

TAYSIDE BIODIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

CORN BUNTING ACTION PLAN

Common Name: Corn Bunting
Scientific Name: *Emberiza calandra*



Corn Bunting © RSPB

Species Profile

UK Biodiversity Status: Priority species under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. The corn bunting is a Red List species of high conservation concern owing to its historic decline and a decline of over 50% in the past 25 years. The UK Action Plan for corn bunting can be viewed at www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans.

Tayside Status: Priority species

Statutory Protection:

EU Birds Directive (European SPEC Category 2; Unfavourable Conservation Status in Europe.)

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004

UK Lead Partner: RSPB

Description and habitat

The corn bunting is similar in colour to a skylark but is bigger with a stout beak. The song is a short shivering burst of notes, like jangling keys, repeated continually from a favourite song post such as a treetop, fence or overhead wire.

The corn bunting is a seed eating (primarily grain) farmland specialist, characteristic of open, lowland habitats such as arable farmland and is one of the few species largely dependent on cropped land. It is a sedentary species with most individuals undertaking only local movements. In the UK, corn bunting mainly breeds in arable and less intensively managed mixed farmland.

The species requires open fields, a supply of seeds throughout the year and insects and soft grain in summer to feed young. Nesting and foraging habitats include cereals, set-aside and improved and unimproved grassland. They nest on the ground, in fields of cereals, ungrazed grass, set-aside and weedy brassicas. Nesting may commence from late May and continue until early September. In winter, they form mixed flocks with finches, sparrows and other buntings often remaining close to their breeding areas. Winter feeding habitats include seed rich cereal stubbles, livestock feed sites, grain spills, unharvested crops and newly sown spring cereals.

Current Status

The corn bunting has been in long-term decline over much of north-west Europe. Results from the Common Birds Census and Breeding Bird Survey reported an 84% decline in the UK breeding population between 1967 and 2003 (Baillie et al., 2006).

In Scotland, it is one of the fastest declining birds and has gone substantial population decline and range contraction during the 20th century and particular during the last 30 years. There is thought to be as few as 800 territorial males left in Scotland (RSPB unpublished data). Eastern Scotland now holds most of the remaining corn buntings with the largest population in Aberdeenshire. A small population of approximately 50 singing males remains in Angus (RSPB survey 2002). Almost all are found between Lunan Bay and Arbroath. Recent winter flocks have been recorded around Auchmithie with the highest count of approximately 70 birds during the late winter in 2007.

Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- The switch from spring-sown to winter-sown crops reduces the availability of over winter cereal stubble, an important winter seed source. The loss of winter feeding is thought to be a major contributing factor to corn bunting declines in Tayside.
- The increased use of more effective herbicides has reduced populations of weeds. More efficient harvesting and changes to grain storage have resulted in less cereal grain being available.
- The use of broad spectrum herbicides and pesticides has reduced the number of insects available to feed chicks in summer.
- Set-aside areas cut or sprayed during the breeding season can result in destruction of nests and loss of insect and seed rich foraging habitats.
- Intensive silage production has largely replaced management of hay and fodder brassicas. This has led to fewer insects, weed and grass seed being available. Earlier mowing and increased frequency of silage cuts results in nests being destroyed.

Case Study

During 2001, RSPB began the Farmland Bird Lifeline (FBL) targeting corn buntings in East Scotland. This work has been supported by FWAG and has been funded by SNH and through the Biodiversity Action Grant Scheme. Initially the project ran in Fife and Aberdeenshire and paid farmers to manage areas of land to benefit corn buntings and other seed eating birds.

In 2002 the RSPB carried out a survey of the Tayside corn buntings' known range. This revealed 47 singing males with most found between Inverkeilor and Arbroath. During 2003, three Tayside farms entered FBL and managed wild bird cover on set-aside. The winter response from the corn buntings was almost immediate at one participating farm. Windyhills Farm, south of Auchmithie held a flock of 27 corn buntings in the wild bird cover during the first winter.

