

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Species

This Species Action Plan is a generic plan for the following species:

Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

Several additional Hampshire priority species occur regularly on farmland. These include Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*, Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*, Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*, Quail *Coturnix coturnix* and Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*. All will benefit from the actions in this plan. Other priority species found on the county's farmland include Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, which are included specifically in the Birds of Wet Meadows SAP, and Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedipnemus*, which has its own national plan. The proposed actions will also benefit other non-priority seed-eating birds such as House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* as well as other farmland wildlife including the brown hare *Lepus europaeus*.

1.2 Farmland Birds

Over three-quarters of the UK's land area is farmland. As such, it supports a major proportion of the country's birds but it is now well established that many farmland birds have experienced dramatic population declines over the past 20 to 30 years¹. Farmland is also the largest single habitat type in Hampshire² and similar declines have occurred in the county. All the species in this plan have undergone substantial reductions and are far less common in Hampshire now than they were 30 years ago^{3,10}. During that period the Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*, a species that shares many ecological and habitat requirements with these species and was formerly widespread, has become extinct in the county.

The reasons for the declines differ from species to species but there is compelling evidence that the common causal factor is related to changes in farming practices and agricultural intensification⁴. This plan is intended to draw attention to the negative impact of modern

farming practices and to identify actions to reverse the downward trends in Hampshire's farmland birds.

1.3 Links with Habitat Action Plans

Although all the species in this plan are primarily associated with mixed and arable farmland they utilise a range of habitats and depend on a wider landscape mosaic. The needs of the species should be considered in conjunction with habitat action plans (HAPs) for:

- Wood Pasture and Parkland
- Hedgerows
- Arable Land
- Neutral grassland
- Lowland Calcareous Grassland
- Lowland Wet Grassland (Floodplain Grazing Marsh and Fen Meadow)

Species
Action
Plan

2 CURRENT STATUS

2.1 Ecology and Habitat Requirements

The species share a number of broad ecological and habitat requirements:

- All depend to a greater or lesser extent on arable or mixed farmland for both breeding and winter habitat.
- Most of our breeding populations are resident in the UK and essentially sedentary, moving relatively short distances between breeding and wintering areas (although see Linnet below).
- All are seed eaters although insects form an important part of their diets (with the exception of Linnet – see below) especially when feeding young.
- All nest on the ground or in hedgerows or scrub except for Tree Sparrow, which nests in holes and crevices in trees and buildings.

Further details for each species are given below⁵.

- **Grey Partridge** - Strictly a ground bird with preference for relatively short grass or crops with some open patches and some taller, denser cover such as grassy hedge bottoms for nesting. In Hampshire grey partridge is found predominantly on arable farmland where they are increasingly dependent on game strips and conservation headlands. Adults feed mainly on green leaves of grass, cereals and clover, grain and wild plant seeds. Chicks rely especially on

insects taken from broad-leaved weeds amongst cereal crops. Outside the breeding season generally occurs in small parties or coveys.

- Skylark - Prefers open farmland with good cover of grass, cereals or other low crops and some more open patches. Rotational set-aside often provides suitable habitat. It also occurs on salt marshes, golf courses, airfields and other grassy open spaces. It nests on the ground and feeds on plant and animal material throughout the year. Insects are particularly important when feeding young. Outside the breeding season it is usually found in flocks on arable farmland where it feeds mainly on cereal leaves, grains and wild plant seeds.

- Tree Sparrow - In it Hampshire prefers farmland or rural areas with well-spaced mature broad-leaved trees, particularly pollarded willows. It nests in holes or crevices in buildings or trees and will take to nest boxes readily. Predominantly a ground feeder taking seeds, buds and berries from low growing plants. Also eats invertebrates particularly when feeding young. It is gregarious throughout the year nesting in loose colonies and forming larger feeding flocks outside the breeding season.

- Linnet – Occupies farmland with hedges and low trees, downland scrub and heathland. Generally feeds on, or close to, the ground on a wide variety of seeds and fruits. Particularly dependent on weeds of open country and waste ground. Chicks fed almost entirely on seeds. Oil Seed Rape has become an important food source with late broods heavily dependent on this crop^{6,7}. Some Hampshire Linnets migrate in winter to southern France³ and are therefore subject to pressures outside the remit of this SAP. Forms large flocks outside the breeding season.

