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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

# Stone-curlew

HLS

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Stone-curlew by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com), eggs by Tim Cowan (RSPB)

The stone-curlew is a distinctive crow-sized bird with long yellow legs, a yellow and black bill, large yellow eyes and a black and white wingbar. The eggs are extremely well camouflaged.

*The stone-curlew is one of the UK's rarest birds. An 85% decline in both range and numbers from the 1930s left the population concentrated in two core areas – Wessex and the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecklands. Conservation efforts since the mid-1980s resulted in the population doubling to approximately 300 pairs by 2005. Stone-curlews are summer migrants arriving on their breeding grounds in late March and leaving for their wintering grounds in southern Europe and North Africa in October.*

## WHAT DO STONE-CURLEWS NEED?

### Light, free-draining soils

Stone-curlews only nest on light, free-draining soils following the chalk ridge from Wessex through the Brecks and into north Norfolk, with a small outlying population on the Suffolk coast.

### Bare or sparsely vegetated ground on which to nest

Stone-curlews prefer to nest on sheep- or rabbit-grazed acid or calcareous grassland, with a sward height of less than 2 cm. However, a large proportion of the population nests on arable fields, typically in areas of summer fallow, set-aside, or spring-sown crops such as sugar beet, root

vegetables, spring barley and maize.

### A nearby food source

Stone-curlews generally feed within 1 km of the nest site on invertebrates found in short-grazed semi-natural grassland or in areas frequented by livestock, including outdoor pig units.

### Protection from farming operations

Stone-curlews are extremely difficult to find as they are secretive birds and well-camouflaged. Nests and chicks in arable fields are often at risk from farming operations, especially as

stone-curlew chicks often remain motionless when disturbed. By working with the local RSPB stone-curlew team, land managers can ensure that arable nesting stone-curlews are located and protected from farming operations.

### A nest site safe from disturbance

Stone-curlews are very susceptible to disturbance and tend to avoid nesting near busy roads and areas used often by people on foot (particularly dog walkers).

**GUIDELINES OVERLEAF**



## PRIORITY ACTION

- If you see a stone-curlew please contact the RSPB.
- Maintain bare areas in fields throughout the breeding season through Environmental Stewardship or set-aside derogations.
- Maintain areas of grazed grassland to provide feeding and nesting areas.



Tim Cowan (RSPB)

A cultivated plot in arable farmland

## Higher Level Stewardship options benefiting stone-curlews

### ARABLE OPTIONS

Fallow plots for ground-nesting birds  
Fallow plots for ground-nesting birds as an enhanced set-aside option

HP13  
HP17

### GRASSLAND OPTIONS

Maintenance of species-rich semi-natural grassland  
Restoration of species-rich semi-natural grassland  
Creation of species-rich semi-natural grassland  
Maintenance of semi-improved or rough grassland for target species  
Restoration of semi-improved or rough grassland for target species  
Creation of semi-improved or rough grassland for target species

