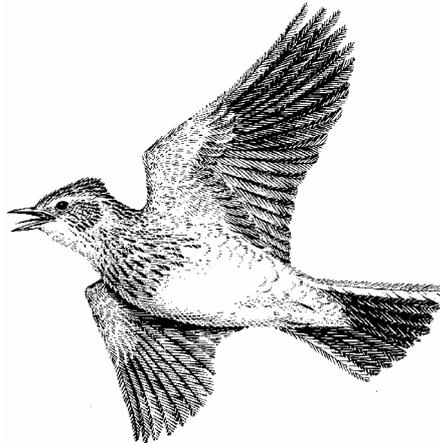




Farmland Birds



October 2008 – This plan was previously called ‘Farmland Seed Eating Birds’ but has been expanded to include a number of species recently added to the UK BAP list. The main text of this plan needs review in line of the fact that there are new species covered by this plan since the 2007 UK BAP list review.

A number of seed-eating farmland birds have undergone significant declines since 1975. This group of birds includes tree sparrow, reed bunting, corn bunting, yellowhammer, linnet, house sparrow, bullfinch and skylark. Many of these are familiar and popular birds of open countryside that are still perceived as common and widespread. However skylark, for example, declined nationally by 75% between 1972 and 1996. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey shows that Skylark populations have continued to decline, by around 10% between 1994 and 2004, and most of the other species of seed-eating farmland birds have also continued to decline over this period. Some short term slight increase is apparent for some species, eg Tree Sparrow, but this increase is from an extremely low starting point and time will tell if it is the start of a long term trend.

All of these species are seed-eaters in the winter and feed on invertebrate food during the spring and summer, but have slightly different habitat requirements within the farmed environment. Traditional mixed farming, with grazed pastures, hay fields, areas of rough grass margins and hedges, and spring-sown cereals with over-wintered stubbles, provide the variety of conditions necessary for supporting these birds. The increased specialisation and intensification of farming, encouraged by a system of production support payments, has reduced the suitability of large areas of farmland for these birds, but it is hoped that the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme will help reverse these trends.

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The Shropshire Targets for 2005 set in the previous edition of the BAP (2002) have not been achieved, and many of the Actions were not implemented, so concerted action is needed to achieve the targets set for 2010.

1 Objectives and Targets

1.1 Objectives

- A. Maintain existing populations and range of farmland birds in Shropshire.
- B. Reverse the decline in farmland birds.
- C. Establish and maintain a comprehensive understanding of the distribution, status and ecological requirements of farmland birds in Shropshire through research, survey and monitoring.
- D. Promote communication, education and awareness of the status and needs of farmland birds.

1.2 Targets

- Increase the populations of farmland birds in Shropshire by 50% (as recorded by the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)) by 2010.
- Increase by a further 50% the number of farmland birds in Shropshire between 2010 and 2015.

2 Current Status

2.1 Importance

Tree sparrow, reed bunting, corn bunting, linnet and skylark are priority species under the UK Biodiversity Programme and national species action plans have been written. These 5 species are also on the *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern 2002-2007*. Yellowhammer is now also Red Listed, and is a Species of Conservation Concern in the UK Biodiversity Programme. Some of these species, such as skylark and yellowhammer, are familiar and popular birds with many people. Farmland birds have been included by the Government in its "Quality of Life" indicators and restoring the populations of 20 specified species, including many of those covered by this Action Plan, are a Defra target in their PSA agreement with the Treasury.

2.2 Trends

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Common Bird Census shows that the UK population of these species declined very significantly between 1972 and 1996, and the Breeding Bird Survey shows this decline has continued for most species since 1994:

Comment: New species have been added to this plan which need recognition in the text

Species	Change 1972-96 (CBC)	Change 1994-2004 (BBS)
Tree sparrow	- down 76%	- up 48%

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Reed bunting	- down 40%	- up 4%
Corn bunting	- down 74%	- down 24%
Linnet	- down 40%	- down 14%
House sparrow	- down 64%	- down 3%
Skylark	- down 75%	- down 10%
Yellowhammer	- down 37%	- down 22%
Bullfinch	- down 62%	- down 9%

(Shropshire BBS figures to be added where sample sizes are large enough)

2.3 Population and Distribution

These species are generally distributed across Shropshire. However reed bunting and corn bunting both show a strong preference for the north-eastern quarter of the county, around the Shropshire Plain from Telford north to Market Drayton.

3 Current Factors Affecting these Species

- Increased specialisation and intensification of farmland leading to:
 - loss of mixed farms;
 - loss of rough grass margins, hay meadows and extensively grazed pasture;
 - loss of hedgerows and adjacent field margins, rough corners etc.;
 - switch from spring sown to autumn sown cereals;
 - loss of over-wintered stubbles;
 - increased use of pesticides, which removes weed and invertebrate food for birds.

4 Current Action

4.1 Policy and Protection

- All eight species receive protection under the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.
- All are on the *Red List of Birds Of Conservation Concern 2002-2007*
- Tree sparrow, reed bunting, corn bunting, yellowhammer, and skylark are all Target Species in at least one of the Joint Character Assessments (JCAs) which cover Shropshire, and which set the priorities for the Defra / RDS Environmental Stewardship. They provide guidance on the land management options that should be included in ES applications.
- Tree sparrow, reed bunting, corn bunting, linnet, yellowhammer, and skylark are all included amongst 20 species on Defra's Farmland Bird Index. Defra is committed to reversing the long term decline in these species, as part of its Public Service Agreement with the Treasury. Annual monitoring reports are published by Defra

