

Accessing advisory materials

The RSPB has a wealth of expert staff on hand to offer on-farm advice, as well as printed and online materials for specific species, habitats and farming systems.

Want to find out more about what you can do?

- Sign up to the RSPB's farming e-newsletter at www.rspb.org.uk/farming
- Contact the farmland bird advisor in your region (see below for details).
- Check out www.farmwildlife.info for case studies and advice. Join the online forum or keep up to date with events in your area.
- Request materials on paper or CD-ROM – please speak to your regional RSPB office or contact UK headquarters.



Andy Hey (rspb-images.com)

Keeping you informed

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

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

Please contact 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
7.3.1 Cameron House, White Cross Estate, Lancaster LA1 4XQ Tel: 01524 581000

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

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



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

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654 223-0773-09-10



a million
voices for
nature

The RSPB newsletter for agricultural projects

FIELD OF VIEW

ISSUE 8 NOVEMBER 2009



Lapwing – tens of thousands of farmland birds have been recorded by volunteers since the V&FA was launched in 1999

Tom Marshall (rspb-images.com)

Happy 10th Birthday, V&FA!

Welcome to our special 10th anniversary issue of *Field of View!*

Free bird surveys for a decade. It's hard to believe that the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance (V&FA), launched in the Midlands in 1999, has been providing farmers with free bird surveys for a decade. In that time the project has become an invaluable source of information for over 4,000 farmers around the UK, who are keen to know more about the birds on their land and what they can do to help them. Tens of thousands of birds have been recorded with the help of our dedicated and ever-enthusiastic volunteers, helping us to identify target areas for bird conservation and ensure that we are delivering the most effective advice to improve the health of our farmland bird populations.

Our celebrations kicked off in May with a special reception at the House of Lords, attended by Environment Minister Hilary Benn, top conservation and farming industry figures, as well as farmers and volunteers. This was a fantastic opportunity to celebrate the success of the project so far, as well as to say thank you to all those who have been involved – we couldn't do it without you!

The next three years are going to bring exciting changes and improvements to the delivery of the Volunteer & Farmer Alliance. Despite the success of the project and demand for surveys, we have so far been unable to provide consistent coverage across the UK. Until now! Next year brings new opportunities for us to extend our reach and provide surveys across the whole of the UK – read more about this inside.

**In this issue: The Nature of Farming Award • Set-aside update • A new package for farmland birds
Birds of Conservation Concern • Dates for your 2010 diary**



Benn backs Option B

Farmers in England will face a new challenge when the Campaign for the Farmed Environment launches in November. This is a voluntary initiative developed by the National Farmers Union (NFU) and the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) to retain the benefits of former set-aside land. The campaign will focus on the three main beneficiaries of set-aside: farmland birds, farmland wildlife and resource protection.

Defra's decision to introduce the voluntary campaign followed a lengthy consultation period. The RSPB had supported a mandatory option that would have required farmers in England to manage a small percentage of their arable land for the environment in return for their Single Farm Payment. This would have linked future arable subsidies to environmental benefits and mirrored the distribution of former set-aside land. As the voluntary package announced contains robust targets, the RSPB are backing the campaign and will do all it can to encourage the scheme's best possible delivery. We will however press for a mandatory fallback to be triggered if the campaign fails to generate the agreed outcomes.

The campaign aims to promote options available in the Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) scheme that will help achieve the benefits provided by set-aside. Targets have been set to double the uptake of beneficial "in-field" ELS options for voluntary management with agri-environment schemes and to increase the area of uncropped land available in the farmed landscape. The success of the campaign will rely on farmer participation and will be delivered through County Liaison Groups and demonstration farms. The RSPB will provide advice and training to farmers and their agents through our network of regional agricultural advisers. This advice will centre on promotion of the "Farmland Bird Package" of ELS options.

The area of set-aside in Wales and Northern Ireland was significantly less than Scotland and England, therefore no plans have been developed to mitigate for its loss. In Scotland set-aside was important habitat for many declining farmland species such as the corn bunting. A decision has still to be made on how the benefits of set-aside could be replicated in Scotland. The RSPB supports a compulsory scheme through cross-compliance with top-up measures available through agri-environment.

