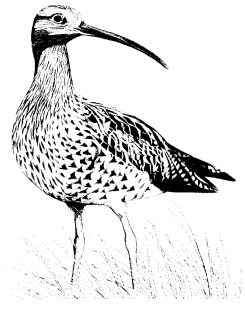


# THE UPPER ONNY WILDLIFE GROUP



## Report 2014

The Group was formed in 2003, to work within the local community to find out more about the local populations of Lapwings, Curlews, Skylarks and other wildlife, and to help in their conservation.

Members all live or work in the area. New members are welcome, and we need new people to help.

We cover a total area of about 125 square kilometres, between the Long Mynd and the Welsh Border (from just north of Bridges, Pennerly and Shelve, as far south as Horderley and Bishops Castle) Most of this area is within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

We have carried out a Breeding Bird Survey each year

since 2004, concentrating on Curlew and Lapwing. Farmers with nests on their land are advised of their presence, and encouraged to take appropriate conservation measures. This includes joining one of Natural England's farm payment schemes, so farmers are rewarded financially for conservation.

We are now working with the Landscape Partnership Scheme Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project to reverse this decline (see page 3)

More recently, we have surveyed several sites for plants and wild flowers, and organised events to involve more people in plant surveys (see back page).

We are also now identifying potential Wildlife Sites.

### Lapwing – Still on the Slippery Slope?

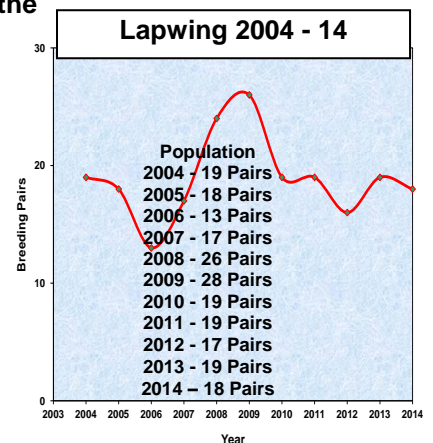


In our first three years 2004 - 06, the breeding population declined from 19 to 13 pairs. If that rate of decline had continued, Lapwings would have disappeared within two years.

We launched a Lapwing Recovery Project, and worked with several individual farmers and Natural England to reverse the decline. We were successful initially, and the population increased to 28 pairs by 2009, but further loss of important habitat led to a further

decline, and by 2010 the population was down again to when we started. It has been stable at 17-19 pairs for the last five years

Lapwings are now restricted to only a few farms, and we are working with the farmers and Natural England to improve habitat and breeding success, to reverse the long-term decline.



### Curlew – Still Disappearing Fast



The bubbling call of Curlews is one of the first signs of spring, and in 2004 we found close to 40 pairs. However, very few young birds fledge, and the older ones are dying off, so now there are less than 30 – more than a quarter (26%) have gone in only ten years.

Nest loss is mainly due to farm management of grassland (field preparation and first silage cut while eggs are on the ground, second silage cut and hay cut often just before chicks fledge), and to predation.

Curlews are declining everywhere, and this area is very important for them – it holds perhaps one-fifth of the Shropshire population.

Curlews inhabit wet grassland, rushy pasture and hay meadows, and we produced a leaflet, *Conserve our Curlews Please* to promote management of these types of farmland to help these iconic birds.

Distribution Maps for Lapwing and Curlew can be found on our website. Rapid and Effective Action is Needed if Lapwing and Curlew are not to Disappear from our Area Forever

## Nest Box Schemes

The Group operates three nest box schemes, for Dippers, Barn Owls and small woodland birds. Breeding success in all three nest box schemes was much better than in 2013, as weather conditions were more favourable

### Barn Owls



The Group has provided special Nest Boxes to Farmers & Landowners with suitable habitat, and 31 have been installed.

In 2013, Barn Owls had their worst breeding season for many years, and none of these boxes were occupied. It will take several years for numbers to recover, but in 2014 at least 3 young fledged.

*Some boxes were not monitored in 2014, so if you would like to help with this, please let us know. Also, if you think you have a suitable site for a box, or if you see a Barn Owl, we'd like to know, please.*

### Small Woodland Birds

We provide up to 10 small nest boxes to people in our area who have a suitable site, and who agree to maintain them, provide us with a report on the birds that use them, and the outcome.

In addition, boxes have been installed at prime locations, including the banks of the East and West Onny. Redstart and Pied Flycatcher chicks in these boxes have been ringed as part of the BTO scheme

By 2014, over 400 boxes had been put up, and seven different species have nested in them. Many are used by Pied Flycatcher (right), a summer visitor from Africa. Robin, Redstart, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Nuthatch have also nested in our boxes.

386 boxes were checked as part of the ringing -141 were occupied, by 48 Pied Flycatchers, 4 Redstarts, 60 Blue Tits, 26 Great Tits and 2 Nuthatch.

Six members reported that 37 Great Tit, 26 Blue Tit, 9 Redstart and 6 Pied Flycatcher chicks fledged from their boxes, plus an unknown number of Nuthatch.



