Upper Clun

Community Wildlife Group

Report 2019

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INTRODUCTION

The *Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group* was formed in 2007, following extensive promotion and development work in the area initiated by 'Down to Earth in the Clun Forest' as part of the Shropshire Hills AONB's Blue Remembered Hills Project. This process was described in the Group's 2007 report. The first Annual Public Meeting in November 2007 agreed the Aims and Objectives, and its area of operation, and elected a Committee.

The Group aims to contribute to local knowledge and conservation of popular "flagship" wildlife species, by undertaking surveys to establish their status, and promoting conservation by working with farmers and landowners to safeguard and increase important habitats. It complements but does not duplicate the work of either *Land, Life and Livelihoods,* or the Clun and Bishop's Castle branch of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT). We have worked closely with both groups, which have in turn actively supported the Wildlife Group.

The Group has carried out Bird and Plant surveys each year since 2007, and Butterfly surveys since 2010. Well over 100 different people have been involved in these surveys. This Report presents the results for the current year, and updates our knowledge of wildlife in the area.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The Group will

- Undertake survey work to establish the status of key bird, plant and butterfly species and habitats
- Encourage and enhance local interest in wildlife
- Actively promote conservation.

AREA & MEMBERSHIP

The Group covers the catchment area of the River Clun west of Clun, including the River Unk and the Folly Brook, plus the part of the Bettws-y-Crwyn parish that is outside the River Clun catchment area. It includes the whole of the parishes of Newcastle, Bettws-y-Crwyn & Mainstone, and parts of the parishes of Clun, Colebatch and Llanfair Waterdine.

The Group is open to anyone who lives or works in the area, and who wants to actively contribute to local knowledge and conservation. It is for everyone in the community, not just experts. Interest in the area, and enthusiasm, are far more important than detailed knowledge. The target birds and plants are important and easy to recognise and search for. Initial training on identification and simple survey methods, and regular support and advice, is provided, so members learn a lot, and the work is very enjoyable.

The mailing list has grown each year, and now includes over 220 local people at more than 170 addresses, plus representatives of various organisations.

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The Role of the Committee is to

- Organise survey work
- Involve more local people
- Work with local people and other groups to develop a policy for conservation action
- Seek to influence other organisations
- Obtain and manage funds to continue existing work and develop new projects.

The membership, and details of meetings in 2019, are set out in the Annexe to the Report.

PUBLICITY

To help recruit and involve new members, the Group's activities have been well publicised in the area, through posters and press releases, and articles in the *Clun Chronicle.* The annual public meeting is well advertised, a recruiting leaflet is available in community centres and elsewhere, a

display is put up at the Newcastle Show, and occasional Bird, Plant and Butterfly events have been organised.

WEBSITE

There is a website for all the Community Wildlife Groups, with separate pages for the Upper Clun Group www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk. Future events and news will be listed. Members are requested to check the website periodically, particularly before events.

FACEBOOK GROUP

UCCWG now has a Facebook group. Log into Facebook and then in the search bar, (with the magnifying glass icon), start typing the name of the group, i.e. 'Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group, (UCCWG)'. Facebook may come up with a list of suggestions as soon as you start typing in the name. Click on the group name to select the group and it should come up, (the 'cover' photo is currently a picture of a Curlew), then click on '+ join group', to become a member.

The UCCWG Facebook group was created before last year's annual meeting, and so far has attracted 23 members. The group provides timely communication with members and they can post their wildlife sightings, photos, videos and questions.

The group is administered and moderated by Karen Mitchell and Katie Steggles and is open to the public, so anyone can find the group, see who is in the group and what they post. Anyone can request to become a member or submit posts once they are a member but posts require approval from the administrator or moderator.

It has promoted repeated annual events, such as the UCCWG public meeting and the SWT / SOS, 'Save Our Curlew' campaign and 'one offs', such as the jointly organised UCCWG & Camlad Valley CWG river health training session provided by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, (SWT), in March this year.

The group has shared relevant 'posts' from other affiliated organisations, such as the SWT and the Clun & Bishops Castle branch of the SWT, about local activities and events. Information from other appropriate organisations, such as the RSPB, 'Curlew Country' and Butterfly Conservation on wildlife identification and suggestions on how to help local wildlife have also been shared. Wildlife surveys such as the British Trust for Ornithology's 'Tawny Owl survey', Freshwater Habitats Trust's 'Spawn Survey', Butterfly Conservation's 'Big Butterfly count', Woodland Trust's 'Natures calendar' and RSPB's 'Big Garden Bird Watch' have been promoted too.

The web address for the group is:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/UpperClunCommunityWildlifeGroup/

CO-OPERATION WITH FARMERS, LANDOWNERS & OTHER ORGANISATIONS

The vast majority of the area is farmland, and almost all of the birds, plants and butterflies that the Group wishes to conserve live on it. Close co-operation with farmers is therefore crucial to our success.

The Group has continued to actively promote conservation of popular "flagship" wildlife species by working with, and influencing, farmers, landowners, other local organisations, Government Agencies and the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, to protect and restore important habitats.

In 2010, we brought together the results of four years' survey work to identify some of the best sites for birds, plants & butterflies in the Upper Clun. These sites have survived thanks to the way they have been managed, and we have subsequently worked with some of the land owners to help ensure that they continue to be managed in the same way. We have now made personal contact with almost all the farmers who own one of these high-quality sites, and we hope the information we have collected is useful to them. We have worked with both farmers and Natural England to ensure that the best wildlife sites are incorporated into Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme (HLS) agreements.

We made a successful joint application with Land, Life and Livelihoods for a Natural England Countryside Stewardship (CS) Facilitation Fund Grant for a three year project to support people and organisations that bring farmers, foresters, and other land managers together to improve the local natural environment at a landscape scale. This landscape scale approach can cover land under existing agri-environment and forestry/woodland agreements, common land and land not currently covered by a scheme. It builds on the principles of partnership working to deliver environmental benefits.

ACTIVITIES & SURVEYS

Since its launch in 2007, the Group has set out to find all breeding pairs of Lapwing and Curlew, monitor other important farmland birds and their habitats, and promote the conservation of Barn Owls, Dippers and woodland birds through provision of nest boxes. This built on local knowledge of Lapwing and Curlew gained since 2004.

In 2007, a dozen different wild flowers were also located, and a further 12 plants indicative of woodland, and 12 indicative of grassland, were included in the 2008 surveys. These results were used to highlight the most important sites, and these sites have been the subject of detailed Plant surveys in subsequent years since 2009, with the aim of getting the best sites adopted as Local (County) Wildlife Sites.

Three Nature Reserves in the Upper Clun area are owned by Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Rhos Fiddle, Lower Shortditch and Mason's Bank. These reserves have also been surveyed in some years.

Our area was initially divided into 31 squares, 2x2 kilometre squares on the Ordnance Survey National Grid. A map showing these squares has been included in previous Annual Reports. The Group recruited a local member to survey each of these squares for birds and/or plants each year, and well over 100 people have either undertaken surveys, or provided additional useful information, since 2007. However, since 2009, only the best sites have been selected for further survey work, and many of them do not fall into single squares, so this division of the area into squares is no longer important. The map of the area, divided up into these squares, can be viewed on the website.

Butterfly surveys, supported by Butterfly Conservation and concentrating on Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, were started in 2010.

It was hoped to organise Mammal surveys, following the invitation to the Shropshire Mammal Group to speak at the 2014 Annual Public Meeting. However, this has not proved possible, and it is hoped to find a volunteer to take this on.

The aims and results of these surveys are described elsewhere in this Report.

COVERING OTHER TYPES OF WILDLIFE

The Group wants to expand its activities, and survey and promote conservation of other types of wildlife. These activities will be shaped by the interests of all the people who join.

FUNDING

Initially the Group was funded by the AONB's *Down to Earth* programme, and then its Sustainable Development Fund.

