



Final Report – Ground-nesting bird recovery project – Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund 2015/16

Project Background

The Stiperstones & Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme is delivering 15 projects over 5-years between 2013-18, primarily funded under the Heritage Lottery Fund's National Landscape Partnerships Programme.

The Ground-nesting bird recovery project aims to promote the monitoring and conservation of Curlew, Lapwing and Snipe, and celebrate their contribution to the local landscape, wherever they occur in the LPS area. The project is taking urgent action aiming to stop and then reverse the decline of curlew, lapwing and snipe, particularly the iconic curlew, to prevent their local extinction, working with the other wildlife projects by:

- Surveys, mapping and research to find the birds' nesting sites and foraging areas and causes of decline
- Increasing and improving breeding and foraging areas, by advice, training, small grants and demonstration projects

The Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund has supported the project during 2015/16, alongside funding from Heritage Lottery Fund, The National Trust, Shropshire Ornithological Society and Upper Onny Wildlife Group.



Specifically the funding this year has supported the following aspects of the project:

- Nest surveillance and monitoring provided by Consultant Ornithologist Tony Cross
- LPS ornithologist, Leo Smith, to liaise with Community Wildlife Groups and to feed the results of volunteer surveys into the project
- Predation survey and analysis, including farmer engagement support, provided by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust
- Community and landowner awareness raising & engagement

The project was overseen by a Project Steering Group consisting of the following representatives:

Amanda Perkins – Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country LPS Countryside Officer, Curlew Recovery Project Manager

Leo Smith – LPS Consultant Ornithologist and Bird Surveyor Group co-ordinator for Upper Onny, Camlad and Rea Valley Community Wildlife Groups

Simon Cooter – Natural England, Senior Reserve Manager Stiperstones NNR

Dave Cragg – Natural England Countryside Stewardship Officer

Peter Carty – National Trust, Countryside and Parklands Manager, South Shropshire

Mike Shurmer – RSPB Senior Conservation Officer

Ian Coghill, Andrew Hoodless and Roger Draycott – Game Conservation and Wildlife Trust Chairman and scientific officers, keeping a watching brief and offering advice where needed.

Project Context

The Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* has experienced considerable declines across much of its global range in recent decades and is listed as globally near threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). A large proportion of the global population (ca.25%) breeds in the United Kingdom and even greater numbers spend the winter here. This makes the UK of international importance for this species.

Curlews declined in the Upper Onny part of the LPS area by around 26% from 2004 to 2014. In 2014 the LPS area held around 47 breeding pairs of Curlew - 40 pairs in England and approximately seven in Wales. This is a high proportion of the remaining Shropshire population, which is now below 200 pairs.

These declines are not restricted to the LPS, with comparable declines seen in Shropshire as a whole and other parts of the UK. In Shropshire, comparison of the Breeding Bird Atlas maps, published in 1992, with comparable maps from the 2007-12 Atlas survey, shows that Curlew now has a much more restricted range. Local surveys suggest that the Curlew population has fallen by 85% in only nine years in the 50 survey plots monitored by the BTO Breeding Bird Survey in Shropshire.

The decline in Curlew populations in the UK has been linked to a number of factors. These include habitat fragmentation and a loss of habitat quality through agricultural intensification and drainage; agricultural operations, such as early cutting of silage and hay, reducing the number of chicks that fledge successfully and predation which is known to be a key in causing low productivity and population declines in some areas. The relative importance of these factors however differs between different areas and a deeper understanding of their local relevance may be needed to achieve a recovery.

Achievement of project outputs and special conditions

In terms of a progress towards the agreed outputs and special conditions, the following has been achieved:

Nest Monitoring Pilot Project Results

Field monitoring work in 2015 was carried out by Tony Cross, ornithological consultant with ground nesting bird experience. Tony was contracted from 1st April 2015 to provide curlew surveillance and nest monitoring using observation and filming using RSPB cameras and trail cameras, and radio tagging of chicks. Nests have been monitored throughout the breeding season to determine number of chicks fledged and to determine reasons for nest failure. All photos courtesy of Tony Cross.



