, number of birds and the breeding status. Bird records are also gathered from many local bird clubs and national datasets held by the RSPB (eg the V&FA) and the BTO (eg the Bird Atlas).

The target maps, which include records from the most recent five year period, will be updated annually to ensure that they enable resources to be targeted accurately using the most up-to-date information.

The Bird Conservation Targeting Project is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Forestry Commission England, Forestry Commission Wales, Forest Service, Natural England, the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage.

For more information about the project, visit www.rspb.org.uk/targeting



The RSPB knows that farmers are all important to the conservation of wildlife on farms and that many are already taking action to help wildlife. As such we joined forces with *BBC Countryfile* magazine, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife to launch a competition to highlight the work that farmers undertake for wildlife.

There were 325 entries in the Nature of Farming Award this year. The judging process identified eight winners, selected for their commitment to providing and improving fantastic habitats, and increasing biodiversity through sensitive farm management. Along with Peter Davies whose farm won (and features on the front page) the following seven farms were selected as finalists.

Michael Poland, *Isle of Wight, South East England*

Michael's 485-hectare farm, Wroxall Manor, boasts six ancient woodlands, heathland, chalk downland, ponds and a network of thick, bushy hedgerows. The vast array of habitats means it is home to red squirrels, dormice, adders and both Bechsteins and Barbastelle bats. Exceptionally, the birds that benefit include Dartford warblers and nightjars. Measures introduced by Michael include tree surgery to prolong the life of ancient woodlands, heathland restoration and seasonal grazing with Highland cattle to maintain and enhance the species-rich downland where butterflies, including orange-tips, and pyramidal and bee orchids can now be found.



Orange-tip

Robert Thompson (Butterfly Conservation)



Red squirrel

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Neil Dobson, *Shropshire, Midlands*

The Dobsons run a mixed farm, where improvements have been made to wet grassland for lapwings, with wet features created using a rotary ditcher and a wind pump to distribute water. Low input barley and wild bird seed mixtures provide habitat for corn buntings and grey partridges. Wild flower meadows have been created using green hay from a nearby Site of Special Scientific Interest.

A nature reserve has been established with high botanical interest and has attracted birds such as the bittern. The hedgerows have a dense base, providing valuable nesting habitat and areas of scrub have been planted using species appropriate to the historic fen landscape.

The passion, commitment and ability that the family demonstrate by providing important habitat for wildlife while maintaining a profitable business is very impressive.



Yellow wagtail

Stephen Blair (RSPB)

Martin Smith, *Essex, Eastern England*

Martin has shown that profitable farming and positive management for wildlife can work together on his mainly arable farm, managing wild bird mixes, fallows and margins for birds and butterflies. He has created a wetland habitat, using a solar-powered pump to retain water levels throughout the year, attracting waders during both the winter and summer, and the farm supports a population of water voles. It also boasts an impressive number of farmland birds in decline, including corn buntings, grey partridges, lapwings and yellow wagtails.

Martin's way of balancing the needs of farmland biodiversity and a commercially viable farming system allows the promotion of this type of approach to a wide agricultural audience.



Linnets

David Morris (RSPB)

Hamilton Kee, *Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland*

Hamilton's farm is on the banks of the River Camowen and is a true product of the drumlin landscape with a rich network of broadleaved woodland, raised bog, species-rich grassland and scrub. It is a real model for sustainable farming. Historically a dairy unit, it is now a mixed enterprise including beef, cereal and horticultural production, supporting a farm shop and organic produce box scheme. Irish hares thrive on the farm, which supports buzzards, kestrels, linnets, reed buntings, snipe and woodcocks, while the Camowen is home to dippers, kingfishers, otters, salmon and brown trout.

The farm is in Countryside Management which has enabled Hamilton and his son to fence off more water courses and replace parkland trees. In keeping with other taxa, bats benefit from the abundance of insects that the habitats on the farm provide.

Andrew Holland, *Lancashire, Northern England*

Andrew is an incredibly passionate farmer and conservationist, who is a great advocate of how farming and wildlife can work together. Andrew farms his productive 37-hectare vegetable and cereal farm in a traditional manner, while allowing space for wildlife to flourish. The farm supports a wealth of wildlife including at least 18 species of butterfly and flora such as the snake's head fritillary, the purple rampion-fumitory and a spectacular abundance of bluebells and wild garlic.