Hope Farm report

This year will be remembered at Hope Farm for spectacular bird results. Firstly, the exciting news that, for the first time, breeding barn owl was recorded. The pair fledged two chicks using a box that previously held stock doves. The adults drew lots of attention around the village, hunting voles and shrews along the grass margins, research trials and paddocks.

Secondly, breeding bird figures provided record counts of yellowhammer (39 pairs), skylark (44), grey partridge (5), whitethroat (48) and starling (19). The overall Hope Farm Farmland Bird Index has now risen by 177% from our baseline year in 2000. The index is a collective population trend using the same 19 species as the UK government national indicator. At Hope Farm, we have been able to demonstrate that increasing farmland birds does not have to be at the expense of producing food or maintaining profits. Creating seed and insect rich habitats, and providing safe nest sites, help to provide the three vital ingredients that farmland birds need to thrive. While most species increased, there were a few disappointments, most notably only a single pair of yellow wagtail was recorded. Corn buntings are also an enigma, nesting on neighbouring farms but not ours; proof there is still work to be done!

Harvest proved straightforward although patience was required for the moisture levels to drop low enough to

avoid artificial drying. The oilseed rape was harvested mid-July, wheat mid-August and spring beans early September. The oilseed rape averaged 4t/ha, wheat 9.4t/ha and spring beans a disappointing 1.2t/ha.

Not a day that goes by without climate change in the news. To understand Hope Farm's impact on the climate, the RSPB commissioned the University of East Anglia and Lawrence Gould, a specialist farm business company, to assess our carbon footprint.

Three key findings to emerge were:

- 1) the biggest contribution to our farm carbon footprint arises from the fertiliser we apply. Emissions are produced during the manufacture and application of the fertiliser;

- 2) greenhouse gas estimates per tonne of crop are higher for oilseed rape than winter wheat. Spring beans have the lowest estimate;
- 3) environmental options in place to help wildlife, such as grass margins, wild bird cover and nectar mixtures, are able to store carbon. Further work is needed to determine the effectiveness of each method.

Over the next few months, the RSPB will use the report to examine how we can adapt our farming operations to reduce the footprint of the farm whilst maintaining high yields. This will be the key challenge for all farmers.

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



From left to right: Peter Kendall (President, NFU), Chris Bailey (RSPB Farmlands Project Manager) and Dr Mark Avery (RSPB Director of Conservation)

New Birds of Conservation Concern list

Birds of Conservation Concern 3 is the latest assessment of the status of all of the UK's 246 regularly occurring birds, compiled by a partnership of organisations including the RSPB. This updated list shows 52 species are now of the highest conservation concern. Cuckoo, lapwing and yellow wagtail join the turtle dove, grey partridge, house sparrow and starling on the "red list". Woodland birds, summer migrants and seabirds have also joined the list, which now represents 21% of all the UK's bird species.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. In Scotland, the Scottish crossbill population is now stable and has been moved from red to amber status. Five other species, including the stone curlew, have followed suit. Virtually confined to Wessex and central East Anglia, the stone-curlew population has increased because of the fantastic efforts by landowners and farmers to improve the fortunes of this striking wading bird.

V&FA – why get involved?

The Volunteer & Farmer Alliance relies on interested farmers providing access to their farms, and on the volunteers who give up their time to do the surveys. Thousands of people have been involved over the last ten years, so here we look back over just some of their experiences, and find out what made being part of V&FA important for them.

Alan King joined the V&FA project as a surveyor in 2003, having previously volunteered for several other RSPB projects. What's most important to him "is that it's an opportunity to do some meaningful bird watching and the fact that you meet the farmers. They're usually dead keen to have us there." Alan has surveyed over 400 ha of farmland with his surveying partner Ken Orgill. They have recorded many yellowhammers, lapwings and skylarks. Ken says: "As we can only survey on fair days, we always have a wonderful early morning walk around the farms. The farmers I have met are very welcoming – last year our farmer asked us to return in the evening for tea and cake and view his barn owls. We didn't see the owls, but the cake was very nice indeed!"



Dr Mark Avery, RSPB Director of Conservation with volunteer Alan King

RSPB

Volunteer Nigel Jenkinson from Norfolk tells how he "jumped at the chance to undertake a farmland bird survey, and was delighted to find turtle doves" on the farm he visited. "It's great to think that my local farmer is benefiting from my surveys, and I have benefited too, learning a great deal about the farmer's perspective of the countryside."

