

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*)



Reed bunting
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The reed bunting is a small songbird, a little larger than a sparrow. The general appearance is like a female house sparrow except that the male has a striking black head with a white moustache, collar and underparts. The female is much duller but both sexes have long, notched tails with obvious, white outer feathers to which they draw attention by habitual tail-flicking movements.

The nest is generally low down among tall, rank vegetation, usually close to water. Because of its association with wetland habitats, it has been informally known in the past as the 'water sparrow'⁽¹⁾. Adult reed buntings feed mainly on seeds but they will take invertebrates during the summer. Chicks are highly dependent upon invertebrates in their diet⁽²⁾.

Outside the breeding season, reed buntings form flocks, frequently with other seed-eating birds, and inhabit seed-rich areas such as stubble fields and the upper saltmarsh.

Main Habitat(s): All types of wetland habitat; arable farmland and saltmarsh in the winter.

National status

The reed bunting is found throughout Britain. The BTO census results show a relatively high population from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, followed by a decrease of more than 50% by the early 1980s⁽³⁾.

The Waterways Bird Survey also showed a steep decline from 1974 to 1983⁽⁴⁾. Both surveys indicate a relatively stable population since then. The British population was estimated at 220,000 territories in 1988-91.

A UK Species Action Plan has been produced⁽⁵⁾. The reed bunting is on the 'Red List' of 'Birds of Conservation Concern'⁽⁶⁾.

It is legally protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Regional status

The species is widely distributed as a breeding bird throughout North West England apart from the high Pennines⁽⁷⁾.

It seems to be most frequent in north Merseyside, Greater Manchester, south western Lancashire and around Barrow-in-Furness. It is also found throughout Cheshire⁽⁷⁾. It has been proposed as a regional biodiversity indicator to highlight the desirability of creating new wetland habitat⁽⁸⁾.

Local status

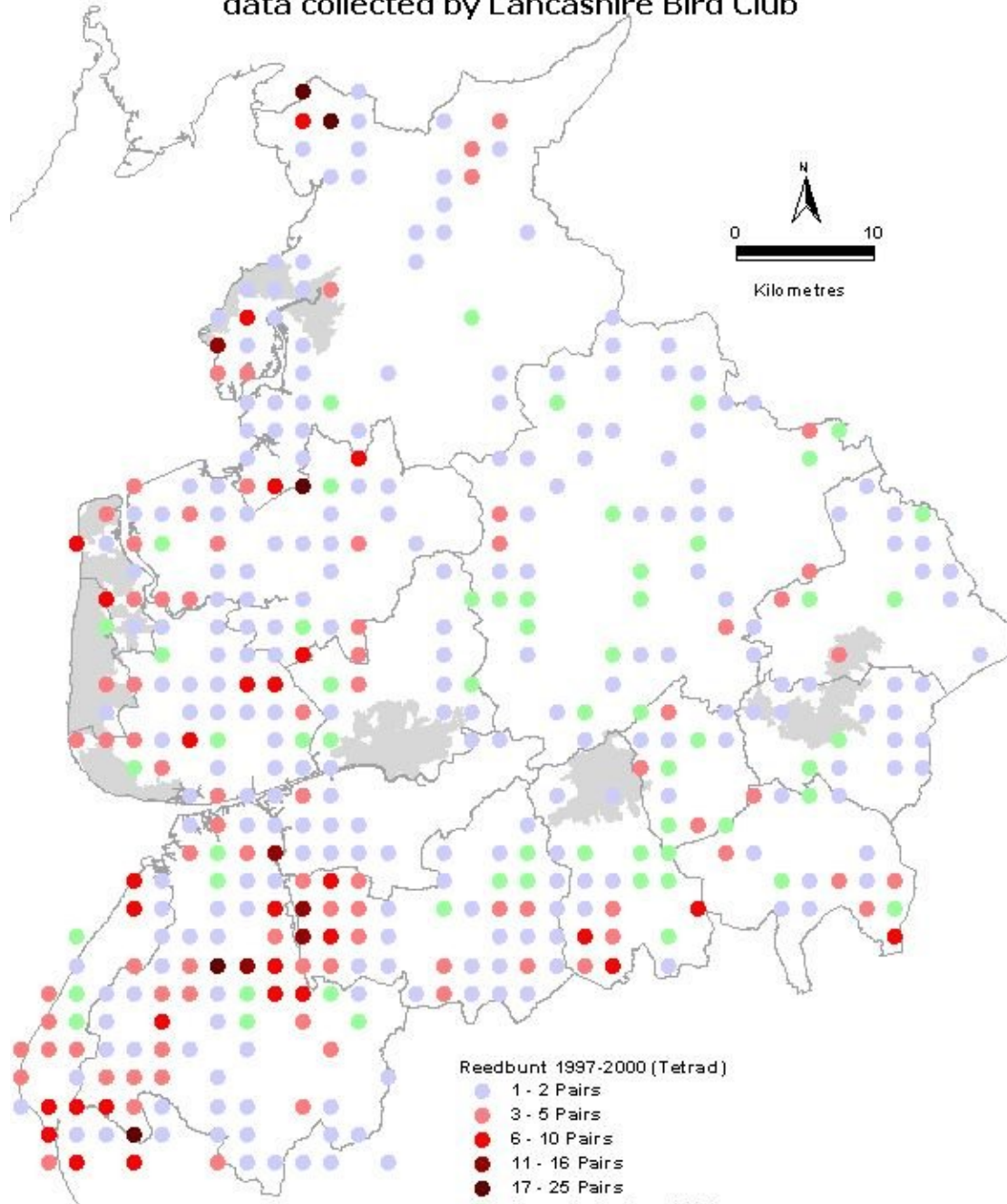
The species is widely distributed throughout Lancashire with particularly strong populations in the lowland areas. Large roosts are formed during the winter at several sites particularly at places with reedbeds.