A suite of farmland birds includes barn owls, corn buntings, grey partridges, skylarks, yellowhammers and yellow wagtails while the tree sparrow population has trebled in recent years. The farm woodland is being managed to encourage breeding willow tits.



Woodland with bluebells

Mark Thomas (RSPB)

Patrick Bowden-Smith, *Fife, Scotland*

Patrick demonstrates an exciting ability to farm commercially, with the environment at the heart of his business decisions. Wind turbines and solar panels power electric fences and water pumps assist agrinutrient reduction. Farmland birds such as barn owls and grey partridges thrive due to a great range of bird-friendly management such as well-sited wild bird cover, grass margins, hedgerow and farm woodland management and even bird-friendly (wide-mesh) fencing. The production of charcoal is being trialled on the farm from coppiced ash, creating additional income.

Some of the most impressive achievements involve managing water. Wetland restoration and improved water and field margins support otters and water voles and have enabled sea trout to return to the local burn to spawn for the first time in 60 years.



Barn owl

David Morris (RSPB)

THE NATURE OF FARMING AWARD



Martin Warren (Butterfly Conservation)

Chalkhill blue

Henry Edmunds, Wiltshire, South West England

A visit to the Cholderton Estate is a lesson in biodiversity. Henry has dedicated the last 20 years to improving wildlife habitat on his land. The restoration of 220 hectares of chalk downland has boosted numbers of rare butterflies, including Adonis and chalkhill blues. Under Henry's management, 13 km of cultivated arable margins have been created for rare arable plants, 50 hectares of winter seed is provided for birds and cropping patterns are planned annually to benefit breeding lapwings. Hedges are kept tall and thick providing nesting habitat for turtle doves. Mature areas of hazel woodland are coppiced as suitable habitat for dog violets and associated butterflies including purple emperors and fritillaries.

If you believe you are doing your best to provide for wildlife on farmland, then you could win £1,000. The Nature of Farming Award aims to recognise your achievements in adopting management practices that benefit wildlife.

Cavan Scott, Editor of *BBC Countryfile* magazine, said, "Peter is a fantastic example of the role farmers play in managing our countryside and its wildlife. Above all, it proves that conservation work and profitable farming aren't mutually exclusive goals."

Dr Darren Moorcroft, Head of Countryside Management Advice at the RSPB, said, "Peter should be proud to be the public's first choice given the strength of the competition. All the finalists are showcasing the best farming practices. An eye for detail in both food production and help for wildlife means everything that depends on their land is benefiting. We hope other farmers will be inspired to follow Peter's lead."

If you think you might like to enter the competition next year, find out how at www.rspb.org.uk/farming



David Morris (RSPB)

Turtle dove

Recovering choughs

In Northern Ireland, the chough is a rare breeding bird, with just one pair remaining on the north coast. Because they have nested on the Causeway coast during the last few years, and more recently on Rathlin Island, the RSPB and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have been working with farmers to ensure that feeding areas are managed for choughs, through agri-environment schemes.

The RSPB and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency have also been managing land for the species on their reserves on Rathlin. This work has helped to sustain the only remaining pair, but we need to find out why the young birds are not returning to breed. Thirteen young have been raised on Rathlin, but there's still only one breeding pair there. A key to working out why the choughs are not returning is to find out where they go in autumn and winter.

Choughs are unusual in that they take their young to a flock with other young birds once they have fledged. The closest flocks to the north coast are on the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal and on Islay in Scotland, but up until now it has

been unclear which area the Rathlin young go to. This year, the chough pair bred on Rathlin Island and four healthy chicks were fitted with colour-rings. The next step was to find someone willing to search the flocks on Inishowen to see if they could find the Rathlin birds. Dave Lamacraft who works for the RSPB in Wales, took on the task and spent two weeks in September, following the chough flocks.

As this article goes to press, the story has taken an interesting turn. In areas with large numbers of choughs, the adults leave the young with the flock and then return to their home area. The Northern Ireland birds traditionally haven't done this and have only returned in spring. However, this year the breeding pair returned just a few weeks after leaving. We think this is a sign that the habitat is good enough to sustain them over the winter. Let's hope that the young choughs follow this good example and return to Rathlin when they reach maturity.

