NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

SKYLARK
(Alauda arvensis)

A well-known and well-loved bird on account of its aerial singing, noted as early as the 13th century. A sandy brown coloured bird, and one of few British birds with a pronounced crest used in display.

Ref 1/S5	Tranche 1	Species Action Plan 5
Plan Author:		RSPB
Plan Co-ordinator:		Farmland BAP Topic Group
Plan Leader:		RSPB
Date:		Stage:
31 December 1998		Final Draft
January 2006		Revised Final Draft

1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- One of the most widespread birds of the British Isles, with over 2 million breeding pairs, the resident population is joined in winter by a significant proportion of the northern European population - possibly up to 25 million individuals. The UK breeding population of skylark on lowland farmland declined by 61% between 1977 and 2002, and continues to decline.

- The skylark is protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Norfolk Status

- Still widespread in Norfolk as a breeding and wintering bird throughout the open countryside despite a likely decline in numbers in the county (it is not possible to measure population size or trends on a county level). In the *Norfolk Bird Atlas* (Kelly 1986), it was found in 97% of 2km squares, the blank squares being built up, plantations or wetlands. Early work for the new *Norfolk Atlas* suggests the picture is currently much the same.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

- Management of arable fields has reduced ephemeral weeds and insect prey through the use of ever more efficient pesticides (including insecticides and herbicides).

- Decrease in livestock levels.

- An increased trend to autumn-sown cereals has reduced the number of essential winter stubble fields and may provide unsuitable breeding habitat in comparison with spring-sown varieties.

- Conversion of grassland to intensively-farmed arable.

- Intensive management of grasslands.

- Silage and haylage making replacing hay making, which destroys nests and exposes incubating skylarks and young to predators.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- Intensive research into the cause of the decline of skylarks, including work in North Norfolk, has been completed. Recent research has been directed towards finding a cost-effective means of reversing the decline.

- In June 2004, results from the Sustainable Arable Farming For an Improved Environment (SAFFIE) project revealed that 4m by 4m undrilled plots in cereal fields improved skylark breeding success by 49%. If undrilled plots were created on only 20% of arable farmland and stubbles left over winter, the decline in skylarks could be reversed.

- Managing set-aside in a way that benefits ground nesting birds is happening but on an unknown scale.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- Maintain the BBS population index for skylarks at or above the 1995 level.

- Maintain the number of wintering skylarks at or above 1997/98 level as determined by the JNCC/BTO survey.

- Maintain the range of skylarks as measured by the frequency of occupation in BBS squares at or above the 1995 level.

- Reverse the population decline on lowland farmland and other habitats, where found to be declining, as measured by BBS indices

Norfolk

- Maintain current distribution in Norfolk.

- By 2010, restore to any parts of the county that have lost breeding skylarks since 1986.

Skylark - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	**Policy and Legislation**			
5.1.1	In the light of research, consider the need for incentives for maintaining and re-establishing permanent pasture, reducing pesticide use, retaining field margin features and introducing winter stubbles.	Consider the needs of skylark when targeting arable options under Environmental Stewardship.	NE, FWAG, RSPB	CLA, NFU
5.1.2	Consider the requirements of the skylark in any negotiations on changes to, or reform of, agricultural support.	Consider skylark needs as part of any future agri-environment scheme review.	NE, RSPB	
5.1.3	Consider further improvements to the set-aside regulations to reduce the harmful effects of cutting and wide-spectrum pesticide use.	No actions proposed.		
5.1.4	Review procedures for testing, introduction and replacement of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals to assess indirect effects on non-target species before approval for use is given.	No actions proposed.		
5.1.5	Encourage a more cautious and targeted use of pesticides on farmland.	Encourage more cautious and targeted pesticide use.	NE, FWAG, CLA, NFU	Farmers and Landowners
5.2	**Site Safeguard and Management**			
5.2.1	Encourage sympathetic management of rotational set-aside.	Encourage the use and management of set-aside to benefit ground nesting birds.	NE, FWAG	Farmers and Landowners

Skylark - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.3 **5.3.1**	**Species Management and Protection** No actions proposed.	Review or develop management plans for 'publicly'-owned land to maintain or improve suitability for skylark and other farmland wildlife.	NCC, NT, Crown Estate, MoD	
5.4 **5.4.1**	**Advisory** Disseminate information on skylark conservation to farmers and farm advisory services.	Disseminate information on grass strips/beetle banks, and management of set-aside and winter stubbles to benefit skylarks. Ensure Easton College has management for skylark and other farmland wildlife in agriculture courses. Develop a strategy for promoting an integrated summary BAP for farmland species, focussing on specific action. Promote the uptake of the skylark scrape option in the Entry Level Stewardship.	FWAG, NE, RSPB RSPB Farmland BAP Topic Group NE, FWAG, RSPB	 Easton College Farmers and Landowners
5.5 **5.5.1**	**Future Research and Monitoring** Survey habitat use to determine the distribution of farmland skylarks in relation to crop types.	No action proposed.		
5.5.2	Undertake a detailed ecological study on skylarks on lowland farmland, to determine the reasons for decline, including examination of crop preferences, breeding success, diet and foot supply. (RSPB research in progress.)	No action proposed.		