Henry Lang and his brother Richard requested a survey on their Somerset farm in 2007, to obtain a baseline record against which to measure their success in wildlife-friendly farming in the future. Henry believes that commercially successful, non-organic farming and conservation can go hand-in-hand, and quite rightly says that "to change your farming practices for wildlife, you need to know what wildlife you have."

For Roger Mathias, who had a V&FA survey in 2004, the results from his Pembrokeshire farm were quite revealing. "The V&FA survey highlighted that we had reed buntings. It's great to watch them, and other birds on the farm, eating the wild bird seed mixture I planted specifically for them, through my Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme."

Arnold Park had a survey this year on his mixed farm near Selkirk. "With the Rural Stewardship Scheme coming to an end, I want to retain important habitats and go even further with new measures such as species-rich grassland, hedgerow planting and wild bird cover. The V&FA survey has helped us and our Scotland Rural Development Programme application by highlighting important birds on the farm – such as reed buntings, curlews and lapwings – and how they will benefit from our application."

It's clear from the testimonies of these farmers and volunteers that the benefits of V&FA are far-reaching. Not only are we helping farmland birds, we are also providing others an opportunity to give something back, whether it be through volunteering or managing their farm in a wildlife-friendly way.

We're always looking for new farmers and volunteers, so if you know of farmers who would be interested in a survey, or willing volunteers who can help us carry them out, please ask them to get in touch! Contact details can be found on the back page, or e-mail volunteer&farmeralliance@rspb.org.uk

Farmers, volunteers and the Atlas join forces to target conservation

The Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP) has continued to expand its coverage this year, producing breeding distribution maps to target conservation for more than 40 rare and declining bird species throughout the British Isles.

The success of the maps relies heavily on obtaining widespread, high quality bird records collected from a range of sources including national surveys, V&FA, local bird clubs, and BirdTrack. V&FA records are invaluable, as surveys include land often missed by other surveys, and that land can be perfect for targeted agri-environment resources.

V&FA survey data is put to immediate use by BCTP. Rapid processing of the records by the BCTP means that every year new target areas appear on the maps. UK government agencies can then use them to guide agri-environment resources. The birds, therefore, directly benefit from the surveys as quickly as possible.

Records collected for the upcoming Bird Atlas, coordinated by the BTO, Birdwatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, will feed into the BCTP maps beginning in 2010. The Atlas, which covers all the BCTP species, has widespread coverage and will make a huge difference to BCTP target maps in the coming years, as increasing numbers of Atlas records are added to the maps.

The BCTP is supported by a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Centre for Data and Recording (CEDaR), the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Forestry Commission England (FCE), Forestry Commission Wales (FCW), Forest Service (FS), the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).

For more information, see www.rspb.org.uk/targeting



Knowing which birds are present can help farmers plan their future management

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Tree sparrow

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

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

NORTHERN IRELAND FARMER SCOOPS THE NATURE OF FARMING AWARD 2009

For the second year running, we teamed up with *Countryfile* magazine, Butterfly Conservation and Plantlife to celebrate the work that farmers undertake for wildlife and find the UK's most wildlife-friendly farmer. The high quality of entries made choosing the winners a difficult task, but eventually our judges picked their favourites, selected for their commitment to providing and improving fantastic habitats, and increasing biodiversity through sensitive farm management. Cavan Scott, Editor of *Countryfile* magazine said: "The quality of this year's finalists has been outstanding. Each shows that farms can be both profitable and havens for wildlife. They've gone the extra mile, proving themselves true stewards of their environment and ambassadors for conservation." The public cast votes in their thousands to select the UK Winner, and we're thrilled to announce the winners of the 2009 competition.

UK winner Michael Calvert

County Down, Northern Ireland

Michael's 80-ha arable farm is situated in the drumlin landscape of County Down, just inland from Strangford Lough. After joining the RSPB's Yellowhammer Recovery Project in 2006, Michael has seen numbers of yellowhammers, tree sparrows, linnets and reed buntings triumphantly increase as a result of his hard work and focus.