From October 2011 until June 2013, funding came via the "LEADER in the Shropshire Hills" programme, "part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development 2007-2013: Europe investing in rural areas". This programme was co-ordinated by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership with Defra as the Managing Authority. The National Trust was the lead organisation and banker for the LEADER Project

The Group is not currently in receipt of any grants. Efforts will therefore be made to raise funds by asking people attending meetings and events to make donations, and support raffles. Members have not been asked to contribute since the Group started, and the Committee hopes to avoid having to charge a membership subscription, but hopefully members will now support the Group financially, as well as through voluntary activity.

Grant Applications will be made when the opportunity arises. An unsuccessful application was made to the Garreg Llwyd Windfarm Community Fund to help finance the Curlew Nest Monitoring and protection project in Bettws-y-Crwyn parish, and a revised application is about to be made for funding Curlew work in 2020.

CONSTITUTION

To make Grant Applications, it is necessary to have a written Constitution, which was adopted at the Annual Public Meeting in November 2013. The Constitution can be viewed on the website.

OTHER COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUPS

The Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group was the second CWG to be formed, following the Upper Onny Wildlife Group, launched in 2003.

The Kemp Valley CWG started in 2011. The LEADER project funded these three Groups, and also three new groups, covering Clee Hill, the Strettons, and Wenlock Edge. However, one of these three new groups, Wenlock Edge, is no longer operating.

The Stiperstones – Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS), financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund, has supported the development of two new CWGs, covering the Rea Valley and Camlad Valley, since 2014.

These groups all survey important wildlife in their areas, but they are developing differently. All are monitoring birds and plants, but the species being searched for are different. Six of these groups are monitoring Lapwings, and five Curlews.

Until 2017, all the Community Wildlife Groups were in the Shropshire Hills, in the south-west of the County, but the Three Parishes CWG (covering Weston Rhyn, St. Martins and Gobowen, north of Oswestry) was formed in 2017, and Tanat to Perry CWG (covering the area to the south of Oswestry and the Severn-Vyrnwy Confluence CWG were both launched in 2018.

An eleventh group, Abdon District CWG, was formed by local residents in 2018. It also carries out a Lapwing and Curlew survey, but monitors other local wildlife too.

The activities and results for each of the Groups can be found on the website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

THE BIRD GROUP

BIRD SURVEYS

Introduction

Since 2007 the Bird Group has monitored the population and distribution of Lapwing, Curlew, and other species of conservation interest. Early surveys highlighted the importance of 'wetland' areas retaining a more diverse flora, especially Soft Rush *Juncus effusus*, and such sites were given particular attention from 2010 onwards. Up to 2011 the Group attempted to survey all 31 tetrads ((2x2 kilometre squares) in the Upper Clun, focusing increasingly on Curlew as Lapwings disappeared. However, as Curlew's range contracted and its population decreased, blanket coverage was replaced by more intensive fieldwork on its strongholds.

Geographic surveys are now supplemented by observations from a network of resident recorders in Curlew hotspots who are prompted to collect evidence of activity at key points in the breeding cycle, and members of the Wildlife Group are encouraged to send in all records of Lapwing or Curlew. Observers are kept informed by emailed progress reports.

The Methodology and Recording Instructions for the Bird Surveys were described fully in the 2011 Report (Appendix 1), and can be found on the website.

Participation and Coverage

This year six members carried out surveys of agreed geographic areas; 38 others, including resident recorders and 'casual' observers, contributed records by phone, email or personal contact, a total of 44 participants. Just under 150 Curlew observations or sets of observations were received. Six nest box hosts sent in breeding results.

All observers who undertook geographic surveys or continuous recording, or submitted nest box data, live within the survey area. Several are farmers, and many other farmers provided valuable information. Landowners who allowed access to their land is gratefully acknowledged

LAPWINGS

Fieldwork Results

There were no reports of Lapwing during the breeding season. There have been no breeding records since 2012. A map showing the approximate location of all breeding Lapwing found by the Group since 2007, together with the nests found previously in 2004 – 06 (Smith 2006) has appeared in previous reports, and can be found on the website.

Local Extinction

The local breeding population declined from 6 pairs in 2004 by around a pair a year up until 2010; only two pairs have been found since, both in 2012. As no young are known to have fledged since 2008, Lapwing appears to be extinct as a breeding species in this area.

Habitat requirements

Their Habitat Requirements, and the reasons for the Population Decline, were described in the Group's 2010 (and previous) Report, and are not reproduced here. Full details are provided in Shrubb's book *The Lapwing*, and papers by Sheldon, listed in the References.

CURLEW RECOVERY PROJECT

This project was launched in 2018 funded jointly by Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Ornithological Society appeal. Its aim is to try to improve the breeding success of local Curlews so that the population can first become stable, then increase. A full report of the Project's work in 2018 is available online at www.shropshirebirds.com

This year we aimed to build on last year's work. Again, professional help was engaged to build on the survey work by UCCWG members to find and monitor as many nests and chicks as possible.

Unfortunately two unrelated factors disrupted our plans. Firstly, for reasons unknown, the local Curlew population was very unsettled, pairs moving around and some not breeding until much later than expected. Secondly, personal and financial factors beyond our control prevented optimum coverage at the beginning of the laying period when pairs are most detectable.

Fieldwork Results

Residents in Curlew hotspots provided updates on activity in their areas, and more remote sites were surveyed regularly. The data collected were used to brief the professional nest-finding team. Only one nest was found; it was not fenced as the land was under probate and permission could not be obtained. It was discovered to have failed soon after laying, almost certainly predated, and subsequent observations suggested that the same pair went on to lay again close by and probably hatched young.

In all other cases we relied as previously on observations by surveyors, residents and others to judge the whereabouts and breeding status of each pair. The number of active pairs was slightly down: two previously-used sites appeared to be abandoned, leaving only six territories about which we could be confident.

In addition to the nest described above, there was proof of breeding just outside the Upper Clun area, where a Curlew and single chick were seen over a period of about nine days in mid-July, but then disappeared. At three further sites observations of anti-predator behaviour and timing of peaks in activity strongly suggested that young hatched. One site remained ambiguous in spite of close observation, although on balance there was probably a nest attempt. A further four sites saw regular Curlew activity over periods of varying lengths, but there was insufficient evidence to confirm that any related to active breeding attempts, and in at least one case the numbers involved suggested it was more likely to have been a focus for communal feeding.

At all sites activity ceased before any young would have been expected to fledge. The nest that failed early was predated, and there is some evidence that it was not the only one: early failure of pairs that had appeared to be settling would explain some of the movements and erratic behaviour that characterized this season. In the cases where Curlew are believed to have hatched chicks, the end of activity coincided with hay- or silage-making, suggesting that some chicks may have been lost during those operations.

It is worth making the point that threats to Curlew chicks from predation and from agricultural operations are not discrete but reinforce each other: Curlews displaced by mowing are more likely to be spotted and targeted when predators, especially avian, are attracted to harvest fields to pick up the inevitable casualties. This temporarily inflates the number of opportunist predators, while at the same time the chicks lose the cover of the long sward.

