

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

WOODLARK (*Lullula arborea*)

The woodlark is a medium-sized streaked brown bird like the skylark, but with black and white marks visible on the leading wing edge in flight and a white stripe over the eyes that meets round the back of the neck. Its flight is undulating with alternating wing beats following "body glides". It sings at night and in the morning and occurs in young or recent clear-fell plantation, forestry, heathland and arable set-aside land.

The objectives and targets for the woodlark are to be achieved by protecting, maintaining, restoring and re-establishing lowland heathland; encouraging the maintenance/restoration of extensively managed, mixed agricultural systems; and ensuring the adoption of sympathetic management of afforested land. Population size and range need to be monitored, in line with national objectives, every 12 years.

1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- The woodlark was formerly found across Britain, south from Yorkshire, and in Northern Ireland, but is now largely restricted to five core areas: Devon; east Dorset/south Hampshire (including the New Forest); the Surrey/Hampshire border; Breckland; and the Suffolk coast. The number of ten km squares occupied in the breeding season decreased by 62% (from 198 to 73 ten km squares) between 1968-72 and 1988-91. However, since 1986 (when the population was estimated to be around 250 pairs), the population and range have increased with up to 620 pairs breeding in 1993, and the 1997 survey has recorded around 1,500 pairs. The nesting habitats are varied and include farmland, recently felled forestry plantations (mainly in East Anglia but also now in Sherwood, Lincoln, SE England and midland forests) and heathland in southern and eastern England and the Suffolk coast. In 1997, over 85% of territories occurred on heathland or within forestry. The recent increase in the population has largely resulted from the provision of restocked plantation habitats within the current core areas. Little is known of the woodlark's winter requirements and distribution, although there appears to be some movement southwards within England and to the continent. In Europe, the woodlark is declining in both numbers and range.
- The woodlark is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix II of the Bern Convention.

Norfolk Status

- The 1997 national survey found between 237 and 248 pairs of woodlark in 16 ten km squares in Norfolk. All but 11 pairs were found in the Brecks: four pairs were found in the Horsford/Marsham/Cawston heathland complex; four pairs at Roydon/Dersingham; two pairs at Kelling Heath; and one pair at East Ruston Common. Since then, almost any forestry restock area of suitable size has potential to support breeding woodlark.
- Annual surveys of Forestry Commission areas in the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks have shown a steady population increase from 20 pairs (singing males) in 1988 to a peak of 456 pairs in 2000. However, in 2004, only 286 males were recorded throughout

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Thetford Forest, of which 147 were in Norfolk; this represents a decrease of 12% on 2003 and 43% on 2000.

- Recent records from outside the Breckland stronghold include: eight pairs/singing males in north Norfolk (Kelling/Salthouse); 14 in west Norfolk (Roydon/Dersingham); and five in central Norfolk (NBM Report, 2004). However, there have been numerous reports of birds present in suitable habitat during the breeding season, so the true number is probably higher than these figures indicate (NBM Report, 2004).

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

- An estimated 40% of England's lowland heathland has been lost since the 1950s. This has led to a loss of feeding and nesting habitats for woodlarks.
- Woodlarks require a mosaic of bare ground or short vegetation for feeding, and tussocks of vegetation with disturbed ground for nest sites, and up to 3 ha can be needed for a single territory. Lack of appropriate management can lead to sites becoming unsuitable for the species. Rabbits play a key role in creating bare ground and short grass (less than 5 cm) for feeding at many sites, and their decline following myxomatosis in the 1950s may have played a significant part in the decline of the woodlark.
- Severe winter weather and, in particular, snow cover has had an adverse impact on winter survival. The hard winters of 1962/63 and 1981/82 had considerable impact on woodlark populations on the southern heathlands. The East Anglian populations do not seem to be influenced as much as the southern populations.
- In the Brecks, the woodlark utilises restocked forestry plantations and their preferred habitat is sustained by the continuity of clear-felling and replanting. The main reason for the recent declines in the Brecks area is most probably due to the increased rate of nest predation, which has caused a 50% decline in breeding productivity over the last three decades.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- 41.4% of the UK population (1997 survey) was found on SSSIs. This is now likely to be greater following the designation of Thetford Forest as an SSSI.
- Woodlarks occur on a number of heathland nature reserves which are managed partly for their benefit.
- Research has been carried out by RSPB and FC on the habitat use of woodlarks in restocked conifer plantations in Breckland. This has allowed the impact of changes in the age structure of forests to be predicted enabling Design Plans in Thetford Forest to be modified so as to maintain good numbers of woodlarks. Further research into the vegetation changes at Thetford Forest is planned.
- Research on woodlark ecology continues to be carried out by the University of East Anglia.
- The North Norfolk Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage (THH) initiative has restored 750ha and re-created 75ha heathland, which has assisted this species on a number of sites.