Simple measures, including planting hedgerows and native woodland, limiting insecticide and herbicide use, and utilising arable options like Wild Bird Cover available through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) Countryside Management Scheme (CMS), have made this possible.

Orchids, newts and dragonflies are found in fenced off areas around the Glen Burn, which runs through part of the farm, and an area of sensitively managed fenland attracts many species.

On winning his award, Michael said: "I would like to thank all those who voted for me. I've had a keen interest in all things to do with nature for many years and joining DARD's Countryside Management Scheme offered a structured approach to farming in an environmentally sensitive way. The expertise and enthusiasm from the RSPB team when I joined the yellowhammer project was infectious and it has been a pleasure to work alongside such committed people."

The RSPB's Darren Moorcroft, Head of Conservation Management Advice, said: "We are extremely proud to be handing this award to someone who really cares about the countryside and the wildlife it supports. All the finalists in this competition have proved that there is a real desire amongst many UK farmers to work their land in harmony with nature and they are setting a great example which we hope others will follow."



Stephanie Sim



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Corn bunting

THE NATURE OF FARMING AWARD

Winner, Midlands George and Ann Eaton

Buckinghamshire

Rectory Farm is a 150-acre mixed farm, with both Countryside Stewardship and Entry Level Stewardship agreements in place. Rotational cropping of winter wheat, oats and barley is managed, as well as 600 head of sheep and 35 suckler cows.

The River Great Ouse forms part of the farm boundary. Three years ago water voles were reintroduced and have now naturalised. Otters have also re-appeared as mink have been removed, and a new backwater and kingfisher bank were created last winter.

In the riverside pasture, the RSPB's rotary ditcher was used in the summer to restore old water channels and incorporate scrapes for lapwings and curlews. One of the water meadows is a County Wildlife Site, designated for its botanical interest. Management of this field as a traditional hay meadow has allowed plants such as meadow saxifrage and yellow rattle to spread.



Andrew Waters

The arable land boasts an impressive patchwork of wild bird seed mixtures, margins and new woodland and hedgerows. George has erected a birdwatching hide, and a restored pond and dipping platform are well-used by the many groups that visit the farm as part of its educational access project, with George and Ann hosting up to sixty school visits per year.

Winner, Scotland John Moir

Aberdeenshire

John is an excellent example of a farmer successfully integrating environmental management into his commercial farm business. His mixed farming enterprise, with diverse cropping and late cutting of grass provides nesting opportunities for corn buntings. Numbers of this rare species have increased on the farm from five singing males in 2006 to 14 in 2008. Breeding waders nest on the spring tilled land and make use of sympathetically managed wet grassland areas. Through the Rural Stewardship Scheme and more recently, Rural Development Contracts, John has introduced unharvested crops to provide seed food for birds such as corn buntings, tree sparrows and yellowhammers. Grass margins and beetle banks have been created to boost insect populations around the arable land, and species-rich grasslands to enhance habitats for plants, butterflies and other insects. During the summer, fields are brought alive by arable plants such as cornflowers and corn marigolds. Butterflies recorded include green hairstreaks, dark green fritillaries and graylings.

The farm plays a significant role in the Strathbeg Goose Management Scheme, enabling thousands of pink-footed geese to graze undisturbed on several grass fields each year. Extensive grassland management attracts thousands of golden plovers, curlews and lapwings during the autumn and winter. The Moirs are involved in the Savoch Burn Catchment Initiative, dedicated to reducing diffuse pollution of this watercourse that feeds into the Loch of Strathbeg. Having begun organic conversion in 2006, their land management reduces nutrient run-off into the burn. By planting riverside woodlands, water margin vegetation has been allowed to develop and valuable buffer strips have been created.



Hywell Maggis

Visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming to enter in 2010

Winner, Northern England Stephen and Joceline Gibson

Yorkshire

Birkdale is a 120-ha mixed arable and sheep farm in Yorkshire, with an impressive range of rare arable flowers including venus's looking glass, hairy buttercup, corn buttercup, weasel's snout, red hempnettle, large flower hemp nettle, shepherd's needle, corn cockle, smooth tare, treacle mustard and four species of poppy. Spotted orchids also appear in the grass margins. Stephen is encouraging these plants to produce seed for spreading these rare species back into the local area through a Cornfield Wild Flowers Project.

