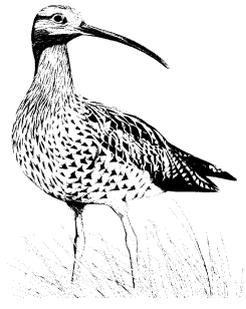




# THE UPPER ONNY WILDLIFE GROUP



## Report 2017

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 have been 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 provided the Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project with Curlew distribution maps from our surveys, to help them to find and protect nests, to discover the causes of this decline, and try and reverse it.

We have carried out plant surveys, and we are identifying potential Wildlife Sites. Events are held to involve more people in this work (see back page). The project to clear invasive species continued in 2017.



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 26 – a loss of one more since last year.

Almost one third (32%) have gone in only 13 years. As we think no young fledged in 2015 or 2016, the decline is expected to continue.

## Curlew – Still Disappearing Fast

Curlews are declining everywhere, and they were added to the *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in 2015*, but our area is still very important for them – it holds perhaps one-fifth of the Shropshire population. Here they inhabit wet grassland, rushy pasture, hay meadows, and hay and silage crops.

Although land management has played a part in the long-term decline, the LPS project has shown that predation is the biggest problem now, and protection and monitoring of many more nests is needed before an Action Plan can be developed to reverse the decline. (see Curlew projects on page 3).



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.

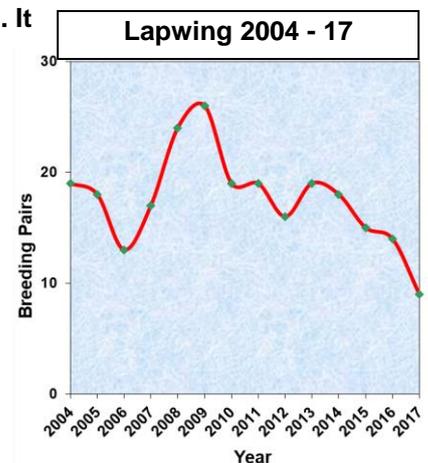
We launched a Lapwing Recovery Project, and worked with several individual farmers and Natural England to reverse the decline. We were successful initially, and the

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

## Lapwing – Still on the Slippery Slope?

to when we started. It had been stable at 17-19 pairs for five years, but two more pairs were lost in 2015, and another in 2016. The 9 pairs found in 2017 was the lowest since 2004.

Lapwings are now restricted to only four 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 and population trends for Lapwing and Curlew are 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, 2016 and 2017.

### 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, but a slow recovery started, and in 2014 at least 3 young fledged, four boxes were occupied in 2015, and 2016 was better still: 25 boxes were checked, 6 were occupied, 5 were successful, and 15 young and a pair of adults were ringed. In 2017, again 25 boxes checked, and 5 were occupied. Of the 18 chicks, 16 survived until ringing and fledging, a very high proportion compared to normal, and the number of fledged young was the highest for many years.

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. Well over 300 have been provided, but many have been incorporated into the monitoring scheme at prime locations, described below. Otherwise, four members reported on 50 nest boxes. Occupancy rate was low, and 14 were used for nesting: six by Great Tit, five by Blue Tit, two by House Sparrows and one by Redstart. Minimum number of chicks were: Great Tit 36, House Sparrow 7 and Blue Tit 5, but the number that fledged is unknown. No other species were recorded.

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 2016, 465 boxes had been put up, and nine species have nested in them altogether. In 2017, 434 were checked and 30% were occupied, and Pied Flycatcher (right), a summer visitor from Africa, occupied 46 boxes (the highest since 48 in 2014), just over 10%, and 184 chicks were ringed, rather less than in 2016, indicating a poor year for chick survival. 20 adults were also ringed for the first time, and 30 others had already been ringed in previous years, at different sites (8) or the same site (22). Redstarts occupied 4 boxes, and 3 adults and 15 chicks were ringed. Another adult ringed in a previous year was re-caught. Great Tit (21), Blue Tit (38) and Nuthatch (5) also nested in these boxes.



Pied Flycatcher

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



Dipper

### 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.

Upstream from Horderley, in 2017, 22 sites were checked, 15 sites were occupied, and 12 of the nests were in boxes/pipes. There were 10 broods (totalling 34 young), 31 of which were ringed. Totals were almost the same as in 2016, which had better conditions, and more ledged young, than for many 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*.

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.

## **Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS)**

The LPS has been funded by the Heritage Lottery, and includes most of the Upper Onny area. It involves several partner organisations, and has delivered 15 local heritage, wildlife and education projects. It finishes at the end of March 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 recording all wildlife. This was agreed, and two new groups have since been established by a successful project, to cover plants as well as birds. The LPS has also funded the Upper Onny Wildlife Group, and we gratefully acknowledge this support.

The two new Community Wildlife Groups, covering the Rea Valley and the Camlad Valley, have been operational since 2014. For their results, and more information, visit [www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk](http://www.stiperstonesandcorndon.co.uk)

These groups have now joined the Community Wildlife Groups website, [www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk)



The Ground-nesting Birds project has done excellent work in gaining the support of farmers and landowners, monitoring nests to identify the causes of poor breeding success, and protecting them against predation, particularly by foxes. Fundraising, supported by UOWG, allowed the original project plan to be accelerated, and it has achieved far more than we originally hoped. Unfortunately, UOWG has been effectively excluded from the project, and has had no involvement in planning the successor project.