Skylark - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5.3	Ensure annual monitoring of breeding skylarks through the British Trust for Ornithology/Joint Nature Conservation Committee/Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Breeding Bird Survey.	Promote volunteer participation in Breeding Bird Survey/Norfolk Atlas project and combined national breeding and wintering bird atlas.	RSPB/NBC, BTO	Volunteers
5.5.4	Assess the wintering population of skylarks to put the UK population into a European context.	No action proposed.		
5.5.5	Pass information gathered during survey and monitoring of this species to Joint Nature Conservation Committee or Biological Records Centre so that it can be incorporated in national databases.	Pass any local survey and monitoring information to the Norfolk Biological Records Centre.	BTO, RSPB, Bird Recorders	
5.5.6	Provide information annually to BirdLife International on the UK status of the species to contribute to maintenance of an up-to-date global red list.	No action proposed.		
5.6	**Communications and Publicity**			
5.6.1	Ensure that the problem of the decline of farmland birds has a high profile, using the skylark as an illustration.	Use skylark as example of farmland bird decline and of how its fortunes can be reversed by positive action.	RSPB, Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership, Farmland BAP Topic Group	Media

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

Between 1980 and 1984, skylarks were found on every farmland 2km square in Norfolk. There is currently no comparable data available, but results from survey work for Norfolk's new atlas found breeding skylark in 98% of surveyed 2km squares at an average of 13.2 pairs per occupied square.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

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

Skylark productivity can be increased by 49% by creating 4m by 4m undrilled plots in cereal fields at a density of 2 plots per hectare. These can be easily created by simply lifting the seed drill for a couple of seconds whilst drilling. The plots have no effect on yields and can receive the same fertiliser and pesticide treatments as the rest of the field.

Skylarks respond rapidly to beneficial management of farmland.

What do Skylarks Need?

- Mid-field areas in which to nest and feed.

  Skylarks occupy the open fields to avoid predators. They cannot be conserved by measures taken within 10 metres of the field boundary.

- Seeds and weeds throughout the year.

  Adults feed on leaves and seeds of crops and weeds. Their association with weedy stubbles in winter shows they prefer seeds and weed leaves.

- Nesting habitat to produce up to three broods every year.

  Skylarks nest on the ground, in vegetation that is 20-50cm high. This vegetation must be open enough to give the birds easy access to the ground. They need to make two or three nesting attempts between April and August to sustain the population. Crops such as winter wheat generally grow too tall and thick to enable more than a single brood. Silage fields attract skylarks, but are generally cut too frequently to allow successful breeding.

- Insects and spiders in the spring and summer.

  Skylark chicks are fed exclusively on insects and spiders for the first week of life. These are also an important part of the diet of adults from April until August. Insects are collected from crops, set-aside and pasture.

Encouraging Skylarks on Set-aside

- Use a mix of natural regeneration on rotational set-aside for seed food and grass cover on non-rotational set-aside for nesting habitat.

- Delay the use of broad-spectrum herbicide on rotational set-aside until July to provide important feeding and nesting habitat for skylarks in the spring. However, spraying is preferable to cutting or cultivating.

- You can create nesting cover by putting a low yielding field or a 20 metre strip through the middle of a large field into non-rotational set-aside. Establish a green cover by natural regeneration or sowing a native grass mix. Cut on or just before 15 August. Make use of the option to leave 25% uncut on a rotational basis around the set-aside area.

Encouraging Skylarks on Arable Land

- Include spring cereals or a spring break crop (other than oilseed rape, which grows too quickly) in the rotation, where viable. This will provide ideal nesting habitat.

- Weedy stubbles are the most beneficial winter feeding habitat for skylarks on the arable farm. Even sprayed stubbles generally provide more food than cultivated ground or autumn-sown crops. Can you delay cultivation of stubbles going into a spring crop until February or March?

- Natural regeneration on rotational set-aside is very important on farms where over-winter stubbles are not a viable option.

- Use beetle banks in fields greater than 20 hectares to provide nesting cover 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.

Encouraging Skylarks on Grassland

- Skylarks can nest in silage fields. However, these nests are only successful if the field is not cut or grazed between early April and the end of May. Subsequent cuts must be at least six weeks apart.

- It may be more practical to return an unproductive, sparse grass ley to hay meadow management. This could provide a safer nesting habitat.

- Introduce arable fodder crops (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in pastoral areas.

- Skylarks can nest in grazed pasture if you can maintain a tussocky sward with a low stock rate through the spring and summer.

CONTACTS

RSPB
East Anglia Regional Office
Stalham House
65 Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1UD
Tel: 01603-660066 / Fax: 01603-660088/ Web: www.rspb.org.uk/farming

Defra RDS (to become part of Natural England in October 2006)
122a Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1RN
Tel: 01603-631033

Norfolk FWAG
122a Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1RN
Tel: 01603-660334