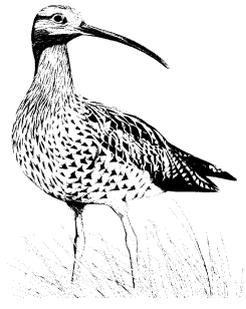




THE UPPER ONNY WILDLIFE GROUP



Report 2015

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, Pennerley 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 (LPS) Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project to reverse this decline, and we have launched an Appeal to raise funds to monitor nests and chicks, to find out the reasons why there are so few young (see page 3).

We have carried out plant surveys, and we are identifying potential Wildlife Sites. Events are held to involve more people in all our work (see back page). New in 2015 is a project to clear invasive species.

Curlew – Disappearing Even Faster



The bubbling call of Curlews is one of the first welcome 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 only around 25 –

more than one third (34%) have gone in only 11 years. The decline appears to have speeded up. Until 2014 it averaged a pair a year, but in 2015, 3 - 4 pairs disappeared.

Curlews are declining everywhere, and they have just been added to the Red List, but our area is still very important for them – it holds perhaps one-quarter of the Shropshire population. Here they inhabit wet grassland, rushy pasture hay meadows, and hay and silage crops. We have worked closely with the LPS Project, and our survey results identified the areas where Curlews nest, and helped it to find 12 nests.

Although land management has played a part in the decline, in 2015 all the nests that were monitored were predated. 2015 was not typical, and monitoring of many more nests is needed before an Action Plan can be developed to reverse the decline.

We have launched an Appeal to help fund the further necessary research work. Please Contribute

Lapwing – Still on the Slippery Slope?



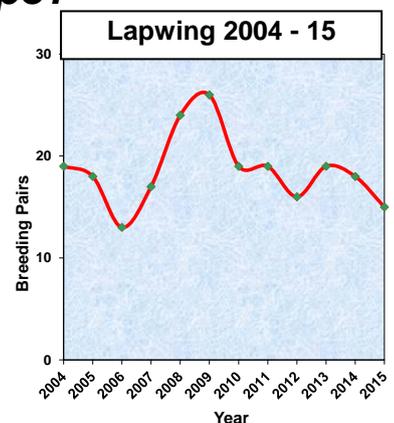
In our first three years 2004 - 06, the breeding population declined from 19 to 13 pairs. If that rate of decline had continued, Lapwings would have been lost within two years.

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 26 pairs by 2009, but loss of important habitat on a single farm led to a further decline, and by 2010 the

population was down again to when we started. It had been stable at 17-19 pairs for five years, but two more pairs were lost in 2015.

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.



Distribution Maps for Lapwing and Curlew can be found on our website. Rapid and Effective Action is Needed if they are not to Disappear 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 in 2014 than in 2013, as weather conditions were more favourable, and the improvement continued in 2015.

Barn Owls



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

In 2013, Barn Owls had their worst breeding season for many years, and none of these boxes were occupied. Although it will take several years for a full recovery, it has begun, and in 2014 at least 3 young fledged, and four boxes were occupied in 2015.

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 2015, over 400 boxes had been put up, and nine different species have nested in them. Pied Flycatcher (right), a summer visitor from Africa, occupied 30 boxes in 2015, and 28 adults and 131 chicks were ringed. Robin, Redstart, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Nuthatch have also nested in our boxes, and, for the first time in 2015, Swallow and Grey Wagtail.



Three members reported on 43 nest boxes, from which 34 Great Tit, 23 Blue Tit, and an unknown number of Nuthatch chicks fledged. No other species were recorded.

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 most bridges.

In 2015, 25 previously used nest sites were visited, 19 were occupied, and eggs were laid in 16 nests. Eight were successful, and 28 young were ringed and almost certainly fledged. After poor breeding conditions in the previous three years, numbers were better in 2014 and 2015.

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 2013-15 Dipper report will be on the website later in 2016.

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. The two new Community Wildlife Groups, covering the Rea Valley and the Camlad Valley, have now been operational for two years. To see their results, and for more information, visit www.stipsterstonesandcorndon.co.uk



Conservation Work

Curlews



Our 2014 report highlighted our work with individual farmers, and with Natural England, to try and ensure that the best Lapwing and Curlew habitats were included in

Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme (HLS) Agreements, so farmers receive payments to manage their land sympathetically.

HLS has now been 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. We passed our survey results on nesting habitats to NE, which was crucial in making the case for effective Curlew conservation, and it has now been agreed that the new scheme will provide targeted help for Curlews.

However, a greater understanding is needed of the reasons why the population continues to fall. At the outset, we proposed that the LPS should run a Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project, and in 2015 it carried out research to try to establish the causes of poor breeding success, by locating nests, monitoring them with cameras, and radio-tagging chicks.

The LPS has engaged farmers in this work, initially for permission for monitoring on their land. Almost all value the Curlews, and want to help. If action to reverse the decline is to be successful, farmers need to be actively involved, and we welcome their support.