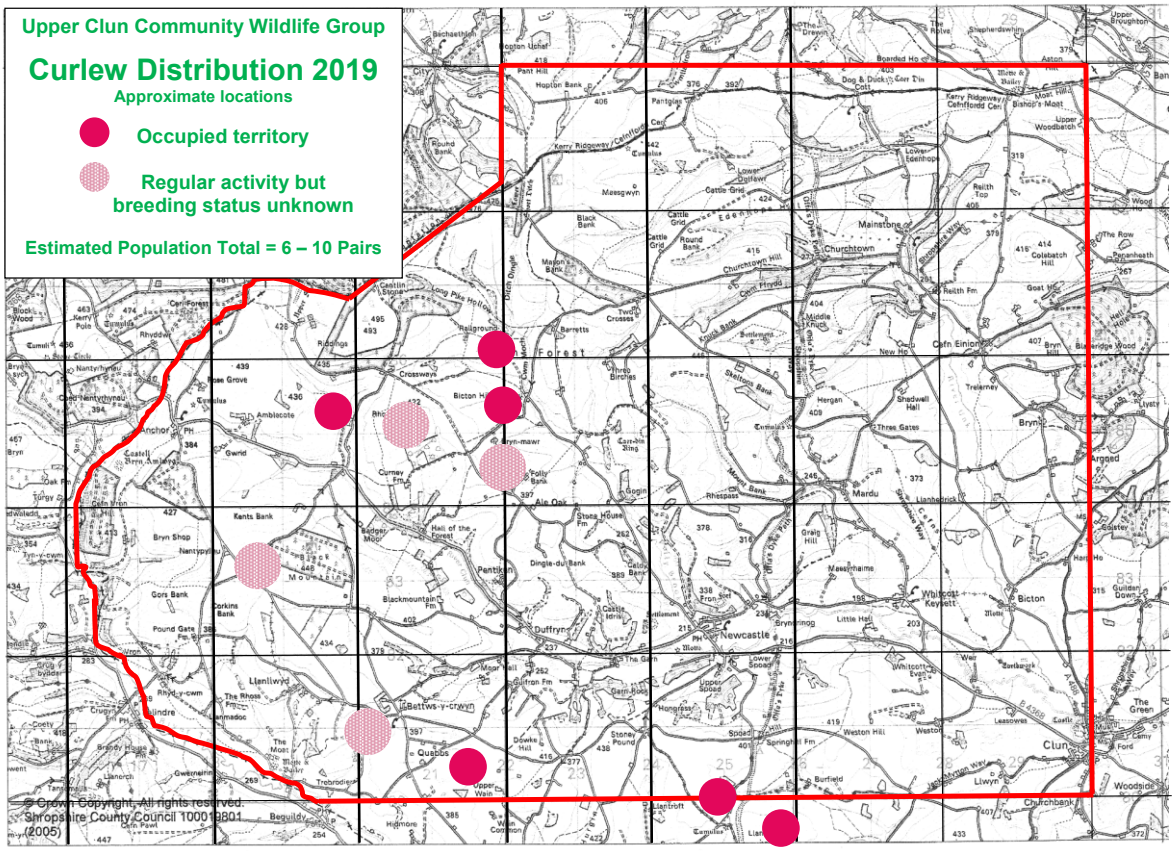
With the possible exception of the chick and accompanying adult, which might have moved to a site where they were not observed, there was no evidence that any Curlew got even close to fledging. Since this appears to have been the case for several years now the future of the population looks bleak.

The estimated population found each year since 2007 is shown in Figure 1.

The full results of the Group's Curlew surveys are set out in Appendix 2.

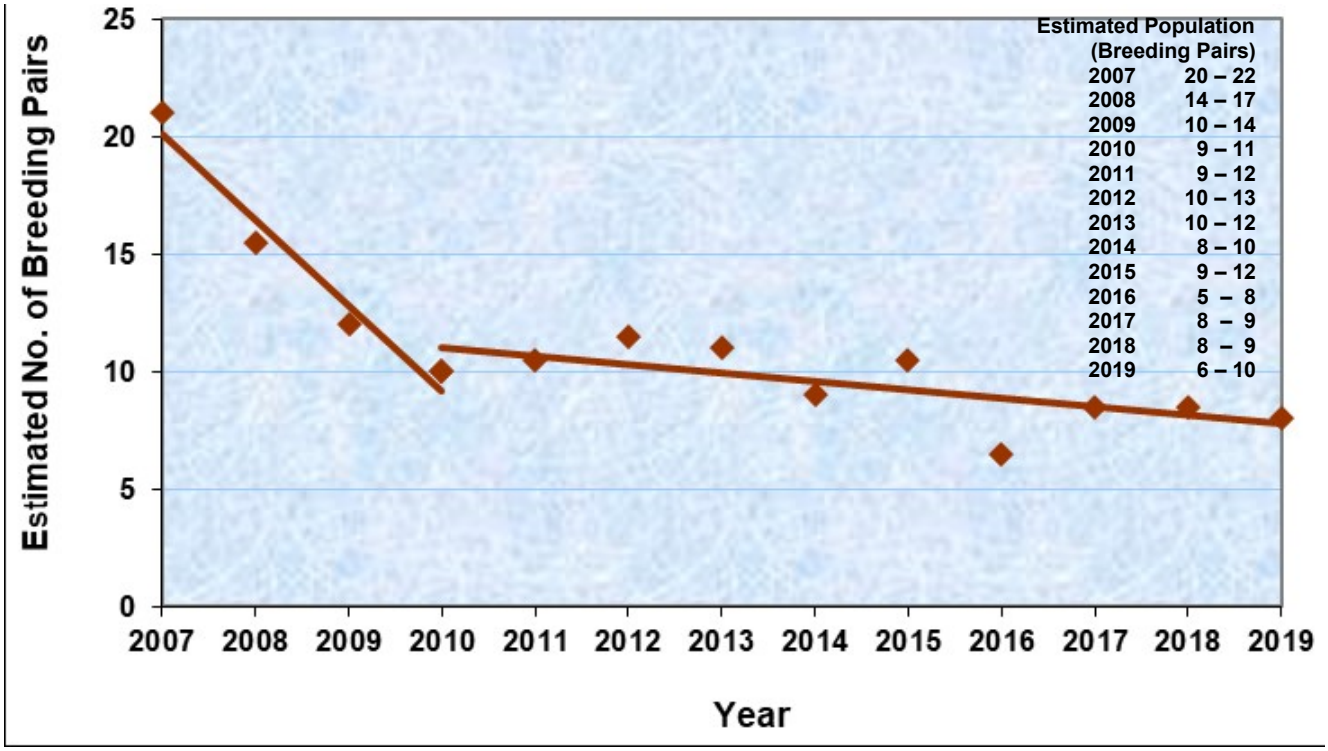
The distribution of territories in 2019 is shown in Map 1.

Map 1. Approximate location of Curlew Territories 2019



The rate of population decline appears to have slowed since 2010, following several years of steep decline. However, productivity in recent years was not sufficient to maintain, let alone rebuild, the population, and as no young are believed to have fledged in 2017 or 2018, the decline is set to continue. The estimated population found each year since 2007 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Decline of Curlew in the Upper Clun 2007 – 2019



Curlews are long-lived, and may return to their breeding territories for many years without producing any fledged young. Eventually the adults will die, and the breeding population will only be stable if there are enough young birds to replace them. Breeding success will fluctuate from year to year, and is likely to be better in years when wet weather delays grass cutting and other agricultural activity until after the Curlew breeding season, so any long term decline is unlikely to be steady – it will go in fits and starts.

Colour-ringing

One male Curlew seen in 2018 at a site near The Anchor had been colour-ringed by Tony Cross of the Mid-Wales Ringing Group at Dolydd Hafren near Montgomery in February 2016. As the male at the same site last year was ringed (though not read), and Curlews are loyal to sites, it may well have been the same bird. This was the second ringed Curlew to be found in the Upper Clun, but the male in the Llanfair Hill area in 2017 (see photo) was not relocated.
No colour-ringed Curlews were seen in 2019. If you see a Curlew on the ground in future years, please check it for colour rings. The red/orange on the right leg is conspicuous.

Habitat Requirements and Population Decline

Curlews are ground-nesting birds, requiring rank vegetation as cover for the sitting bird and eggs. They nest on unimproved grassland and heather moorland, rushes or tussocks on rough grazing, or in grass being grown for hay or silage, and feed on damp pasture and meadows with wet, boggy areas rich in invertebrates. Since they need all-round visibility to detect approaching predators, they are found only in open landscapes.

