

## LANCASHIRE BAP DRAFT SPECIES ACTION PLAN

### Farmland Birds



#### *Summary*

A number of farmland birds have undergone significant declines since 1970, and these declines have been well documented in recent reports and publications. This group of birds includes tree sparrow, reed bunting, corn bunting, yellowhammer, linnet, skylark, yellow wagtail and grey partridge. Many of these are familiar and popular birds of open countryside, which many people still perceive as being common and widespread. However skylark declined nationally by 53% between 1970 and 2005, whilst grey partridge declined by 88% and tree sparrow by 93% in the same period.

**Action Plan Aim - To reverse the decline in farmland bird populations.**

#### Species Description

The species covered by this plan are:

- Grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*)
- Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)
- Yellow wagtail (*Motacilla flava*)
- Tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*)
- Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*)
- Reed bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*)
- Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*)
- Corn bunting (*Miliaria calandra*)

With the exception of yellow wagtail, these are commonly known as the seed-eating farmland birds. They share similar ecology in all being seed eaters during the winter, and in the spring and summer,

with the exception of the linnet, they all largely switch their diet to include invertebrates. Linnets feed on seeds throughout the year.

Yellow wagtail is included in this SAP as it is a nationally declining farmland passerine, though its ecology is somewhat different to the seed eaters, being a summer migrant and an insectivore.

## **Main Habitats**

Farmland and its associated habitats make up the main habitat for this group of birds. They typically have three basic requirements that can be summarised as follows.

Winter seed food (not yellow wagtail) – stubbles, fodder crops, wild bird and game cover crops, some grassland swards.

Spring and summer insect food – spring sown crops, fodder crops, conservation headlands, grass margins, floristically rich margins, meadows and pastures, damp areas and ditches.

Nesting sites – various crops and grassland swards, hedgerows, grass margins and banks, hedgerow trees and scrub.

Some of these species do occur in other habitats, away from farmland. Skylark for example can be found in coastal dunes, on grazing marsh and on upland heath and blanket bog. Reed bunting can also be found on grazing marsh and in reedbeds and upland habitats. Yellow wagtails are often found on coastal and floodplain grazing marsh.

A number of other species associated with farmland, not dealt with here, will also benefit from the actions promoted in this plan. Spring crops for skylark will benefit lapwing, and tussocky grass margins are a favoured hunting habitat for barn owls. Song thrushes also occur on farmland and are likely to benefit from aspects of this SAP. House sparrows in rural areas also use farmland, and as seed eaters they will also benefit from actions in this SAP.

## **National Status**

All of the species covered by this plan are UK BAP Priority Species, and they are all Red Listed due to the rapid decline of their UK breeding population.

Declining national populations between 1970 and 2005:

Grey partridge	-88%
Skylark	-53%
Yellow wagtail	-65%
Tree sparrow	-93%
Linnet	-53%
Reed bunting	-34%
Yellowhammer	-54%
Corn bunting	-89%

(Source: *The State of the UK's Birds 2006*)

Reversing the long term decline in farmland birds by 2020 is part of the government's national biodiversity Public Service Agreement.

## **Regional Status**

Since the introduction of the Breeding Bird Survey in 1994 (the national bird monitoring programme), it has become possible to assess trends for some species at the regional level.

For the north west, the trends for 1994-2006 are:

Grey partridge	1% decline (based on limited data)*
Skylark	14% decline
Yellow wagtail	2% decline (based on limited data)*
Tree sparrow	99% increase (based on limited data)*
Linnet	1% decline
Yellowhammer	19% decline
Reed bunting	8% increase
Corn bunting	54% decline (based on limited data)*

(Source – *The Breeding Bird Survey 2006*, except for species marked \*, where data originates from regional wild bird indicator analysis of BBS data)

The Defra report '*Wild bird population indicators for the English regions 1994-2006*' (2008) suggests an 8% increase in the north-west farmland bird indicator, compared to the all-England trend of -7% for the same period. Of the 18 species that make up this indicator, it was species like goldfinch, greenfinch and stock dove that had increases which may have contributed to this overall upward trend. The report does highlight that corn bunting continued to decline in the north-west, though tree sparrow increased.

