

The Farm Flyer

Newsletter of the North Wessex Farmland Bird Project - Berkshire & Hampshire Downs



© Diane Nicolle

Rolling the seedbed: spring cultivations taking place on the North Hampshire Downs

The North Wessex Farmland Bird Project, covering the parts of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire that lie within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has now been in place for a year.

For those of you unfamiliar with the project, North Wessex Farmland Bird Advisor Diane Nicolle explains: "The Hampshire and Berkshire Downs holds important populations of key farmland bird species such as grey partridge, lapwing and corn bunting; while these species have disappeared from other parts of the country over the last few decades, some populations are still holding on in this area. We are therefore in a very privileged position to be able to help boost the numbers of these birds while they still exist in the Downs, by providing the habitats they need to breed and feed throughout the year. Environmental Stewardship enables farmers to do this while receiving financial compensation over a period of 5 or 10 years."

Diane can assist those entering or renewing Stewardship by advising on options that benefit farmland birds, where to locate these and best management so they work best for the birds they provide vital habitat for, as well as being practical on a commercial farm.

Berkshire farmer **Ed Ryder** is one of those who has made use of Diane's free advice. When Ed's ELS agreement came to the end of its five year period last year, at the suggestion of Des Sussex from Natural England and Diane, he decided to renew his ELS agreement and enter HLS. This year he has been busy planting hedges and preparing his new fallow plot for nesting lapwing and is getting ready to establish wild bird seed plots and areas of pollen and nectar mix, amongst other Stewardship options.

Ed says, "We decided to apply for HLS to improve the habitats on our farm for all types of wildlife, particularly farmland birds, while also securing a significant guaranteed annual income from some of the most unproductive areas of the farm. Our application coincided nicely with the Campaign for the Farmed Environment and with the help of Des and Diane we managed to agree on a range of options which meet a lot of CFE objectives whilst also fitting in with our commercial farming plans. Diane visited the farm and helped us to choose options to target certain species such as lapwing, corn bunting and skylarks and we now eagerly look forward to seeing the results over the coming years."

To contact Diane for free advice - see details on back page

Read on for...News on ELS & HLS and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment... Top tips on establishing options in the spring... A FREE farmland bird survey...Nature of Farming Award...More news and events in the Hampshire and Berkshire Downs

Update on ELS and HLS

Des Sussex, Natural England

The Environmental Stewardship scheme is the main way in which farms can receive payments for providing some of the vital habitats and food resources for farmland birds. The Government's spending review last year has resulted in some changes to the availability of Higher Level Stewardship, but Entry Level and Organic Entry Level Stewardship agreements are still available to all. New applicants, and those in ELS or CSS agreements coming to an end are encouraged to enter or renew ELS or OELS. Diane can advise on this and Natural England also offer free half day visits from an NE advisor to help with ELS - contact Natural England on 0300 060 1695 to arrange a visit: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/farmevents>.

Many farms renewing schemes (including CSS agreements) will have the opportunity to choose new or different options that can help provide great farmland bird habitats and also contribute to the CFE.

The Higher Level Stewardship budget is more limited, and there is already great demand for HLS agreements in the 2011/12 year. A number of farms in the North Wessex Farmland Bird Project area are currently applying for HLS - if you are interested, it is important that you contact a Natural England adviser to find out if HLS will be available to you, and when.

Following an EU audit of Environment Stewardship, NE has recently reorganised the way payments will be made to agreement holders, with changes coming into effect 30 June 2011. This will apply to all agreements that started on or after 1 February 2007. To minimise the impacts of these changes, payments due during the first half of 2011 will be unaffected. Details of the changes are found on the website:

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/funding/euaudit.aspx>

Top tips on Stewardship options in spring

When establishing a **wild bird seed mix** in spring, Chris Bright from Bright Seeds advises on important considerations:

- Decide on the best location then establish a stale seedbed as soon as possible.
- Apply FYM within NVZ guidelines to supply the soil with crucial organic matter
- Control the weeds as necessary before sowing
- Plough, power harrow and subsoil if compaction may be a problem
- Just before sowing spray the seedbed with glyphosate to really rid the soil of weeds
- Sow generally in mid to late May and drill straight into the seedbed, although timing will depend on the seeds planted. Sow preferably in 15inch rows, as this enables birds to move freely within the plot and the plants to stand up
- Fertilise as required - the crop needs feeding as much as any other!

Oliver Yiend from Kings Game Cover and Conservation Crops advises on the successful establishment of

Nectar flower mixtures:

- Establish in early spring or late summer
- Sow a grass free option - this allows plots to be managed proactively and provides greater longevity.
- Cut the crop hard during the first 12 months of establishment which will create a tight sward. This will help prevent the encroachment of pernicious weeds such as thistles, docks and ragwort.
- Successful establishment of a grass free pollen and nectar mix should provide in the region of five years benefit.



© Kings Crops
Grass-free nectar flower mix

For further advice on wild bird seed and nectar flower mixes, contact:

Chris Bright at Bright Seeds: 01747 873930

Oliver Yiend at Kings Game Cover and Conservation Crops: 01406 430341

Remember... look out for lapwing nests when carrying out in-field operations at this time of year.

Arriving soon from winter in Africa....if you're lucky enough to have turtle doves on your farm, conservation headlands and wild bird seed mixtures are two types of Stewardship option that can supply crucial seed for these rare birds through their breeding season from April to September.