Over 100 species of bird have been recorded on the farm including barn owls, turtle doves, grey partridges, a thriving population of tree sparrows and regular breeding spotted flycatchers. New wet grassland has been created for breeding waders, while arable margins and beetle banks support insects. Restored hedgerows now provide excellent cover for nesting birds, berries and a good source of blossom for nectar-feeding insects, and skylark plots have been created to boost breeding success.

Stephen's pond and wetlands support banded demoiselles, black tailed skimmer dragonflies and water voles. Badger gates have been introduced to manage their movement from field to field so as not to disturb nesting lapwings.

The farm encourages visits from universities, ecologists, members of the public and farmers.



RSPB

Winner, South West England David Willoughby de Broke

Gloucestershire

Lord David Willoughby de Broke's farms is a 365-ha mixed unit on the Gloucestershire/Warwickshire border. It holds good numbers of farmland birds with five of the "Arable Six" (grey partridge, lapwing, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow and corn bunting) recorded. Birds are encouraged through the Countryside Stewardship scheme. The farm is working with the RSPB and Natural England to enter into Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), focussing on improving biodiversity. Farm manager Brian Hall (right) has worked with David over the past 35 years to help increase biodiversity on the farm.

Management includes fallow plots in cereal fields for nesting lapwings, wild bird seed mixtures for yellowhammers and linnets, and the small mammals which are the prey of barn owls and kestrels, thrive in a network of rough grass margins.

The farm's 12-ha flower-rich permanent set-aside and extensive grass margins support many butterflies and other insects including the nationally rare bumblebee *Bombus ruderatus*. Other wildlife management undertaken on the farm includes laying and creation of hedgerows, provision of nest boxes and the creation of several ponds, which support dragonflies as well as breeding tufted ducks, reed buntings and reed warblers. The latter species also attracts cuckoos.



Kirsty Brannan

Hester Phillips (RSPB)



Winner, South East England David and Marian Harding

East Sussex

David and Marian Harding run a 222-ha mixed farm on the Pevensey Levels, East Sussex. The farm boasts a wide range of habitats including wet grassland, rough grassland, arable land, ponds, hedgerows and deciduous woodland. Much of the farm has been in a Countryside Stewardship Scheme for the last 10 years, and has recently been transferred into HLS.

Wet grassland management has been a key focus of the work at Court Lodge Farm. Scrape creation, water level management and grazing provide suitable nesting and feeding conditions for lapwings. Ditches are cleared in rotation to create a succession of flowering plants and to provide suitable habitat for the fen raft spider. Across the rest of the farm, arable margins provide hunting habitat for barn owls. Newly planted woodlands include the rare black poplar and hedges are cut on a 2-3 year rotation to provide nest sites for farmland birds.

The conservation work is integrated into the farm business and advertised through the drinking yoghurt that is produced on the farm. Future conservation plans include the creation of a 7-ha reedbed in a naturally wet area of the marsh, and it is hoped this will attract bitterns and marsh harriers.

Winner, Eastern England Andrew and Allison Bond

Essex, Eastern England

Allison and Andrew Bond from Essex have a wide variety of birds and insects on their 113-ha arable farm, all of which are directly benefiting from the couple's dedication and commitment to integrated wildlife friendly farming. Practices such as winter stubbles, unharvested cereal crops, nectar flower crops and fallow plots for ground nesting birds are encouraging lapwings, skylarks and corn buntings onto their land. This allows the farm to provide much-needed sustenance and shelter for a huge range of farmland wildlife.

As well as creating bird habitat and food sources, pond and river management is helping water voles. Nectar sources are available for many invertebrates and grass leys are managed to provide specific conditions for butterflies and moths.

Allison and Andrew have implemented specific land management practices to help their farm biodiversity. Their enthusiasm for the farm and its wildlife, coupled with the willingness to promote it to both their peers and members of the public is truly impressive.



Simon Tonkin

THE NATURE OF FARMING AWARD

Winner, Wales Alan Morgan

Monmouthshire, Wales

Alan Morgan beat stiff competition to become Wales' winner of the Nature of Farming Award. Alan's 58-ha farm in Monmouth is a haven for the rare silver-washed fritillary and clouded yellow butterflies. He also has flocks of seed eating birds such as linnet and yellowhammer, and rare plants such as meadow saffron, greater butterfly orchid and herb paris.