Its work is going to continue as "Curlew Country" in 2018, as part of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. UOWG welcomes the commitment to continue with the Curlew nest monitoring and protection. However, the governance arrangements for, and policy of, "Curlew Country" are not yet clear. The future relationship between UOWG and Curlew Country remains to be clarified.

## **SWT / SOS "Save our Curlews" Campaign**

Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) have launched a "Save our Curlews" Campaign, funded by an appeal. The campaign is overseen by a "Shropshire Curlews Group", which includes the Community Wildlife Groups (including UOWG), Natural England, National Trust and RSPB. Curlew Country have said they do not want to be involved in this Group, which therefore intends to start nest finding and protection in two other Community Wildlife Group areas, Upper Clun and Clee Hill.

Further information can be found on the SOS website [www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/](http://www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/)

UOWG launched a Curlew appeal to support 'finding and monitoring nests, protecting them, and fitting chicks with radio tags, to gain scientific evidence of the reasons for their decline'. Curlew Country has already raised the funds for this work in its own area, so the UOWG Committee has agreed to donate its Appeal funds (about £5,000) to the SWT/SOS Appeal.

---

## **Invasive Plant Species**

Himalayan balsam and Japanese Knotweed are non-native invasive plants that are colonising many rivers and streams. The Group secured funding for a third year from the AONB Conservation Fund, LPS and Natural England, and, in 2017, from Severn Rivers Trust, for a project to find where they occur along the Onny upstream from the confluence at Eaton, and then eradicate them where possible.

Himalayan balsam was found right at the top of the West Onny just into Wales at White Grit, in a tributary near the Bog, and there were large amounts along the Crifin Brook. Eradicating it, by pulling it up wherever possible, has been the major part of the project.

In 2017, 12 volunteers were recruited to help with clearance, contributing 23 volunteer days.

Japanese knotweed was only located in a few places.

When approached, all landowners were sympathetic, and some had already been controlling the balsam. A flyer was produced for landowners about both species and how to control them.

The problem is being kept under control here with a reasonable input of time and money, unlike other river systems where it is totally out of control. The project will hopefully continue in 2018. A full report can be found on the website.

---

## **Annual Report**

This short report summarises the results of our work in 2017. It will be widely distributed in the area. Previous 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 funded the Group 2014-17.

---

## **Website**

UOWG 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.

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

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

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

UOWG initially concentrated on Birds, but it has also carried out a considerable amount of survey work on Wild Flowers and plants. A separate Plant Group was established in 2013, to organise and develop this work. When the LPS started promoting Community Wildlife Groups (CWGs) in the Rea and Camlad Valley areas in 2015, we decided to run the three CWG plant groups together, and this was continued in 2016 and 2017.

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

A series of outings and training days started in 2014, with backing from Natural England. Several visits were made to sites 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. There were 12 events and outings in 2017. There is a full account on the website.

We will also continue looking for unimproved meadows and working with the Marches Meadow Group.

### ***Roadside Verges Surveys***

These surveys started in 2015, and continued again last year. In 2017 we modified and simplified the survey form, and volunteers were provided with it and a tetrad map (4 square kilometres). The majority of tetrads have now been surveyed, and 20 people have taken part. Approximately 170 kilometres of verges in the Upper Onny area, 130 km in the Rea Valley area and 80 km in the Camlad Valley area have been completed.

This information has now gone onto the Shropshire Council GIS data base. Hopefully the remaining species rich verges will be managed in a more sympathetic way by Shropshire Council, with the help of local Parish Councils (some of whom have already expressed interest). We hope Powys Council will do the same

A new project, 'Life on the Edge', has emerged from this work. It was instigated by Myndtown Combined Parish Council and is centred around Norbury, Wentnor and Ratlinghope.

We will continue looking for and surveying unimproved meadows and other sites in 2018 and working with the Marches Meadow group.



Petty Whin, found at Shelve Pool SSSI



Marsh violet, the food plant of the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary Butterfly

### ***Recording for the Shropshire Wildlife Trust***

In addition to the above outings and surveys Shropshire Wildlife Trust arranged for the group to monitor several Local Wildlife Sites and potential Wildlife Sites. At each site:-

- 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, and a photographic record was made.

We visited wetland, grassland and woodland sites and mostly they were in good condition.

Many thanks to everybody that came on the outings and especially to those who contributed as surveyors, tutors, owners and managers of the sites we visited.

Sites that we visited on the Welsh side of the border had records sent to the Montgomery Flora and MWT. Fungi records went to the Shropshire Fungi Group.

Many of the people involved have also helped with surveys for Caring for God's Acre of churchyards and burial grounds in Norbury, Wentnor, More, Ratlinghope, and Shelve

A more detailed report can be found on the website.

Bird Walks and Plant Outings were organised in 2017, to introduce new people to the fascinating wildlife of our spectacular area. More will be organised in 2018. 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](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk)

You can contact us, or join, through the website or via the Secretary,  
Alyson Small, Hill Cottage, The Bog, Minsterley, SY5 0NL  
01743 791476 [alyflo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:alyflo@yahoo.co.uk)