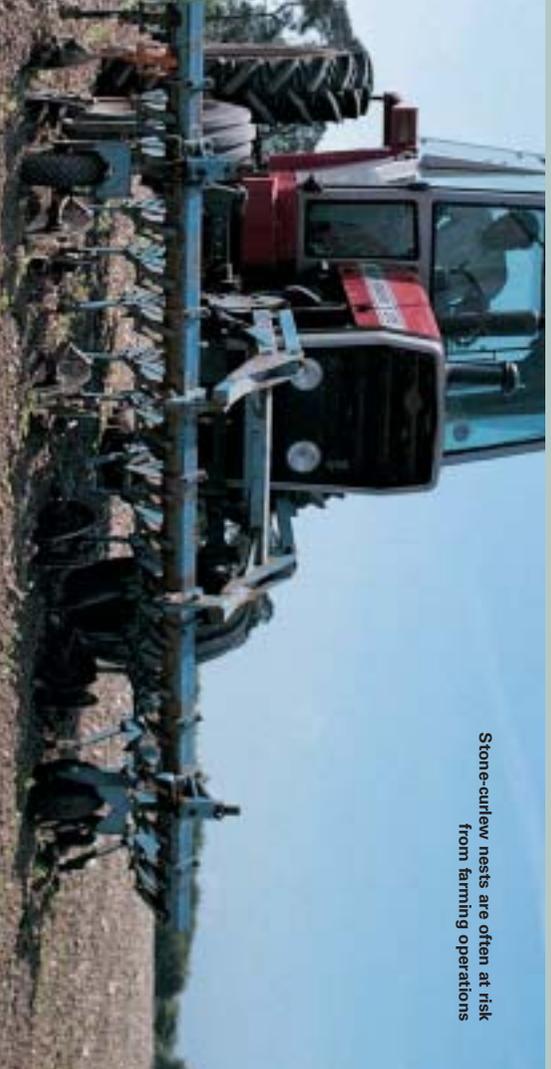
HK6  
HK7  
HK8  
HK15  
HK16  
HK17

### HEATHLAND OPTIONS (in East Anglia)

Maintenance of lowland heathland  
Restoration of lowland heathland on neglected sites  
Restoration of forestry areas to lowland heathland  
Creation of lowland heathland from arable or improved grassland  
Creation of lowland heathland on worked mineral sites

HO1  
HO2  
HO3  
HO4  
HO5

Stone-curlew nests are often at risk  
from farming operations



Tim Cowan (RSPB)

Chalk grassland in optimal condition for stone-curlews



Rob Lucking (RSPB)

Acid grassland in optimal condition for stone-curlews



Phill Sheldrake (RSPB)

A cultivated plot in grassland

Stone-curlew nesting habitat created on set-aside

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE STONE-CURLEWS?

### On arable fields

- The Defra Higher Level Stewardship Scheme contains an option to provide cultivated plots for ground-nesting birds. For stone-curlews, this involves cultivating an area of 2 hectares (ha) or more within either set-aside or an arable crop and keeping it bare during the breeding season by cultivating or spraying.
- Apply to Defra for a derogation to cultivate set-aside in February or early March to create bare areas for nesting stone-curlews. Keep the area bare throughout the breeding season by cultivating or spraying.
- Increase the amount of spring cropping, as this provides nesting areas for stone-curlews.

### In grassland

- By keeping livestock on your farm, you will provide an important invertebrate food supply for stone-curlews.
- Create new areas of acid or calcareous grassland on arable farms to provide nesting and feeding habitat for stone-curlews. Higher Level Stewardship has

options for creating, restoring and maintaining grassland.

- Allow at least some grassland areas to be tightly grazed to produce a short sward (<2 cm), which will provide nesting and feeding areas for stone-curlews.
- Ensure grassland areas have enough bare ground for stone-curlews to nest by creating cultivated areas within existing or new areas of grassland. (Note if the grassland is an SSSI you will need consent from English Nature).

### Management and locations of cultivated plots

- Site plots away from major roads, occupied buildings and public rights of way.
- Plots should be in fields with an all-round open aspect and should be positioned not too close to trees and hedgerows, and ideally at the top of a ridge, slope or hill. They should not be positioned in areas close to sources of predation (eg near a fox earth or badger sett, or near areas that attract large numbers of crows).
- Ideally, the plot will remain in a fixed location. A 2 ha plot is the minimum recommended area, being divided into two adjacent 1 ha plots, which are then managed independently. The first of the plots should be prepared by discing in February to create a bare earth surface in time for the breeding season. The second half is then prepared in late May or early June, and subsequently the first half again in August. Cultivation of each 1 ha plot can then continue in rotation.
- The timing of plot management may need to be adjusted to suit local conditions or nesting birds, and there may be situations where spraying with herbicide is preferable to cultivation.
- Your local RSPB stone-curlew team will be able to advise you of the best way to manage plots in your area.
- Stone-curlew chicks and eggs can be predated by foxes and corvids (crows) – farmers should consider the use of legal predator control on their land.

### Do you need further advice and assistance about stone-curlews?

If you have stone-curlews on your farm, we would very much like to hear about it. RSPB stone-curlew teams in Wessex and Eastern England are able to locate nests and chicks so they can be protected during farming operations. They can also give free advice on providing habitat for stone-curlews, including location of nest plots and how to manage them. They can be contacted at the following addresses.

Eastern England  
RSPB Breckland Office,  
4a White Hart Street,  
Thetford, Norfolk IP24  
1AD. Tel: 01842 821787

Wessex  
RSPB Wessex Team,  
Enterprise House, Cherry  
Orchard Lane, Salisbury,  
Wiltshire SP2 7LD. Tel:  
01722 427232

Berks & Oxon  
The RSPB, Denford  
Manor, Lower Denford,  
Hungerford RG17 0UN.  
Tel: 01488 680459

For advice on legislation,  
contact English Nature at:  
English Nature,  
Northminster House,  
Peterborough PE1 1UA.  
Tel: 01733 455000



The stone-curlew recovery projects in East Anglia, Wessex and Berkshire are part of *Action for Birds in England*, a partnership between English Nature and the RSPB.