The farm also has a variety of habitats managed to benefit wildlife including restored hay meadows, a woodland that is classed as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) with ancient hazel coppice and dormice, and 15 ponds which support frogs, toads and all three species of newt, including the rare great crested newt.

Alan and his family have farmed the land at Gadr Farm for nearly 40 years, and in November 2000 Alan entered the Welsh Assembly Government's agri-environment scheme Tir Gofal. Over the years, Alan has become more and more interested in managing the farm to benefit wildlife, particularly the SSSI woodland area, and carries out all of the traditional hazel coppicing himself.



Lesley Cowhig (RSPB)

Farming methods can often be modified to reduce negative impact on skylarks



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The Nature of Farming Award celebrates the achievements of farmers putting in place beneficial management practices for all wildlife whilst maintaining a profitable farm enterprise.

If you think your farm could be a winner, why not enter the 2010 competition? Entry is now open, with a chance to win £1,000 and the title of the UK's most wildlife-friendly farm.

"The Nature of Farming Award is a fantastic way to draw attention to the needs of farmland flora and the wildlife that depends on it as well as celebrating the outstanding achievements of so many of the UK's farmers. Working with the RSPB helps all of us spread the vital message of the importance of farming for wildlife, and vice versa." Victoria Chester, Chief Executive of Plantlife.

"Farmland is a vital habitat for butterflies and other wildlife. Butterflies are declining fast. We need the help of farmers to ensure their future survival." Martin Warren, Chief Executive of Butterfly Conservation.

To enter your farm, visit www.rspb.org.uk/farming, e-mail nature-farming@rspb.org.uk or call RSPB headquarters on 01767 680551 for an application form.

New era for V&FA

Although 2009 marks ten years of the V&FA in the UK, the project has not been available to all farmers during that time. Indeed this year there have been no project staff to deliver surveys for farms in Northern Ireland or the north of Scotland, and only minimal activity in Wales.

Now we know how well the project works, and how keen farmers and volunteers are to take part, we want to extend and develop the project fully across the whole of the UK. To do this, we asked the EU's LIFE+ funding programme for help.

In August, the news we had all been waiting for came through – our application had been successful. We are all very excited that we can now help even more farmers identify birds on their farms, and through offering advice and support help them to manage in a beneficial way for the birds found. It also means that we need more volunteers!

Please do get in touch with the Project Officer in your area (contact details can be found on the back page) if you are interested in volunteering or having a survey.

Farm events, shows and training

Technical events promoted through the Farm Wildlife website have been a great success this year.

Specific events looked at barn owl ecology and grey partridge conservation, and gave advice on getting the best out of agri-environment schemes. Events not only give the opportunity to access quality advice and up-to-date knowledge and research, but also a chance to discuss experiences and challenges with other farmers and land managers.

We'll be at events next year so why not come along and have a chat? Visit www.farmwildlife.info for updates on event information, or to add your events.

Some dates for your 2010 diary:
TRAINING

Best use of Environmental Stewardship on an Arable Farm – 19 May and 15 June, RSPB Hope Farm, Cambridgeshire

Integrating the needs of farmland wildlife in lowland livestock/mixed farming systems – March (tbc), Duchy College and 22 September, Great Wollaston Farm, Shropshire

EVENTS

Balmoral Show – 12–14 May 2010, King's Hall, Belfast

Cereals – 9–10 June, Royston, Cambs

Royal Highland Show – 24–27 June
Ingliston, Edinburgh

Scottish Game Fair – 2–4 July, Scone Palace, Perthshire

Royal Welsh – 19–22 July, Royal Welsh Showground, Powys

CLA Game Fair – 23–25 July 2010
Ragley Hall, Warwickshire

Sheep Event – 3 August, Three Counties Showground, Malvern

British Birdwatching Fair – 20–22 August, Egleton Nature Reserve, Rutland

Dairy Event and Livestock Show – 7–8 September, NEC, Birmingham



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

RSPB training events are a great way to keep yourself informed of the best ways to manage farmland for wildlife

A FARMLAND BIRD PACKAGE FOR ARABLE FARMERS

Over the summer, the RSPB met up with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and Natural England to determine the minimum package of conservation measures that should reverse the decline of farmland birds on arable farmland. Although we already know which measures help farmland birds, we have never been able to answer the question “how much?” before. This partnership brought together ecologists and advisers to go through all the scientific evidence gathered over the last 20 years of research into this subject.