## **Local Status.**

An analysis of data from the Breeding Bird Survey (1994-2006) at the individual county level gives an indication of trends, however due to small sample sizes, the resulting information is not robust and should be treated with caution. For the species covered by this SAP, the trends for Lancashire (incorporating north Merseyside) appear to be largely stable since the mid and late 1990's for most species, following a period of earlier decline. The exceptions are corn bunting and yellowhammer which appear to show continued declines of c15% and 40% respectively.

The recently published county avi-fauna '*The Birds of Lancashire and North Merseyside*' (White, McCarthy and Jones, 2008), describes the status of these species.

For grey partridge, it suggests '*widespread*' and '*locally common*', and describes Lancashire as something of a stronghold for the species in western Britain.

Skylark is described as having undergone a '*calamitous decline*', whilst for yellow wagtail, reduction in population size and range in Lancashire is suggested to be putting the species in '*serious danger of local extinction*'. The decline is considered to be much greater than the 2% figure quoted above.

For tree sparrow, a decline in range of 40% is reported between the 1960's and 1997-2000 based on occupied 10km squares.

The situation for linnet across the county is stated as being unclear, though local population '*collapses*' from several areas are reported. For yellowhammer, '*a reduction of its Lancashire range*' is described, along with '*fragmentation of breeding areas and local extinctions*'.

Declines in local reed bunting populations are described, whilst for corn bunting the county is said to still be a '*stronghold*', though a 40% reduction in range between 1968-72 and 1997-2000 is reported.

### **Current factors affecting these Species.**

Extensive research carried out on these species by RSPB, GCT, Defra and others, has highlighted changes in farming practice as being the main driver for these declines.

These changes have had impacts on the nature or quality of farmland habitats for birds. In stating that these changes have driven these declines, it is not to suggest that farmers are to blame. Production support policies under the European Common Agriculture Policy have driven these changes as farmers have been encouraged to maximise production from their land.

A significant change in farming practice has been the switch from spring sown cereals to those sown in the autumn. Autumn sown cereals have two significant impacts on farmland birds – the removal of over-wintered stubbles from farmland, and in the following spring, a reduction in nesting opportunities for species such as skylark and corn bunting.

The increased use of pesticides has had an indirect impact on many farmland birds by removing the plant and insect food that they rely on.

Loss of uncropped field margins and corners have removed nesting sites for species like grey partridge and corn bunting. Intensive grass management for silage production on livestock farms has reduced the suitability of these swards for nesting skylark.

The loss of mixed farming systems (arable and grass on the same farm) has removed habitat diversity from many areas. This is likely to have had an impact on species such as yellow wagtail. Loss of wet areas on farmland, and the accompanying reduction in insect availability, has also impacted on many farmland birds.

Cattle used to be fed outdoors during the winter, and this created rich feeding areas for farmland birds. Increasingly, livestock are now wintered indoors. Increased hygiene requirements around grain stores and in farmyards now means that these areas are less valuable as feeding areas to birds.

## Current Action/Mechanisms

From the early 1990's until 2007, the requirement for farms to provide areas of set-aside created various habitats that benefited farmland birds. However, in 2008 the set-aside requirement was set at 0%, and this is likely to have further negative effects on populations that are already struggling.

The availability of agri-environment scheme payments through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and more recently the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) has enabled farmers to undertake conservation management. Since 2002, this has included a suite of arable options that were intended to benefit farmland biodiversity, including the farmland birds covered by this plan.

Through advice and promotion of these schemes by organisations such as FWAG, RSPB, LRF and NE, there are farms in the county that are now providing agri-environment scheme management that should be benefiting farmland birds.

It is hoped that targeting of the Higher Level Scheme within ESS will prioritise key areas in Lancashire for farmland birds. The national RSPB/BTO/NE Bird Conservation Targeting Project, which collates county bird records to produce regularly updated 'distribution' maps, will help inform this process.

Several nestbox and feeding station schemes exist across the county, aimed primarily at tree sparrow. The feeding stations will also be benefiting other seed-eating species. However, supplementary feeding needs to be considered a short term measure, perhaps capable of supporting populations until suitable longer term land management is in place.

The RSPB Volunteer & Farmer Alliance project has undertaken a free breeding bird survey on nearly 50 farms in the county. This project raises awareness amongst farmers of the farmland birds that they have on their land, and provides them with advisory material tailored to the species identified as being present. This data can be used to support an application for ESS.

