

South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative



The Farm Flyer - Spring 2014

Information and advice from the South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative

Welcome to the first edition of the South Downs Farmland Bird Initiative (SDFBI) Farm Flyer. Through this newsletter we will be covering issues and topics related to on-farm management for farmland birds and other biodiversity.

The SDFBI is a collaborative partnership between Natural England (NE), the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and the South Downs Land Management Group (SDLMG). As the South Downs is a largely farmed landscape, the SDFBI's primary aim is to act as a central point for farmland bird advice and information to assist farmers and land managers in their conservation delivery.

The Initiative is also working with other organisations such as the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Sussex Ornithological Society (SOS) and the Hampshire Ornithological Society (HOS) on specific projects. One such example is a farmland bird survey due to start this year to help us get a better picture of the trends and distribution of key species across the Downs. Read on to find out more.

In each addition, we aim to bring you an update of the work going on across the South Downs, practical management advice, and views of farmers actually undertaking the work on the ground. We appreciate that to be successful, conservation has to fit within modern farming, and hope to show ways in which this can be done.

This newsletter is for the farming community and their advisors, to provide a central point for advice and information.

As well as this newsletter, keep an eye out for farm events that will cover specific management options in detail on the ground. We also hope to set up a website in the coming months to provide an online resource.

If there is anything that you would particularly like to see covered through the SDFBI in the future, please contact us with your suggestions at: sdfarfbirds@yahoo.co.uk



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The farmed landscape of the South Downs provides a wide range of habitats for wildlife. By managing them in an effective way, it is possible to produce good quality food and cater for wildlife at the same time

Read on for...Top tips on fallow plot management...How grey partridge fared on the Downs in 2013...An Interview With...South Downs Event listings...News on a new farmland bird monitoring scheme...A Keepers view on delivering HLS supplementary feeding...

Top Tip—more bums on nests in fallow plots

Fallow plots within arable fields can provide nesting habitat for lapwing, and potentially stone-curlew as they start to make a come back across the South Downs. They also help other wildlife by providing feeding and nesting sites for skylark, corn bunting and grey partridge, lying-up areas for brown hare, and places for rare arable plants to grow.

But what is the best way to manage the plots to achieve maximum results? Some recent trials on similar plots in East Anglia have indicated a few key features that lapwing and stone-curlew seem to prefer:

- Plot location is key, open areas away from tall vegetation and public access are best
- A plot located next to or near to grazed pasture provides areas for lapwing to take their chicks to feed. The less distance they have to travel the better
- Nesting birds seem to prefer firm soil. Consider using minimal cultivation techniques, or deeper cultivations earlier in the winter so that the ground has time to settle
- An undulating surface provides better cover for nesting birds. Try to choose plot sites and cultivation techniques that achieve this, however, avoid cultivations that leave ground in a very rough state (such as deep ploughing), as birds will struggle to move around
- Stones and flints provide good cover for birds.

Particularly stony fields, or parts of fields can be good places for fallow plots

- Some vegetation growth on fallow plots provides cover and supports a greater insect food source. Another way to enhance this is to locate plots next to habitats such as beetle banks or conservation headlands



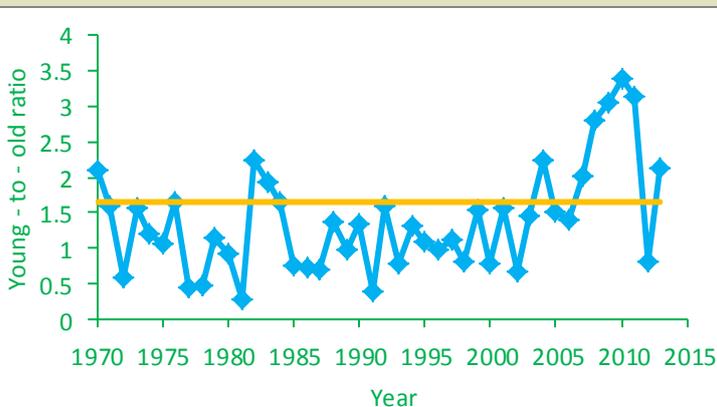
© Hayley New

This plot has a good level of cover and is open enough for lapwing and stone-curlew to nest

By following these guidelines, your plot will have the right elements for lapwing or stone-curlew. If you would like further advice, contact your local NE, RSPB, GWCT or SDNPA Advisor.

How did grey partridges fare on the Downs in 2013?

Grey partridges are farmland specialists, one of a suite of species that are particularly associated with lowland agriculture throughout Europe. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust has led research into their conservation, including long-term monitoring of their status on the South Downs.



Grey partridge chick production on the Sussex Study area. The orange line represents the chicks needed for stability.

This year was the forty-sixth year of grey partridge counts in the GWCT's Sussex Study on the South Downs. The study area includes the downland farmland from the river Arun to the river Adur. Autumn counts are undertaken in early September, with Dr Dick Potts, who

started the study in 1968, and is still involved today. These counts give us a measure of both breeding abundance (we measure this as the number of spring pairs per 100 hectares) and chick productivity (measured as the number of chicks counted per adult bird counted). They also give an indication of how other farmland specialists will have fared, as the chicks of most farmland specialists feed on or are fed similar invertebrates and many are ground-nesting like grey partridges.

Most of us will remember the wash out that was the summer of 2012 for some time and the summer of 2013 started out little better. The cold spring resulted in low numbers of chick food insects which we monitor in the third week of June, peak hatch time for grey partridges. The glorious warm spell in July and August provided much better conditions for invertebrates, but too late to benefit early partridge broods. The results of this were borne out in the September, when the majority of the broods of partridges counted had been hatched in mid to late July.

On average, we counted a little over two chicks for every adult; this was over 2.5 times the chick productivity of 2012. The majority of chicks were found on areas where habitat and legal predator management is being directed towards grey partridge conservation.

An Interview With.....

In this section, **An Interview With**, gives South Downs farmers, landowners and advisors an opportunity to give their warts and all view of conservation management, and hopefully give you some ideas of what may or may not work on your land. In this edition it's South Downs Land Management Group Vice-Chairman, David Taylor, who farms at Housedean Farm near Falmer, East Sussex.

What do you farm on the South Downs?

I farm single suckled beef and arable crops. I have about 50 cows grazing permanent pasture. The arable crops include Winter Wheat, Winter Barley, Spring Barley and Oilseed Rape.

Do you have an agri-environment scheme?

Yes. I am in ELS and HLS. Previously I was in the ESA scheme.



Winter stubbles are a popular ELS and HLS option on the Downs as they fit in with spring cropping

What management are you undertaking for farmland birds?

Overwintered stubble, fallow plots, headland buffer strips, pollen and nectar mix headland, sacrificial cereal crop and a beetle bank.

How does environmental management fit with your farming system?

Generally it fits fairly well, partly because I have chosen options that do fit. The overwintered stubbles can't be ploughed until 15th February and in some years there is a clash with spring drilling. The other problem is always the worry that we are not quite compliant with our agreement eg a buffer strip is only 5.5 metres and not 6. We have been OK so far but it is always in the back of my mind.

What aspects have worked well and why?

The overwintered stubbles have worked well in providing winter food for small birds and so have the sacrificial crops.

What aspects haven't worked and why?

I am not convinced about the effectiveness of the beetle

bank. We are only in the first year of it so it might improve. The problem is in establishing the tussocky grasses in an environment where there is strong competition from volunteer cereals and wild oats.

The fallow plots are ploughed in the winter and left ploughed until the following winter when they are ploughed again and cropped. Another area is used for the next year. The problem is that the area can become very overgrown during the summer. It is often not possible to spray with roundup because of the risk of damaging surrounding crops.

Does the work you're undertaking help with any other objectives you have on the farm?

Not for the commercial farming but it does give noticeable improvements to levels of wildlife on the farm which is an objective of nearly all farmers who care about their farms.

Do you have any tips for others thinking of undertaking environmental management?

Choose your options very carefully so that they fit in with your farming system.

How do you see the future of farming on the South Downs?

Farmers will respond to external economic pressures just as they always have. Cattle farming will become increasingly difficult unless TB is tackled in a serious way. As it becomes more difficult to get into new environmental schemes farmers may decide to plough up some of the land that was taken out of arable production with the ESA scheme so there may be an increase in the arable area. This will be even more likely if cereal prices rise further.



The South Downs is currently a mixed farming landscape, but what does the future hold?

Event listings:

18/02/14—**SDNPA Farmer Breakfast meeting**, Langish House Hotel, Langrish, Hants, GU32 1RN, 7.30am tel: 01730 811762

27/02/14—**CFE Feed your birds farm walk**, Paythorne Farm, Fulking West Sussex, 9.30—12.30, tel: 07580 004654, email: southeast@cfeonline.org

07/03/14—**South Downs NIA Farm Walk**, Rotherfield Park Estate, Alton, Hants, 10am, tel: 01425 651013, email: lferguson@gwct.org

New bird survey to start in 2014

How are farmland birds faring on the South Downs? We know that national statistics paint a bleak picture for farmland species such as corn bunting, skylark and lapwing, but is there a similar situation across the Downs?

To try and find out, this summer the SDFBI is launching a new monitoring project to help assess populations of farmland birds across the South Downs. In conjunction with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), and the Sussex and Hampshire Ornithological Societies (SOS and HOS), the project aims to recruit at least 50 volunteers who will survey randomly selected grid squares within the National Park boundary.

Aimed to be repeated every year, the data collected

during two morning visits in April and June will hopefully help us track the fortunes of birds such as skylark, linnet and yellowhammer. Over time, we can use this information to map population trends for the South Downs and see how species are faring, and where conservation action would be best directed.

The surveys are designed to be completed from public rights of way, but in cases where this is difficult, some volunteers may approach landowners for access. If you fall within a survey square and are contacted, it would be much appreciated if you are able to allow access as it enables the full survey to take place. If you are approached, remember to ask for sightings to be sent back to you, you never know, it may throw up some surprises!

A Keeper's view on delivering HLS supplementary feeding

Natural England Advisor, Sue Simpson, speaks to Norfolk Estate Head Keeper, Charlie Mellor to find out how he is delivering the HLS supplementary feeding option across the Estate.



© Charlie Mellor

Wire mesh is used around the hoppers to keep pheasants out and ensure food is available for grey partridges

The option was introduced with effect from January 1st 2013 to enable land managers to fill 'the hungry gap' between January and April when the supply of available food, both from natural and sown sources is exhausted. HF24 was added to the Norfolk Estate's agreement in late 2013. Below is a brief account of Charlie's experience of delivering the option, and a couple of tips that may prove useful to others.

I asked Charlie whether he thinks the addition of HF24 has led to an increase in the numbers of birds seen at this time of year: *I think because we have fed through this period for a number of years now we usually retain good numbers of grey partridge, yellowhammer, linnet and corn bunting, but I can see that feeding over this*

period is very important as there is very little around to hold the birds.

Moving on to the practical issues of management I asked if he had encountered any particular difficulties: *One problem has been ensuring that pheasants don't take all the small seeds. We have overcome this, in part, by feeding some of the ground fed seed within a mesh enclosure which excludes the pheasants. This is in addition to the scattering of some seed more widely.*

Charlie also had a tip about the record keeping required for this option under HLS: *I store everything on my ipad. I keep records of what we have fed and where, I have given the other keepers notebooks and transfer all the information regularly so that everything is accessible when I need it. I can also take and store photographs on the same device, it just makes things easier and it is good to have an accurate record of what we are seeing.*



© Charlie Mellor

Charlie has adapted his quad bike to make spreading the seed easier and quicker

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