The package they came up with can be delivered through Entry Level Stewardship in England. It has also been used to develop the farmland bird theme of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment: the industry-led voluntary approach to replacing the environmental benefits of set-aside. It also has relevance to areas of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where there are important populations of seed-eating farmland birds. It has three elements: winter food, summer food and in-field nesting habitat.

Winter food

The package includes either 2% of farmland managed as wild bird cover (or wild bird seed mixture), or over-wintered stubbles (with no pre-harvest desiccant) on 5% of farmland, or a combination of the two (eg 1% bird cover and 2.5% stubbles). The evidence for the scale of seed food required came from research that showed areas with 10–20% of the land with over-wintered stubbles had no decline in skylarks and yellowhammers. It was agreed that, if no pre-harvest desiccant was used, this could be cut to 5%. Seed-rich wild bird cover crops are estimated to hold eight times the density of seed-eating birds through the winter than conventional stubbles, so 10–20% of stubbles equates to roughly 2% of cover crop.

Summer food

Insect-rich habitat spread across the farmland (eg as six-metre margins) should make up 1% of the land using one or more of the options listed below.

- Conservation headlands (harvested or unharvested)
- Uncropped cultivated margin
- Undersown spring cereals
- Nectar flower mixtures or flower-rich margins
- Low-input cereals followed by overwintered stubbles

The scale of insect-rich habitats required is less well understood. Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust research suggests that insect-rich brood-rearing habitat on 3% of land would be required to reverse the decline of grey partridges, but as many of the other measures in the package would also have benefits for insects, this was scaled down to 1%. It is important that the benefit for insects is maximised by spreading this area across the farm in the form of a network of habitats. For the benefit of species such as the grey partridge, low-input options such as conservation headlands, and cultivated uncropped margins would be preferable to pollen and nectar mixtures, which are generally too dense for birds to forage in successfully.

Nesting habitat

Twenty skylark plots per 100-ha would improve the quality of farmland for nesting skylarks in areas where winter cereals form a significant proportion of the arable cropping. Alternatives are a fallow plot for ground-nesting birds or winter stubbles retained through the spring (akin to the old rotational set-aside but with no sprays before mid-May) on 1% of the farmland. It is estimated that two skylark plots per hectare on 10–20% of winter cereals would be sufficient to halt the decline of skylarks on arable land. Ten hectares of good management of winter cereals (with 20 skylark plots) per 100-ha would roughly meet this target. Retaining winter stubbles or fallow land through the spring would be a good substitute, especially where there are nesting lapwings, and would provide nesting habitat for yellow wagtails and skylarks as well as food for a wide range of species.

Who will benefit?

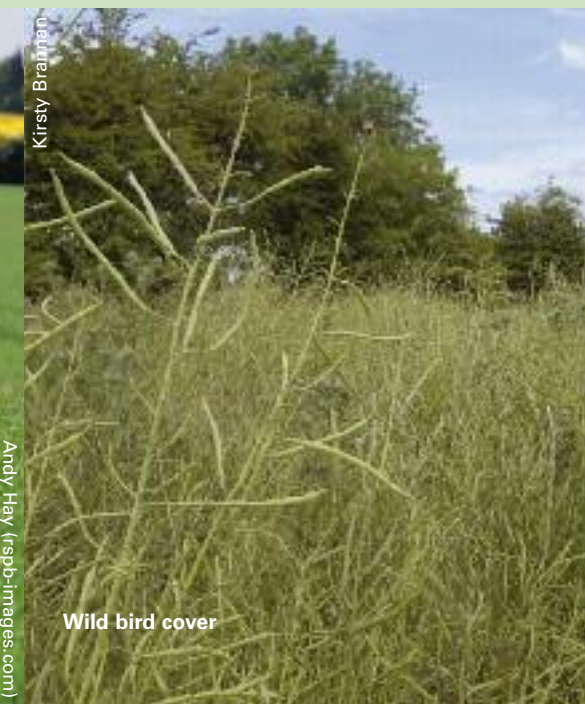
There is clear evidence that the full suite of declining birds on arable farmland will benefit from implementation of this package. It will also directly benefit the wild flowers and insects of arable farmland, and



much of the other wildlife that depends on them, such as bats and hares. Where specific species of conservation concern are present on a farm, it is best to seek advice about the most effective way to tailor this package to benefit them.