- Yellowhammer – Prefers mixed habitat with scrub cover for nesting and open areas for feeding. It is widespread in Hampshire throughout arable and mixed agricultural areas but is largely absent from an area around Southampton including the lower Itchen and Test valleys³. Usually nests low in dense cover. A ground feeder, taking a variety of seeds, chiefly of grasses and cereals, and invertebrates during the breeding season. In autumn and winter they form loose flocks generally in association with other seed-eating species at good feeding sites.

- Corn Bunting – Strongly associated with arable farmland, particularly linked with barley. Usually nests on, or close to the ground in field margins and the bases of hedges. Feeds on seeds,

other plant material and invertebrates especially during the breeding season. Young are fed on both plant and animal material. Generally gregarious outside breeding season often with other buntings and finches.

2.2 Population trends

Based on the BTO's Common Bird Census (CBC) data, all the species have suffered major population declines on UK farmland over the past 25 years (1973-1998)¹.

Grey Partridge	-83%
Skylark	-53%
Tree Sparrow	-93%
Linnet	-47%
Yellowhammer	-45%
Corn Bunting	-86%

In Hampshire the population trends mirror the national picture. The Game Conservancy Trust has been monitoring Grey Partridge numbers for many years⁸. Historic data show that the populations on two central Hampshire estates fell by a massive 98% between 1935 and 1987³. Populations have continued at a low level to the present day. Local CBC data for Skylark, Linnet and Yellowhammer indicate 22%, 18% and 45% reductions respectively between 1981 and 1999¹⁰. The 45% reduction in Yellowhammer numbers is the reason for it being included in this SAP, despite the species not being on the Hampshire BAP priority species list. Although less quantitative information is available for Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting, the downward trends for both species are particularly clear. Corn Bunting is increasingly difficult to find in Hampshire and Tree Sparrow is on the verge of extinction as a breeding species.

2.3 Populations and Distribution in Hampshire

Population estimates in Hampshire were last made in 1992³.

Grey Partridge	2400-3000 pairs
Skylark	30,000 pairs
Tree Sparrow	<50 pairs
Linnet	6000-10,000 pairs
Yellowhammer	<25,000 pairs
Corn Bunting	450-750 pairs

In some cases the rates of decline have slowed in recent years and all the species, other than Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting, remain widely distributed in the county. All are heavily dependent on farmland but some are able to utilise other habitats, which helps to boost their numbers and masks the full impact of changing farming practices. For example, Skylark is still common in many open grassy places (including downland, commons, coastal marshes) while Linnet and Yellowhammer occur in downland

and heathland scrub. Those species that are more dependent on farmland, Grey Partridge, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow, have suffered the largest declines. The number of Corn Buntings, once regarded as an agricultural pest, is falling rapidly and its range is contracting. The species has disappeared from large areas of its traditional cereal-field habitat on the Hampshire chalk. The Tree Sparrow has been declining in the county since the mid-70s. At that time, while not common, it was widespread particularly in the north-east between Basingstoke and Farnborough and large winter flocks occurred in many areas. Today it is decidedly rare in Hampshire. It has not been proved to breed in the county since 1996.

2.4 Protection

All the species in this plan are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the EC Birds Directive. Linnet and Yellowhammer are also listed on Appendix II, and Grey Partridge on Appendix III of the Bern Convention.

3 CURRENT FACTORS AFFECTING SEED-EATING FARMLAND BIRDS

Several specific changes in agricultural management practices are thought to have combined to bring about the reductions described above. For the species in this Action Plan, the most significant factors are:

- Autumn sowing of cereal crops. The switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown cereals has resulted in loss of weedy stubble fields and an associated reduction in autumn and winter food supply. All the species in this plan have been affected by this change. In addition, the earlier and more vigorous growth of these crops has resulted in the reduction of nesting opportunities and loss of feeding habitat for some species during the breeding season.
- More intense grassland management. Changes in management regimes, such as heavier grazing and earlier mowing for silage, have reduced nest site availability and increased the likelihood of nest failure for the ground-nesting species. In addition, 'improvement' of grasslands has resulted in the loss of diverse meadow floras which, in turn, has reduced both insect and seed food availability.
- Polarisation of farming types. The switch away from livestock and mixed farming to arable farming has resulted in a reduction in the planting of fodder crops such as maize and kale. These, and the weeds that they contained, used to provide an important winter food source for seed-eating birds. The undersowing of

spring crops to provide a grass ley for grazing livestock after harvest is also far less common than it used to be. The undersown crops were good for sawfly larvae which are an important food source for Grey Partridge and Corn Bunting⁹.

