

UPPER CLUN COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

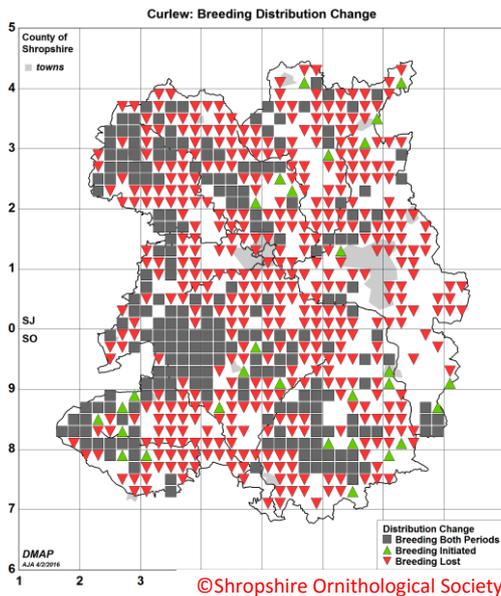
2015 ANNUAL REPORT SUMMARY

CURLEWS ON RED ALERT



Curlew © Paul Hillion

If you thought our Curlew conservation work was important, think again - it's more than that, it's absolutely vital for the future of the species. Curlew has been identified as 'the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK' (Brown *et al.* 2015), and was added to the Red List of birds under serious threat in December last year. This is bad news, and not just for us: the UK holds an estimated 19-27% of the entire global population; in Europe, only Russia and Finland support more breeding Curlews.



A Clun Forest without Curlews doesn't bear thinking about, but there's more to it than that. Curlew is considered 'an indicator of the decline in both extent and quality of...semi-natural habitats, including upland grassland and moorland' (*op cit*). In other words, we shouldn't be concerned about Curlew only for its own sake, but because its plight is sending us an important message: a landscape where Curlews are struggling is one where many other species, plant, insect and animal, are struggling too.

Take a look at the shockingly graphic map on the left. It shows the change in the number of squares in the county that held Curlew in the 25 years since the last Shropshire Atlas. Blank areas are where Curlew had already been lost; black squares show where it's still at least potentially breeding; the few green 'up' arrows where it was found this time but not previously, and the host of red 'down' arrows where it was before, but has disappeared.

The numbers are hardly necessary, but in case you were wondering, Curlew's range has contracted by 47%; it was found across three-quarters of the county by area in 1990, but in less than a third today. In fact, even that probably overstates the current population, since some pairs recorded in the earlier years of fieldwork, and therefore represented on the map, for example the Clun pair in our area, have since disappeared.

Can we do anything about this? Yes we can! When Natural England was shown the data we've collected over the years, it said it was 'fantastic evidence, just the sort of information we can utilize'. Everything we can find out about the whereabouts, breeding success and habitat use of local Curlews helps to make their case to those in a position of influence, and suggests what interventions might set them on the road to recovery.

Let's not give way to despair, but treat this as a wake-up call to go out and do what we can to stop the rot

SURVEY SEASON 2015 - ON THE WING

*After a bit of a dip in the last few years, Red Kites in the Upper Clun raised 3 chicks
In spite of unsettled weather, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were found at more sites*

THE BIRD GROUP

The Bird Group continued to monitor the Curlew population, using a combination of surveyors and resident recorders, at the same time collecting further records of other target species. We monitored Red Kite nests and Barn Owl boxes*. The Nestbox Scheme recorded nests of small woodland species, with some data submitted to the BTO Nest Record Scheme. We contributed to the forthcoming book *The Birds of Shropshire*, and sent records to the County Bird Recorder.