Where this package can be undertaken using agri-environment scheme funding, this will also benefit the farm business, and delivers one of the core

objectives of agri-environment funding. Many farmers who have undertaken this scale of conservation work have been rewarded with noticeably higher populations of farmland birds. It is clear that the more conservation work you do, the greater the benefits will be. However, if every arable farmer was to adopt this package then the decline of arable farmland birds would be reversed in time.



Regional round-up – some V&FA facts and figures

Hundreds of farms across the UK have participated in the V&FA this year. Below are the results we've had so far for 2009:

% of farms where birds were recorded in each region

	Eastern England	South East England	South West England	Midlands	Northern England	East Scotland	South and West Scotland
Corn bunting	32	19	8	2	17	9	0
Grey partridge	30	29	3	48	41	39	5
Lapwing	56	42	8	52	70	65	46
Linnet	70	74	75	77	47	83	59
Reed bunting	54	29	12	27	46	83	59
Skylark	98	81	69	95	70	100	72
Song thrush	70	90	88	91	67	83	74
Starling	75	84	34	77	71	87	77
Swallow	93	90	97	93	97	100	97
Tree sparrow	14	7	3	39	35	43	21
Turtle dove	18	7	0	0	1	0	0
Whitethroat	91	90	66	86	49	74	41
Yellowhammer	95	84	57	95	54	91	49
Yellow wagtail	33	7	5	14	14	0	0

What do farmers think of the V&FA?

The feedback we receive from farmers each year helps us to improve the delivery of the V&FA, and make sure that we all get as much benefit from the project as possible. Questionnaires are sent to farmers who participated in the V&FA the year before last, which gives an opportunity for management techniques and advice to be put into practice by those who wish to do so. The questionnaire results from those farmers who participated in 2007 indicate that:

- 84% of farmers felt that taking part in the V&FA was a worthwhile experience
- 90% of farmers had species on their farms that they had not previously been aware of
- 97% of farmers found the laminated map useful
- 90% of farmers have put into practice the farmland bird management guidelines that accompanied the map
- 62% of farmers are now more likely to get involved with other RSPB initiatives.

Big Garden Birdwatch

Thank you to everyone who took part in *Big Garden Birdwatch* in 2009 – a record-breaking 551,881 people participated this year counting over 8.5 million birds in their gardens over the weekend of 24 and 25 January.

The house sparrow retained its top spot for the sixth year running with the starling, a former number one, coming in at number two and the blackbird completing the top three. Unfortunately, despite being the most frequently spotted birds, all three having significantly declined since *Big Garden Birdwatch* started in 1979.

The long-tailed tit flew into the top ten for the first time in 30 years with numbers having nearly doubled compared to last year's results. This increase is being linked to milder

winters and the species adapting to feeding at bird tables and hanging feeders. It may also be that the range of food being left out is now more suitable for birds like the long-tailed tit.

The goldfinch and the greenfinch are each down one position this year although both species have steadily increased in recent years.

Next year the *Big Garden Birdwatch* takes place over the weekend of 30-31 January 2010. Join in and help us make 2010 even bigger!

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

Whitethroat

Sue Tranter (rspb-images.com)

Many more species have been recorded but they are far too numerous to list here! You can view complete and up-to-date results at www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa.

As farming systems, landscape and habitat are incredibly variable from region to region, these results are not a comparison between regions but a snapshot of what was recorded in each. Many of the farmland species listed here are dependent on arable farming, and are therefore scarcer in the west of the UK. Others are migrants with more southerly distributions and therefore scarce or absent from the north.

As well as the above, we had some other exciting results this year. Cirl buntings were recorded on three farms, including the first record for the V&FA in Cornwall (following a relocation project on Roseland peninsula), and four red kite sightings across three counties in South West England.

Long-tailed tits make it into top ten for first time in Big Garden Birdwatch history

Sue Tranter (rspb-images.com)