The local decline has been accompanied by a sharp contraction of what was already a very limited range in a short space of time. The last pair of Curlew nesting in the “lowlands” of the Upper Clun has been lost: they occupied a territory north-west of Clun, in the Unk valley, but they were last recorded breeding there in 2010. The Curlew population appears now to be entirely confined to the very highest ground, with no known territory below around 375 metres.

In late 2015, Curlew, previously Amber-listed, was added to the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern. Its national decline is attributed primarily to agricultural intensification, in particular:

- land drainage, which reduces rank vegetation for nest sites, and the invertebrate food supply
- increased use of fertilizers, intensifying the effect of drainage
- control of 'weeds', such as rushes, which are necessary for nest cover
- rolling and chain-harrowing when it can destroy nests and chicks
- silage production, with earlier and more frequent cutting, endangering eggs and chicks
- intensive grazing, with higher stocking levels leading to an increased risk of trampling

(See Birds of Wet Meadows Survey 2002 (Wilson et al., 2005) and the Repeat Upland Bird Survey 2002 (Sim et al., 2005))

Predation has also played a part in the decline (Grant et al, 1999). The sparse Curlew population, the reduced amount of nesting cover, and the distances involved in finding food mean nests and chicks are extremely vulnerable to predators, particularly foxes and corvids, which do very well in the current farmed landscape.

Curlew are loyal to nesting sites even if the habitat has changed over the years, so their choices may reflect historic conditions rather than those prevailing at present. However, the few remaining Curlew nest sites are all within 1 km of damp, rough or semi-natural areas, three of which are SWT

reserves, and there is evidence that these are important for foraging. Sites which have themselves become marginal may continue to support Curlew by virtue of their proximity to such habitats.

Curlew do not have to raise many young each year to survive in an area, but no population can sustain productivity as poor as that found here. In the Upper Clun there is still a nucleus of breeding birds to work with; in other parts of the country the situation is even worse. Revival will require a long-term strategy aimed at re-establishing habitat of suitable quality on an appropriate scale.

The importance of Curlew conservation has been increasingly recognised in recent years, and a summary of work towards this goal, at local, regional and national level, can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

After a rapid initial decline, then a period of stability, the decline in the Curlew population has resumed, and is now around 8 pairs.

The situation is now critical, and a Curlew Action Plan was launched in 2016 to attempt to recover the population.

In 2018, nest finding and protection was organised as part of the SWT / SOS "Save our Curlews" campaign. Three nests were found and fenced. The nests all survived, but none of the chicks fledged. All were predated, mainly by foxes. However, we learnt a lot about how the chicks move about, and feed, in the landscape, and this will help future conservation efforts.

In 2019, one nest was found, but it could not be fenced, so we added little to our previous knowledge

SNIPE

The important local Snipe population at SWT Rhos Fiddle Nature Reserve was surveyed as part of the Shropshire Snipe Survey 2009. Four pairs were found, including a new territory in the centre of the Reserve, compared with 3 – 4 pairs in 2004. The survey was repeated in 2014, 2015 and 2016 with no conclusive evidence of Snipe.

The Shropshire Snipe survey is repeated every five years, including 2019. No breeding-season records were obtained this year.

Snipe appear now to have been lost as breeding birds throughout the area, although they are still regular winter visitors. A site on Black Mountain, occupied in 2004, was surveyed in 2009 and 2010, but no Snipe recorded. Rush management and the creation of a scrape may have improved the habitat for Snipe, and the site should be revisited, but the prognosis is poor if the much better and more extensive habitat at Rhos Fiddle is vacant.

BIRDS OF THE "WETLANDS"

The Wetlands Project, launched in 2010, aimed to identify and survey all bogs, mires, flushes, wet meadows and rush pasture in the Upper Clun area in order to assess their condition and census the birds, plants and butterflies they support.

A baseline survey of the major 'wetland' sites and their bird communities was made in 2010 and 2011, with the aim of resurveying the sites at approximately five-year intervals to monitor breeding species and assess the effectiveness of any conservation measures. Where sites have been shown to support Lapwing, Curlew or Snipe, or at least four of the additional target species (Kestrel, Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Stonechat, Linnet, Yellowhammer & Reed Bunting), they qualify for adoption as County Wildlife Sites (CWS).

Initially, priority was given to privately-owned farmland with potential for inclusion in HLS. (This work is described in the Chapter on Conservation Action later in the Report.) The sites owned or managed by SWT (Lower Short Ditch, Masons Bank & Rhos Fiddle) are now included in the survey as a standard of comparison, and, since they are more extensive than the other sites, as a means of assessing the importance of site area.

Survey Findings

The sites were not formally surveyed in 2019, but were visited as part of other fieldwork. All target species were recorded, though not at all sites, and numbers seemed lower than the last few years: for example, fewer pairs of Stonechat were using regular sites. However Cuckoo, which like the previous two years arrived late and left early, was recorded at more sites, including two birds simultaneously.
The more diverse flora and fauna of the wetlands benefit many other bird species besides the group's targets, including other Red-listed species such as Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher, Whinchat, Tree Pipit, Tree Sparrow and Lesser Redpoll.

All survey records, and the maps based on them (Maps A2.1 and A2.2 in the 2011 Report, Appendix 2) will be submitted to Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) as evidence of the extent to which the sites continue to justify their status as Local (County) Wildlife Sites.

Results for 2019 are shown on Map A2.1 in Appendix 2, p34

RED KITE

Six Red Kite nests were found and monitored, including a new one. However the failure rate was high, and only three were successful; productivity was low, no nest producing more than one chick. A total of 45 active nests have been found in the Upper Clun since 2007. Thirty were successful, producing 43 young.

Although the kite-tagging project is much reduced kites can be long-lived and there are still tagged birds in the area whose breeding history is of interest, so please continue to report sightings of a Kite in the same vicinity on several occasions, or of two together, or of one going into a wood between January and July, which may indicate a nest site.

Such locations should be kept strictly confidential, as Kites are still persecuted, but should be reported immediately to Leo Smith or Michelle Frater (both of whom have a monitoring licence).

KESTREL PROJECT

The state of the Kestrel population has given rise to increasing concern in recent years, and in response the Raptor Study Group and the Shropshire Ringing Group have begun a county-wide

programme of nest monitoring. Nest boxes are being erected in areas of suitable habitat, such as rough grassland, heath and rushy areas, which have surviving Kestrel populations, in order to supplement scarce natural sites and to gather data on breeding and productivity.

There are now four nest boxes in the Upper Clun but only one was occupied in 2019. Kestrels were seen near a second but it proved to have been taken over by squirrels, as had another. If there was an active nest in the occupied box it failed, probably before hatching. A regularly-used natural site was vacant for the second consecutive year after several successful years. There were breeding-season records of Kestrel at another site but no confirmation of breeding, and sightings throughout the area were much thinner than usual.

Kestrel fortunes fluctuate according to the peaks and troughs in the vole cycle, so they can recover. The state of the Kestrel population has given rise to increasing concern in recent years, and in response the Raptor Study Group and the Shropshire Ringing Group have begun a county-wide programme of nest monitoring. Nest boxes are being erected in areas of suitable habitat, such as rough grassland, heath and rushy areas, which have surviving Kestrel populations, in order to supplement scarce natural sites and to gather data on breeding and productivity.

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Kestrel fortunes fluctuate according to the peaks and troughs in the vole cycle, so they can recover from bad years, but the overall trend is not encouraging.

Please report all Kestrel sightings to Michelle Frater, 01588 640909.

DIPPERS

Dippers are restricted to, and dependent on, fast-flowing streams and rivers with stony beds. The headwaters of the River Clun, including the River Unk and the Folly Brook, are one of the County strongholds. The average length of the fiercely-defended territory, approximately 1km in the Upper Clun, is closely related to water quality. The health of the Dipper population, assessed by nest monitoring, ringing, and trapping or re-sighting ringed adults, is therefore an important indicator of changes in the river environment.

