

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

CORN BUNTING

(*Emberiza calandra*)

The corn bunting is a large, heavy looking brown bunting typically found in open lowland habitats, such as farmland and grazing marsh. Corn buntings nest on the ground in tussocky vegetation within grassland or around the edge of cereal fields. They require an abundance of invertebrates in the summer to feed their chicks and a supply of seeds and grain for winter foraging.

Ref 2/S10	Tranche 2	Species Action Plan 10
Plan Author:	RSPB	
Plan Co-ordinator:	Farmland BAP Topic Group	
Plan Leader:	RSPB	
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1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- 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 distribution is curious, with the bulk of the population found across southern and eastern England but with small outlying groups as far away as Cornwall, Lancashire, the Outer Hebrides and north-east Scotland.
- Corn bunting 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 (see www.bto.org/birdtrends). The results of the Common Bird 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 (1968-72 and 1988-91) has led to further fragmentation of the remaining high density areas and the loss of the species from many areas such as Devon, Shetland, and parts of the West Midlands and south-east England.
- The Farmland Bunting Survey, organised by the BTO in 1993, recorded only around 20,000 territories remaining in Britain, with no confirmed breeding in Wales. None was found breeding in Northern Ireland during the 1988-91 atlas survey. The species is declining over much of north-west Europe but remains common and widespread in southern Europe.
- The corn bunting is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Schedule 1 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the EC Birds Directive.

Norfolk Status

- Sparsely distributed within the county with an important concentration in the Brandon Creek/Feltwell area of the Norfolk Fens and along the North Norfolk Coast (RSPB/EN/BTO/Defra Farmland Bird Database).
- The 1986 Norfolk Bird Atlas recorded corn bunting in only 8% of 2km squares. It is not possible to measure corn bunting population size or trends at a county level.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

- Although the precise factors remain unclear, the loss of extensive mixed farming appears to be the key to the decline of the corn bunting.
- Loss of winter food is also thought to be a cause of 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 abundance of wildflower seeds.
- 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.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- Little direct conservation work has been carried out specifically for corn buntings in Norfolk.
- Rotational set-aside will have benefited the species, although this has been significantly reduced in area in recent years.
- Corn bunting has been targeted by the arable options in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, encouraging the growth of spring-sown cereals, the retention of winter stubbles and the provision of wild bird seed crops.
- Grass margins put in under CSS are likely to have benefited corn bunting by providing suitable nesting habitats. Two metre field margins required under cross-compliance from July 2005 onwards will provide additional benefits.
- The Environmental Stewardship schemes will continue to provide management options that will be promoted and targeted in support of this species.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- In the short term, halt or reverse the decline in numbers of the corn bunting by the year 2003 so that the Breeding Bird Survey index is at least at 1996 levels.
- In the long term, see a sustained recovery in numbers, so that the BBS index is at least 50% higher than 1996 levels with a measurable increase in range by 2008.

Norfolk

- Maintain the current distribution of corn bunting in Norfolk and by 2010 restore to any parts of the county that have lost breeding corn bunting since 1986.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Take account of the need to recover the corn bunting and other farmland bird populations when developing agricultural policy and CAP reform; consider how to extend the Arable Stewardship Scheme if the pilot is successful, and how to substitute for the benefits of set-aside, if this is further reduced or abolished.	Target Environmental Stewardship options which will benefit corn bunting within the species' core range in Norfolk Maintain watching brief on possible impacts of land abandonment on corn bunting	NE NE	RSPB, FWAG RSPB, FWAG
5.1.2	Where appropriate, incorporate new management prescriptions when reviewing agri-environment schemes, especially ESAs, Countryside Stewardship, Tir Cymen and Countryside Premium Scheme, in order to reverse some of the recent changes in farm management outlined in Section 2.	None proposed.		
5.1.3	Seek uptake of a more cautious and targeted use of pesticides and fertilisers on farmland to reduce the impacts on potential food sources for the corn bunting.	Promote the Voluntary Initiative to reducing the environmental effects of pesticides	NFU, NE	
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	None proposed.	None proposed.		
5.3	Species Management and Protection	None proposed.		

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.1	Promote further advice to land managers on management for corn bunting as one of a suite of farmland birds and update that advice in the light of new policies and research findings.	Promote the sympathetic management of set-aside, field margins and other arable habitats for the benefit of the corn bunting, advice to be kept up-to-date as required.	NE, RSPB, FWAG	
		Promote winter feeding in core corn bunting areas as a means of increasing overwinter survival	RSPB, FWAG, NE	
5.4.2	Promote effective management of set-aside for breeding and wintering birds, including the corn bunting.	Promote effective management of set-aside for breeding and wintering birds, including the corn bunting.	NE, FWAG	
		Review the management of land owned/managed by BAP partners for its suitability for corn buntings (and other farmland birds).	NCC, NT, Crown Estate, MoD	
5.5	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Carry out further studies to gain an adequate understanding of the ecological requirements of the corn bunting, including the role of different factors in the decline of the species in different parts of the UK.	None proposed.		

