



COLLABORATION

Ringling in change for farm birds

Perhaps now is the time for wildlife groups to work in a more positive way with the industry, writes Paul Hopwood from the West Midlands Ringing Group.

Edited: Oliver Cartwright

NFU members will be well aware of the pressures on farmland birds but despite the doom and gloom recent figures indicate that positive changes may not be that far away.

Most farmers don't need reminding about the issues there are when it comes to farmland birds and actually there needs to be more recognition of the work they do to support habitat, species and bird populations.

The West Midlands Ringing Group (WMRG) acknowledges the decline in farmland birds has continued at a slower rate more recently, and even more encouragingly the decline decreased significantly between 2013 and 2018 - it is our view that this is the start of the seeds of change. As a group we continue to see and hear generalisations that all farmers don't care about wildlife and that productivity is a farmer's only concern, and for us this is unjust and unfair. We see real positivity and enthusiasm from the farmers in respect of wildlife and a desire to improve and, where possible, do more.

We are not naïve enough to think that all farmers have the same passion, however the tide, in our experience, is turning and we have numerous requests for our services!

The Government's Environment Bill sets out to tackle the biggest environmental priorities of our time, and reward farmers for the work they undertake for the environment.

In some quarters this may not have gone far enough, but WMRG feels it is a step in the right direction. What we do know is that even before the proposed Government legislation, positive action was already being conducted by the farmers we work with, and in some cases this represented a cultural change, but a change some farmers have embraced. But we also can't forget the few who quietly did all they could for the environment often at their own expense. We work with regional NFU members who have a passion for wildlife and the environment. These are farmers who are proud of their farms, of their soil, of their birds and have real passion and enthusiasm for what they are doing, coupled with a thirst to share their knowledge with others.

We hear their excitement over worm numbers, soil quality, the numbers of farmland birds seen and their ideas to do more. Now is the right time, rather than dwelling on a past we can't change, to increase partnership working with farmers to encourage their actions, support British farming and ensure the positive steps continue for the benefits of a future we can shape. Only by working together are we going to reverse decline.



The iconic lapwing on farm

Reversing the fortunes of declining farmland birds is dependent on adequate provision of three things; safe nesting areas, access to invertebrate-rich habitat for feeding chicks during the breeding season and sufficient food to sustain populations through winter.

Countryside stewardship aims to meet these broad requirements and our findings do highlight the difference that these schemes make.

In my view farm efficiency and technological advances have been a double-edged sword in some ways.

While it has increased productivity it has also resulted in the loss of available crop seeds to farmland birds, mainly due to greater harvest efficiency and better storage.

NOW IS THE RIGHT TIME, RATHER THAN DWELLING ON A PAST WE CAN'T CHANGE, TO INCREASE PARTNERSHIP WORKING WITH FARMERS

Long gone are the days when grain was stored temporarily as bundles of sheaves or 'stooks' in the field but instead it is whisked off quickly to secure stores. I think it would be a backward step to revert to these methods today so instead stewardship has come up with the solution of providing designated crops left entirely for wildlife. These can take the form of unharvested parts of regular field crops or bespoke mixes sown specifically to provide a range of seeds. Wild bird seed covers, pollen and nectar margins and supplementary feeding are all designed to provide year round food for farm species. When combined with sensitive tillage methods, managed hedgerows and reduced disturbance these appear to be making a difference. For several years we have surveyed farms across Staffordshire, Shropshire, West Midlands and now Worcestershire. Ringing data supports farmers with real time quantitative and qualitative data and we would suggest that the data we collate offers excellent baseline data both now and in the future. Ringing activities cover a range of species and take place throughout the year. We target a range of species from skylark and wading birds to key farmland bird index species. Our surveys and findings show there are key areas that have a positive impact. In isolation each has benefits, but where combined and balanced they significantly benefit bird populations. Balance is vital.

The last two years have been challenging, with reduced effort due to



Ringling a woodcock captured on farmland

Covid-19 restrictions during key parts of the year.

As restrictions lifted we did get out and managed to conduct surveys across the Midlands region and we offer support and advice to farmers in respect of getting the best out of the farms and the schemes that they are in.

So for us, it makes sense that supplementary winter feed is provided in areas near to wild bird seed covers, close to hedgerows and away from tall trees or structures which provide perches for raptors and corvids.

We tend to favour feeding tracks and field margins which allow birds to access to find the food and find cover near should they be disturbed.

We also recommend a rotation of feeding areas to prevent disease.

As well as the commonly known farmland bird species we find we also find red list birds and now and again rare and scarce birds are encountered utilising winter feed.

In early 2021 we caught and ringed a Little Bunting in Worcestershire, see the main picture for an example.

This bird (*Emberiza pusilla*) has a large range but usually can be found from Scandinavia to Eastern Siberia.

Only 240 of these have been encountered in the UK, with most records being from the far north of Scotland and coastal bird observatories.

This was a county first and it was taking advantage of the feed supplied by the farm. Other sightings in the UK of this species are often in wild bird seed covers.

This goes to show the importance of these schemes for a range of species, both common and rare.

We have met up on farm with the NFU and its members, good work is being done and we are keen to keep this going and to hear from you.

I would urge any interested NFU members out there to get in touch with us and we can talk about surveying your farm and seeing what birds are out there!

+ For further details on the work of the ringers go to www.westmidlandsringinggroup.co.uk online; @ringerswm on social media or wrmrg.contact@gmail.com by email.

CAPTURE, RECORD, RING, RELEASE

The ringers go out on farm and use a technique very similar to lamping or spotlighting - birds are identified through a hand-held thermal imager, the ringers then approach shining a torch on the bird before scooping it up into a net. The technique is not as simple as that though and the ringers display real efficiency, skill and care in what they do.

Different techniques are used, but the ringers often move slowly towards their target and then separate, one keeping the bird illuminated with the other using the net to capture it. Details including measurements are then recorded and the bird is ringed and released.