Nests are located directly above flowing water; natural sites are used, but man-made structures are preferred where available, and Dippers take readily to nest boxes. With landowners'

permission, specially-designed nest boxes have been installed under bridges in the Upper Clun to increase nesting opportunities and breeding success, and facilitate population monitoring.

- 29 potential nest sites were monitored, the great majority nest boxes under bridges
- 12 sites were occupied, down from 16 last year, and the lowest since 2011
- there were 15 active nests, including three second broods, 6 on the Clun, 6 on the Folly Brook, 2 on the Unk and 1 on the Mardu Brook
- all nests were in boxes but two natural nests were reported after the season
- 47 chicks and 3 adults were ringed at 11 sites; chicks that reach ringing age are likely to fledge
- 20 colour-rings on breeding adults were read; only four of the breeding birds were unringed, and two of those have now been ringed

Although fewer sites were occupied this year more chicks were produced, and there were more second broods. If winter survival is good this should lead to a higher occupancy rate next year: it has dropped considerably since 2016 when 20 sites were occupied.

Tony Cross has been monitoring Dippers in the Teme catchment since 1987, by ringing chicks at nest sites, and counting birds at winter roost sites. Colour-ringing of adults started in 2011, and since then as many colour-rings as possible have been read during the breeding season, giving an important measure of adult movements and survival. The oldest dipper in the Upper Clun was seven years old when he disappeared; the national record is 8 years 9 months. Three dippers ringed as nestlings at sites on the River Ithon in Powys have bred in this area, and a recent ringing report included a dipper that fledged at Bicton and moved to a site near Ratlinghope, 40km away.

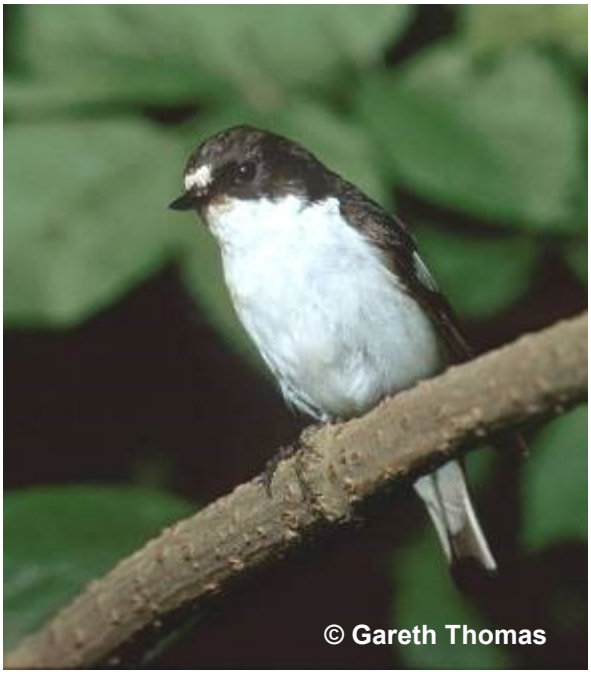
Annual reports of this project, *Dippers in the River Teme Catchment*, were produced from 2007 to 2011-12. It is intended to produce an up to date report over the course of the next year.

The study suggests that the local population declined in the 20 years prior to the start of the nest box scheme in 2006, then increased until 2010, as the boxes created more nesting opportunities. Productivity is slightly higher in boxes as they tend to be less vulnerable to predation. The highest number of chicks so far fledged in 2015, with the number of breeding pairs peaking the following year before declining to the present. Natural fluctuations are normal for species inhabiting dynamic environments, and long-term trends will become apparent only after years of monitoring.

If you see Dippers regularly, or know of an existing nest site,
please contact Michelle Frater, 01588 640909.

NEST BOXES FOR WOODLAND BIRDS

The Nest Box Scheme aims to increase the number of suitable nest sites for hole-nesting woodland birds, and to collect data on their breeding success. Some members with suitable gardens or access to woodland host up to 10 boxes provided by UCCWG. New members are welcome to join, but unfortunately the Group is no longer able to fund new boxes, so people must now provide boxes themselves.



Results were submitted for six sites. Boxes were used by four species: Blue Tit occupied 13, followed by Pied Flycatcher (7) and Great Tit (6).One box was used by Redstart. Thirty-nine Blue Tits fledged, along with 19 Pied Flycatchers and nine Great Tits. These are minimum figures as final outcomes were obtained for only some of the nests

Andy Spencer rings Pied Flycatcher and Redstarts at Woodbatch, together with sites in the Onny valleys and the Stiperstones, and some to the south of the Upper Clun (over 700 boxes altogether). There are now about 120 boxes at Woodbatch, and the Group helps him identify which of the boxes hold the two target species, and more volunteers for this work would be welcome.

Species	Adults	Chicks	Retraps	Total
Pied Flycatcher	3	6	0	9
Redstart	2	14	0	16
Total	**5**	**20**	**0**	**25**

Ringing results for Woodbatch in 2019 are shown in the table.
The metal rings, fixed to the leg, are inscribed with a unique number, recorded by BTO. If the bird is caught again, or found dead, and the ring details are reported, its age and movements are known. Almost everything we know about bird migration and longevity is as a result of ringing.

If you live in the Upper Clun area, and are interested in having nest boxes on your land, or you would like to help monitoring Pied Flycatchers at other nest box schemes in the area, please ring Marie Zenick on 01588 630750 e-mail mariezenick@yahoo.co.uk

BARN OWLS

Barn Owl was removed from the *Amber List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern* in 2015, but remains scarce locally. Loss of rough grassland rich in prey is the major factor, but lack of suitable nest sites has contributed. The Shropshire Barn Owl Group (SBOG) installed a few nest boxes in the Upper Clun, and UCCWG many more, mostly in isolated farm buildings or large trees 400m or more from woodland, near at least 4 ha (10 acres) of permanent rough grassland.

In 2017 and 2018 there were active nests at the same two sites, though the final outcomes are unknown. At one of these sites, a nest box installed by a farmer near The Anchor was regularly used up until 2009, but apparently not again until 2017. The nest at the second site is not in one of the Group's boxes, and the location is confidential at the request of the farmer.

Results of monitoring in 2019 have not yet been received, but will be posted on the group's website when available.

If you see a Barn Owl, especially if you suspect it may be breeding, please tell Michelle Frater, 01588 640909.

OVERVIEW

Our survey work over 13 years has made a detailed assessment of the bird populations in the Upper Clun. During this period Lapwing appears to have become extinct as a local breeding species, and Curlew appears to be heading the same way. The status of the other target species is more secure, largely because their habitat requirements are less exacting, and are met on the three SWT reserves and a few other sites of comparable quality.

The data has helped us to identify key Local (County) Wildlife Sites, and support several farmers in applications to join Environmental Stewardship HLS; Natural England made use of our data in identifying priorities for new agreements. Future surveys will continue to monitor the populations of the target species, especially in relation to changes in land management under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Their fortunes will be an important measure of its effectiveness.

The Bird Group has evolved over the years: geographic surveys are still important, and those who carry them out are reliable, conscientious and increasingly knowledgeable. At the same time, the contribution of our network of resident recorders and other local people who send in records of the bird activity they see around them has greatly increased. Information is exchanged via an email distribution list. Records are submitted to the County Bird Recorder, and, where relevant, to BTO.

THE PLANT GROUP

(THE WILDLIFE SITE AND BOTANY SURVEY GROUP)

INTRODUCTION

The Upper Clun botany group have been recording for 13 years in the Upper Clun and Teme (tetrads SO18, SO27 and SO28). The focus over the years has mostly been on the local wildlife sites (LWS) and in 2019 the group continued to survey these sites, although far fewer due to funding issues at Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT). The surveys are an attempt to assess the health of LWS and the wildlife they support. The methodology for the surveys was changed this year to be in line with the national Nature Recovery Networks (NRN).