Pied Flycatcher

*If you would like to participate, please let us know.*

### Dippers



Dippers feed almost exclusively on larvae that live on the stony beds of fast flowing streams, and the Upper Onny is one of their strongholds in Shropshire. Some build nests on ledges on bridges, and they take readily to nest boxes. Each box must be located directly above the water, in a position where predators are unable to reach it.

Since 2005, over 50 boxes have been installed, under every bridge.

In 2014, 15 previously used nest sites were visited, and 11 were occupied. Six were successful, and 19 young fledged. Numbers were lower this year because of poor breeding conditions in the previous three years.

Over several years, we have shown that the nest box scheme has increased the population – there are more potential nest sites, and the pairs that nest in boxes produce more fledged young.

This work is part of a wider project, *Dippers in the Teme Catchment*. A report for 2011 – 12 can be found on the website. The 2013-14 Dipper report will be on the website shortly.

## Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS)

The LPS is funded by the Heritage Lottery, and includes most of the Upper Onny area. It involves several partner organisations, and will deliver 15 local heritage, wildlife and education projects up until spring 2018. At the outset we proposed that the LPS should promote the conservation of Ground-nesting Birds, particularly Curlews, and should set up new Community Wildlife Groups to find them, and involve more people in finding and recording all wildlife. This was agreed, and two new groups have been established, to cover plants as well as birds. The LPS also now funds the Upper Onny Wildlife Group. For more information, and see the results and first Annual Reports of the two new Community Wildlife Groups in the Rea Valley and the Camlad Valley, see [www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk](http://www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk)





## Conservation Work

As well as discussing the needs of Lapwing and Curlew with individual farmers, we have been working with Natural England to encourage them to offer Environmental Stewardship Higher Level (HLS) Agreements to farms where our target species breed.

We produced the map showing all the Curlew nesting and foraging areas found since 2004, and asked NE to give priority to HLS applications from farms with land highlighted on the map, if they include options to maintain and improve it for the benefit of Curlews. NE wants to reverse their decline too, so this was agreed.

Chris Hogarth, NE's Shropshire Land Management Team Leader, took the trouble to come to our annual meeting last year to explain how our data was used by NE in selecting and negotiating HLS agreements, and how valuable it was, because the improved targeting based on our data gave NE better value for money.

HLS is now closed for new applications, but existing agreements still have up to 10 years to run. There are 37 holdings with HLS agreements in the Curlew foraging areas, and 31 of these have HLS options in place that specifically safeguard Curlew. The Curlew foraging area is about 3,200ha, of which about 1,700ha is managed under HLS agreements and 950ha of this is covered by options that safeguards Curlew (i.e. 53% of the foraging area is under HLS agreement, and 29% under an option that safeguards Curlew).

Most of the land where Lapwings still breed also benefit from HLS agreements – 14 of the 19 pairs of Lapwing found in 2014 are on such land.

Similarly, HLS pays to maintain habitats for a number of wild flowers and butterflies, and our data has helped these species too.

HLS is being replaced by a new Countryside Stewardship Scheme, as part of the EU Common Agricultural Policy 2014-20. We were consulted on a

draft Targeting Statement for the Shropshire Hills. This proposed helping Curlews as part of a "wader assemblage".

We have found that Curlews nest in hay crops or meadows, rough grazing, or rushy / wet pasture, so this approach will not work here, as Curlews use a different habitat from other waders. Our data was sent to NE, and also passed to RSPB, who used it to put forward a similar case at national level.

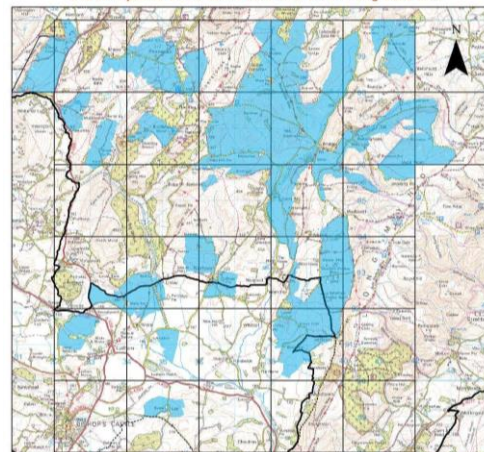
Our results helped make the case for effective Curlew conservation, and it has now been agreed that the new scheme will provide targeted help for Curlews.

Perhaps most importantly, as a result of our proposal that the LPS run a Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project, research will be carried out in 2015 to try to establish the causes of poor breeding success. This involves locating nests and filming the loss of eggs and chicks, to find out the relative importance of agriculture and predation. We will help find the nests.

The LPS will work to engage farmers in this work. Most farmers value the wildlife on their land, and want to help. Almost all the land in our area, and the places where Lapwing and Curlew breed, is farmland. Therefore, if action to reverse the decline is to be successful, farmers need to be actively involved. We hope all farmers will support the project.

