# CHALK COUNTRY UPDATE

March 2012

## Stone-curlew update 2011

In 2011 the UK stone-curlew population verged on breaking yet another barrier with the number of confirmed breeding pairs increasing to 397! The number of those pairs confirmed breeding in Wessex was 142, which means that just over a third of the UK's stone-curlews are found in our region. In order to continue increasing the population, each pair needs to produce about 0.7 fledged young per pair each year. Whilst it may be difficult to imagine what 70% of a stone-curlew chick looks like, over a period of years this is the threshold figure for productivity that we, and no doubt the breeding stone-curlews, aspire to. Last year, at least 104 chicks survived to fledge, putting that magic productivity figure at 0.73, and sparking a thick-knees up across the region! The average figure across the last five years is 0.62, so we need to continue monitoring progress for now.


Nick Tomalin – new Wessex Farmland Project Manager

As in previous years, the field team were busy monitoring throughout the breeding season, leaving no stone-curlew unturned in their quest to provide reliable observations on the Wessex population. But with such a wide area to cover and stone-curlew numbers on the up this is no easy task. The population in the core area around Salisbury Plain is doing well, and there have been encouraging signs of range expansion in the peripheral areas too. Some pioneering birds have returned to historic sites in recent years and we hope that they will increase the range of the species over the coming years.

Work with the local landowners has continued, with over 250 specially created plots providing suitable nesting habitat for stone-curlew. These areas are vital to the species, by providing nest sites in areas where the birds would otherwise use cropped fields and could therefore be vulnerable to farming operations. It is this close partnership between the landowners and the RSPB team that has worked so well over the last thirty years to increase the population of stone-curlew in the area. And this includes the MoD, who have continued to manage habitat on Salisbury Plain for the benefit of the species.


The work is hugely intensive, as many nests need to be marked or chicks moved when they are vulnerable to agricultural operations, and all of this requires a lot of man power. It is also a very difficult species to work with, since it is well camouflaged, is active mainly at dawn and dusk, and is easily disturbed. If only they knew the efforts that are being made on their behalf! This work will continue in 2012, with another season of surveying and further habitat management. Fingers crossed that this will see the population surge through the 400 pair mark!

*After five years at the helm of the project, Nick Adams has decided to swap the delights of Wessex for a new post managing the RSPB conservation team in the North-East. Thanks to Nick for guiding the project so well, and we wish him all the best in his new role. Stepping into his sizeable boots will be Nick Tomalin (we like to make it more confusing by having the same name!). Nick will be getting up to speed with the species over the coming months. Good luck to the team!*

**News from RSPB's Wiltshire Reserves 2011...**

Keeley Spate, Reserves Warden

RSPB Wiltshire Reserves enjoyed a fantastic 2011, and what better place to start than with a round up of our successful stone-curlew breeding season. For the first time, all six of the fallow plots were occupied by breeding birds. In fact, plot space was in such high demand, that we even had a 7th pair displaying in the reversion grassland before eventually leaving to nest in a neighbouring farm. Four pairs second brooded, and two of the second nests hatched two chicks each giving a final count of 11 young proven to have fledged. This makes a productivity rate of 1.83 chicks per pair, smashing the target rate of 0.7!

A huge reserve milestone was reached on 3rd October as the final phase of our arable reversion programme was completed when Sheepfold field was sown with brush-harvested wildflower seed. Further to this, we translocated "green hay" from Reservoir & Stoney Furland fields to floristically enhance 14 ha of permanent pasture. The reserve has now got underway an amazing total of **175 ha** of chalk grassland creation, and will be an amazing sight of nodding flowers and buzzing insects once the reversions have become established.

Another turning point on the farm was reached as 50 Romney shearlings and 50 Romney ewes (NZ stock) were bought from Sussex to start the transition of the ewe flock from North Country mules to Romney Marsh ewes. The Romney's are better adapted to grazing on unimproved grass, and as such are ideal for grazing downlands, on which other varieties of sheep would not thrive. They also have the added advantage of being better suited to lamb outside.

We were overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and support offered by local volunteers this year. One work party saw an amazing **22** eager volunteers stepping up for nature and clearing scrub along the disused railway. Once again we were able to monitor butterfly populations across reserves with the help of our dedicated butterfly surveyors who have been committing their time to this for a several years now.

Normanton Down successfully fledged two strapping stone-curlew chicks and 7 lapwing chicks from its two fallow plots. The corvids are an ongoing issue with the near by pig farm attracting very large numbers. The barn had a very active season, producing 4 kestrel chicks, 3 barn owls chicks, and 4 little owl chicks. Hobby nested in the nearby woodland, and there were sightings of Montagu's harrier, hen harrier and peregrine falcon. Two 1.5 hectare areas were sown with wildflower seed to botanically enhance the sward in Stonehenge Top Field.

Suddern Hill had a breeding pair of stone-curlew for the first time since 2003, which nested on the grassland reversion instead of the specially prepared fallow plot, and produced one chick. We also had breeding Lapwing and corn bunting. Keeley and reserve manager Patrick Cashman used 59.5kg of wildflower seed from Salisbury plain and Winterbourne Downs to floristically enhance "Big Field".

Keeley Spate, Reserves Warden Wessex


Stone-curlew chick (Keeley Spate)


Volunteers at work (Keeley Spate)

## Managing Chalk Grassland Reversion for key Butterfly Species at RSPB Winterbourne Downs

Keeley Spate – Reserve Warden

When you think of RSPB Winterbourne Downs, it's probably the large scale chalk grassland reversion program or breeding stone-curlew that spring to mind. But did you know that a significant part of our work involves managing the land to provide habitat for key chalk grassland butterfly species?