Wild bird seed mix including kale

© Diane Nicolle

Campaign for the Farmed Environment - why you should take notice

Peter Thompson, Hampshire CFE Coordinator

When set-aside was set at 0% by the EU in 2008, Government made it clear that they were looking to introduce a new “environmental set-aside” to protect what they viewed as the environmental benefits of the old set-aside scheme. They put forward proposals in 2009 for new compulsory environmental set-aside as a requirement of the Single Payment through cross compliance which would have involved up to six per cent of land being taken out of production and would have required active environmental management. It was a significant win for the NFU and the CLA, to have the then Minister eventually agree that a voluntary approach would be of more benefit than a compulsory approach and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) came into being.



Beetle bank next to a stubble field, both ELS options that count towards the CFE

The CFE has until June 2012 to demonstrate that farmers can provide environmental benefits on their land without set-aside. The threat of compulsory set-aside remains, especially now that France has recently

brought back compulsory environmental set aside, at 3% this year and 5% next year. In turn, they are now putting pressure on other member states to follow suit.

So what do you have to do to help with the Campaign?

- If you are already in ELS, re-new your agreement for a second five years, choosing one or more of the CFE “in field” target options
- If you are not in ELS, join ELS and choose from one or more of the target options
- If you are not able to join ELS, or have land outside of your agreement that is fallow/not cropped, please retain these areas and choose from some of the voluntary CFE management options
- Please complete any survey that asks what you are doing towards the Campaign

Nick Rowsell is chairman of the CFE Group in Hampshire and farms at Crux Easton where the farm is in ELS and HLS. Nick says “I see this as our choice – we can either embrace this opportunity to voluntarily manage our soil & water, farmland birds and wildlife and get paid to do so – or we can have compulsory set-aside, most probably with “attitude”, forced upon us once more. It did not take me long to make the decision to support the campaign!”

For further details go to www.cfeonline.org.uk or contact your local CFE coordinator:

Hampshire – Peter Thompson
peter.thompson@cfeonline.org.uk 07710 344340

Berks, Bucks, Oxon – Laura Francis:
laura.francis@cfeonline.org.uk 07707 352458

FREE farmland bird survey on your farm

As the farmland bird breeding season comes into full swing, this is the best time of year to have a survey carried out to discover more about the birds using your farm.

The Volunteer and Farmer Alliance scheme (V&FA) provides farmers with a free bird survey of up to 80ha of non-wooded farmland, carried out by a trained volunteer during three to four visits from April to July. After the results are collated, you receive a free laminated map showing which bird species were recorded as breeding on the farm and advice on planning future habitat management if you wish to do so. The results can be especially helpful if you are considering entering ELS or HLS. For more details contact Diane or go to: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa/index.aspx>

© Andrew Hughes



Grey partridge on the Trinley Estate, Hampshire Downs, taken by Estate Partner and Farm Manager Andrew Hughes.

Recent studies demonstrate how Environmental Stewardship is helping farmland birds

Studies published earlier this year in the scientific journals *Ibis* and *The Journal of Applied Ecology* have added more weight to the current evidence that providing winter food for farmland birds through Stewardship options really does benefit key species. The paper in *Ibis* reported that greater numbers of wintering birds were found on plots of Environmental Stewardship wild bird seed mixtures than on traditional game cover such as maize. The second study showed that numbers of corn buntings increased markedly on farms in agri-environment schemes with options targeted at this species, in contrast to farms not in any scheme, where numbers continued to rapidly decline. If you would like advice on helping corn bunting and other farmland birds through options such as overwintered stubbles and pollen and nectar mix, contact Diane (see below).



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Corn bunting, one of the farmland birds that benefit from well located Stewardship options



© Diane Nicolle

Nature of Farming Award 2011 - could YOU be this year's winner?

Jon Capes (pictured left with a wild bird seed plot on his farm) manages Hatherden House Farm, a 500 hectare commercially run arable farm near Andover and was the 2010 Nature of Farming Award winner in the South East. The farm is in HLS with around 15% of the cropped land managed for environmental targets including key habitats for farmland birds such as fallow plots for nesting, wild bird seed mix and unharvested headlands.

This year, the RSPB has joined forces with The Telegraph, Plantlife and Butterfly Conservation in the search for the UK's best farms for wildlife in 2011. With a top prize of £1000 the award celebrates the fantastic work for wildlife that farmers like Jon are already doing across the UK .

If you think you might be a contender, enter now online at: <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/natureoffarming/index.aspx> or contact Diane for an entry form.

News and events in the area:

Morning bird ID walks with breakfast provided - FREE events for farmers and their families. Start the day with a refreshing morning walk with local bird experts in the Downs followed by a hearty pub breakfast. Walk at **Hannington, Hampshire on Friday 8th April** and at **West Ilsley, Berkshire on Friday 15th April**. Contact Diane Nicolle (details at the bottom of page) for details and to book.

FWAG Barn Owl Project - if you manage land in the Bourne Valley and would like to be involved in a project to help barn owl survival in the area, please contact either Debbie or Alice at FWAG: 01256 381655

Ridgeway Habitat Islands Project - this project, led by the North Wessex Downs AONB is seeking landowners willing to host chalk scrapes on marginal farmland. These will be planted with chalk grassland plants acting as habitat islands to help expand the range of chalk grassland butterflies. Contact Oliver Cripps: 01488 680457

Weed Control in Environmental Stewardship - free morning events with lunch, run by Natural England. Hampshire - 29th March and Berkshire - 1st April. For details and to book: call 0300 060 1695 email: farmevents@naturalengland.org.uk

Hedgerow plants - Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust has a small pot of money to assist with hedgerow planting and gapping up, primarily in the parish of Kingsclere. For more information contact Amanda Bassett 01256 381186

For free Stewardship advice contact: Diane Nicolle, North Wessex Farmland Bird Advisor Email: diane.nicolle@rspb.org.uk Tel. 01488 680452



a million voices for nature