Fiona Gomersall also carried out specific network mapping on three farms in the Teme, identifying spaces where trees, copses or riparian woodland could be planted. This project, termed 'Trees Outside Woodland', the idea of which originated from the Woodland Trust and the Shropshire Hills AONB, will potentially form part of a test and trial for Defra's New Environmental Management Scheme (NELMS). If successfully funded, the consequences of such work would be the strengthening of ecological networks, enhanced biodiversity, a reduction in flooding, sequestering of carbon and the improvement of water, soil and habitat quality.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The Upper Clun and Teme have a core group of seven skilled volunteers who carry out the LWS and network surveys. The group to date has been supported by SWT and since this is a community wildlife group, other local people are always encouraged to join in.

In 2019 overall, 6 sites were surveyed (see Appendix 1).

SWT provided maps, network survey cards, NVC recording cards, botanical record cards and risk assessments and arranged for access to sites.

There was one training day on network mapping and identification of quality habitat. All surveyors used recommended floras (listed under References) and the *axiophyte* lists; the target species for the area covering the three key habitats: Rush Pasture/Purple Moorgrass, Blanket Bog and Meadows, (Appendix 4) are used for guidance.

A special Nature Recovery Network survey form and a species recording card were used (NRN forms for Grassland and Wetlands were also used).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Eight people variously carried out the site surveys in 2019, collecting valuable information on the six LWS. Good species lists were compiled along with useful ecological network and site condition data.

One very rare plant, Great Burnet, *Sanguisorba officinalis* was found at Wern Tanglas LWS.

The rare Great Burnet


Smith's Pepperwort

This was a first, both for the LWS and for the Clun Forest as a whole. Other good species like, Marsh Cinquefoil, Smith's Pepperwort, Maiden Pink, Hares-tail Cottongrass and Pale Sedge were also recorded on local sites.

Around 100 target species are usually recorded each year. These plants are the Shropshire 'axiophytes', the species which are good habitat indicators as they are relatively uncommon and indicate an unimproved and relatively unspoilt habitat. As a rule of thumb, the higher the number recorded, the better the site. Species-rich hay meadows (for example at Wern Tanglas) are measured using a different set of indicators since they may have few axiophytes but are nonetheless important priority habitats.

Out of the 6 sites surveyed four were in a good condition, one had not improved and the sixth site had declined and was partly destroyed. A further site, identified during the network surveys was of LWS quality and will hopefully be put forward as a potential new LWS by SWT this autumn.


Common Cow-wheat

The cumulative result of the Botany Group's work (together with the complementary work of the Bird and Butterfly Groups) is shown in Map 4 "Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife and Candidate Sites in the Upper Clun" in the Chapter on Conservation Action on page 20.

DISCUSSION

Through both the LWS and mapping surveys it is evident that there are still semi-natural areas in the Teme and Clun valleys, which although small are nevertheless important for the species they support and for the re-building of ecological networks. Fiona Gomersall found such areas on all three farms during her network surveying in the Teme.

Since the start of the Community Wildlife Group in 2007, 26 (38)* LWS are either completely new or are significant extensions to existing sites.

Many of the 50 (67)* LWS in the Upper Clun (and Teme) have been surveyed within the last five years and around 70% are in a reasonably good condition with this figure remaining relatively consistent. The concern now is that due to SWTs lack of funding, the healthy cycle of LWS surveys will decline along with the support and advice given to farmers and landowners.

Where sites were found to be in a poor or declining condition this was attributed to fertiliser use and over grazing by livestock. One of the woodland sites surveyed was interesting, as half the woodland had been fenced and the other half left open on one side for livestock access. Whereas the fenced compartment had a wilder feel with a tawny owl, fox and badger all observed during the survey, there appeared to be a monoculture of Bluebell and Bramble, the latter quite invasive in places. There was however, good woodland structure with canopy and understorey intact. The partially fenced compartment was without doubt

overgrazed and the understorey virtually non-existent. However, where stock had grazed the woodland floor, there was a greater diversity of ground flora and more indicator plants per quadrat. Neither compartment could be said to be flourishing, and the conclusion drawn from this is that fencing woodland is important given high stocking densities on most farms, but that grazing animals should be given access to woodland for short periods at certain times of the year.

Much of the work of the three groups: Bird, Butterfly and Botany focuses on rush pasture, bogs and unimproved grassland habitats of the Clun Forest. There are around 15 good rushy pastures in this landscape where conservation work needs to be focused for vulnerable and threatened species like the Curlew and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterfly. A key aim of the Upper Clun Facilitation Fund is to increase the extent of these rushy pastures.

The Botany group has continued to work closely with farmers, essential if habitat conservation and restoration is to be successful since most of the Upper Clun is farmland. The group also worked closely with Natural England (NE) and staff of the Shropshire Hills AONB (SHAONB) office ensuring that LWS received appropriate management within schemes and projects.

CONCLUSION

Less sites were visited by the group in 2019 with fewer LWS receiving 'health checks'. The landowner involvement, interest and cooperation was good and useful data was collected. If it is possible to continue working with our partners at the SHAONB, Shropshire Council, Natural England, SWT and Land Life Livelihoods, then so much more will be achieved.

FURTHER WORK

Fiona Gomersall has supported the Plant (Wildlife Sites and Botany Survey) Group since UCCWG was founded in 2007, partially through her paid employment as Conservation Officer at Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT), although she put in a lot of extra effort as well. The group has benefitted considerably from her expertise, commitment and enthusiasm, and would have achieved far less without it.

Fiona has changed jobs recently, and is now a Farm Advisor for the whole of the Clun catchment, employed by Severn Rivers Trust. She aims to write water and soil feasibility studies for 80 farmers by March 2021, and the work involves interviewing farmers, soil testing and looking at erosion risks. The soil testing includes worm counts. It's about stopping silt, soil, pesticides and fertilisers entering the River Clun. Advice to farmers includes improving biodiversity and maintaining unimproved habitat. She will continue to liaise with the group, and help as much as her new role allows, but continued activity will depend on the level of support the group receives from SWT.

SWT have recently advertised for a replacement, who is expected to be in post by February, and who is expected to support the continued work of the group. Its programme will need to be agreed with the new post-holder, but a proposed list of wildlife sites to be surveyed in 2020 has been drawn up. New and returning surveyors will once more be encouraged to join the survey group.

Fiona Gomersall has done an excellent job organising, supporting and developing the Plant (Wildlife Sites and Botany Survey) Group over many years, contributing the annual report, and ensuring that landowners know the value of their sites, and how to look after them.

Thank you for all you've done, Fiona.

( )* = figures where Teme valley local wildlife sites are included

THE BUTTERFLY GROUP

INTRODUCTION

Surveys of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries started in 2010 and the results for 2010 to 2016 were summarised in the 2016 report.

This fritillary is a UKBAP Priority Species, of High Conservation Priority which has suffered long term decline across the UK. The most important sites in the Upper Clun are: Barretts West (Masons Bank West Local Wildlife Site), Pant-y-Lidan LWS and Gors Bank LWS. The numbers found at Barretts West in 2010- 2011 made this a regionally significant site.

In 2019, visits were made by John Lyden and Rob Rowe to check on Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries at three of the known sites, Curney plantation, Barretts and Rhos Fiddle They were present at all three. The number of visits to sites this year was limited by a lack of recorders.

A day course was organised for farmers on behalf of Butterfly Conservation through the Facilitation Fund scheme. Two farmers attended and there were good views of the SPBFs and discussion about the butterflies' habitat requirements. Unfortunately, attendance was limited because good weather for viewing the butterflies coincided with good weather for haymaking.

A Dark Green Fritillary was seen on Llanfair Hill.

