



**October 2008 – March 2012**

The decline in farmland wildlife over the last forty years has been well documented and the disappearance of many once familiar farmland bird species from the farmed landscape is indicative of this decline. Birds like the lapwing and the grey partridge have been lost from large parts of the English countryside.

A range of studies have shown that these declines have been caused by the loss of the following habitats:

In-field nesting habitat,  
Seed food during the winter and early spring  
Insect rich foraging habitats

These are often referred to as the **'big three'** for farmland birds. Loss of the big three has resulted from: Increased specialisation in either arable crops or livestock, loss of spring-sown crops and weedy stubbles, increase in the use of pesticides and fertilizers, intensification of grassland management, loss of hedges, margins and other non-farmed habitats.

For these reasons farmland birds have fewer places to nest, produce fewer offspring and survive the winter less well. Those species of farmland bird associated with arable farmland have been particularly affected by the loss of these habitats. Reversing the declines in farmland birds and other wildlife associated with arable landscapes is now one of the great nature conservation challenges we face.

### **The South West Farmland Bird Initiative**

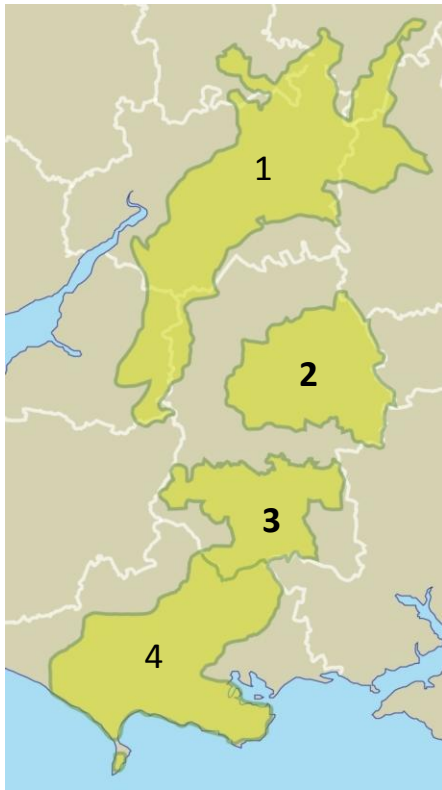
The South West Farmland Bird Initiative (SWFBI) is an exciting four year partnership project that has been set up to specifically help reverse the decline of farmland birds across Wessex. The initiative is targeting nationally important farmland bird hotspots across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Dorset as defined by the distribution of the six rarer, most declining farmland birds, often called the 'Arable Six': **Grey partridge, Lapwing, Turtle dove, Yellow wagtail, Tree sparrow, Corn bunting.**

By targeting these six species, we are targeting our best arable habitats in Wessex, and the measures that we put in place for these species will also benefit other wildlife associated with arable farmland - in particular rare arable plants like shepherd's needle, brown hare and the more widespread farmland birds like skylark, linnet, reed bunting and yellowhammer.

### **Partnership approach**

Across these three counties, four sister projects work together under the umbrella of the initiative. Each is led by a different partner organisation, with a dedicated project officer

giving practical advice to farmers on how they can best use the Environmental Stewardship (ES) scheme to help farmland birds and the plants and animals associated with the arable landscape. All four posts work together with the farming community to deliver measures that specifically provide the key in-field habitats that farmland birds and other arable wildlife need in order to thrive – insect rich foraging habitats, in-field nesting habitats and over-winter food - the ‘big three’.



#### The Four projects are:

1. Cotswolds Farmland Bird project – Natural England led post
2. North Wessex Farmland Bird Project – RSPB led post
3. South Wiltshire Farmland Bird project –AONB led post, Cranborne Chase & W Wilts Downs
4. Dorset Arable Project – Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) led post

Partnership working is the key to the project's success and the initiative has funding from and works closely with regional and national teams in Natural England, RSPB, FWAG, NFU, CLA, GWCT, Cotswolds Conservation Board, North Wessex Downs, Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs and Dorset AONBs, Defra, Wessex Water, agents, agronomists and most importantly the farming community. The initiative has developed strong working links with Waitrose and with the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) both regionally and nationally.