4.2 Management, Survey and Research

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- Defra / RDS Environmental Stewardship has both Entry Level and Higher level schemes which encourage farmers to manage their land to provide environmental benefits, including habitat enhancement for these birds. This includes options such as winter stubbles, spring-sown cereals and wild bird cover
- In 2002 options from the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme were introduced into the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). These were closely targeted at known seed eating bird (and lapwing) hotspots, based on data provided by SOS and RSPB.
- Many farms still have CSS agreements, which include measures such as management of hedgerows and arable field margins, provision of beetle banks, reversion of arable land to grassland, extensive management of pasture and provision of fenced grass margins within intensive grasslands. Areas of set-aside of high conservation status can also be managed under the Scheme. Elements of the pilot Arable Stewardship are also included within some CSS agreements.
- Under the set-aside scheme, land can be managed to provide rotational stubbles, or permanent rough grass cover, and the scheme also includes the option to sow a wild bird cover mix. The recent multi-annual set-aside option can be used to deliver targeted benefits over a 5 year period.
- Most farms in the Shropshire Hills and the Clun Hills are still covered by Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) schemes. Grant-aid is available for the management of hedgerows and conservation headlands.
- The RSPB has a Shropshire-based research project studying the use of grassland systems by farmland birds.
- The RSPB established an intervention project, targeted at key sites for tree sparrows and corn buntings. The project will aim to monitor the effectiveness of providing winter food such as seed or particular crops to increase the winter survival of these populations. Several sites included in this national project were in Shropshire.
- In 2004, the Shropshire Ornithological Society carried out a sample survey of tetrads that were found to be occupied 1985-90 during fieldwork for *The Atlas* (1992), to supplement the regular records sent to the County Bird Recorder. The results suggest some decline in population and range since 1990, but the trend cannot be quantified.

5 Key Habitats

- Mixed farmland
- Field and rough grass margins
- Spring-sown cereals and over-wintered stubbles
- Hedgerows

6 Complementary Plans

UK Corn Bunting SAP
UK Linnet SAP

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UK Reed Bunting SAP

UK Skylark SAP

UK Tree Sparrow SAP

Shropshire Field Margins HAP

Shropshire Floodplain Grazing Marsh HAP

Shropshire Hedgerows HAP

Shropshire Reedbeds HAP

Shropshire Semi-Improved Upland Rough Grassland HAP

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7. Actions

Habitat / Species	Action Code	Action text	Location of action	Start Date	End Date	Lead
Birds Plan	SHR BRD AP 02	Establish monitoring arrangements to record the population, population change, breeding success and habitat usage for all BAP and PSA Target Bird Species on all farms covered by any Agri-environment scheme in Shropshire, and measure the effectiveness of such schemes.	Shropshire	2006	2007	NE
Birds Plan	SHR BRD AP 03	Monitor population, population change, breeding success and habitat usage for all BAP priority bird species on all CSS & ESA Farms in Shropshire until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	NE
Birds Plan	SHR BRD CA 01	Provide specific management guidelines to all ESS Higher Level Scheme applicants	Shropshire	2006	2015	NE
Birds Plan	SHR BRD FR 06	Seek the necessary resources to implement all the above actions.	Shropshire	2006	2015	SC
Farmland Birds	SHR FSB CA 01	Provide DEFRA with details of hotspot areas for effective targeting of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme	Shropshire	2002	-	RSP
Farmland birds	SHR FSB CA 02	Publicise the support of DEFRA and NE for the conservation of farmland seed-eating birds, and creating suitable habitat for them, amongst farmers and landowners until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	SWT
Farmland birds	SHR FSB CP 01	Produce general publicity and education materials, to raise the profile of Farmland birds, and publicise their habitat requirements amongst farmers in the Shropshire Hills AONB until 2015.	Shropshire Hills AONB	2006	2015	AON

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Farmland Birds	SHR FSB FR 01	Ensure that agri-environment schemes are appropriately targeted to include measures to benefit farmland birds.	Shropshire	2002	-	NE
Farmland birds	SHR FSB FR 02	Aim to target the Environmental Stewardship at areas known to be farmland bird 'hot-spots' such as the Shropshire Plain, Weald Moors, and Severn-Vymwy confluence area until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	SWT
Farmland birds	SHR FSB HS 01	Actively encourage farmers to maintain and increase the area of suitable winter feeding habitat (including creative use of Set-aside), good quality hedges, grass field margins and extensive pasture in arable systems, through all agri-environment schemes, and monitor progress	Shropshire	2006	2015	SWT
Farmland birds	SHR FSB ID 01	Provide SWT & Natural England with details of hotspot areas for effective targeting of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	SOS
Farmland birds	SHR FSB SU 01	Ensure adequate coverage of the Breeding Bird Survey in Shropshire to monitor farmland seed-eating birds annually until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	BTO
Farmland birds	SHR FSB SU 02	Ensure that bird recording in the county continues to highlight key sites until 2015.	Shropshire	2006	2015	SOS

N.B

1. The above Actions are specific to this species. In addition, the "Actions for All Bird Species", listed in the generic bird undertaken for this species.
2. Implementation of the Actions listed under the final Action, "Seek resources", is conditional on the resources being secured by some organisations is conditional partly on these further resources being secured, and partly on the continuing availability of

KEY TO ORGANISATIONS

AONB	Shropshire Hills AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) Partnership
BTO	British Trust for Ornithology
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
LSP	LongStones Partnership
NE	Natural England
RS	RuralScapes
SBP	Shropshire Biodiversity Partnership
SC	Shropshire Council
SOS	Shropshire Ornithological Society
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
UOWG	Upper Onny Wildlife Group

Plan Author: Leo Smith (2002)

Plan last revised: November 2008 by Fran Lancaster (Biodiversity Support Officer, Shropshire Council)

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