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5.2	Ensure appropriate monitoring of the breeding population through continuation of the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey and consider setting up an equivalent survey to monitor winter populations.	<p>Promote voluntary participation in the Breeding Bird Survey.</p> <p>Encourage submission of corn bunting records to BirdTrack (www.bto.org/birdtrack/) and participation in national breeding and wintering bird atlas project.</p>	<p>BTO, RSPB, Norfolk Bird Club, Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society</p> <p>BTO, RSPB, Norfolk Bird Club, Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society</p>	
5.5.3	Consider including corn bunting in any future work which assesses the effects of set-aside, ESAs, the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme and other mechanisms which may encourage farmland birds.	None proposed.		
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	As appropriate, use the corn bunting as an example when highlighting the issue of declining farmland birds.	Promote the corn bunting as a species of conservation concern.	BAP Partners	
5.6.2	Promote the importance of traditional crofting with cattle and mixed cultivation for the conservation of corn buntings in western Scotland, and of traditional ley farming elsewhere in the UK.	Highlight the benefits, and change perceptions, of more traditional and conservation-friendly farming practices, using the corn bunting as an example.	BAP Partners	
5.6.3	Promote a change in perception of wild plants on farmland as essential food sources for seed-eating farmland birds, rather than as 'weeds'.	Ensure local education establishments include management for the corn bunting and other farmland birds in relevant courses.	Local Education Authority, Easton College, UEA etc	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.7	Links with Other Action Plans			
5.7.1	It is likely that implementation of this action plan will also benefit the following UK BAP farmland birds: bullfinch, grey partridge, linnet, reed bunting, skylark, song thrush, spotted flycatcher, tree sparrow, turtle dove.	It is likely that implementation of this action plan will also benefit the following UK and Norfolk BAP farmland birds: bullfinch, grey partridge, linnet, reed bunting, skylark, song thrush, spotted flycatcher, tree sparrow, turtle dove.	Farmland BAP Topic Group, Communities and Nature BAP Topic Group	
5.7.2	The plan should be considered in conjunction with that for cereal field margins.	The plan should be considered in conjunction with that for cereal field margins.	Farmland BAP Topic Group	

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

Between 1980 and 1985, corn buntings were found in 8% of tetrads, primarily just inland of the NW Norfolk Coast and patchily in the Fens and SW Norfolk.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)

- **A nesting habitat that remains available until the late summer**

Corn buntings nest on the ground in cereal fields, set-aside, grass field margins or unimproved grassland. They start nesting late in the spring, usually June or July, and can have flightless chicks in August.

- **Lots of seeds throughout the year**

Adults feed mainly on seeds, especially cereal grain. Places where they can find seeds include rotational set-aside, harvested root crops, winter stubbles, newly-sown crops, weeds in the crop margins, areas of spilt grain or places where cereals are fed to outdoor cattle. They are becoming extinct in some pastoral areas of the UK.

- **Insects and spiders to feed to chicks in the spring and summer**

Corn buntings take insects from crops, set-aside, grassland and field margins to feed their chicks. Breeding success relates directly to the availability of insect food.

Helping corn buntings on Set-aside

- You can provide a highly attractive feeding area at a low cost with small plots (eg one acre) of wild bird cover. Establish a seed-rich crop in the spring and maintain it for two years. Kale and cereals are particularly useful components.
- The natural regeneration of rotational set-aside is the cheapest and easiest way of providing seed food through the winter.
- Sowing 20 metre strips of non-rotational set-aside with a grass mix around field margins provides good nesting habitat. Cut on or just before 15 August or seek a derogation from the set-aside rules to cut later. Make use of the option to leave 25% uncut for up to three years.

Helping corn buntings on arable land

- Only use pesticides when the infestation exceeds the economic threshold. Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March. These remove beneficial insects and spiders that move into the crops in the spring. The loss of this food source is particularly damaging to corn buntings.
- Adopt conservation headlands. Avoid spraying the outer six metres of cereal fields with insecticides or herbicides targeted at broad-leaved weeds. This enables beneficial insects and chick food for corn buntings to survive. You can get agronomic advice from the Game Conservancy Trust.
- Spray and cultivate stubbles as late as possible. This provides important winter feeding habitat.

- The rotational set-aside and wild bird cover options described above are very important on farms where overwinter stubbles are not a viable option.
- Create grass margins around arable fields to increase food and nesting habitat. Include species such as cocksfoot in the seed mix to create a tussocky sward. After the margins are established, cut in the autumn only once every three years. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year. Corn buntings are more likely to use margins that have no boundary feature or just a post and wire fence.
- Use beetle banks in fields greater than 20 hectares to provide nesting cover for corn buntings and over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects. Beetle banks are two metre grass strips through the middle of arable fields. Such fields can be managed as one unit, as the headland is still cropped.

Helping corn buntings on grassland

- Introduce arable fodder crops or create small plots of wild bird cover to provide a seed-rich habitat in pastoral areas. Maize is probably not of value to corn buntings unless it is undersown with a seed-bearing crop. Undersown cereal crops will provide seed food through the winter. The lack of cultivation in the autumn as well as restrictions on herbicide use will produce an abundant supply of insects.
- Fence off margins of up to six metres around improved grassland and leave these unfertilised, uncut and ungrazed. Graze or cut in September every two to three years. Select margins that are adjacent to short thick hedges or post and wire fences.

CONTACTS

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