#### The Farmland Bird package

When the project was set up farmers and land owners were very enthused by the initiative but came back to us with one very important question - what did we actually want them to do for farmland birds? In response to this request from the farming community we have developed a specific ES package of options that delivers the ‘big three’ for farmland birds.

The development of an evidence based Farmland Bird package has been central to the success of the approach. The package focuses on those in-field options that deliver the maximum benefit for farmland birds with a ‘fixed list’ approach. When deployed together, the options provide the critical resources that farmland birds need to survive and breed successfully i.e. over-winter seed food, spring/summer invertebrate food and places to nest in-field - the ‘*big three*’. The mix of ES options was formulated using the best research, evidence and experience to date from RSPB, GWCT, BTO and Natural England. The evidence all pointed to a need for a minimum of 4-7% of a 1 km-square to contain suitable

in-field management to deliver enough key habitats to help reverse the decline of farmland birds.

The HLS minimum threshold is higher than the ELS threshold because it is designed to meet the needs of the six fastest declining and now range-restricted arable specialists (the 'Arable Six'). The ELS package will benefit these species but is more focussed on the still widespread species which require a lower level of intervention such as Skylark, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Linnet.

#### The Farmland Bird package

Resource 'big three'	ES options	ELS (minimum per 100 ha)	HLS (minimum per 100 ha)
Winter seed food	Wild bird seed mixture or Weed-rich stubble (or a combination)	<b>2 ha or 5-10 ha</b>	<b>2 ha or 5-10 ha</b>
Spring-summer invertebrate food	Conservation headlands, low input spring cereals, field corners, beetle banks, blocks/strips of nectar mix/flower-rich margins	<b>1 ha</b>	<b>2-3 ha</b>
Places to nest in-field	Skylark plots Fallow plots	<b>20 or 1 ha</b>	<b>20 plus 2 ha</b> (if appropriate)

These packages are at the heart of SWFBI's activities with the four projects working across the Wessex area to deliver a comprehensive programme of free tailored advice, 1:1 farm visits and workshops. All the projects deliver the same message and same ask of the farming community, ensuring that the options are sited correctly for the needs of the farmland bird species that the initiative is targeting. Having an evidence-based figure to work to at the farm-level has been very well received by the farming community and has made the approach easier to 'sell', with many farmers actually now delivering more than the minimum 7% ask within their HLS agreements. The farming community has also responded very positively to the way partner organisations are working together to deliver the same consistent message.

#### Key Stats

The amount of habitat delivered over the last two years speaks for itself - working with farmers and landowners the four projects combined have delivered close to 4,000ha of key in-field habitat across Wessex for farmland birds. The South West Farmland Bird Initiative continues to go from strength to strength. Since its start in October 2008 the initiative has delivered the following (April 2011):

- Total Ha of farmland advised on: **113,414ha**
- Number of 1:1 farm visits carried out: **401**
- Number of farm workshops/events run or presenting SWFBI at: **53**
- Number of Farmers/Land owners/Agronomists/others attending workshops/events run: **1,129**
- Total 'Live' Ha of key in-field ES (ELS/HLS) Farmland Bird Options delivered on the ground: **3,847ha**
- Total 'Live' £ spend on key in-field ES Farmland Bird Options delivered on the ground: **£11,645,533**

### **How are the farmland birds responding?**

It is early days, but initial results have been positive. For example on two of the project's key farms:

- Some five pairs of corn bunting are now breeding (in 2009 and 2010) on Whittington Lodge Farm in the Cotswolds, where they have not bred before. All five pairs are using the 'big three' habitats that we have provided through ES – including actually nesting in the wild bird mix we provided for them to nest in.
- During the cold snap in late December 2010 at Rainbow Farm in Dorset some 2,000 skylark, 1000 Linnet, 160 Corn bunting, 120 reed bunting, 150 yellowhammer and a covey of 12 grey partridge were observed feeding on a combination HLS wild bird mixes and brassica fodder options.