- Wider usage of agrochemicals. The application of herbicides and pesticides to control weeds and insect pests has reduced food supplies for both adults and chicks. Increased usage of nitrogenous fertilisers has also favoured strong cereal plants at the expense of non-crop plants, further reducing food supply.
- Tidier, more efficient farming. Accreditation schemes requiring strict controls of grain storage, tidier farmyards with less spilled grain and more efficient harvesting machinery have resulted in less grain being left in the fields or accessible around the farmyards.
- Elimination of unproductive land. Historically, the removal or close cropping of hedgerows, elimination of field margins, drainage of ponds and wet areas and general tidying of unproductive areas has resulted in loss of nest sites and food supply. The reduction of cover has also left nests and sitting birds more susceptible to predation.

4 CURRENT ACTION

The conservation of birds on farmland is particularly challenging. Apart from the very large geographic areas involved, most of the land is in private ownership and is managed to be as commercially productive as possible. However the population declines have been well publicised and efforts to reverse the downward trends are being made by many private landowners and farmers as well as government and non-government agencies.

4.1 National

- Stated government policy is to protect biodiversity in the UK. All the species in this plan, with the exception of Yellowhammer, are on the UK Biodiversity Steering Group's Priority List with their own Species Action Plans¹¹.
- Agricultural intensification has been driven primarily by commercial pressures to make farming more economically attractive. It has been exacerbated by government policy and financial subsidies, particularly via the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Some progress has been made towards CAP reform. The introduction of the set-aside scheme in 1992 has undoubtedly been of short-term benefit to farmland

birds¹². However, it was not designed as a wildlife conservation measure and some aspects, such as the use of broad-spectrum herbicides, are not helpful. The latest reform of the CAP took place in 1999. New rules for the development of rural areas have been introduced and there has been some limited re-direction of funds towards more environmentally friendly practices. However, the fundamental feature of the CAP that encourages intensive agriculture - its pricing structure - is still in place.

- Financial incentives to encourage environmentally friendly farming practices are channelled through agri-environment schemes, now co-ordinated by DEFRA under the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP). The Countryside Stewardship Scheme is the Government's main green grants scheme. Payments made under it are intended to compensate farmers for income lost when establishing or improving environmentally beneficial aspects of farmland. The Arable Stewardship scheme is aimed specifically at restoring the wildlife interest of arable farmland. A pilot scheme has explored a range of relevant measures including retention of cereal stubble over the winter, a switch to spring cereals and sowing of wildlife seed mixtures. The scheme is about to be incorporated into Countryside Stewardship and rolled out nationwide. Other potentially useful sources of ERPD funding are the Organic Farming Scheme and the Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes for calcareous and river valley grasslands. The latter, as applied in the Avon and Test valleys, has field margin options which may benefit the species in this SAP.
- The government has proposed a so-called Skylark Index as an 'Indicator of Sustainability'¹³. One of the 13 indicators of the well being of the nation, ranked alongside factors such as economic growth, employment and average life expectancy, is the population of wild birds. The index shows that while, overall, this population has remained relatively stable since 1970, farmland birds have declined rapidly.
- The BTO, in partnership with JNCC and RSPB, co-ordinates the on going monitoring of wild bird populations by volunteer surveyors throughout the UK. This work has been instrumental in identifying the widespread declines of farmland birds. The Trust also carries out research into the reasons for the declines and other aspects of farmland bird ecology and provides advice on habitat management, land-use change and environmental impacts. A recent example is work carried out jointly with the GCT to

investigate the value of various types of 'winter bird crops'¹⁴.

- The RSPB has identified reversing the declines of farmland birds as one of its top priorities. An assessment of the scale of the impact that agricultural intensification has caused is part of this work. In addition to sponsoring research, lobbying government and highlighting the problem, the Society has purchased Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire where it will trial and demonstrate how profitable farming and wildlife conservation can go hand-in-hand. The Skylark has been selected as one of the key UK species for priority action and, jointly with the BTO, the Society hosted a conference on the ecology and conservation of this species at Southampton in 1999¹⁵.

- The GCT carries out long term research into the effects of farming intensification on farmland birds including both game birds, such as Grey Partridge, and non-game birds, such as Corn Bunting. There is good evidence that conservation methods used by game managers to enhance game numbers for shooting can also benefit other farmland birds. Examples include conservation headlands, pioneered by GCT in Hampshire, and planting special seed crops to provide winter feed.

