

## EDITORIAL

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The marked declines shown by many species closely associated with lowland farmland are widely considered to represent one of the most pressing issues in British nature conservation. Twenty-one bird species that inhabit farmland have undergone population declines; for 12 of the species, their range, population size or both have more than halved compared with the early 1970s. The plight of farmland birds is underlined by the fact that 13 out of the 26 birds regarded as “priority species” by the *UK Biodiversity Action Plan* are particularly associated with farmland, and that half of the 36 species on the “Red” list of *Birds of Conservation Concern* are farmland birds.

Responding to this concern, the theme of the 1999 spring conference of the British Ornithologists’ Union was the “Ecology and Conservation of Lowland Farmland Birds”. It was held at Southampton University on 27-28 March 1999, with the aim of bringing together a wide range of individuals involved in research, monitoring, land management advice and practice, and policy development relating to lowland farmland birds in Britain. It was highly successful in this regard as the 196 registered participants included BOU members, representatives of government departments and statutory agencies, researchers from universities, government institutes, non-governmental conservation organisations and industry, farmers, advisers and extension officers. Despite the relatively narrow focus on British birds, it also held a wider appeal as ten foreign countries were represented among the attendees.

In putting together the programme, the organising committee (N.J. Aebischer, A.D. Evans, P.V. Grice, A.R.H. Swash, J.A. Vickery) sought to present the current state of knowledge on the ecology and conservation of lowland farmland birds in Britain, an assessment of current conservation initiatives and agricultural policies, and recommendations for future policies, research and monitoring. Presentations fell naturally into three categories:

- (1) *Trends, agricultural policy and conservation.* An introductory session covered the changes that have taken place in farmland bird populations and agricultural practices (R.J. Fuller), the changes in farmland plants and invertebrates (N.W. Sotherton & M.J. Self), and a review of the four British species that have been sufficiently well studied for recovery plans to have been implemented and their progress assessed (N.J. Aebischer, R.E. Green & A.D. Evans). The presentations from the last session of the conference also fell into this category, as they described the changes in bird numbers and farming in Europe (L. Schifferli), and an overview of UK agricultural policies and Biodiversity Action Plan (A.R.H. Swash, P.V. Grice & D. Smallshire).
- (2) *Effects of farming on birds.* Over the last 30 years, lowland farming practices have changed profoundly. The presentations in this category reviewed the latest scientific findings concerning the impact of current forms of agricultural land management on lowland farmland birds and evaluated the success of various land-management initiatives. They ranged from a consideration of organic farming (D.E. Chamberlain & J.D. Wilson) to set-aside (I.G. Henderson & A.D. Evans), wet and dry lowland grassland (A. Wakeham-Dawson & K.W. Smith) and pesticide use (A.J. Burn). In addition, practical options for managing arable farmland sympathetically for birds were also described (N.D. Boatman, C. Stoate & P.N. Watts).
- (3) *Studies of lowland farmland birds.* Following the concern over farmland bird declines, many research projects have been initiated in recent years. Two conference sessions served to disseminate the results to date, produce details of current knowledge, bring together complementary research on the same species, and identify species management requirements. The sessions included presentations on the following six declining species: Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (P.F. Donald & J.A. Vickery), Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (D.L. Thomson & P.A. Cotton), Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* (N.W. Brickle & D.G.C. Harper), Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (R.B. Bradbury & C. Stoate), Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (D. Moorcroft & J.D. Wilson) and Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* (D. Vanhinsberg). In addition, other presentations considered the demography of farmland birds (G.M. Siriwardena, S.R. Baillie, H.Q.P. Crick, J.D. Wilson & S. Gates) and the role of predation (C. Stoate & D.L. Thomson).

The Right Honourable Elliott Morley, Minister for Fisheries and the Countryside, very kindly agreed to open the conference. He stressed the government’s commitment to the protection and enhancement of wildlife. We are pleased that farmland birds have come to play an important role in this. In the time between the conference and the publishing of the proceedings, the Government has adopted an index of farmland bird abundance as a “headline” biodiversity indicator for both sustainable agriculture and the general quality of life in the UK. Closing

remarks were made by Baroness Young of Old Scone (English Nature) and Graham Wynne (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), who considered what the future might hold from a governmental and non-governmental perspective respectively. Both speakers remarked on the timidity of the conclusions from the Agenda 2000 talks on future European agricultural policy, which were completed the previous day. Much more radical changes in policy are required to shift the influence of agricultural subsidies towards achieving environmental benefits, and the two speakers differed in their optimism about such future prospects.

The critical importance of achieving such a shift was underlined by the award, at the conference dinner, of the Godman-Salvin medal to Dick Potts (The Game Conservancy Trust) for his classic 32-year study into the factors responsible for the decline of the Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*. Although the study has resulted in a detailed scientific understanding of the requirements and limiting factors of this farmland species, and translated them into conservation actions that have been shown to work, its numbers are still declining because, nationally, the economics of farming are against it.

We have encouraged speakers to produce written papers from their presentations for several reasons. First, we wanted a permanent record of the conference, available not least to those who were unable to be present. Second, we wished to make available the results of recently completed or nearly finished studies as soon as possible. Third, by bringing together the different facets of the ecology and conservation of lowland farmland birds, we sought to provide a rich and easily accessible source of reference material in one volume for conservation practitioners, scientists, policy makers, postgraduate students and all other interested parties. Each paper in

these proceedings has been subject to peer-review by two independent referees plus the editors.

The British Trust for Ornithology, English Nature, Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, The Game Conservancy Trust, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have all provided help with the conference organisation. The British Ornithologists' Union supported two speakers and supplied 24 student grants. We are very grateful to Subbuteo Natural History Books for a donation towards conference expenses, and to English Nature, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for financial contributions towards the publication of the proceedings.

Many individuals also contributed to the success of the conference. From the British Ornithologists' Union, we especially thank Steve Dudley for handling the logistics of the conference and publication of its proceedings, Gwen Bonham for bookings and registration and Iain Bishop for manning the projector. We are grateful to Andy Swash for providing input into the scientific programme and liaising with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. We thank Sue McGloin and the Conference Office at the University of Southampton for local arrangements. We acknowledge the efforts of the referees who helped improve the written papers, and render particular thanks to Claude Berthelier for preparing the manuscripts for the printers. We are grateful to Carry Akroyd for providing the artwork for the cover and chapter heads which capture brilliantly so many different images of farmland birds. Finally, we thank Chris Packham for his entertaining slide show on the eve of the conference, and all the speakers whose excellent contributions combined to produce a most enjoyable and informative conference. We hope that this proceedings volume will be equally enjoyable and useful.

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