To quantify the success of the evidence based ES Farmland Bird package we are monitoring 35 farms across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Warwickshire, Sussex and Kent. The 35 farms chosen are all delivering the farmland bird package through ELS/HLS. Working with farmland bird research scientists from the GWCT, RSPB and Natural England, we have designed a methodology that monitors the fortunes of the 19 species of bird found within the wider countryside (including the key arable specialists that we are targeting) and which are likely to be present on the 35 farms. These 19 species are the same 19 that are used to measure the national trends in farmland bird populations through the national farmland bird index.

By monitoring a sample of 35 farms and this suite of 19 species, we have developed our own specific farmland bird index by which we can track the fortunes of farmland birds on these farms against that of the national farmland bird index, and assess whether the measures that have been put in place through Environmental Stewardship are making the difference for farmland birds. This started in November 2010.

### **Wider Influence**

The SWFBI targeting and delivery approach has now been adopted across England as a way to deliver for farmland birds in arable/mixed landscapes using ES as the key delivery tool. Many areas now have a range of local farmland bird projects or initiatives in place - with all of these delivering the same consistent message and ask of the farming community across England for farmland birds. The approach has now influenced the way the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) and ETiP has been developed with the ELS farmland bird package now central to both CFE's and ETiP's activities and delivery on the ground.

### **Case Study: Cotswolds Farmland Bird Project**

Neil Harris of Natural England, who runs the Cotswolds Farmland Bird Project, first started working with Bob and Pete Richards at Manor Farm, Hawling in 2004 as their adviser for their existing Cotswold Hills ESA scheme. As this relationship developed, they soon became aware that they had a shared passion for wildlife, and birds in particular.

In 2006 Neil suggested to Bob Richards that they consider applying to join the new Higher Level Stewardship scheme, based on farmland birds, resource protection and species-rich grassland. The HLS agreement went 'Live' in August 2006 and incorporated a number of arable options aimed at target species like lapwing and corn bunting.

When the SWFBI came into existence, and the Cotswold Hills Farmland Bird Project began in October 2008, the Richards's farm was positioned in the heart of one of the key target areas for the project. Over the past 2 years Neil has worked with the landowners to increase the provision of 'The big three' with the addition of a large block of corn bunting wild bird seed mix and brassica fodder crops followed by overwintered stubbles. The farm has incorporated skylark plots, nectar mixes, wild bird seed mixes, fallow plots and unharvested conservation headlands as well as overwintered stubbles, brassica fodder crops followed by overwintered stubbles and low input spring cereals, in all covering approximately one third of the arable area of the holding.

The owners are very enthusiastic about their farmland birds and they have noticed a marked increase in the number of birds to be seen on the holding. A recent survey by one of the county bird recorders noted 300 corn buntings (beating the previous record of 225 for the area), 500 skylark, 250 yellowhammer, 100 chaffinch and 1000 linnet in the vicinity of the farm.

### **Getting more Involved**

If you would like to learn more about the initiative and would like to get more involved then please do contact any one of the four project advisers, who will be happy to help you with your enquiry:

Cotswolds Farmland Bird project: [neil.harris@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:neil.harris@naturalengland.org.uk)

North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Project: [sarah.blyth@rspb.org.uk](mailto:sarah.blyth@rspb.org.uk)

South Wiltshire Farmland Bird Project: [TracyAdams@cranbornechase.org.uk](mailto:TracyAdams@cranbornechase.org.uk)

Dorset Arable Project: [ruth.wilkins@fwag.org.uk](mailto:ruth.wilkins@fwag.org.uk)

Or myself at: [james.phillips@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:james.phillips@naturalengland.org.uk)

And for further information on the South West Farmland Bird Initiative please visit our webpage at [Further info](#)

**James Phillips, Delivery Leader, Natural England. 7<sup>th</sup> February 2011**