Since then a further four farms have entered the project, all sowing wild bird cover on set-aside. The mix that attracted birds at Windyhills was amended slightly to provide grain for a longer period over the winter. The new mix was trialed at nearby Boghead Farm in 2006. During the first summer of establishment, a pair of corn buntings nested in this crop and throughout the winter of 2006-07 a flock of up to 70 corn buntings were regularly recorded feeding here. This record probably concerns a high proportion of the entire Tayside population. During the early part of the breeding season in 2007, three males were holding territory around this crop.



Wild bird cover © RSPB

Current Action

- An RSPB intervention project is working with farmers in Tayside to manage areas of land to benefit corn buntings. Summer and winter monitoring is carried out on participating farms.

Opportunities

- Inclusion of prescriptions to benefit corn buntings in new Rural Development Contracts (RDCs).
- Sympathetic management and retention of set-aside land to provide summer and winter habitats.
- Continue with RSPB intervention work until sufficient habitat provisions can be delivered by Rural Development Contracts.
- Support agri-environment schemes that are geographically targeted and which provide flexibility to deliver for corn buntings. Ensure specific corn bunting prescriptions are appropriately targeted.
- Advisory events to advocate corn bunting management to advisors, land owners, farmers, decision makers and general public.
- Ensure corn bunting features as a high priority in the Scottish Rural Development Programme and encourage collaborative working at a landscape scale.

Main Objectives/Targets

Objective

- Maintain the current population and range of the corn bunting in Tayside.

Target

- No net loss of 1km² squares occupied by corn buntings in 2002 (last corn bunting survey).
- Increase the population and range of corn bunting in Tayside by 2013.

Objective

- Corn bunting habitat to be provided through Rural Development Contracts and other schemes.

Target

- Development of prescriptions for inclusion in Rural Development Contracts that will benefit corn buntings and be attractive and practical for farmers to implement.
- Appropriate targeting of Rural Development Contracts in corn bunting areas delivered through on the ground advice.

Objective

- Increase awareness of corn bunting requirements and appropriate management with farmers, land managers, advisors and decision makers.

Target

- Identify demonstration farms, providing management beneficial to corn buntings
- Minimum of one advocacy and advisory event to be held annually on demonstration farms.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations

RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
FWAG	Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
SAC	Scottish Agricultural Colleges
SGRPID	Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate
SNH	Scottish Natural Heritage
RDC	Rural Development Contracts
SRDP	Scottish Rural Development Programme

References

Baillie, S.R., Marchant, J.H., Crick, H.Q.P., Noble, D.G., Balmer, D.E., Coombes, R.H., Downie, I.S., Freeman, S.N., Joys, A.C., Leech, D.I., Raven, M.J., Robinson, R.A. & Thewlis, R.M. 2006. *Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside: their conservation status 2005*. BTO Research Report No. 435. BTO, Thetford, UK. (<http://www.bto.org/birdtrends>)

Action for Biodiversity - Corn Bunting

	Lead Partner	Partners
Policy and Legislation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promote the Scottish Rural Development Programme to farmers and land owners and appropriate measures to benefit corn buntings. ▪ Continue to advocate appropriate management options for inclusion in Rural Development Contracts and targeting in corn bunting areas. 	FWAG/SAC	RSPB
Site and species safeguard/management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide safe nesting habitats and year-round feeding opportunities through appropriate farm management (provided in interim by RSPB <i>Farmland Bird Lifeline</i> project - funding available until 2009). Long term management to be provided by agri-environment scheme prescriptions. 	RSPB	
Advisory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure farm advisers and SGRPID/SNH have access to most up-to-date information on management for corn buntings by annual newsletter and report on research findings. 	RSPB	FWAG/SAC
Research and Monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring of Tayside corn bunting population through repeat corn bunting survey in Angus by 2011. ▪ Continue research into species requirements through RSPB intervention project in Angus linking into national research projects. 	RSPB	
Promotion and awareness raising <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advisory events held to raise awareness of corn bunting requirements amongst farmers, land owners and general public. One event per annum from 2008-2011. ▪ Minimum of one local and national press release per year, attendance at minimum of one local/national agricultural show to highlight the decline of the corn bunting and to document work underway to address this. 	RSPB	FWAG/SAC