4.2 Local

- Relevant Countryside Stewardship Schemes and Environmentally Sensitive Areas in Hampshire are reviewed in the Arable Land HAP. These schemes are being used to restore winter stubble, to create conservation headlands around crops and to provide specialised habitat for Stone Curlews. All these measures will benefit the species in this SAP.
- Many farmers and landowners in Hampshire grow winter gamebird crops and create conservation headlands and other features to provide food and cover for Pheasants and partridges. Such management can also benefit farmland birds and provides a practical and, potentially, widely applicable conservation strategy.
- HOS has established a Joint Hampshire (BAP) Bird Monitoring Group (JHBMG) with HWT, RSPB, BTO and HCC. The Group ranked birds wintering on farmland as its highest priority group of species and began its first survey of these birds in 2000/01. The project extends an existing BTO national survey to cover substantially more randomly selected Hampshire sites.
- There is at least one private nest box scheme for Tree Sparrows in the county.

Seed-eating Farmland Birds

Enthusiasts have erected boxes at Odiham RAF station, an area where Tree Sparrows formerly bred.

- The RSPB is undertaking a national project to identify what benefit, if any, feeding farmland birds has on their over-winter survival and breeding productivity. The project is focusing on Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting, two species

that could become extinct as breeding species if urgent action is not taken. Two sites, both for Corn Bunting, have been identified in Hampshire. If feeding proves beneficial, this could be a relatively cheap action that landowners could take for farmland birds. All species covered by this SAP could benefit from this action.

5 OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this Plan is to protect and increase the populations of seed-eating farmland birds in Hampshire. This broad aim translates into the specific objectives set out below. Where feasible, objectives have been allocated targets against which achievement can be measured. The 'Proposed Action' table in section 6 identifies the action to be taken to meet these objectives.

Species
Action
Plan

	OBJECTIVES	PROPOSED ACTIONS
A	Maintain existing populations and ranges of seed-eating farmland birds in Hampshire, preventing further fragmentation or loss.	1-11, 17-21
B	Expand the populations and ranges of seed-eating farmland birds in Hampshire.	1-6, 7-11, 17-21
C	Establish a comprehensive understanding of the distributions, status and ecological requirements of seed-eating farmland birds in Hampshire through appropriate research, survey and monitoring.	12-17
D	Promote communication, education and awareness of the status and needs of seed-eating farmland birds in Hampshire.	8, 9, 18-21

6 PROPOSED ACTION

The following table lists the actions required to achieve the objectives set out in this Plan. Each action has been assigned to one or more 'Key Partners'. Key Partners are those organisations that are expected to take responsibility for the delivery of the actions assigned to them, according to the targets set in this Plan. Other organisations may also be involved in the delivery of action, and they have been indicated in the 'Others' column.

Key to symbols in Action Table:

- ◆ To be completed by the indicated year. Work can commence at any time before the due date, at the discretion of the Key Partner.
- ◆⇨ Design or production of a plan/strategy to be completed by this year and then followed by its implementation.
- ➡ To start by the indicated year and usually followed by ongoing work. A start arrow in year 2000 can indicate a new action, or a new impetus to existing work.
- ⇨ Work that has already begun and is ongoing.

	ACTION	DELIVERY BY		YEAR						MEETS OBJ.
		Key Partner	Others	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2010	
◆ = complete by ➡ = start by ⇨ = ongoing ◆⇨ = design by and implement										
Site and Species Policy and Protection										
1	Specify the recovery of seed-eating farmland bird populations as a key objective when reviewing and adjusting agri-environment schemes.	EN DEFRA		➡						A, B
2	Encourage bodies that offer various agri-environment and landscape improvement schemes to target areas in Hampshire which have greatest potential influence on habitat quality for seed-eating farmland birds.	EN DEFRA		➡						A, B
3	Select target areas for the roll out of the Arable Stewardship scheme; ensure that advisors are aware of the scheme and its benefit for wildlife in general and for seed-eating birds in particular; lobby advisors to encourage application of the scheme in key farmland areas in Hampshire.	DEFRA		➡						A,B
4	Press for additional government funding of new measures providing positive management for seed-eating farmland birds, for example additional payments for use of target-specific sprays rather than broad-spectrum sprays for set-aside.	RSPB		⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨	A, D
5	Consider the practicalities of protecting newly discovered populations of Tree Sparrows lying outside designated conservation areas via an appropriate designation such as SINC.	EN HCC	HWT LAs	➡						A, B
Site and Species Management										
6	Encourage sympathetic habitat management where appropriate by translating recommendations of research into on-the-ground actions: EN through Management Statements/ Agreements:	EN DEFRA EWAG	LAs HWT	➡						A, B