## Species Targets

Target	Area	Measure	Timescale
<i>To see Lancashire contributing to a reversal of the decline in the regional farmland bird trend.</i>	Lancashire	Regional trend reversed.	2015
<i>Maintain Lancashire distribution at 2000 Atlas level</i>	Lancashire	Distribution maintained	2011 – next atlas
<i>To ensure key areas are targeted for HLS delivery</i>	Lancashire	HLS target maps include priority areas as defined by current BCTP data.	2008
<i>10% of holdings within</i>	Lancashire	10% of holdings	2012

HLS farmland bird target area are delivering appropriate management.			
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### **Proposed Actions**

<b>Action</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Milestone/ Measure</b>	<b>Partners</b>	<b>Timescale</b>
<b><i>Research and monitoring</i></b>				
Ensure these species are recorded by local observers and the national BCTP is kept up-to-date through these local records.	Lancashire		Lancashire and Cheshire Fauna Society Local bird clubs RSPB	Ongoing
County atlas work informing BCTP	Lancashire	Atlas produced	Lancashire and Cheshire Fauna Society BTO Local bird clubs Individual birdwatchers	Ongoing
Maintain and extend BBS coverage – baseline is 90 1km squares covered in Lancs in 2006	Lancashire	Squares maintained or increased across the county.	BTO	Ongoing
<b><i>Policy</i></b>				
Ensure HLS targeting accurately reflects key farmland bird areas.	Lancashire	Targeting maps highlight key farmland bird areas	NE RSPB	Phase 2 – Oct 08 Then ongoing
Develop ELS policy to secure more targeted benefits for farmland birds in key areas.	Lancashire	NE position statement adopted	NE	2009
Secure necessary flexibility within ESS options to meet needs of key species, eg safe nesting sites for corn bunting	Lancashire	Availability of field scale sacrificial crop/WBC secured for corn bunting	NE RSPB FWAG	2008
Develop policy and advocacy around bio-fuel expansion.	Lancashire	Guidance issued and adopted	RSPB LWT NE NWDA	2009
<b><i>Species management and protection</i></b>				

Provide and maintain a network of sites with tree sparrow nestboxes	Lancashire	Network of sites established and maintained, with minimum of 25 boxes per site.	FBC RSPB Local volunteers	Ongoing
<b><i>Site safeguard</i></b>				
Identify key farmland bird areas and promote via relevant LDFs	Lancashire	Important farmland bird areas identified within LDFs	RSPB LWT	Ongoing
<b><i>Land and habitat management</i></b>				
Run a series of farmer events, in key target areas, demonstrating and promoting farmland bird management.	Lancashire	10 events organised	FWAG RSPB NE ADAS Myerscough College	2008-2010
Provide advice and support to farmers regarding HLS applications in key areas	Lancashire	Farmland bird focussed HLS schemes secured	FWAG RSPB NE	2008-2012
Provide advice and support to farmers regarding ELS applications in key areas	Lancashire	Farmland bird focussed ELS schemes secured	FWAG RSPB NE	2008-2012
Identify demonstration farms.	Lancashire	2 best practice/ESS farms established	FWAG RSPB NE Myerscough College	2009
Disseminate advisory material/messages amongst farmers and farming organisations/agronomy companies	Lancashire	Messages disseminated	FWAG RSPB NE	2009
Develop a Corn Bunting Recovery Project to deliver the above actions.	Lancashire	Project format agreed and established, and delivering Actions	RSPB FWAG NE	2008-2012
Identify joint working opportunities with other projects, eg water vole and CSF initiatives.	Lancashire	Opportunities identified and objectives agreed	RSPB FWAG NE LWT EA	2008-2012

<b>Public relations</b>				
Seek media opportunities to raise profile of farmland conservation work undertaken by farmers.	Lancashire	Media releases issued	RSPB FWAG NE Farmers Guardian	Ongoing
Encourage farms to enter farming conservation competitions.	Lancashire	Farms entering (and winning!) competitions	RSPB FWAG NE	Ongoing

### **Related action Plans.**

Song thrush SAP

Lapwing SAP

Reedbed HAP (reed bunting)

Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh HAP (yellow wagtail, reed bunting, skylark)

Upland HAPs (reed bunting, skylark)

Arable HAP

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