Results:

- 12 nests with eggs monitored, through nest cameras and radio tagging of chicks.
- 38 eggs laid – 4 x 4 egg, 5 x 3 egg and 2 x 2 egg clutches.
- Nest failure – 1 desertion, 6 mammalian (1 fox, 1 badger and 4 almost certainly fox from evidence, but not on camera), 1 avian and 1 unknown
- Chicks - 9 eggs from 3 clutches hatched and all chicks tagged, none survived.

- All chicks almost certainly predated, evidence of fox and avian predation in some cases.
- During the nest location phase, 3 fields under observation because of Curlew activity were mown before any nests were located and there was a further report of a farmer finding an abandoned nest after mowing a field.



The population in the Upper Onny area apparently declined by a further 3-4 pairs. None of the 3 Community Wildlife Groups found evidence of fledged young anywhere in the whole LPS area.

Support from LPS Ornithologist and Community Wildlife groups

The three Community Wildlife Groups active in the LPS area (Upper Onny CWG, Rea Valley CWG and Camlad Valley CWG) have continued to survey curlews this spring 2015 breeding season and have contributed useful records to Leo Smith (ornithologist) who has collated them and forwarded them to our specialist ornithologist Tony Cross. This data has informed a baseline curlew population figure for the LPS area and has usefully informed the more in-depth curlew nest surveillance and monitoring project.

Predation Survey & Analysis, and farmer engagement support

The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust have helped us to frame a plan for implementing appropriate predation control based on the findings of our 2015 nest monitoring project. We sent out a survey on existing predation control to be collated by GWCT and a number of farmers responded.



We had hoped to introduce fox control this year, but a lot of discussion and research was needed before we could get all members of the Project Advisory Group to support the proposals and agreement could not be reached until it was too late. Amanda Perkins, Project Officer, attended a two-day RSPB course on 'Best Practice in Fox Control', which has proved very useful when discussing some of the most contentious

issues. GWCT has invited all members of the Project Advisory Group to the Avon Valley to see how all this works in practice on a similar project there.

Amanda Perkins learnt about the potential to use electric fencing as a predation prevention measure on the RSPB course and we have been considering this as an option to trial in 2016. GWCT have put us in touch with someone in Germany who has trialled 25m x 25m plots around curlew nests achieving a much higher breeding success rate.

We have been in touch with the Project Manager of the new RSPB Curlew Recovery Project. Their initial findings in respect of predation are very similar and we are keeping in touch in

relation to best practice, although most of the land in their project is moorland and predominantly within a single ownership, so there are some marked differences to our situation in the Shropshire Hills.

Farmer and community engagement

Over 30 farmers gave permission for Curlews to be monitored on their land. All the farmers approached were interested and sympathetic to the plight of Curlews and concerned about the effect of predation that they felt had hitherto been overlooked in efforts to save this species. The farmers with nests on their land were keen to know precise nest locations so that they could reduce any potential disturbance to nests. There have been feedback presentations for farmers and landowners, who have shown support for the project to continue.

Tony Cross and Amanda Perkins have given a number of presentations to various audiences finishing in March, 2016. Attendance numbers have ranged between 15 and 40+ at each event.

Three meetings were specifically for farmers, the first 'by invitation' to farmers who had engaged with the Nest Monitoring Project. One meeting was for the Upper Onny, Camlad and Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group bird surveyors who survey the curlew population each year according to BTO methodology. The others have been more general public feedback and awareness raising events including a talk at Bishops Castle Town Hall.

The presentations have been well received with people expressing an interest in helping the project further. There have been a few challenging questions about predation control, but most people seem to support the project's intended course of action.



Events delivered as follows:

- Monday 2nd November 2015, Norbury Village Hall – farmers feedback event
- Monday 16th November 2015, Norbury Village Hall – landowners feedback event
- Monday 25th January 2016, Norbury Village Hall – CWG feedback event
- Monday 8th February 2016, Minsterley Parish Hall – public feedback event
- Monday 29th February 2016, Bishops Castle Town Hall – public talk
- Summary presentations at three Community Wildlife Group bird meetings between January and March 2016.

Amanda Perkins, Project Officer, has started to visit the farmers again during March 2016 in an effort to see them before the lambing and nesting season starts in earnest. Amanda has also visited one or two new farmers where we know curlews nested last year to encourage their participation in the project.

Special conditions

Amanda Perkins, LPS Project Officer, and Joy Howells, Scheme Manager, attended the SHAONB Presentation event on 6th October 2015.