

CORN BUNTING *Miliaria calandra*

1. CURRENT STATUS

1.1 National

1.1.1 The UK population of Corn Bunting declined by 74% between 1972-1996. The most recent national survey gave a population estimate of 16-23,000 territorial males in 1993. This is likely to be too high, as the BTO Breeding Bird Survey recorded a continuing decline, of 26% between 1994-99. Concurrent with the population decline has been a large contraction in the species' range, with population collapses over much of central and SW England and Scotland. The highest densities in the UK are found on flat, open arable land and chalk downland.

1.1.2 The Corn Bunting is a Priority Species in the UK BAP, due to its rapid population decline.

1.2 Local

1.2.1 The magnitude of the local population decline is not known. Certainly, a decline is indicated from the changes in the peak counts of wintering flocks. The North Merseyside population was estimated at 200 pairs in 1997-99.

1.2.2 The species remains widespread on farmland in the area, but in variable densities. Small populations are found in Knowsley, St. Helens and Liverpool, with a few birds on the edge of the conurbation at Speke, Croxteth, Aintree and the Rimrose Valley. The highest population densities, reaching a maximum of 4-5 pairs per square kilometre, occur on arable farmland in Sefton. This is the southern part of a fairly continuous area of approximately 200 square kilometres of mosslands, most of it outside Merseyside, which holds the largest population of Corn Buntings in North West England, estimated in 1997-99 to total 1200 pairs, or at least 5% of the UK population. The distribution of birds within this area is typically patchy. The highest densities in Merseyside, around Altcar Withins and Little Crosby, are similar to the highest densities so far recorded in North West Europe.

1.2.3 Most of the UK population makes only local movements of a few kilometres between breeding and wintering areas. Therefore, wintering distributions are likely to be similar to breeding distributions on a coarse scale in North Merseyside. There are local re-distributions, for example of birds onto the

dunes at Crosby in winter, where there is no breeding population.

1.3 Legal

1.3.1 Corn Bunting is given general protection by the Wildlife and Countryside Act. It is an offence to kill, injure or take the species and to take, damage or destroy eggs and active nests.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE

2.1 National

2.1.1 A number of factors are correlated with Corn Bunting abundance and likely to contribute to its decline, but the mechanism of the decline remains unknown. The following description of factors incorporates research subsequent to the writing of the UK BAP.

2.1.2 The change from spring-sown to autumn-sown cereals, consequently reducing the extent of stubble; increased herbicide use; and the disappearance of fallow systems and under-sowing of arable crops have reduced the quantity of winter seeds available as a food source. Of these, loss of stubble is the most important recent change. Consequently, winter mortality is likely to have increased.

2.1.3 Increased agricultural use of pesticides and herbicides has reduced the density of larger invertebrates, which are the most important food items of adults and chicks in the breeding season. This has had no effect on brood size, but may have reduced later survival.

2.1.4 Autumn sowing results in earlier harvesting of crops and consequently some nest destruction, although it is not known whether this has simply resulted in redistribution of nests to field margins.

2.2 Local

2.2.1 On the Sefton mosslands there has been a large decline in the area of stubble and probably a decline in permanent grassland, the latter a locally important winter feeding habitat elsewhere in the UK.

2.2.2 Uncultivated field margins and ditch banks are likely to be of key importance as nesting sites and for food supply during the breeding and wintering season. There has been some loss of this habitat due to field amalgamation.

2.2.3 Earlier harvesting of crops has reduced the area of potentially suitable nesting sites.

3. CURRENT ACTION

3.1 National

3.1. A national Species Action Plan has been prepared. This acknowledges the paucity of action to assist Corn Bunting, due to its relatively recent status as a species of conservation concern.

3.1.2. GCT, EN, RSPB and university research is investigating the causes of the population decline, particularly in relation to agricultural intensification.

3.3 Rotational set-aside, the DEFRA Countryside Stewardship Scheme, the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme and prescriptions within the South Downs ESA scheme can address loss of winter and summer food supplies.

3.2 Local

3.2.1 The Lancashire Bird Club Breeding Bird Atlas surveys for Lancashire during 1997-1999 provided tetrad information on the species' local distribution and population size.