The Winterbourne Downs management plan includes some very ambitious and exciting ideas for chalk grassland butterflies. They include providing the larval food plants for Small Blue (*kidney vetch*), Chalk Hill Blue and Adonis blue (*horseshoe vetch*), Brown Argus (*Rock Rose*), Dark Green Fritillary (*Hairy Violet*), Marsh Fritillary (*Devil's bit scabious*) and Duke of Burgundy (*primrose & cowslip*). Some of these larval food plants, such as Kidney vetch, Cowslip, and Devil's-bit Scabious, have come in the seed mix we used on the grassland reversions and are starting to become established within the sward. Other, lower growing plants such as Horseshoe Vetch, Rock Rose and Hairy Violet, do not get picked up in the brush harvesting process which is used to collect seed off Salisbury plain and surrounding Downlands. Therefore, they will need to be planted in plug form once the conditions are right.

In some cases it's not as simple as just providing the right larval food plants. Take the Adonis Blue for example. For this species we will be managing the topography of the newly created chalk grassland. The reserve lacks any natural steep slopes, so we plan to create raised south facing chalk banks and depressions to create suitable habitat for Horse-shoe Vetch, the food plant of the Adonis blue. This butterfly also relies on a mutually beneficial relationship with ants which will protect the butterfly larvae from parasites and other predators in return for the sweet secretions they produce from their "honey" glands. These ants rely on a very short turf and warm soil temperatures in order to colonise an area – conditions that will also be created with the new chalk banks.

So, how is the work going so far? Well, butterfly species have increased from 18 in 2007 to 25 in 2011. These include BAP species Small Blue, Grizzled Skipper and Dingy Skipper, and priority species Dark-green Fritillary. This increase goes hand in hand with the developing chalk grassland reversions and the increase of floristic diversity, and demonstrates how quickly butterflies can respond to the environment. There is much work still to do, but I look forward to seeing what happens with the butterfly populations as the habitat continues to develop and mature.

**If you want to learn more about this work, we are holding a butterfly walk at RSPB Winterbourne Downs on the 15th July!**

Adonis blue (Chris Hill)

Small copper (Sarah Marshall)

Brown hairstreak (Patrick Cashman)

Grassland reversion (Patrick Cashman)

## Fat birds in the barley

**By Sarah Blyth**

In my second year at college I did an ornithology module. My teacher was a bird mad FWAG advisor and he instilled in me a deep seated enthusiasm for the countryside and the birds that dwell there that's never gone away. I landed the perfect job in 2008 when I became the North Wessex Downs Farmland Bird Project Officer.

Based in the glorious rolling downs of North Wiltshire, I spend my days exploring an area that's filled with nationally important populations of farmland birds, including one of my favourite species – the ever elusive fat bird of the barley, the corn bunting. Corn buntings are your typical little brown bird, and they get their nickname from their distinctive stout shape. They're the first bird I listen for when I see a field of rippling barley. I love them because of their quirky song and the dumpy shape they have sat on a post. If you get close enough to one, they have a distinctive diamond shaped patch of darker feathers on their fronts, a bit like they're wearing a medallion; and a much chunkier beak than the other LBJs you'll see on the farm.

In the spring and early summer they're easiest to spot if you look along lines of fence posts on the edges of arable fields or at the scattered bushes across the downs, which they use as song posts. Corn buntings are territorial and will often sing from the same song posts throughout the season. Male corn buntings are polygamous and can often have 3 or 4 females in their territories – when I shared that snippet with my husband he laughed and told me one wife was enough! Corn buntings feed on seeds throughout the year, nest on the ground in crops and feed their chicks on insects. They prefer spring crops to winter crops for nesting habitat, and generally choose to nest in the outer area of the crop. Using stewardship options we can provide a complete suite of habitat for corn buntings, and a whole host of other species.

The most exciting thing about working in the North Wessex Downs for me however isn't the birds I work with. It is the enthusiasm of the farmers I get to meet and work with every day. Without their passion for the countryside and their dedication to provide habitat for farmland birds, the North Wessex Farmland Bird project would never have gotten off the ground. It's been a privilege working with them for the last few years, and I hope that they continue to work for the future of their farmland birds for many years to come.

Corn bunting (© Tom Marshall rspb-images.com)

### North Wessex Farmland Bird Projects.... two become one!

There are currently two separate farmland bird projects operating in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The North Wessex Farmland Bird Project covering the half of the AONB that lies in the South West is part of the South West Farmland Birds Initiative (SWFBI), while the other project of the same name, covers the half of the AONB in the South East, including parts of West Berkshire, north Hampshire and south Oxfordshire. These are now merging to become one project, with the same title and with the whole project part of SWFBI.

Sarah Blyth, North Wessex Farmland Bird Advisor for the current Wiltshire project is leaving to pastures new in Devon and as of April 1st, Diane Nicolle, currently North Wessex Farmland Bird Advisor for the SE project and based in Hungerford, will cover the whole AONB. Diane, who is familiar with Wiltshire from a previous role at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, is looking forward to working in the county again and getting to know farmers in the area. If you farm anywhere in the North Wessex Downs AONB or the immediate vicinity and would like advice on environmental stewardship or other ways of helping the farmland birds on your farm, please get in touch and Diane will be pleased to help.

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