

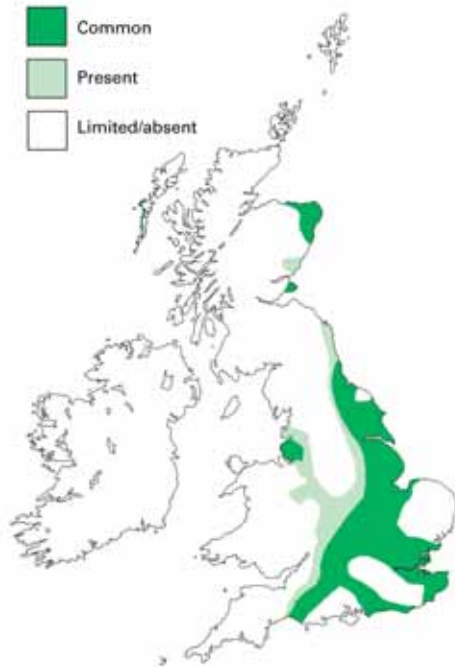


for birds
for people
for ever



FARMING FOR BIRDS

Corn bunting



Distribution map showing the relative abundance of corn buntings in Britain and Ireland 1988-91



Corn bunting by Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The corn bunting is a large, heavy-looking brown bunting with a particularly thick bill

Corn buntings are generally found on open arable and mixed farmland. The UK population of corn buntings fell by 89% between 1970 and 2003. This is mainly because fewer seed and insect food sources are available to them on farmland. Also, because corn buntings are a late nesting species, their nests can be destroyed during harvesting or mowing.

WHAT DO CORN BUNTINGS NEED?

Nesting habitat: corn buntings nest on the ground in cereal fields, set-aside, grass field margins, unimproved grassland and in cereal-based wild bird cover crops. They start nesting late in the spring, usually June or July, and can have flightless chicks late into August. As a result, some

nests are lost during harvesting. In Scotland, they often nest in hay or late-cut silage, but this is not known in England.

Summer food: adults eat seeds and insects. Insects are very important for chick survival. Breeding success relates directly to the availability of insect food and

can be reduced by the use of pesticides. Corn buntings take insects and spiders from crops, set-aside, grassland and field margins.

Winter food: in winter, they feed on seeds, particularly cereal grains in cover crops and winter stubbles. They have become extinct in some pastoral areas of the UK.

ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A CORN BUNTING

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Flocks may move to find new sources of seed food, especially cereal grains, throughout the winter and spring. Males return to territories to sing during the winter, especially during fine weather.					Main breeding season. Most nest in cereal crops and feed on seeds and grains. Chicks are fed mainly on insects. Second broods are rare in England.		They require seed-rich cover crops or stubbles for moulting, when almost flightless.		They flock together in winter to find sites with plenty of seed food and roost communally in habitats such as weedy stubbles or scrub.		

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE CORN BUNTINGS?

Nesting habitat	Summer food	Winter food
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If possible, harvest fields with nesting corn buntings last. SA Provide a mix of winter and spring-sown cereals and set-aside. ELS HLS Use wild bird seed mixtures, low-input cereals or undersown cereals to provide a dense crop favourable for nesting. Under HLS you can create a wild bird seed mixture completely made up of cereals, or unharvested conservation headlands for nesting corn buntings, which would also provide winter food. SA Use wild bird cover to provide a dense crop for nesting. SA Destroy set-aside vegetation as late as possible or obtain a derogation from Defra to delay cutting until September to protect nesting corn buntings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELS Undersown spring cereals can boost insect numbers on mixed farms. Maintain a range of crops (eg both autumn and spring cereals) to extend the periods of food availability. SA ELS Create wide, rough grass buffer strips, ditch banks and field corners around arable fields, especially fields away from large hedges or treelines. ELS Create beetle banks through the middle of arable fields larger than 16 hectares. Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March. ELS Adopt conservation headlands HLS or low-input cereal crops to boost broadleaved weeds and the associated insects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELS HLS SA Create areas of wild bird seed mixture in the spring with a high proportion of cereal in the mix and, where possible, re-sow each year to maintain the supply of grain food. Spread seed-rich tailings or waste grain on farm tracks or in stubbles. SA ELS Leave fields of over-wintered stubbles and rotational set-aside unmanaged for as long as possible through the winter and spring. HLS Low-input cereal crops followed by over-wintered stubble provide more seed food for birds than conventional stubbles.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELS In pastoral areas where corn buntings are still present, leave 6 m buffer strips of silage fields uncut and maintain or increase areas of arable cropping. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELS HLS Maintain areas of unimproved grassland or manage grassland with low-inputs to boost insect food. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ELS HLS In pastoral areas where corn buntings are still present, maintain or increase areas of arable cropping, especially cereals.

KEY

= all farms
 = arable and mixed farms
 = pastoral farms
 ELS = Entry Level Stewardship
 HLS = Higher Level Stewardship
 SA = Set-aside

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB,
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk/farming



Farming and Wildlife Advisory
Group, NAC, Stoneleigh,
Kenilworth, Warwickshire
CV8 2RX Tel: 024 7669 6699
www.fwag.org.uk



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge,
Hampshire SP6 1EF Tel: 01425 652381
www.gct.org.uk

RSPB regd charity no 207076 223-1310-05-06

PRIORITY ACTION

- The corn bunting is a target species for Higher Level Stewardship.
- Ensure that the farm provides nesting habitat, summer food and winter food.
- Boost insect food using low-input options, conservation headlands or buffer strips.
- Provide seed food, especially cereal grain, through the winter with wild bird seed mixtures, over-wintered stubble, rotational set-aside, or waste grain/tailings.

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

- arable crops on livestock farms
- beetle banks
- buffer strips on cultivated land
- buffer strips on grassland
- conservation headlands
- grazed pasture
- hay and silage meadows
- low-input cereals
- over-wintered stubble
- set-aside management
- wild bird seed mixtures.

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info