- The Brecks THH initiative is restoring over 6,000ha and re-creating 300ha heathland in the Brecks (250ha of the re-creation occurring in Norfolk) between 2002 and 2006, again assisting woodlark on a number of sites.
- Norfolk Wildlife Trust has purchased 110ha of afforested heathland adjacent to Grimston Warren for heathland re-creation.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- Achieve an increase in the number of breeding pairs in the UK, from 1,500 breeding pairs to 2,150 by 2018 (a 43% increase in 12 years).
- Increase the range of the woodlark from 90 to 125 ten km squares, including the recolonisation of Wales and south-west England, by 2018.

Norfolk

- Maintain as a minimum 200 breeding pairs of woodlark in Norfolk in the existing range of 16 ten km squares. (*Target to be reviewed following the results of the 2006 national survey.*)
- By increasing the area of suitable habitat, increase the possible breeding and feeding areas for the woodlark, and so provide scope for further population expansion in the county.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Ensure that clear targets for the woodlark are incorporated into appropriate site management plans, particularly land managed by the MoD and local authorities.	Ensure appropriate habitat management and targets for the woodlark are incorporated into site management plans, particularly sites managed by the MoD (eg the Stanford Training Area).	MoD, NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	
5.1.2	Prepare and implement an Endangered Species Action Plan for woodlarks on FE land, to include specific targets for woodlarks in Forest Design Plans in forests within their current and former range	Ensure the requirements of the woodlark are fully considered in all future reviews of the Thetford Forest Design Plan.	FE, RSPB, NE	
5.1.3	Take full account of the requirements of the woodlark when considering felling and restocking proposals.	Ensure the requirements of the woodlark are taken into account when considering felling and restocking proposals.	FE, FC	
5.1.4	Encourage the development of extensively managed, mixed agricultural systems to provide suitable rough grassland and spring-sown cereals with winter stubbles, through appropriate agri-environment schemes.	Consider the requirements of the woodlark when reviewing agri-environment schemes in the county,	NE	
5.1.5	Encourage the uptake of schemes supporting the reversion of arable land to heathland through agri-environment schemes.	Ensure that new environmental stewardship schemes offered on heathland sites include woodlark as an objective.	NE	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	Consider notifying heathland sites important for woodlarks as SSSI.	Consider the notification of undesignated heathland sites important for woodlarks as SSSIs. Ensure the appropriate management of all such SSSIs (existing and future).	NE	
5.2.2	Designate as SPAs areas of 'special interest' that support nationally important populations of woodlarks (subject to current guidelines) and encourage their appropriate management.	Confirm SPA designation of Breckland including the Breckland Forest SSSI, the Breckland Farmland SSSI and the suite of Breckland heathland SSSIs.	NE	
5.2.3	Seek to achieve 'favourable conservation status' of the woodlark by measures complementary to SPAs. This will include projects to maintain, enhance and restore heathland adjacent to SPAs (eg through agri-environment schemes).	Seek to achieve 'favourable conservation status' of the woodlark by measures complementary to SPAs. This will include projects to maintain, enhance and restore heathland adjacent to SPAs (eg through agri-environment schemes).	NE	Farmers/ Landowners
5.2.4	Protect nationally important localities for woodlarks from damaging developments and land use change using the planning process.	Protect sites important for the woodlark from damage and further fragmentation, due to development and land use changes, through the planning system. This includes the incorporation of suitable policies into Development Plans and planning guidance.	LAs	
5.2.5	Incorporate suitable policies for the conservation of lowland heathland into Development Plans, Regional Government Strategies, Indicative Forestry Strategies and Heathland Strategies.	Promote the Regional Heathland Mapping Opportunity Project and Brecks and North Norfolk Re-creation Plans.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.2.6	Seek to secure long-term funding for county heathland management projects.	Secure long-term funding for North Norfolk THH Partnership.	NE, EA, NWT, NCC, LAs, NT, THH Partners	
5.2.7	Introduce or continue management for woodlarks on heathland nature reserves.	Review the management of land owned/managed (including nature reserves) by the BAP Partners for its suitability for woodlarks.	NE, NWT, FE, RSPB, NT, LAs	
5.3	Species Management and Protection			
5.3.1	None proposed.	Ensure through appropriate restrictions and access management that new access rights to heathland under the CroW Act do not have a negative impact on woodlark.	NE, Norfolk Local Access Forum	
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.1	Produce specific advisory material for the management of heathland and forestry plantations for woodlarks.	Promote the suitable management of forestry plantations and heathland for the benefit of the woodlark. Advice to be kept up-to-date as required in the light of continuing research activity.	FE, FC, RSPB, NE, FWAG, LAs	
5.4.3	Promote effective management of set-aside for breeding and wintering birds, including woodlark.	Promote the sympathetic management of agricultural habitats (eg set-aside, winter stubbles and horticultural land). This may be achieved through agri-environment schemes and heathland management schemes. Advice to be kept up-to-date as required in the light of continuing research activity.	NE, FWAG	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Monitor the UK breeding population of woodlarks every 12 years through the statutory agencies'/RSPB programme of scarce bird monitoring (next survey due in 2006).	Contribute as required to the 12 yearly programme of scarce bird monitoring (next woodlark survey due in 2006).	NE, RSPB, BTO, BAP Partners	
		Continue the annual monitoring of the Breckland woodlark population. Consider extension of the survey to cover other areas currently utilised by the woodlark.	FE, NNNS, (BTO: voluntary commitment by staff)	
5.5.2	Consider the need for habitat usage survey and monitoring in the south-west.	Continue research into aspects of habitat/forestry management (eg inter-row ploughing, vegetation, proximity of suitable habitats and new planting densities) and their potential impacts on woodlark populations.	FE, RSPB, UEA	
		Conduct research on nest predation, predators and effects of predator control.	UEA, RSPB, FE	
		Disseminate findings of research into the wintering ecology of the East Anglian woodlark population.	UEA	
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	Use the woodlark as a species to support the conservation of heathland and extensively managed mixed farmland.	Use the woodlark as a species to promote the conservation of heathland (and extensively managed farmland).	BAP Partners	
		Use the woodlark as an example of how conservation and other land use practices (eg, forestry), can be successfully integrated.	FE, FC and other BAP Partners	