3.2.2 The active management of some areas of farmland in North Merseyside for Grey Partridge is likely incidentally to benefit Corn Bunting, through the provision of uncultivated field margins.

3.2.3 Habitat selection by Corn Buntings in the Altcar area was the subject of an undergraduate project at John Moores University.

4. KEY HABITATS

* Arable field margins

5. OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

5.1 Populations are relatively high in Sefton and are part of the nationally important South West Lancashire population. The main objectives, to contribute to the UK BAP, are to maintain this population in the short term and in the medium term to increase the population in line with UK BAP targets, whilst not neglecting the species' status in the remainder of its North Merseyside range.

5.2 Maintain the species at its 1997-99 local population size and range.

5.3 Increase the population by 20% (40 pairs) by 2015.

6. PROPOSED ACTIONS

6.1 Site safeguard

6.1.1 Map important breeding clusters and winter feeding areas for Corn Bunting. (Action: LWT; EAS) (Priority: High)

6.1.2 Consider incorporation of important breeding and wintering areas within non-statutory Wildlife Sites by 2005 (SLBI, SBI, SNCV, SCWI). (Action: EAS; LWT; LAs) (Priority: Medium)

6.1.3 Maintain existing Green Belt in Unitary Development Plans in areas of importance for Corn Bunting. (Action: LAs) (Priority: Medium)

6.2 Policy

6.2.1 Consider Corn Bunting requirements and important areas for the species in the allocation of agricultural support through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and other schemes that may be instigated. (Action: DEFRA; GCT; RSPB; EN) (Priority: High)

6.3 Land management

6.3.1 Ensure appropriate management of banks of watercourses, through, for example, prescriptions for late summer mowing and retention *in situ* of mown vegetation. (Action: EA) (Priority: High)

6.3.2 Promote reduction in agricultural usage of pesticides and herbicides. (Action: DEFRA/FRCA; GCT; RSPB) (Priority: High)

6.3.3 Distribute national advisory literature to land managers (Action: DEFRA; GCT; RSPB) (Priority: Medium)

6.3.4 Promote appropriate management of field margins (Action: DEFRA; GCT; RSPB) (Priority: Medium)

6.3.5 Promote retention of winter stubbles as an essential feeding resource. (Action: DEFRA; RSPB) (Priority: High)

6.3.6 Consider establishment of demonstration farm to highlight beneficial management practices. (Action: DEFRA; LAs) (Priority: Medium)

6.4 Research and monitoring

6.4.1 Re-survey important breeding areas and carry out a complete winter survey of farmland by 2005. Carry out a complete breeding survey by 2010. (Action: LBC; BTO) (Priority: High)

6.4.2 Establish database as part of Local Records Centre (Action: EAS; LWT) (Priority: Low)

6.4.3 Encourage further scientific study of winter and breeding habitat selection in Sefton. (Action: universities) (Priority: medium)

6.5 Communications and publicity

6.5.1 Encourage increased participation in Breeding Bird Survey. (Action: BTO; LBC) (Priority: Medium)

6.5.2 Encourage submission of records to Lancashire Bird Report. (Action: LBC) (Priority: Low)

7. LINKS TO OTHER ACTION PLANS

7.1 UK BAP - Grey Partridge SAP, Skylark SAP, Song Thrush SAP, Tree Sparrow SAP, Linnet SAP, Reed Bunting SAP, Brown Hare SAP, Purple Ramping Fumitory SAP, Arable Fields HAP

7.2 North Merseyside BAP – Skylark SAP, Grey Partridge SAP, Brown Hare SAP, Purple Ramping Fumitory SAP, Field Boundaries HAP

8. CONFLICTS WITH OTHER PLANS

8.1 UK BAP - None

8.2 North Merseyside BAP - Woodland HAPs, Field Boundaries HAP

9. CONTACT POINTS

Tim Melling (RSPB) - advice on management
Steve White, (LWT, LBC) - records
Simon Dowell, (LJMU) – research
Andy Evans (RSPB) and Phil Grice (EN) – national BAP