



Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group



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Please Help Hedgerow Birds

People often ask "Where have all the Yellowhammers gone?" Or Linnets? Or Bullfinches? These birds, along with Dunnocks and Tree Sparrows, are all declining, and may disappear from our area altogether. The Wildlife Group looked for all five in 2008, and found each of these once-common birds in less than half of our area, and in low numbers even there. We also looked at the places where they live. Based on our local results, we are now calling for small-scale changes in land use and management which can help these birds survive here and build up their numbers again.

What did we find?

Yellowhammers prefer dense hedges with no gaps at the bottom, with wide verges, field margins or rough grazing nearby to provide the grass and weed seeds they eat.

Linnets were also found in hedgerows, but as many were in gorse and scrub, especially in open country with rough grazing and seed sources such as thistles.

Tree Sparrows need mature trees in, or near, hedgerows to provide holes for nests.

Dunnocks like wide, dense hedges. They too were found where there were good verges and margins, which provide the insects they eat, as well as some seed in winter.

Bullfinches avoid hedges with gaps in them: they need tall, dense, twiggy vegetation, to provide secure nest-sites and the buds, shoots and fruit-seeds they feed on.

We found that these birds have different needs. Although our survey was small and local , our results were the same as more detailed research elsewhere.

Only a very varied landscape can support a wide range of species.

Causes

Many factors have contributed to the decline, gradually and over a long time. Changes in farming (including the shift to autumn sowing, and increased use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers), cutting back or removing hedges, gorse and scrub, and a reduction in the variety of plants in the countryside, have all played a part. Many hedges are cut too early in the year and too often, and over-zealous management can be as harmful as removing them. These changes can all be summed up as habitat loss, which removes the food sources and nest sites needed for a healthy population. Each action seems insignificant in itself, but it all adds up and over time the birds find fewer and fewer places to feed and nest. Their populations dwindle until we begin to wonder "Where have they all gone?"

What can we do?

It is not too late to reverse the decline. Just as habitat loss has happened gradually, so habitat restoration can take place a bit at a time. It needn't involve wholesale changes in landscape management, farming methods and gardening practice, or heavy investment of time or money. It just needs an awareness of the importance of bushes and trees, verges, margins, gorse and brambles to the health of our local birds, and a willingness to do things a bit differently to give them a better chance. The ESA has helped by encouraging new hedges, but they must still be put in the right places and managed carefully.

Increasing diversity is a good thing

There is no simple answer to improving habitat, but the more different kinds of plant there are, the more likely our birds are to be able to find food throughout the year. Trees, shrubs and hedges host different insects, bear fruit, and offer different types of nest site as they grow older. Management such as cutting of hedges, verges and field margins, and use of weedkillers, reduces variety and hence the opportunities that birds have to feed and breed. **Everyone** who cares about a thriving, healthy, and wildlife-friendly landscape, can help. Based on our initial results we are asking people to make some changes now. As our local knowledge increases in future, we will offer more specific advice for different groups.

Most land here is farmland, but householders, smallholders, local authorities, and land managers of all kinds, as well as farmers, can help by:

- *retaining mature trees (and sensitive planting of new ones), especially in and around hedgerows: they produce more seed and support more insects, and Tree Sparrows and other birds can nest in the holes*
- *protecting the base of hedges from grazing livestock, especially sheep*
- *maintaining hedges by laying and trimming so that they stay dense and vigorous. Encourage variety – cut the top but not the sides, don't cut some at all, leave others uncut for a couple of years or more, and rotate the cutting so they aren't all cut in the same year. Do not cut any so they are low or thin, and leave hawthorns for at least two years to keep the berries.*
- *replanting hedges on historic lines using a mix of native plant species*
- *encouraging small areas of mixed scrub, both open and dense: Yellowhammer & Linnet prefer open scrub, Dunnock & Bullfinch dense*
- *leaving some verges, field margins and uncultivated corners uncut and unsprayed: allow them to go to seed and develop structure. If they are to be cut, don't do it until September, as Yellowhammers still have nests in August*
- *preserving patches of gorse, especially on sheltered valley sides*
- *putting out any waste seed or grain to create a feeding station for birds*

*Some of these requests involve less work and therefore save time & money
Please do what you can, even if you can't do it all at once: it all helps!!!*

Financial Help for Farmers

Farmers can apply to Natural England for money for action to plant and improve hedges on their land. Those in the ESA can still get additional capital and annual revenue grants for this. The Environmental Stewardship Entry Level scheme pays for hedgerow management, and "cross compliance" insists on minimum standards. The Higher Level Scheme also offers revenue and capital incentives to reward farmers for management to benefit birds.

Farmers can get more information and advice from James Griffiths at Natural England, 01743 285793.

The Community Wildlife Group will help any farmer making an appropriate application.

Official Support

The following organisations support the Wildlife Group in raising these issues: -



More Information & Advice

Further information and advice can be provided on behalf of the Community Wildlife Group by

Leo Smith 01588 638577

Further advice and information on managing your farm for wildlife can be obtained from
Shropshire Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group 01939 262150.

The RSPB website www.rspb.org.uk/farming also provides a lot of evidence-based advice.