Our survey results were a big help in locating nests. Of the 12 nests found (9 in our area), nine were lost at the egg stage, but none of the three broods of young survived either. Predation accounted for all failures, with foxes almost certainly accounting for more than half. In total the three CWGs found 36-39 pairs of Curlew, but found no evidence that any young fledged. An LPS summary report and a full nest monitoring report are available on the LPS and UOWG websites.

We need monitoring results from many more nests in the next two years, and UOWG has launched an Appeal to help raise funds for this crucial work

Invasive Species

Himalayan balsam and Japanese Knotweed are non-native invasive plants that are colonising many rivers and streams. The Group secured funding from the AONB Conservation Fund, LPS and Natural England for a two stage project: find if and where it occurs along the Onny upstream from the confluence at Eaton to Bridges on the East Onny and Onny Cottage on the West Onny, and then eradicate it where possible.

When approached, all landowners were sympathetic, and some had already been controlling the balsam themselves.

Initial spot checks found that the East Onny was free of Himalayan balsam whereas it was found right at the top of the West Onny just over the border into Wales at White Grit, and also in a tributary near the Bog. Considerable quantities were also found along the Crifftin Brook. Widespread publicity, together with a press release and an article in the local deanery magazine, produced several responses with useful information.

Volunteers were recruited to help with clearance, through the LPS, NE and more publicity. Ten people helped, resulting in a total of 26 volunteer man days.



Japanese knotweed was only located in a few places. A flyer was produced for landowners on both species and how to control them.

The problem could be kept under control here with a reasonable input of time and money, unlike other river systems where it is totally out of control. The Group's project will continue in 2016.

A full report can be found on the website.

Annual Report

This short report summarises the results of the Group's work in 2015. 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 2015.

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

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.



Marsh lousewort, seen on the Stiperstones outing

Plants & Wild Flowers

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

A series of outings and training days started in 2014, with backing from Natural England. Some sites were in the wider LPS 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. This continued with 11 outings in 2015:-

- A successful start to the year with a well-attended meeting lead by Dan Wrench teaching the basics of mosses and liverworts [bryophytes] on the lower slopes of the Stiperstones, identifying and collecting specimens then keying them out using lenses and microscopes.
- Veteran tree day near Churchstoke, measuring and recording old and very large oaks. 8 people present.
- The ancient trees at Brook Vessons, an SWT reserve on the east side of the Stiperstones, with possibly the largest Rowan tree in the country and some very large crab apple and birch trees. 9 present
- Montgomery Wildlife Trust reserve and SSSI at Roundton Hill. Much of this border region has a base rich volcanic rock which gives rise to a particular flora. This is the only place that some occur in Montgomeryshire. Early in the year there are tiny plants including rarities such as Early forget me not and lesser cudweed. 10 present
- Brithdir Farm, a species rich SSSI with giant horsetail and the unusual pepper saxifrage. 9 present
- Willow Farm and Camlad Apiary, to learn about the conservation of the English honey bee and see inside the hives, then explore the adjacent valley, where good flushes hold 8 species of sedge, marsh arrow grass and marsh valerian. 7 present
- Ritton Castle and Bog. The castle is the site of an iron age/medieval fort which has recently been cleared of trees and the bog is a species rich area in the valley bottom. 8 present
- White Grit Meadows. Two adjacent species-rich SSSI's, a haymeadow, with an abundance of Greater Burnet, and a series of meadows managed by grazing with an abundance of Dyers greenweed. 12 present
- Hope Valley Meadows SSSI, a species rich bank which looked remarkably colourful with the purple of betony and yellow Dyers greenweed and St Johns Wort. 5 present
- Gatten marsh. Wet flushes and marsh on the east side of the Stiperstones, with marsh lousewort and smooth stalked sedge. 7 present
- Fungi Foray at Snailbeech. A very large turnout of 30+ people of all ages and led by Jo Weightman. We were also joined by several knowledgeable members of Shropshire fungi group. Considering how dry it had been it was very good with a total of 52 species recorded.

Verge survey.

A few tetrads were surveyed, and more will be done in 2016

County Wildlife Sites

In addition the Shropshire Wildlife Trust arranged for the group to monitor 6 Wildlife Sites and 3 potential Wildlife Sites. These outings had a lower attendance rate as they were only advertised to group members, but some were interested in this specialist work. The sites, mostly in good condition, included wetland, grassland and woodland. At each site:-

- The different habitats and plant communities were mapped
- The condition of each habitat was assessed
- A full plant list was produced
- Other species of interest were noted
- A photographic record was made.



Petty whin, found on Stapeley Common Wildlife Site

Bird Walks and Plant Outings were organised in 2015, to introduce new people to the fascinating wildlife of our spectacular area. More will be organised in 2016. All welcome.

If you want any further information about these events, or about the Group, or a copy of the Group's previous Annual Reports, look on the website 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
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