SAFEGUARDING HABITAT

Rush Pasture is an important habitat for Small Pearl Bordered Fritillaries, and the food plants they need, and it is also an important habitat for wetland birds. A UCCWG leaflet on the management of Rush Pasture for its characteristic wildlife was included in the 2013 Report (Appendix 7), and can be found on the website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

A similar document, but concentrating on the Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and its needs, has also been produced. This is available on the website of the West Midlands Branch of Butterfly Conservation www.westmidlands-butterflies.org.uk

FUTURE PLANS

John Lyden will take over organising Butterfly surveys in 2020. Unless more volunteers materialise, all that can be done is to concentrate on sites where significant numbers of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries have been seen previously, i.e. (in descending order of importance): 1. Barretts West, 2. Pant-y-Lidan, 3. Cefn S/Bryn Shop (2 sites close together), 4. Ditch Dingle (close to Barretts W) and 5. Bank.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

We need more surveyors to monitor all the important sites in the area. Until John Lyden takes over, if you can help, please contact Rob Rowe 01588 630648, email rob@robrowe.co.uk

MAMMALS

The Group decided at its 2014 Annual Meeting to expand its interests in birds, butterflies and plant life to mammals (and reptiles and amphibians) and John Mackintosh of the Shropshire Mammal Group made a presentation.

However, for a number of reasons the intention to get a new Mammal Group up and running has not proved possible. Hopefully, new volunteers will come forward and help with that. If you want to help, please tell Rob Harris, phone 01588 640234, email wilksharris@hotmail.com

CO-OPERATION WITH FARMERS

The Wildlife Group needs, and wants, to work closely with the farmers in the area. The vast majority of land in the Upper Clun area is farmland. Therefore, if we are to gather a worthwhile picture of local wildlife, and then undertake effective action to increase populations and habitat, we need the active cooperation of local farmers. We will therefore continue to work with farmers, individually and generally, on conservation issues in future.

We also encourage members of the Group who are not farmers to do whatever they can to develop good relations with individual farmers while carrying out surveys. This often includes discussion while seeking permission to carry out surveys on farmland.

There are now many examples of where this co-operation has produced results, for the benefit of wildlife and farmers, as we have helped farmers with good wildlife habitat to secure an Environmental Stewardship HLS Agreement with Natural England, so they are rewarded for managing these habitats sensitively and effectively. More details are given in the next Chapter.

CONSERVATION ACTION

The Group was set up in 2007 to monitor nationally or locally threatened bird, plant and butterfly species and their habitats, and to encourage interest in, and actively promote, conservation in the area. Annual Reports have documented the results of the surveys, and the data have been used to underpin Conservation Action, particularly in relation to the steeply-declining Curlew population.

The Group has successfully

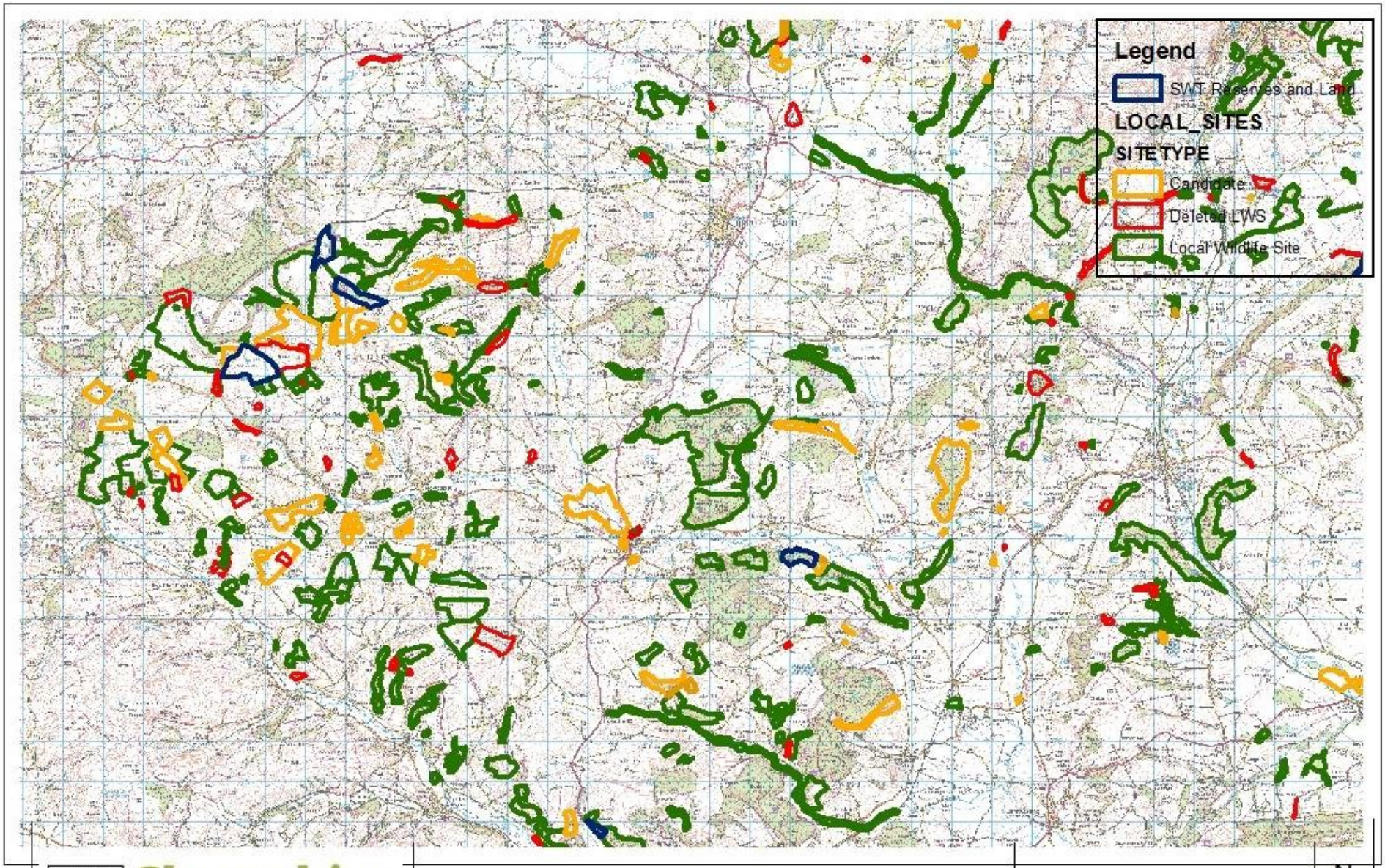
- formed a good estimate of the breeding population, distribution and habitat use of Lapwing, Curlew and other target Bird Species
- identified plant sites which contain axiophytes, indicators of high habitat quality, and produced complete species lists in support of their adoption as Local Wildlife Sites
- identified important Butterfly sites, two of which are regionally important

LOCAL (COUNTY) WILDLIFE SITES

Survey results presented in previous reports demonstrated that 'Wetland' sites which support many of the target birds are also key habitats for plants and butterflies. Data were collated across the three survey groups, and used to make the case that sites that were not already Local Wildlife Sites should if possible be adopted. These sites of wildlife interest are shown in the Local Sites Map on page 19. They include, Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, Candidate Sites and Deleted Sites in the Upper Clun 2018 All the proposals have been accepted in principle by the LWS Committee, but formal adoption requires landowners consent, and this is still being sought in some cases, shown as “Candidate Sites” on the map.

There is little to add to the 2018 map, but good habitat found at The Graig and also Coed yr Hendre wildlife sites.

The map also shows the deleted (red) sites. The wildlife attributes of these sites were lost when they were ploughed, fertilised, built on, planted on, felled or destroyed in some other way, usually more than 10 years ago.


Legend
SWT Reserves and Land
LOCAL_SITES
SITE TYPE
Candidate
Deleted LWS
Local Wildlife Site
Shropshire
Wildlife Trust
Local Sites in Upper Clun area 2018
© Crown copyright and database
rights Ordnance Survey 100050351
Date: 12/11/2018
http://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk
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HLS AGREEMENTS

Until 2014, the national and local strategies to reverse the declines of local priority species and habitats, and meet Government Biodiversity targets, were based on using Environmental Stewardship (particularly Higher Level Scheme - HLS) agreements between Natural England and landowners to safeguard and enhance the habitats. Such agreements aimed to mitigate the long-term agricultural changes which have led to the decline of many bird, plant and butterfly species, including “improvement“ of grassland by ploughing, reseeding and / or draining.

