



## Farmland Birds and Biodiversity in Bedfordshire

### *Helping landowners conserve Bedfordshire's biodiversity*

**FWAG** This advice forms part of a series of notes for farmers and landowners that will increase the awareness of, and the opportunities for, biodiversity and wildlife on farmland. It forms part of the Bedfordshire and Luton Biodiversity Action Plan to increase awareness of, and involvement in, the conservation of our wealth of wildlife.

### Why farmland Birds?

Farmland bird populations are part of one of 15 headline indicators of sustainable development used by the Government as indicators of the quality of life. In total 147 indicators are used to monitor whether as a nation we are progressing towards a better quality of life for everyone.

### Good news – bad news

Between 1977 and 1993 farmland bird populations almost halved. This decline has now halted and there is optimism that populations for the 19 species making up this monitored group will now increase as the integration of wildlife friendly management into farm businesses continues to grow in popularity.

### How do we know how our wild bird populations are faring?

Many landowners comment on how some birds are now seen less frequently on their holdings. This is valuable information but only anecdotal and scientific methods have to be used to produce truly analysable data.

Since 1962 the Common Bird Census (CBC) has been the main survey method used for surveying farmland birds. This involves a complete census of targeted species during the breeding season. Recorders visited specific areas 10 times during the breeding season to identify and plot the position and activity of all CBC targeted species. At the end of each season Species Maps are produced and analysed to show breeding territories and allowing yearly comparative population assessments to be made. This scheme has now been superseded by the Breeding Bird Survey which uses similar repeatable methodology.



A less than Ideal habitat for birds

There are many other surveys conducted annually including the Ringing Scheme, which has involved ringing millions of birds since it began in 1909. This has resulted in a wealth of information regarding migration, bird biology and ecology to assist conservation management.



Ringing a Barn Owl

A number of farmers in Bedfordshire are active members of the RSPB/ Farmer Alliance. Through this scheme volunteer RSPB members carry out periodical bird surveys of the farm and provide a valuable and much appreciated map of the farm showing where the different birds were recorded. This may be repeated frequently over several years. The results of these surveys can be incorporated into an individual Farm Biodiversity Action Plan to help you improve the farm for birds and other wildlife. They can help to inform your Farm Environment Record (FER) or Farm Environment Plan (FEP) for the Higher and Entry Level Environmental Stewardship Schemes.

Birds are a very important part of our lives. Because they live so closely with us it can be easy to take them for granted and only notice something is wrong when it is too late. A little help can go a long way.

## What makes a good habitat for farmland birds?



A grass margin with trees in the background

There is no one simple answer to this except that a variety of broad habitat types are needed to ensure stable populations of diverse species. The habitat requirements for a species can vary throughout the year with different criteria needed for the breeding and wintering seasons.

Farmers will often say that they have for example 'plenty of skylarks' but they are then faced with organisations like the RSPB saying that skylark numbers are falling rapidly. This may be because a lot of birds are failing to breed successfully and bring up the number of chicks that are necessary for a replacement population to flourish. You may hear a lot of skylarks but they are not always successfully breeding. This may well be because of the shift to autumn cultivation and early crop growth. In order to try to remedy this situation, farmers, in conjunction with the RSPB, are trying to create small thinly planted areas in

their wheat where repeat broods will be successfully raised.

The importance of having continuity of habitats with 'wildlife corridors' linking isolated areas cannot be underestimated, it is vital to look at the whole farm context; this is especially important for highly mobile bird species.

For many species the nesting habitats are completely different from the feeding habitats. There needs to be both close by, to supply food for growing chicks and nestlings. As many seed eating birds start their life on an insect diet, not only does sufficient habitat capable of supporting high populations of the right type of insect during the breeding season need to be available, but it is also necessary to have habitat available which produces large amounts of seed at the right time of the year.

### Improving what you have already got.

Clearly it would not be easy to create suitable year round conditions for all species; equally there is little value in creating isolated blocks of habitat if they form only part of the overall needs of particular species. The best approach is often therefore to capitalise on what is already present on the farm. Some examples include:

- Rotational trimming of hedges in late winter - instead of every year in spring.
- Creating a rough grassy margin alongside fields, hedges and woods.



A barn owl box

Often it is not a lack of suitable feeding areas that is the limiting factor for breeding populations of birds but a lack of suitable sites in which they can nest. Consider:

- Erecting nest boxes (from Tree Sparrows to Barn Owls nest boxes can be very successful).
- Leaving dead and dying trees where they stand (unless they present a significant health and safety risk).
- Farmers may realise that a shortage of food is critical to the local bird population successfully over wintering in this case:
- Put out 'bird feeding areas' around the farm to ensure the continuity of food that the farm cannot always meet.
- Leave uncultivated strips around field edges or plant wild bird cover crops.



Erecting bird boxes in a young woodland block

For more information, advice or help with farmland birds or any other farming and wildlife queries please do not hesitate to contact: **Matthew O'Brien**, County Countryside/  
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