For further details, e-mail annemarie.mcdevitt@rspb.org.uk

Hope Farm update

It has been an interesting year from both a farm and an ornithological perspective, with record harvest results and our second highest farmland bird index. We finished harvesting the wheat and spring beans at the end of August during one of the few dry spells. Yields from the wheat were particularly impressive with the crop averaging 12t/ha, beating our previous best by nearly a tonne. The crops required some additional drying but compared with our neighbours, we were fortunate. The spring beans averaged 3.6t/ha whilst the oilseed rape produced the most disappointing results achieving 2.5t/ha.

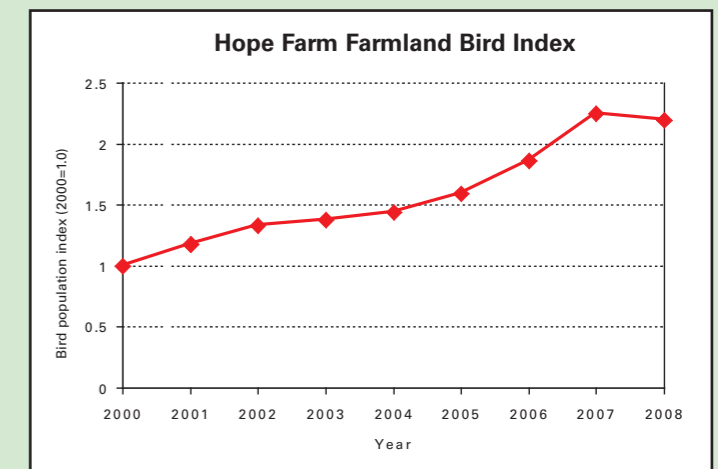
One of the important aspects of Hope Farm has been to show farmers that running a commercial arable farm can go hand-in-hand with increasing wildlife. Whilst 2007's yields were down, the return to the RSPB and arable farmers in general was significantly improved. This largely came from the dramatic rise in commodity prices. Wheat prices rose from £70 per tonne in 2006 to £200 in 2007. You can see the latest Hope Farm results, independently audited by Smith Gore, on the RSPB website. Alternatively, you can request this information from Chris Bailey, the RSPB's Farm Manager.

The farmland bird index for the farm decreased very slightly in 2008 from 2007's record figure (see graph) but overall it still shows the incredible increase in bird numbers since we bought the farm. As this is an annual measure of 19 farmland bird species, it should be expected that some annual variation will occur and it is unrealistic to expect increases every year. The definite winners this year were

yellow wagtails, with five pairs residing in the wheat fields and linnets and reed buntings, with record territory numbers of 18 and 9 respectively. The yellow wagtail numbers were particularly encouraging as our research staff have been testing alternative management measures to create suitable late-season nesting habitat specifically for yellow wagtails.

However, skylark numbers were down from 30 to 23 pairs. We are obviously trying to determine why there was such a sharp decline this year; early indications suggest that the very wet period in May and June 2007 resulted in fewer successful nesting attempts which resulted in fewer breeding adults in 2008. It is hoped that the drier breeding season this year will lead to an increase in numbers in 2009.

For further details, e-mail chris.bailey@rspb.org.uk





Field margins provide important habitat during the winter

Richard Whinspear (RSPB)

Events on how to help farm wildlife

A series of technical events have been started through the Farm Wildlife website. The idea is to bring together the expertise of farmers and ecologists to develop the best practice management of habitats for wildlife on farmland and find solutions to common management problems.

The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust Estate at Loddington hosted the first event, on hedgerow management, in January. Nigel Adams of the National Hedgelaying Society described a plan for hedgerow management using a hedge flail every two or three years and a circular saw every few decades to maximise the length of time that a hedge remains in good condition before more labour-intensive management becomes necessary. He believes hedges would only require laying or coppicing once in a farmer's lifetime under such a system. He also presented his 10-point management scale, whereby every hedge can be categorised on the scale from heavily over-trimmed to an under-managed line of trees. The ideal is somewhere in the middle. He suggested remedial management for each of the stages. Bomford Turner demonstrated the various mechanical means of managing hedgerows and Natural England described how agri-environment schemes benefit hedgerows for wildlife.