### Curlew Territories and Foraging Areas

The areas highlighted in blue enclose all the nest sites and other places where Curlew have been seen feeding since 2004



## Annual Report

This short report summarises the results of the Group's work in 2014. It will be widely distributed in the area. Previous Annual Reports can be found on the website.

## Support

We have the active support of the Landscape Partnership Scheme, AONB Partnership, Natural England, RSPB, National Trust and the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, all of whom have funded our work in the past. The LPS has also funded our work in 2014.

## Website

The Upper Onny Wildlife Group was the first of eight Community Wildlife Groups in the south Shropshire Hills. A website has been set up to promote the work of all these groups.

The Upper Onny Programme, including Bird and Plant walks, and Notice of Events and Meetings, are posted on the website. Please look at it.

[www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk)

## John Muller

John sadly passed away last July. He was the UOWG Chairman ever since the Group's foundation in 2003, and made a major contribution to our work, and development, for more than 10 years.

A letter of condolence has been sent to his wife Brenda, who has also participated in our work.

We miss you, John.

We want to involve more local people. Enthusiasm and interest in wildlife is more important than expertise. Training is provided for anyone that wants it. We have proved that local people can make a difference, and we can do even more with your support. Please help.

## ***Plants and Wild Flowers, and Wildlife Sites***

The Group initially concentrated on Birds, but it has also carried out a considerable amount of survey work on Wild Flowers and plants, and on butterflies. This work has grown, and become increasingly important. A separate Plant Group has been established, to organise and develop this work from 2013 onwards.

### ***Plants & Wild Flowers***



Since 2005, counts have been made of Mountain Pansies on Stapeley Hill and at Rigmores Oak, on The Stiperstones. In 2009 we started recording 16 different species that are indicators of good habitat.

In 2014, with backing from Natural England, we ran six outings and two training days. The area covered included sites in the wider Stiperstones and Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme Project Area. The outings were designed to record the plants at each site, and provide informal training for participants to improve their knowledge and identification skills, and then, if they wish, carry out their own survey work.

#### **The outings covered**

- The basics of mosses and liverworts [bryophytes], led by Dan Wrench. We spent a couple of hours outside collecting specimens which we then learned to key out using hand lenses and microscopes.
- The ancient trees at the Hollies and Brook Vessons, both of which are SWT reserves on the east side of the Stiperstones. The ancient hollies are maybe 400 years old and were once pollarded for winter fodder. Brook Vessons is upland wood pasture with remains of old smallholdings and has possibly the largest Rowan tree in the country and some very large crab apples and birch trees.
- The identification of grasses around the Bog area, a very informative training day led by Kate Thorne.
- A day visit to Shelve Pool SSSI (our second) with its fascinating variety of habitats. The highlight was walking out on the pontoon and standing by the water's edge looking back at the succession from open water to woodland. The many interesting plants included marsh cinquefoil and Dyers greenweed
- A visit with the knowledgeable owner to their rich grassland and hay meadows, over the border into Wales. We were given an extensive species list and an account of its history. We finished off seeing pepper saxifrage, a rare yellowish umbellifer which only grows at 2 locations in Montgomeryshire.
- A day visit to Hope common and Venus Bank SSSI. Hope Common is a varied area of meadows, woodland and steep dingles. Although hard grazed there were still some good areas particularly of Devils Bit scabious and betony. Venus Bank SSSI, a warm south facing bank, was a riot of colour. Of particular note was the bright purple sward of betony, Dyers greenweed, and common spotted and twayblade orchids.
- Norbury Hill, an important site for the small Pearl bordered fritillary butterfly. We found plenty of the caterpillars' food plant, the marsh violet, a profusion of large orb spiders and a golden ring dragonfly, an upland speciality. Following the stream down we saw stands of bottle sedge and marsh cinquefoil.
- Our final outing was a fungi foray led by Jo Weightman of the Hereford Fungi Group. In the morning we walked in the woods around Snailbeach. October had been extremely dry and not a good month for fungi but Jo managed to instil enthusiasm for even the smallest, duller looking specimen! In the afternoon we visited the wax cap meadows at Rigmores oak, the highlight being the unusual pink or ballerina wax cap.

### ***County Wildlife Sites***

In addition to the above outings the Shropshire Wildlife Trust arranged for the Plant Group to monitor 6 County Wildlife Sites and 3 potential CWS of which 2 subsequently became CWS

All the sites were surveyed and

- The different habitats were mapped (with reference to plant communities where possible)
- The condition of each habitat was assessed
- A full plant list was produced
- Other species of interest were noted
- A photographic record was made.



Bird Walks and Plant Outings were organised in 2014, to introduce new people to the fascinating wildlife of our spectacular area. More will be organised in 2015. All welcome.

If you want any further information about these events, or about the Group, or a copy of the Group's previous Annual Report, look on the website [www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk)

You can contact us, or join, through the website or via the Membership Secretary, Pat Holbourn-Williams, Always, The Smithy, Picklescott, nr Church Stretton SY6 6NR  
01694 751491 [patolbourn@hotmail.com](mailto:patolbourn@hotmail.com)