**All monitoring of Red Kite and Barn Owl is carried out under licence*

- we received only one record of Lapwing, 6 birds in late March, almost certainly passing through
- 9 – 12 Curlew pairs improved on last year's low point, but there were several failures; no more than 3 or 4 pairs are believed to have produced hatched young; it's not known whether any fledged
- Red Kite occupied 5 sites in the Upper Clun; two nests were successful, producing 3 young in total
- a Barn Owl pair nested at the site used successfully last year and fledged 4 young
- 27 potential Dipper nest sites were monitored, and 18 active nests found, all but five in boxes
- average occupancy at nest box schemes was 64%, even higher than last year's 57%; the first laying date dropped back 11 days to 27th April; occupants included Pied Flycatcher, Nuthatch & Marsh Tit
- Kestrel, Yellow Wagtail, Goosander and Mandarin Duck were among birds breeding locally

THE PLANT GROUP

The Plant Group's core of skilled volunteers continued its surveys of existing and potential Local Wildlife Sites, with a focus on habitats containing rush pasture and purple moorgrass, as well as species-rich and acid grassland. Expert training was provided by Shropshire Wildlife Trust, who also supported surveys with maps, survey cards & landowner information. Twelve Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) in the Upper Clun, and others in the Teme catchment, were surveyed, habitats mapped, site conditions assessed and plant lists compiled.

- altogether eight people participated, conducting full surveys of 6 LWS, and a further 6 sites identified as of ecological importance, 5 of which are now under consideration as LWS
- once again, around 100 different axiophytes, plants indicative of habitat quality, were recorded
- four prospective LWS, two of them in the Upper Clun, were adopted during 2015
- virtually all the 45 LWS in the Upper Clun have now been surveyed; 71% are in a reasonably good condition, higher than the county average
- since UCCWG began in 2007, 22 extensions or completely new LWS have been adopted
- species of particular interest included Ivy-leaved Bellflower, Northern Marsh-orchid, Intermediate Lady's-mantle, Smooth-stalked Sedge, Corn Spurrey, Hare's-tail Cottongrass & Sheep's-bit Scabious

THE BUTTERFLY GROUP

Nineteen surveys covering 13 sites were carried out between late May and mid-July, principally by Dennis Twist. Although numbers were low, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary was found at more sites than last year.

- SPBF was recorded at Barretts West, a regionally-important site, on three dates in June and July; the maximum was 11 on June 12th, compared with 37 in 2014
- SPBF was recorded at seven other sites, including 7 at Pant-y-Lidan and 6 at Ditch Dingle
- two Dark Green Fritillaries were seen at Pant-y-Lidan, and a probable two more at Three Gates

WHO DID WHAT...

UCCWG members come from every corner of the Upper Clun, and there's a steady flow of new members as people move into the area. There are around 220 'official' members, already a good proportion of the total population, but local people who are not formal members of the group also contribute valuable information. This has enabled us to amass an extensive and detailed record of local wildlife over eight years of survey work.

Forty-five people altogether participated in fieldwork this year – an impressive total in a sparsely-populated area. Thirty-five contributed bird records, as surveyors, resident recorders, nest box hosts, or by passing on casual sightings. Eight botanists, and two dedicated butterfly specialists, spent many hours on concentrated surveys of important sites.

Another group whose support should be acknowledged is the many farmers and other landowners who allow us access to their land, and without whose co-operation our work would be very much the poorer. Some of them also figure among the survey contributors above, often reaching parts that the rest of us don't!

...BECAUSE ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

The backbone of our group is the survey fieldwork, the members who turn out in all weathers, going the extra mile or staying the extra hour to make that last, vital observation. No-one should be put off joining in because they feel they don't know enough: knowledge can be acquired, and never more easily than at the present time, with all the digital resources literally at our fingertips. Far more important are the personal qualities that make a good naturalist - curiosity and persistence. If you've got these, come and give them a good workout.

Habitat restoration can be a slow process, but we're making significant progress. In 2015 and over the winter work parties, mostly members of the Plant and Butterfly groups, sometimes with the assistance of contractors or farmers, cleared scrub to restore species-rich grassland at Cwm Ffrydd and the Hergan. Scrapes to attract waders and a range of plant and invertebrate species have been dug at Knuck Bank and Black Mountain, where a recent record of eight Snipe (and probably more hidden) near the scrape suggests it's beginning to do its job.