The second event was held at the RSPB's Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire, and focused on arable field margin management. Chris Bailey, the RSPB's Farm Manager, demonstrated a wide range of habitats that can be created and managed in field margins. Collectively, these habitats can provide over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects that feed on crop pests, pollen and nectar sources for pollinating insects, opportunities for the germination of rare arable plants and seed food for wintering farmland birds. Rough grass margins are one of the most popular options in agri-environment schemes in the UK, but if farmers can mix and match with wild flower mixtures, clover mixtures, bird seed mixtures and cultivated margins for arable plants, then the range of benefits they could provide for farm wildlife would increase enormously.

A more recent event focused on the provision of winter seed food for birds. Subsequent reports on all events and follow-up discussions are available on www.farmwildlife.info, where future events will also be promoted.

Questionnaire results

We would like to extend thanks to all the respondents to last year's questionnaire on set-aside. The results reveal that:

- 37% of respondents had some rotational stubble. 5% fewer expected to have stubble in 2008
- A very small number of farmers planned to have rotational stubble in 2008, after having none in 2007
- 24% of respondents were growing industrial crops on set-aside land. In 2008 only 8% of farmers planned to grow industrial crops
- 27% of respondents had rough grass margins. This was set to increase to 62% in 2008
- 30% of respondents grew wild bird seed mixtures. This was set to increase to 72% in 2008
- The number of respondents with skylark plots remains very low.

More than 500 farmers provided feedback on how their set-aside land was managed in 2007 and what changes were likely to occur in 2008 following the 0% set-aside rate. This was not a scientific survey, but the results paint a useful picture in conjunction with the findings that emerged from official studies. Please see below for plans for a new measure to capture the environmental benefits of set-aside.

In an effort to improve the delivery of the V&FA, every year questionnaires are sent to the farmers who participated in the V&FA the year before last. The questionnaire results from those farmers who participated in 2006 suggest that:

- 97% of farmers felt that taking part in the V&FA was worthwhile
- 97% of farmers found the laminated survey map useful
- 85% of farmers had put into practice farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map
- 80% of farmers had species on their farm that they had not previously noticed
- 53% of farmers are now more likely to be involved with other RSPB initiatives.

Do you prefer electronic news?

While we believe that many of you appreciate receiving this newsletter in the post, some would prefer to receive it electronically. In an effort to reduce our carbon footprint, we can now offer you the opportunity to receive this publication electronically, from 2009 onwards. If you would like to help us with this matter, please e-mail v&fa@rspb.org.uk

Set-aside update

In 2007, the set-aside requirement was reduced to 0% and earlier this year, the European Commission announced proposals to permanently abolish it as part of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) Health Check.

Although the continuation of set-aside as a production control measure is no longer justified, the widespread benefits it brought in terms of nesting and feeding habitats have been widely acknowledged. With no programme for a gradual phase out or an environmental tool to mitigate the effects of its loss, all signs point towards an immediate and damaging shock for many farmland birds. Peak cereal prices have also ensured that the rational economic decision for many arable farmers has been to increase production into previously set-aside areas, with 85–90% of rotational set-aside expected to come back into production in 2008.

However, as the results of the *Field of View* survey on set-aside show (see above), many farmers are continuing to take steps to encourage birds and other wildlife onto their farms. Furthermore, the phenomenal increase in the cost of fertilisers has led some to leave less productive or accessible areas of land uncultivated. The need for areas of farmland to be managed for the environment, and at a

sufficiently large scale, has been recognised by Defra's recent announcement to develop a scheme to capture the benefits set-aside brought. From 2010, arable farmers in England should expect to manage a small percentage of their land for the environment under cross-compliance. Land will not necessarily come out of production and farmers will be able to access "top-up" options under Environmental Stewardship to reward more demanding management. The RSPB will be working closely with Defra to ensure that the new replacement delivers the best results for the environment whilst also providing a well earned reward for farmers willing to go a step further.

However, although this decision has been warmly welcomed by the RSPB, it will only apply to farmers in England. For a replacement mechanism to be effective, it must apply to every country that implemented set-aside in the past. During the CAP Health Check negotiations, due to be completed in November, the RSPB will continue to press decision makers on the urgent need for a new measure in Europe that will ensure the benefits set-aside brought for birds and other wildlife are not lost.

