

South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative



The Farm Flyer - Autumn-Winter 2014/15

Information and advice from the South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative

Welcome to the second edition of the South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative (SDFBI) Farm Flyer. This issue coincides with a time of considerable change as information about CAP reform filters through. A big part of this are details of the new greening requirements, including Ecological Focus Areas. Read on to find out more.

Following on from the washout of 2012, and the late summer of 2013, this year has seen a welcome return to a more 'typical' summer. Harvest has been aided by periods of dry weather, and national statistics show a welcome increase in yields across most crops. But it's not only farming that has benefited.

Farmland birds have also been reaping the rewards as well. Nesting attempts have been helped by warmer temperatures and drier conditions. Insects have been plentiful, which have in turn provided a great food source for all kinds of birds from corn buntings to lapwings.

Often, a lot of these observations at a local scale are anecdotal. To help back them up, this summer saw the launch of the SDFBI farmland bird monitoring project. Data from over one hundred 1km squares has been collected, and is being analysed to track the fortunes of key widespread farmland birds such as skylark and linnet. This information will be invaluable to celebrate success and inform future conservation actions.

Harvest underway on the South Downs. For many farmers, cropping plans are already in place, but how do these fit with the new CAP requirements? Are you complying with the three crop rule, and have you got enough EFA land? Are you even eligible for these measures? Full details of the requirements can be found at:
www.gov.uk/cap-reform.

As part of the new BPS (Basic Payment System), you will be required to register your details on the new CAP Information Service (CAPIS). This is being gradually introduced, and the RPA will contact you when the service is ready.



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Read on for...The SDFBI website goes live...A good start to the SDFBI Monitoring Project...A Focus on Predator Control by GWCT Field Ecologist Mike Short...South Downs Event listings...Making the most of your Environmental Focus Areas (EFA's)...

The SDFBI website goes live

As part of the resources available through the SDFBI, the website, kindly sponsored by the South Downs Land Managers, is now up and running. Designed to be a one stop shop for all things farmland birds, the site contains links to advice and information from all lead organisations, covering both the birds and the habitats that they use. If you can't find what you're looking for, or would like to speak to an advisor, key contacts are also listed.

As the new CAP begins in 2015, details of available agri-environment schemes will be listed. This will keep you informed of the scheme requirements and what you will need to do to apply. In a change from the 'open to all' element of ELS, NELMS will be a competitive scheme. It is likely that farmland birds will be a key target for agreements on the Downs, and the SDFBI website will be a great place to start when planning your application.



The SDFBI website is now live and provides a one stop shop for advice and information

Following the launch of the SDFBI monitoring project this year, updates will be added to show the data collected, and what it means for farmland bird populations. In conjunction with this, relevant research papers and projects are listed containing more in-depth information on the studies of key species, habitats and farming practices that influence them.

An events diary lists all the details of upcoming events, and for those of you who prefer to catch up on things in the comfort of your own home, back editions of the SDFBI Farm Flyer will be available to browse on-line. So please drop by and see what you think. The website can be found at:

www.sdfarmbirds.com

A good start to the SDFBI Monitoring Project

This summer saw the first year of surveys for the SDFBI monitoring project. The aim is to gather sufficient data to produce trends for key farmland bird species within the South Downs National Park.

In total, approximately one hundred 1km squares have been surveyed. Some of these as part of the BTO's national Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), and some specifically through the SDFBI project. The data is still being analysed, but there are some interesting early results.

Some farmland bird species have been abundant across the survey squares, with skylark appearing in 83%, linnet in 71% and yellowhammer in 65%. Comparing this to BBS data for the whole of Sussex (55%, 39% and 37% respectively), it shows that the South Downs is doing well for these particular farmland birds.

On the other hand, out of the survey data received so far, grey partridge were recorded in 3 squares, lapwing in 9 and corn bunting in 14. Due to their more specific habitat requirements, you would not expect to find these

birds across the board, so the information gathered will be useful in targeting habitat management in the most appropriate areas.



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Yellowhammers were found in 65% of the 1km grid squares surveyed in the SDFBI monitoring project

Further analysis is on-going, and the full results will be published on the SDFBI website as soon as they become available.

Dates for the diary:

20/11/14—CFE Cover Crops Trial, Cowdray Park, Midhurst, West Sussex, 8.30am-12.30pm, tel Tim Clarke on 07713 333196, email: southeast@cfeonline.org.uk

02/12/14—CFE Cover Crops Trial, Northbrook Farm, Micheldever, Hants, 8.30am—12.30pm, tel: Tim Clarke on 07713 333196, email: southeast@cfeonline.org.uk

A Focus on Predator Control

The impacts of predators on farmland bird populations is a hot topic, not least on the South Downs. In this article, Mike Short, Senior Field Ecologist working on predation control studies for the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), talks about predator control, the role it can play in farmland bird conservation, and the most effective way to go about it.

Game managers have long-advised that controlling numbers of generalist predators is paramount to boosting numbers of wild grey partridges; provision of good habitat alone, isn't enough. Their experience-based arguments were validated in the 1990's, when the GWCT's six-year Salisbury Plain Predator Removal Experiment showed, unequivocally, that legal predator control during the nesting season led to a threefold increase in autumn stock and subsequent spring-pairs.

The Salisbury Plain approach became a model for other grey partridge conservation projects. Seasonal predator control by three full-time gamekeepers, has contributed to a staggering rise in wild grey partridges on the Duke of Norfolk's estate at Arundel in West Sussex. Since 2003, when the recovery package was implemented, spring-pair densities have risen from 0.3 to 18.9 pairs per 100ha; autumn densities from 1.2 to a staggering 156.8 birds per 100ha.