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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 nightjar.	It is likely that implementation of this action plan will also benefit the nightjar.	Heathland BAP Topic Group	
5.7.2	The plan should be considered in conjunction with those for lowland heathland and lowland acid grassland.	The plan should be considered in conjunction with the Norfolk HAP for lowland heathland/ lowland acid grassland.	Heathland BAP Topic Group	

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

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

What do woodlarks need?

Sparse short grassy or heathy turf together with bare ground is essential as woodlarks forage for all of their food on the ground. Nests are located under grass tussocks, heather bushes or dead bracken, and scattered trees are used as song posts.

Breeding starts very early; territories start to be established as early as January in the south, and most pairs are incubating eggs from mid March. They will have two and sometimes three broods so can still be breeding in July.

Woodlarks during the breeding season, feed mainly on beetles, caterpillars and spiders foraged from the soil or from short turf.

During the winter they change their diet to feed on seeds and often join flock of finches, skylarks and buntings on stubbles and set-aside fields.

How can woodlarks be encouraged?

Woodlarks need areas of short, sparse, naturally developed turf and bare ground with a high abundance of invertebrate prey, interspersed with tussocky vegetation for nesting; they avoid areas that are overgrown, neglected or agriculturally improved.

Key points

Heathland: Keep areas of short sparse turf and bare ground, with patches of tussocky grassland or deeper heather nearby.

Forestry: A continuity of recently cut clear-fells and suitably managed clear-fells of appropriate size is important.

Farmland: Maintain swards on thin soils with grazing; maintain fallow plots throughout the year; do not cut or cultivate set-aside before the end of July; grow spring cereals and retain stubbles as late as possible.

REFERENCES AND CONTACTS

Agri-environment grant aid schemes can be used to fund management for woodlarks on heathland and farmland; contact Defra for guidance. In forestry areas, the English Woodland Grant Scheme may be applicable where grant is crucial to delivery of UK SAP targets. Contact the Forestry Commission for guidance and also for advice on tree felling permissions and the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations.

Further information on ways of managing land for woodlarks and other wildlife is available from: The RSPB Land Management Advisor, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds.

KEY CONTACTS

Defra RDS (to become part of Natural England in 2006)
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