For further details, e-mail jenna.hegarty@rspb.org.uk



Cereal based wholecrop silage is becoming popular

Chris Tomson (RSPB)

The benefits of cereal silage

As livestock farming has become more specialised and there has been greater reliance on grass silage and bought-in feed, the range of crops grown on livestock farms has reduced. Maize now accounts for most arable cultivation in lowland livestock regions, grown as a high yielding, nutritionally valuable silage. A relatively popular alternative to grass and maize silage is cereal based wholecrop silage – where the cereal crop (grain and straw) is ensiled as livestock feed. A three-year trial across farms in Cheshire and Shropshire has been comparing the agronomic and wildlife merits of these main livestock forages.

The trial compared grass, maize, winter wheat wholecrop and spring barley wholecrop. The barley was subjected to split-field management, with one half managed with standard inputs and the other along the minimal input guidelines of the Entry Level Scheme (ELS) wholecrop option EG4. The main findings of the trial were as follows.

Through the summer, all cereal treatments were strongly preferred by a wide range of farmland birds, although swallows markedly favoured the spring barley over winter wheat.

Through the winter, the spring barley treatments (where the following stubble was retained) had far greater usage by birds of conservation priority (eg reed buntings, skylarks and yellowhammers), than did winter wheat (where the stubble was not retained), maize or grass.

Maize and grass silage were little used by most priority farmland birds – which was explained by a lack of seeding plants and invertebrates (plus a difficulty in accessing available food in dense grass silage). Maize was generally intermediate between grass and cereals in its use. The only groups of birds that favoured grass silage fields as a foraging habitat were soil-invertebrate feeding species like thrushes and corvids during the winter.

Production costs (pounds per tonne of dry matter) of cereal based wholecrop silage compare favourably with those of grass silage (c. £77) and maize (c. £52). The high and consistent yields of winter wheat made it the most attractive wholecrop option (c. £50), with spring barley options 15–20% higher (c. £58 for standard input crop and c. £61 for the minimal input treatment).

Farmers in England can now receive payments through ELS to grow autumn or spring sown cereals for wholecrop production as long as input restrictions are followed and stubbles are left in situ until 15 February. This payment reduces production costs by approximately 40% for spring barley (from c. £61 to c. £36) and by an estimated 33%–37% for winter wheat, depending on the reduction in yield from not using broad-spectrum herbicide.

All production costs are based on 2007 figures.

In summary, the replacement of some maize or improved grass silage with cereal based wholecrop silage is likely to have major benefits for farmland birds. Particularly key to providing these benefits will be the retention of winter stubbles. The use of the ELS wholecrop cereal option can make such beneficial management a financially attractive option. Spring sown cereals will provide benefits over autumn sown crops for birds by providing ideal nesting sites for lapwings and skylarks, and being less likely to require the use of broad-spectrum herbicides.

This research project was funded by Defra, and carried out in association with Harper Adams University College and the University of Reading.

For more details and other ways of benefiting wildlife on livestock farms, contact Gethin Davies at gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk or call 01597 827416.

How big is a football pitch?

Since the start of the V&FA and the delivery of the first surveys in 1999, our trained and enthusiastic volunteers have carried out more than 4,000 farmland bird surveys, across the whole of the UK and that is in excess of 350,000 hectares or, if you'd rather, the same number of football pitches!

Dennis Renney, a volunteer who undertakes surveys most years for the project, was unable to volunteer for the RSPB this year and admits that he has really missed it. He said, "Doing the V&FA makes you feel as if you are really involved in conservation – you meet the farmers and can discuss what you have seen straightaway with them."

We have also benefited from a succession of capable project staff over the years that have subsequently been promoted within the RSPB and become agricultural and wetland advisors, conservation, volunteer, communications, media and policy officers and reserve staff.

Adrian Thomas started in 1999 as a V&FA project officer in the Midlands and, having moved on to become an RSPB communications officer in South East England, has watched

the unbelievable growth in the scheme. "In those early days, we were optimistic, but we really couldn't have predicted how successful the project was going to be. We were amazed to be surveying tens of farms; now there are thousands of farmers who, thanks to all the volunteer effort, know so much more about what birds their land supports and how to help them."

More recent changes include the arrival of Felicity Clarke in Exeter and Emily Field in Norwich, who bring a wealth of experience to their regional teams and we plan to recruit project officers in Newcastle and Glasgow too, later in the year.

Felicity and Emily join a team of existing project staff, who are: Eleanor Burke (Brighton), Anna Broszkiewicz (Banbury), Carol Coupe (Preston), Karen Cunningham (Perth) Mandi Robbins (Bangor) and Jenny Atkins (Sandy).

Thank you to all those volunteers that have helped the project so far. For more information, contact a member of project staff or e-mail v&fa@rspb.org.uk

The Big Garden Birdwatch

A huge thank you to everyone who took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch in January 2008. More than 400,000 people took the time to count the birds in their garden for an hour and sent us their results.

In the 2008 Big Garden Birdwatch the house sparrow retained its top spot, the starling remained in second place and the blackbird completed the top three. Despite being the most frequently seen birds during the survey, all three species have declined significantly since the Big Garden Birdwatch started in 1979.

The 2008 results show the average number of birds seen in each garden has declined by a fifth since 2004. However, the numbers of finches visiting UK gardens over the winter were at their highest levels for five years.

The siskin made it into the top 20 for the first time. Results show that over the last five years siskin numbers have increased by almost two thirds. Scarcer finch species such as the brambling have moved up the rankings, and redpolls were much more numerous than usual. The goldfinch made it into the top 10 for the first time, with a third more birds recorded than in 2004.

Participants also noted an increase in song thrush numbers compared to last year. This is probably thanks to last year's

warm, wet summer, which made it easier for them to find snails, slugs and earthworms to feed their young. However, a decline of almost two thirds in song thrush numbers over the past 30 years indicates that there is a long way to go before the declines of the past are reversed.

Next year, the Big Garden Birdwatch will be 30! It will take place over the weekend of 24–25 January 2009. Help us celebrate the 30th birthday by taking part and making it the biggest Big Garden Birdwatch ever!

Visit www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch for more information.



A warm, wet summer last year has seen an increase in song thrush numbers

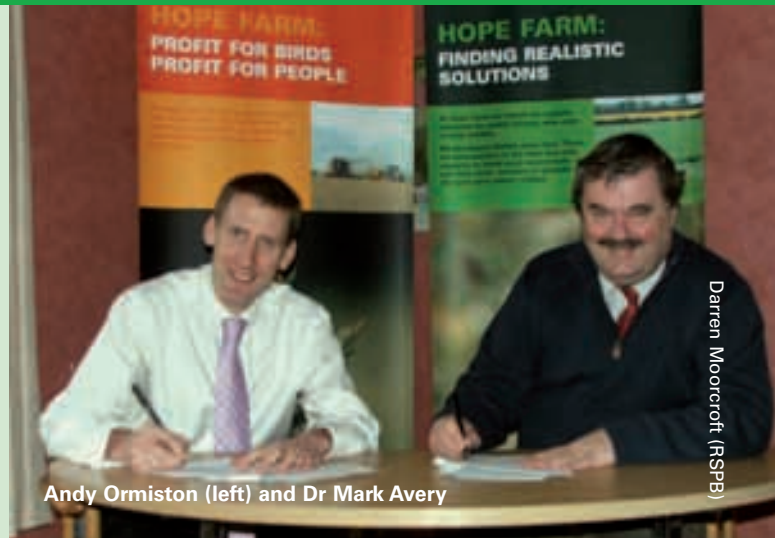
Sue Tarter (rspb-images.com)

Working together

Farming is vital for the future of the UK and its wildlife. That is the firm belief behind a memorandum of understanding signed earlier in the year by the RSPB and the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).

By working more closely and complementing each other's strengths, the two organisations aim to play an enhanced role in helping farmers to protect and care for the wildlife on their land.

In a joint statement, Dr Mark Avery, the RSPB's Director of Conservation and Andy Ormiston, Managing Director of FWAG, said: "At a time when farmers need to balance wildlife and environmental stewardship with the challenges presented by a reforming Common Agriculture Policy, rising demands for food, energy and environmental accountability, and a changing climate, we see the provision of clear support and advice as increasingly important.



Andy Ormiston (left) and Dr Mark Avery

"Farming and the environment are not mutually exclusive and harnessing the knowledge and experience of those with an interest in both is necessary to ensure that a sustainable future for agriculture can become a reality." For further details, e-mail darren.moorcroft@rspb.org.uk

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 the Nature of Farming Award, 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 conservation organisations.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654 223-0983-08-09