Seed-eating Farmland Birds

	EN through Management Statements/ Agreements; MAFF through agri-environment schemes; FWAG, GCT and CLBA through advice to farmers and landowners.	FWAG GCT CLBA	NFU							
7	Ensure sympathetic management of habitat within protected areas aimed particularly at the provision of invertebrate food supply during the breeding season and appropriate plant material at other times.	EN HCC HWT		➔						A
8	Encourage landowners and farmers, through promotion and publicity, to adopt methods and practices in land management, which are mutually beneficial to both game and seed-eating birds. This to include particularly encouraging the planting of game cover crops of most advantage to seed-eating birds.	DEFRA FWAG GCT CLBA BASC		➔						A,B,D
9	Encourage landowners to take up land management schemes such as ESA, Countryside Stewardship, Arable Stewardship and Organic Farming Scheme on farmland where sympathetic management would benefit habitat quality for seed-eating farmland birds.	DEFRA FWAG	EN NFU	➔						A,B,D
10	Consider winter feeding schemes in areas where Corn Buntings currently survive in reasonable numbers	RSPB	HOS HWT		➔					A,B
11	Consider the establishment of nest box and winter feeding schemes centred around newly discovered populations of Tree Sparrows, to maximise opportunities for colonies to survive and grow.	RSPB	HOS HWT		➔					A,B
Research, Survey and Monitoring										
12	Support current research to establish influence of agricultural intensification on seed-eating farmland birds and possible remedial measures.	DEFRA JNCC	BTO RSPB GCT	➔						C
13	Support current survey programmes to monitor the populations of Hampshire's seed-eating farmland birds.	HCC	HOS RSPB BTO	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	C
14	Encourage participation in the GCT's Partidge Count Scheme	GCT	HOS HWT RSPB	➔						C
15	Carry out one-off survey to establish current distribution of Corn Bunting in the county.	JHBMG			◆↔		◆			C
16	Consider how best to locate remaining populations of Tree Sparrows in the county.	JHBMG			◆↔					C
17	Develop and improve long-term monitoring programmes for Hampshire's seed-eating farmland birds	JHBMG			◆↔		◆			A,B,C
Communication, Awareness and Promotion										
18	Highlight the decline in farmland bird populations to the general public,	EN DEFRA	RSPB HOS	➔						A,B,D

Species
Action
Plan

Seed-eating Farmland Birds

	land owners and policy makers in order to promote increased protection and beneficial habitat management.	DEFRA	HOS							
	ACTION	DELIVERY BY		YEAR						MEETS OBJ.
		Key Partner	Others	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2010	
				◆ = complete by ▶ = start by ⇔ = ongoing ◆⇔ = design by and implement						
19	Seek to increase awareness of the ecology and conservation requirements of seed-eating farmland birds particularly amongst farmers, land owners and the general public.	JHBMG	GCT	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A,B,D
20	Promote an appreciation for, and the conservation of, farmland birds in Hampshire through provision of habitat guidelines, workshops, events and open days, press releases and appeals for records. Consider building the awareness programme around a well-known, attractive species such as the Yellowhammer.	JHBMG	GCT	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A,B,D
21	Maintain liaison between organisations in Hampshire with an interest in monitoring and maintaining farmland birds (HOS, RSPB, BTO, HWT, GCT, HCC) in order to facilitate efficient exchange of information on research progress and national issues.	JHBMG		⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A,B,C,D

Species
Action
Plan

KEY TO ORGANISATIONS:

BASC British Association for Shooting and Conservation
 BTO British Trust for Ornithology
 CLBA Country Land and Business Association
 DEFRA Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
 EN English Nature
 FWAG Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
 GCT Game Conservancy Trust
 HBP Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership

HCC Hampshire County Council
 HOS Hampshire Ornithological Society
 HWT Hampshire Wildlife Trust
 JHBMG Joint Hampshire (BAP) Bird Monitoring Group
 JNCC Joint Nature Conservation Committee
 NFU National Farmers' Union
 LAs Local Authorities
 RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

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Species
Action
Plan

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This is one of many Habitat, Species and Topic Action Plans being prepared by the Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership. It will be monitored by the Partnership and fully reviewed in 2005.

This species action plan has been prepared by Dr. John A. Eyre and Hampshire Ornithological Society on behalf of the Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership.

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