Concurrently, the breeding success of other birds of conservation concern, such as lapwing and skylark has improved dramatically. It's an inspiring demonstration of how agri-environment options to create better year-round habitats, supplementary feeding during the 'hungry gap', and legal predator control, can work together to provide emphatic farmland bird recovery.

Gamekeepers come at a cost which some landowners can't afford. However, by careful planning and timely use of resources, effective predation control needn't cost the earth.

Reducing winter losses

In late-winter, grey partridges are highly susceptible to sparrowhawk predation. It's illegal to kill any wild bird of prey, but raptor-kills can be reduced by providing plenty of cover in which partridge-pairs and other birds can hide. Kale-based strips are excellent – the more of them, the better. Provide plenty of feed hoppers and locate them strategically to lessen the risk of feeding partridges being detected by hawks. Other farmland birds will also use these hoppers. Placing hoppers within, or close to, good 'escape cover' probably helps, but remain vigilant against rats, which are serious nest predators.

Reducing nest-predation

Grey partridges and lapwings are especially vulnerable to fox and crow predation during the nesting season. Magpies, rats, stoats and weasels can also inflict substantial nest-losses. Focus your control effort between March and July, when eggs, chicks and incubating hens are most vulnerable. Killing predators outside of this window has less impact, because they're quickly replaced by others, rendering your efforts less efficient.

Foxes

Night-shooting is very effective until the height of growing crops prevent foxes from being detected. If you can't see them, you can't shoot them. Thereafter, use fox snares that comply with Defra's Code of Practice on snaring. Use snares carefully, and check them regularly, setting them in areas where you've found evidence of recent fox activity. Fox snares are especially effective at this time of year, but it's imperative that you're properly trained in their use. Search for active fox earths. If you find one, don't disturb it, or the resident adults might abandon it. Try to shoot or snare attendant adults as they're travelling back to the earth, before dealing with any cubs.



Grey partridge hens are especially vulnerable to fox predation when they are incubating

Corvids

From March-July, use Larsen traps containing a live crow or magpie decoy, wherever these corvids are sighted. Aim to trap and remove territory holding corvids prior to the egg-laying season, before mopping up immigrant birds thereafter. Active crow or magpie nests can be destroyed using heavy loads in a shotgun, preferably when the hen is in residence.

Small mammalian predators

Use terriers, fumigants, traps and rodenticides to kill rats wherever they occur. If checking-time permits, a network of approved tunnel traps set along hedgerows and the best nesting habitats, can reduce nest-losses to rats, stoats and weasels.

Predator control and the Law

The use of traps, snares and rodenticides, are subject to a complex and ever-changing legal framework. Operators must abide by the law. The GWCT provides a comprehensive one-day training course on predator control. For more details, contact the GWCT Advisory Team on: 01425 651013.

Making the most of your Ecological Focus Areas (EFA's)

From 2015, if you are receiving the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) will be required to follow a set of new greening rules. These may include some things that you are already doing, or may require some changes to be compliant. In this article, we will look at the Ecological Focus Area (EFA) requirements, and where they may be combined to benefit farmland birds and other wildlife on your farm.

From an environmental perspective, EFA's have the potential to offer the greatest benefits for farm wildlife. If you have more than 15ha of arable land (although there are some exemptions), you will be required to use your EFA on areas and features equivalent to at least 5% of the total arable land declared in your BPS. These areas and features can be selected from the following list:

- Buffer strips
- Nitrogen fixing crops
- Hedges
- Catch crops/cover crops
- Fallow land

A full and comprehensive overview of EFA's and the other greening requirements can be found in the recently published DEFRA booklet entitled 'The New Common Agricultural Policy Schemes in England – August 2014 update' (see www.Gov.uk). We will focus on fallow land, as this has the greatest opportunity to provide habitats for farmland birds.



Fallow land on the South Downs. For EFA's fallow can be more than just cultivated land

The definition of fallow land is included in the DEFRA booklet, and lists the time and area requirements attached to it. The main point to make here is that it does not just have to be bare cultivated land, which does have environmental benefit as it regenerates, but can

also include wildlife habitats such as wild bird seed and pollen and nectar mixtures.

Wildlife mixtures can be sown that are unharvestable and contain at least two crops that support wildlife and pollinators. This includes species such as barley, kale, quinoa, linseed and millet in wild bird mixes, and birds foot trefoil, common knapweed, sainfoin and red clover in pollen and nectar mixtures. By including plots or strips of these mixtures within your EFA, you will be providing great feeding and nesting habitats for farmland birds as well as pollinators and other farm wildlife.



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Wild bird seed mixtures are an important winter habitat for farmland birds, and can be included under EFA's

Some of you may already be delivering these habitats through your HLS and/or ELS agreements. If you are in any HLS agreement or an ELS only agreement that started before 1st January 2012, then options that meet the requirements can be counted towards your EFA. If you are in an ELS only agreement that started after 1st January 2012, then your options cannot be double counted. If this is the case, Natural England will contact you directly to discuss the best way forward. This could involve adopting new ELS options to replace any lost through EFA, taking a reduced ELS payment with no additional options or ceasing your ELS scheme.

The EFA you have on your land can be changed each year, meaning that you can move things around to fit in with crop rotations. The Government is due to review the EFA area requirements late in 2015, with the potential to increase it to 7% if insufficient environmental benefits are provided. The scheme set-up provides a great opportunity to help wildlife, and can also benefit overall productivity by taking out poorer areas of land or awkward corners. We urge you to look at the possibilities on your farm and make the most of your EFA's to improve your farm.

The South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative is a collaborative partnership led by the following organisations:

