

Corn bunting (*Miliaria calandra*)

The corn bunting is a bird of lowland arable land. It is widespread across the south of the UK, with a patchy distribution elsewhere. It has suffered a severe decline in recent years, along with a suite of other species of birds found on lowland farmland

1 Current status

1.1 National

The corn bunting is a characteristic resident species of lowland arable farmland and is one of the few British species largely dependent on cropped land. Its numbers and distribution have been declining in some areas since the last century and steadily, in most places, since the early 1970s, a trend which appears to be continuing. The results of the Common Birds Census suggest that there was a 76% decline in the breeding population between 1968 and 1991. In addition a decline of 32% in its British range between the two Breeding Atlas periods (1968-71 and 1988-91) has led to further fragmentation of the remaining high density areas. The Farmland Bunting Survey, organised by the BTO in 1993, recorded only around 20,000 territories remaining in Britain.

1.2 Local

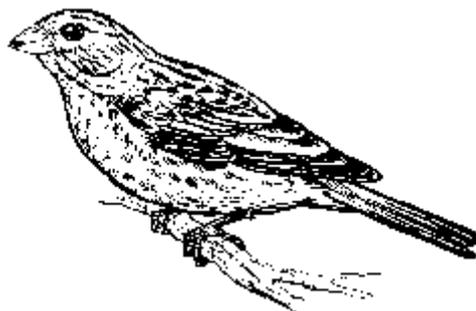
This species has disappeared from ten 10 km squares, and appeared in four other 10 km squares between the two national breeding atlases. This has reduced an already patchy distribution in East Anglia. The Provisional Suffolk Bird Atlas (1993) found this species in around 9% of 2 km tetrads, of which only 30 (33%) had confirmed breeding records.

1.3 Natural Areas

All.

1.4 Protection

The corn bunting is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and the EC Birds Directive.



2 Current factors causing loss or decline

- Although we remain unclear of the precise factors, the loss of extensive mixed farmland would appear to be the key to the decline of the corn bunting.
- Loss of winter food is thought to be a key factor in the population decline. The BTO's winter corn bunting survey, in 1992-93, showed that weedy stubble fields were by far the most important feeding habitat during the winter. The area of winter stubbles has been greatly reduced in recent decades due to the switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown cereals, the decline in mixed farming and the disappearance of undersowing. In addition, increased herbicide and fertiliser use has reduced the weediness of the stubbles.
- Reduced breeding productivity. The intensification of farming practices, such as the increased use of pesticides and fertilisers, has reduced the availability of insects which are essential as chick food. Changes in grazing/mowing regimes may reduce nest site availability and breeding success on grassland, and the decline in mixed farming has led to the disappearance of insect-rich (and reduced input) undersown spring cereals.

2 Establish the breeding numbers to allow accurate monitoring of any change in the population size and range by 2003.

3 Current action

- Until recently the corn bunting was not regarded as a species of conservation concern and, hence, little direct action has been taken to help it.
- BTO census work has highlighted the plight of the species, and a recently completed GCT/EN/RSPB research project in Sussex has investigated the causes of the decline, particularly with respect to agricultural intensification. This work suggested that breeding productivity was the most significant factor in the decline of corn bunting on the study site.
- Rotational set-aside will have benefited the species, although this has been significantly reduced in area in recent years. New prescriptions encouraging the growth of undersown spring-sown cereals and retention of winter stubbles in the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme should also benefit the corn bunting but these need to be much more widely available in order to influence the county population.
- The Suffolk River Valleys ESA has a Buffer Strip Supplement to Tier 3 (Arable Reversion to Grassland) which may benefit this species by providing suitable weed seed in winter, and a source of insects for feeding to chicks.
- The Breckland ESA provides options within Tiers 3 and 4 which will help provide winter seed food and also habitat suitable for insects, which are used as chick food.

4 Action plan objectives and targets

- 1 *Assure the current range of the corn bunting by 2003. By 2008, the range should be extended to include other areas which were previously occupied in the 1976 Atlas.*

5 Proposed action with key local partners

The objectives and targets will be delivered through identifying the causes of the decline of the corn bunting; encouraging beneficial changes in agricultural land management through government mechanisms; and ensuring monitoring is in place to assess the benefits of agricultural schemes to corn buntings. It is likely that implementation of this action plan will also be of benefit to the following farmland birds: Bullfinch, Grey partridge, Linnet, Reed bunting, Skylark, Song thrush, Tree sparrow, Turtle dove.

ACTION	KEY LOCAL PARTNERS	TIMETABLE				
		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
A. Policy and legislation						
Take the needs of the corn bunting and other farmland birds into account when reviewing the current agri-environment schemes in the region and also the success of the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme	MAFF/FRCA	*	*	*	*	*
Where appropriate, consider incorporating new prescriptions within agri-environment schemes which will benefit this species, especially where the food supply of corn buntings can be protected (i.e. reduced pesticide use, provision for overwinter stubble fields and low-input spring cereals)	MAFF/FRCA, FWAG	*	*	*	*	*
B. Site safeguard and management						
No action proposed						
C. Species management and protection						
Consider implementing emergency measures to sustain important populations within the county should local extinction become a real threat.	RSPB, EN, FWAG, MAFF/FRCA	*	*	*	*	*
D. Advisory						
Promote further advice to landowners on the management of land for corn buntings as one of the farmland species of birds which are in decline	MAFF,/FRCA FWAG, RSPB	*	*	*	*	*
Update advice in the light of recent research on the corn bunting	MAFF/FRCA FWAG, RSPB	*	*			
E. Future research and monitoring						
Consider extending surveys to also include wintering habitat surveys, eg BTO's Winter Farmland Bird Survey	BTO, RSPB, EN, SOG	*	*	*		

ACTION	KEY LOCAL PARTNERS	TIMETABLE				
		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Encourage local research and continued support of long-term surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey	BTO, SOG, RSPB, EN	*	*	*	*	*
As this species seems to suffer from the same problems as many other farmland birds, consider its use as a representative bird species of farmland when examining the success of agri-environment schemes	FWAG, RSPB, MAFF/FRCA	*	*	*	*	*
F. Communications and publicity						
Promote the corn bunting as an example of a farmland bird species which is in decline	RSPB, FWAG, MAFF/FRCA	*	*	*	*	*
G. Links with other action plans						
This action plan should be considered in conjunction with that for cereal field margins		*	*	*	*	*