The main concentrations and highest densities of reed bunting are in West Lancashire, on the Fylde and at Leighton Moss.

The estimated breeding population for Lancashire and north Merseyside is 1250 pairs.

Map(s):

Density of Breeding Pairs of Reed Bunting
(*Emberiza schoeniclus*) in Lancashire according to
data collected by Lancashire Bird Club



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Current factors affecting the species

On farmland, reed buntings nest near ponds, ditches, streams, boggy corners and wet meadows. These wet areas tend to be rich in invertebrates, which are the food source for the chicks before they fledge. Field drainage and the infilling or neglect of water features have led to the loss of suitable foraging areas in many parts of the country where reed buntings were more common in former times.

Nests are usually located low down (e.g. on the ground, in hedge bottoms or in ditch vegetation). Consequently, they are vulnerable to stock trampling, hedge cutting and ditch clearance, and on farmland these are major causes of breeding failure at the egg stage⁽⁹⁾. Predation is the major reason for chick mortality⁽⁹⁾.

The banks of watercourses are often managed in ways that are disadvantageous to reed buntings. For example, vegetation is often removed from both sides of rivers, streams and ditches leaving little habitat for reed buntings to feed or nest. Alternating the side that is cut each year would ensure some suitable habitat is left⁽²⁾.

In the winter, reed buntings are generally found in drier, more open habitats such as arable farmland or saltmarsh. Weed seeds are the main component of their diet at this time. A major factor in the birds' decline is believed to be the loss of weedy, winter stubble fields, especially near the coast. This has occurred due to the switch to autumn sown crops.

Current Action / Mechanisms

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 protects the birds, their eggs and nests.

Countryside Stewardship measures that encourage long, rank vegetation near water will help reed buntings. The species has also benefited from rotational set-aside but this has now been reduced in area.

The RSPB has produced management guidelines that suggest steps that landowners can take for a range of lowland farmland birds including the reed bunting. The county FWAG adviser visits farms in Lancashire as part of the 'Landwise' project. This scheme, which FWAG has developed with Sainsbury's, is largely confined to the supermarket's suppliers but provides conservation advice on a whole farm basis.

The species is monitored by the Breeding Bird Survey and by the Waterways Bird Survey, both of which are co-ordinated by the BTO. The local distribution of reed bunting has been surveyed by the Lancashire Bird Club during 1997-1999. It is possible that an estimate of the current size of the county's population could be made from this data.

Objectives, targets and proposed actions for reed bunting in Lancashire

Broad Objective:	A. Establish baseline information on reed bunting abundance and local distribution throughout the bird's current range in the county.			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Establish a centralised reed bunting database	1. Collate all available data for Lancashire for reed buntings. (High)	LBC, BTO, WT, All bird clubs	S	RM

to be used to enable assessment of population changes.	2. Identify and map areas of high concentrations of breeding bunting. (High)	LCC, LBC, BTO, WT, All bird clubs	M	RM
	3. Use BTO Breeding Bird Survey and other data to estimate the overall breeding population size for Lancashire. (High)	BTO, LCC, LBC, WT, All bird clubs	M	RM
	4. Before end of 2002 assess results of A.1.3. and formulate targets by which to increase bunting numbers in the county. (High)	LBC, LCC, BTO, WT, All bird clubs	M	RM
	5. Identify and map areas of high concentrations of over-wintering reed bunting. (Medium)	LCC, LBC, BTO, WT, All bird clubs	M	RM
Broad Objective:	B. Ensure that breeding reed buntings remain present in good numbers throughout their range.			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Seek to secure sympathetic management of farm habitat for reed buntings.	1. Liaise with landowners and land managers to promote the retention of and creation of wetland areas on or adjacent to farms. (High)	BHSP, FWAG, MAFF, RSPB	O	A, LM
	2. Liaise with landowners and land managers to promote spring-sown cereals and the retention of winter stubbles. (High)	BHSP, RSPB, FWAG, MAFF	O	A, LM
	3. Lobby for extension of Arable Stewardship scheme to Lancashire. (Medium)	RSPB, WT	M	PR, P
	4. Lobby for reform of CAP that will reward farming that benefits reed buntings. (Medium)	RSPB, WT	O	PR

2. Seek to secure sympathetic management of watercourses for reed buntings.	1. Ensure that contract specifications and work programmes for the management of the bankside vegetation of watercourses take account of reed bunting requirements in areas where breeding is known to occur. (High)	EA, BW, LAs	M	LM
	2. Incorporate reed bunting population data and conservation prescriptions into appropriate Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs). (High)	EA	M	P
Broad Objective:	C. Promote the reed bunting as a flagship species in the Lancashire BAP			
Operational Objective	Action Required (Priority)	Partners	Time-scale	Type
1. Promote the reed bunting as a 'flagship' species to highlight the problems faced by some farmland and wetland species.	1. Work with community-based groups to raise awareness of bunting conservation issues amongst the general public and landowners. (Medium)	RSPB, WT, FWAG, land-owners, land managers, WWT	O	PR
	2. Encourage participation in Breeding Bird Surveys, and other monitoring. (Medium)	BTO, RSPB, LBC, All bird clubs	S	PR, RM
	3. Encourage submission of records to Lancashire Bird Report. (Medium)	LBC, All bird clubs	O	PR, RM
	4. Include information about the reed bunting in press releases, newsletters and leaflets. (Low)	RSPB, WT, WWT	O	PR

Related Action Plans:

- Otter SAP
- Water vole SAP
- Reedbed HAP
- Rivers and streams HAP

- Arable farmland HAP

References & additional reading:

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