Less strenuous events included a botanical walk at Fron Wood in March, and a food and fungus foray in the autumn, plus of course our annual Public Meeting at Newcastle in November, complete with tea and cake supplied by the local WI. This year it featured a presentation on the work of the Severn Rivers Trust, which is running the Heritage Lottery-funded project in the Teme catchment, of which the Clun forms part.

...AND GIVE US A VOICE IN EUROPE

The Birds and Habitats Directives, which protect wild birds, their habitats, nests and eggs, are the bedrock of European conservation legislation. In 2015 a review threatened to weaken them in response to pressure in some quarters to reduce the burden of 'red tape' on business. A consultation set up by the EU drew howls of protest from conservationists in every corner of Europe: a record 520,000 respondents, individuals, small local groups (that's us!), national conservation bodies like the RSPB and international ones like BirdLife, even some large companies, told the European Parliament in no uncertain terms that far from watering down the legislation, it needed to be strengthened and more effectively implemented.

We made a submission, using our survey data to demonstrate the continuing need for every possible scrap of protection for our local wildlife, pointing out that even with the directives in place we've lost breeding Lapwing, and may yet lose Curlew. And what do you know? it worked: the weight of public opinion was so overwhelming that the environment ministers from every country in the EU voted unanimously in support of the Nature Directives. Of course that doesn't mean we can all relax and forget about it: to adapt an old saying, the price of a healthy environment is constant vigilance, because you never know where the next threat's coming from, or what big guns may support it. So we need to stay tuned in to what's happening to the wildlife on our doorstep, and collect all the data we can so that we have the ammunition to hand next time someone decides that caring for the natural world is a luxury we can't afford.

MAKING HISTORY IN THE CLUN VALLEY

When we highlighted Pine Marten in last year's report summary, we had no idea how soon it would be found in Shropshire. Dave Pearce's spectacular photographic record of a Pine Marten in the Clun Valley, the first conclusive evidence of its presence in England for over a century, made headlines in the national media and attracted world-wide attention.

Shropshire Mammal Group is now following up the sighting, using camera traps and surveying scats to find out how many Pine Martens are about. At least two individuals have been identified, and it's clear that the original animal was not just passing through.



Pine Marten © Dave Pearce

This is the most exciting development in years, and more volunteers are needed to join in the research. If you'd like to help, contact Rob Harris on 01588 640234 or email wilksharris@hotmail.com



©John Lightfoot

BARN OWLS ON THE UP?

Let's finish with some good news: just as Curlew is Red-listed, Barn Owl has rejoined the Green List. That's not to say it's doing well everywhere, and the Upper Clun is unfortunately one of the areas where it reached a very low ebb in the last few years. However, thanks to the weather and an excellent supply of voles, the breeding season of 2014 revived the local population, and produced lots of young elsewhere which may come our way.

And bang on cue, we're beginning to see one or two Barn Owls turning up at local spots where they hadn't been seen for a while. We need your help to find out where the owls are, and whether this is a genuine recovery. Please keep your eyes open, and report all sightings (or hearings - the screech is pretty distinctive, and you can listen to it on the Barn Owl page on the RSPB website to get your ear in). If you know of anyone else who's seen one, please encourage them to do the same. It'll be a while before we can consider Barn Owl secure enough to 'green list' around here, but it's a good start.

***Please send all Barn Owls records, with date and place, to Michelle Frater
email (preferred) michellefrater@outlook.com tel 01588 640909***

***FOR ALL THE LATEST ON THE WILDLIFE GROUP, DON'T FORGET TO CHECK OUR WEBSITE
REGULARLY AT www.shropscwgs.org.uk***

***You'll find details of the UCCWG committee, endorsed by the Public Meeting,
and the full Annual Report 2015 is available to view or download***