



Above: similar to linnets in size and plumage but with streakier appearance overall, pink rump on the male and a distinctive nasal 'twite' call.

The most recent national survey of twite, in 1999, suggested range contraction in the Northern Isles, Harris, Lewis and inland mainland Scotland and indicated population declines in some parts, such as the Northern Isles. Past declines throughout the UK are thought to result from losses of nesting habitat, through changes in moorland management, an increase in upland afforestation, and reductions in seed food, through agricultural intensification (e.g. grassland improvement, switch from hay to silage, the decline in overwinter stubbles, and growing of root fodder crops), and the loss of saltmarsh winter-feeding habitats.

## WHAT DO TWITES NEED?

### **Moorland, or sea cliffs, with farmland nearby for breeding**

Twites breed on moorland (particularly near the edge) and sea cliffs close to areas of low intensity farmland.

### **Tall ground vegetation for nesting**

The twite nests from May to August, primarily in tall heather, mature bracken, on sea cliffs, and to a lesser extent in moorland grasses, rushes, bushes, small conifer trees, rocks, walls and quarries.

### **An abundance of seeds throughout the year**

The diet of both adults and chicks is comprised almost entirely of weed seeds. In the breeding season, twite feed in unimproved pastures, flower-rich hay and silage fields, cultivated fallows, roadside verges, in rough areas around farms and crofts and to a lesser extent on moorland. The main food plants include dandelion, annual meadow grass, common stork's bill, common sorrel, autumn hawkbit and thistles. In winter, they feed mainly on farmland with weedy fodder root crops (especially

turnips), stubbles, unharvested oilseed rape and around stock feeding stands, but also in coastal habitats such as saltmarsh and on the strandline.

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE TWITES?

### On moorland

#### Nesting habitat

- Maintain heather and ensure there are always some areas of tall heather close to the enclosed in-bye.
- Avoid conversion (by liming, fertilising and re-seeding) to improved grassland.
- Retain patches of bracken on slopes, especially if heather is absent in the area, as twites will nest in the dead litter under these. If control is necessary, then undertake management as late as possible (ideally in September). Avoid burning areas with small bracken stands as this will encourage future abundant growth of bracken, which may then need to be controlled.
- Exclude or reduce along sides of watercourses, and steep or rocky slopes, as this will encourage the growth of longer vegetation for nest sites.

#### Feeding

- Burn small patches of purple moor grass in late winter or early spring as this enables twite to feed on the seed that drops to the ground following burning.

### On in-bye, pasture and marginal ground

#### Feeding

- Maximise broadleaved plants such as dandelions, sorrel and autumn hawkbit in hay and silage fields by reducing fertiliser inputs, avoiding herbicide use and by cutting vegetation at a more mature stage.
- Cut grass fields as late as possible i.e. August, as they are an important source of seed food in late summer.
- Leave a two-metre margin or field corner in hay or silage fields unfertilised or uncut. Ideally, these areas should not be cut or grazed until August.
- Where possible, avoid topping vegetation or delay topping until August.
- Graze pastures at stocking levels that achieve a more diverse sward and permit plants to seed.
- Retain weedy areas along field edges, roadside verges and in rough patches.
- Out-winter stock where possible, as the feeding stands and trampled weedy areas around them are valuable winter feeding areas.

### On arable land

#### Feeding

- Maintain or reintroduce winter fodder crops eg turnips, as the weedy crops and stubbles are valuable foraging areas for twites in winter.
- Wild bird cover containing rape, linseed, kale and other small-seeded plants will attract twites.
- Annual weeds in fallows and the margins of crops provide an important source of seed throughout the summer.

## NESTING HABITAT

- Tall heather and bracken.

## SUMMER FOOD

- Seeds from hay fields, pastures, weedy cultivated ground and rough weedy areas.

## WINTER FOOD

- Seeds from weedy fodder crops, stubbles and wild bird cover.

### See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Arable crops on livestock farms
- Brassica and root fodder crops
- Silage and hay management
- Wild bird cover
- Heather moorland management.
- Moorland grazing
- Bracken management in the uplands.

### Contacts and advice

The best way to help twites on your farm/croft is to walk the ground with an adviser and discuss options for management and funding.

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info)

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK charity that speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.

Front cover picture by Andy Hay ([rsqb-images.com](http://rsqb-images.com))

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

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You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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