

Inaugural message

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Before saying anything else, I must say how pleased I am to be here opening your conference on farmland birds.

I am pleased for three reasons. First, because I personally attach very considerable importance to seeking to help the cause of farmland birds. Second, because seeking to help farmland birds is a priority for the Government in general and the Ministry in particular. Third, because the BOU is an organisation which commands very considerable respect.

You have chosen a topic of great importance. I hope that the conference will greatly improve our collective understanding of how best to stem the decline in populations of farmland birds that we have seen in recent decades.

It is sometimes forgotten, even by ornithologists in their mad rush to the coast or the mountains, what a very important place for birds lowland farmland can be.

WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTE?

I can assure you that the Government is committed to the protection and enhancement of wildlife, and this of course includes farmland birds.

To this end, we have supported the development and implementation of biodiversity action plans for priority habitats and species.

It is, I fear, an indicator of the problem that the first tranche of UK biodiversity action plans included five species of farmland birds: the Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, the Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, the Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*, the Corncrake *Crex crex* and the Stone-curlew *Burhinus oediconemus*. And more have followed.

These biodiversity action plans have been developed in partnership with key agencies like English Nature and voluntary organisations like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). They have involved a pooling of ideas and expertise.

This same pooling of ideas and expertise must be brought to bear to ensure that they are implemented successfully and that real benefits are achieved for the species concerned. This requires the Government to work together with agencies and environmental organisations, and vice-versa, to ensure the objectives set out in biodiversity action plans are met. The Government is encouraged by the way in which so many organisations like the RSPB - lead partners for farmland birds - and The Game Conservancy Trust have taken leading roles. I am

pleased to see so many organisations such as these represented at this BOU conference today.

However, the inclusion of farmland birds in species action plans is a recognition that many of these species have declined over the last 25 years. Changes in farming practice, such as the decline in unimproved grassland and change to autumn cereal sowing, are the most likely general explanation to account for this decline, although I am aware of other supplementary reasons that have been suggested.

Nevertheless, I am not aware of any one specific agricultural change that could account for all the decline in all the species. Much research is however underway in this area and I am glad that the Ministry is playing its part. You will be hearing today and tomorrow about some of the results of the research that we have funded.

Research is clearly a tool of major importance since it is important that we understand both the nature of change and why it has come about if we are to address the problem of the decline in farmland birds effectively.

We also need to look at other policy instruments such as advice, incentives and regulation.

There has also been a positive change in attitude. There has been increasing recognition of the importance of conservation and caring for the environment.

Our aim is to achieve efficient and profitable agriculture, but not at the expense of the environment. Care for the environment is crucial.

And it is right that the Government should step in with incentives where market forces do not provide an adequate return for environmental goods which society has made clear that it values and desires. And upon which our wildlife depends.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) has been encouraging farmers for a number of years to farm in an environmentally friendly manner through our system of agri-environment schemes such as the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) scheme and Countryside Stewardship.

ESAs have been a positive influence on farmland bird populations since the pilot scheme in 1986. In recent years, we have extended the scope for ESAs to provide suitable habitats for lowland birds. Last year, I announced the creation of a number of new "wet" tiers in the Stage II & III ESA Scheme. For example, in the Suffolk River Valleys ESAs, we introduced the Water Level Supplement which aims to encourage farmers to create conditions ideal for breeding waders. Elsewhere we have introduced new tiers

to encourage arable farmers to keep winter stubbles because of their value to farmland bird populations.

Outside ESAs, most of the key types of English landscape targeted for assistance under Countryside Stewardship would fall into the broad category of lowland farmland. We were very pleased with the results of last year's application round for the pilot Arable Stewardship scheme in the West Midlands and East Anglia and plan to keep the pilot scheme open for two more years. It offers farmers payments in return for adopting management options designed to create food sources for animals and suitable habitat conditions for plant and animal species that have declined or are threatened on arable farmland.

Overall the Government is committed to a continuing expansion of areas under the major agri-environment schemes and is making an extra £40 million available over the next three years for these schemes in England. You will hear more about the agri-environment schemes from Andy Swash tomorrow.

There have been changes in the context of the Agenda 2000 negotiations as well. The Prime Minister will be making a statement on Monday on the outcome of the package agreed in Berlin in the early hours of yesterday. The agriculture package represents a further shift away from supporting farmers' incomes through keeping food prices artificially high. Direct payments to farmers are being increased to help compensate for the price cuts. We will be considering all the options of the final package in the light of the overall agreement and responses to Nick Brown's consultation exercise in Agenda 2000. Interested parties will have a further opportunity to contribute their views.

There are benefits for the environment in the package agreed. Foremost is a new integrated rural development policy that has been created as the 'second pillar' of the CAP. This provides the basis for a shift of emphasis from production support towards environmental and rural development measures in the future.

We will be consulting on how best to implement the

new Rural Development Regulation, taking account of the funds available. Agri-environment measures are compulsory and we are required to produce a balanced programme.

Hill Livestock Compensation Allowance (HLCA) headage payments are to be replaced by area-based payments. This will enable us to offer support to hill farming in a way that also delivers a better deal for the environment.

The beef extensification premium is now more strongly linked to genuinely extensive farming.

The reforms include a requirement on all Member States to apply appropriate environmental measures where they deem this necessary.

Finally, I would like to mention set-aside, which I know is to be discussed in more detail later today. From what I have just said, you will have gathered that the Government does not support the policy of compulsory set-aside as a way of controlling surplus cereal production. However, whilst arable subsidies continue, we do support the continuation of voluntary set-aside. Set-aside has, of course, had many environmental benefits particularly for birds as it provides both nesting areas and feeding sites.

This is why we are arguing in Brussels that as voluntary set-aside will no longer be a means of controlling production, we don't need these restrictive rules, and I'm thinking in particular of the current minimum width and plot sizes for set-aside. We would like to be able to allow farmers to set aside much smaller areas - around field edges for instance. As well as this, we would like to see the set-aside management rules left to the discretion of Member States as far as possible. We can then have rules that maximise these environmental benefits, and should also increase the public acceptability of set-aside.

For the future, conferences such as this help to ensure that there is a continuing flow of information and that we all benefit from the ideas and experience of others. I am sure that it will be a very successful event.