Most farmland in the Upper Clun was previously covered by Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) agreements, but these all expired in 2014 or earlier. Natural England (NE) had to consider which of the land covered by ESA Agreements should be incorporated into HLS Agreements. The Group’s strategy was therefore to identify the best wildlife sites, make survey information freely available to the land owners and to Natural England, and ask that the species-rich habitats most likely to benefit bird, plant and butterfly species would be included in the scheme. Our detailed proposals to Natural England have been described in previous Reports. The strategy was successful, as our data was taken into account.

New HLS agreements between Natural England and individual Landowners in the Upper Clun were entered into in 2013 (21) and 2014 (a further 11), covering more than 10 sq. km altogether. These agreements run for up to 10 years, so they are still safeguarding some of the best wildlife habitat in the area.

However, while HLS has been a major benefit, it protects only a small proportion of the area, so the Group still needs to monitor key wildlife species, monitor the impacts of HLS, positive or negative, and promote conservation

COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP

HLS has now been replaced by a Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which, although it is supposed to be more simple than HLS, is much more bureaucratic and less well funded. It aims to implement the proposals of the Lawton Report, which recommended reducing habitat fragmentation through a more integrated approach to land management. Participating areas will be selected by Natural England, rather than relying on applications from individual landowners.

CLUN FOREST FACILITATION FUND

The Group, together with Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, has supported a successful application by Land, Life & Livelihoods for a 3 year Facilitation Fund grant to work with local farmers and landowners.

The Facilitation fund, managed by Natural England as part of Countryside Stewardship (CS), supports people and organisations that bring farmers, foresters, and other land managers together to improve the local natural environment at a landscape scale. This landscape scale approach can cover land under existing agri-environment and forestry/woodland agreements, common land and land not currently covered by a scheme. It builds on the principles of partnership working to deliver environmental benefits, as demonstrated by various initiatives, including farm clusters and the farmer-led Nature Improvement Area.

Funding is awarded to successful applications through a competitive process. Priority is given to approaches which show partnership and a collective approach across holdings to deliver shared environmental outcomes that go beyond what could be delivered by individual holdings acting in isolation. The area covered by the Clun Forest project is shown on the map.

The Fund is to help farmers and land managers in the Clun Forest:

- Protect and manage land, soil, and water, and conserve rare and threatened plants and animals, e.g. white clawed crayfish, mountain pansy, small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly, curlew

- Join up areas of the catchment that are important and valuable for wildlife, biodiversity & flood/water management.
- Increase farm viability and care for our special landscape
- Achieve new and improved environmental schemes
- Meet together to discuss, problem-solve and act
- Obtain encouragement, technical, and personal support
- Find funds, advice and practical help so that these aims/objectives can be achieved

Bringing farmers and landowners together in this way provides an ideal opportunity to try and meet the needs of many of the Group's priority wildlife species and habitats. In the past year events have been held with farmers to improve landscape management for Curlews, and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary butterflies.

More information can be found on the relevant part of the Land, Life and Livelihoods website http://www.landlifeandlivelihoods.org.uk/

FUTURE AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEMES

All agri-environment schemes for many years have been part of the European Union Common Agricultural Policy. Given the referendum result and the Government's plan to leave the EU by 2019, the future arrangements for farm payment schemes and benefit for wildlife are very uncertain. It is likely that any new scheme will not be operational for many years.

We hope that future arrangements will help farmers and wildlife, and we will continue to work with local farmers to ensure that both benefit from any new schemes.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS FOR TARGET SPECIES

If the various threatened species are to be saved from local extinction, it is necessary to protect them where they breed now, and improve breeding success so their populations can increase and spread. The loss of Lapwing as a breeding species underlines the urgency of this work. The habitat requirements for Curlew, Lapwing, Snipe, the other Target Bird Species and Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary have been included in previous reports.

Unfortunately, little management work has been carried out in recent years to ensure that sites retain their value for wildlife, but now that some land is being managed under HLS, with funding for such work, it is hoped that this will lead to beneficial changes in farming practice such as rush management, growing hay rather than silage, creating shallow pools and muddy patches, and managing livestock in the vicinity of nest sites.

The Group will continue to monitor these species and sites, particularly the wetlands and Wildlife Sites, to see if our aspirations are borne out in the future.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT LEAFLETS

Based on the results of our local surveys, four leaflets have been published

1. *Please Conserve our Curlews*, requesting farmers to make changes in the way in which grassland is managed and grazed, in 2007 This is based on a similar leaflet produced by the Upper Onny Wildlife Group
   This leaflet was superseded by a replacement, *Curlews Need Farmers*, produced following the Facilitation Fund event in February. This replacement is included as Appendix 5.
2. *Please Help Hedgerow Birds*, requesting all landowners to make small scale changes to the management of hedges, verges, field margins and scrub, in 2008.
3. *Managing Wetlands for Wildlife,* to benefit birds, plants and butterflies, in 2009.
4. *Management of Rush Pasture,* also to benefit birds, plants and butterflies, in 2013.

All these leaflets have been endorsed by the AONB, Natural England, RSPB, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and, while it still existed, Shropshire FWAG.

Each leaflet was published in the appropriate Annual Report, and further copies are available on request. They can also be viewed and downloaded from the website, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

SURVEYING WILDLIFE SITES

'Local Wildlife Site' is not a statutory designation. It provides no protection, and does not limit landowner activity. It recognises the wildlife value of a piece of land based on the species it supports. Sites have to meet published criteria drawn up by Shropshire Wildlife Trust in consultation with Statutory Bodies such as Natural England, the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission, and other Organisations such as Shropshire Ornithological Society and Butterfly Conservation. Applications have to be approved by a committee representing most of these bodies, and adoption needs landowner consent.

Fieldwork associated with current or potential Local Wildlife Sites was done in consultation with landowners, whose permission has been sought both for the survey, and for any subsequent adoption of sites. Landowners are given all survey results, and information about any rare or unusual plants at sites.

RIVER CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Water quality in the River Clun and its tributaries has declined as a result of silting up of the river bed and pollution from people, transport and farming practices. This is being addressed by statutory organisations in compliance with the EU's Water Framework Directive (WFD), under which The Environment Agency is charged with getting all rivers into 'good ecological condition'.

Part of the lower Clun is designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) by the European Union, one of only three such designations in England, because it supports a threatened population of Freshwater Pearl Mussels. The designation requires the statutory organisations to protect the mussel population. Action is urgent: monitoring suggests that if the current rate of decline continues, the population will be extinct within the very near future.

Current initiatives include:

- work on farms to reduce run-off into the rivers through the Catchment Sensitive Farming project funded by Natural England, and advice to farmers provided by Severn Rivers Trust
- a Clun Catchment Management Plan being drawn up by a Working Group, set up by Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, on which UCCWG is represented
- Dippers in the Teme Catchment project, with UCCWG involvement, collects data on a species with similar habitat requirements to the Mussel

The Wildlife Group supports these initiatives, and will seek to become involved in them wherever possible.

SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

The AONB has a statutory obligation to produce a Management Plan every five years. Conservation and enhancing Biodiversity are important elements of the Plan. The new plan for 2019-24 has now been approved, and can be found on the AONB website.

CONSERVATION ACTION

UCCWG recognizes that most land in the area is farmland in private ownership, and the Group needs to work closely with farmers to achieve our conservation objectives, although other landowners, householders with gardens, the County Council (responsible for verges and public open space), Welsh Forestry and the Wildlife Trust, among others, should also be involved. Declines in habitat quality and species richness have occurred slowly over many years, and it will take many more years of sustained, incremental habitat improvement if the populations of the "flagship" species are to return to their former levels.

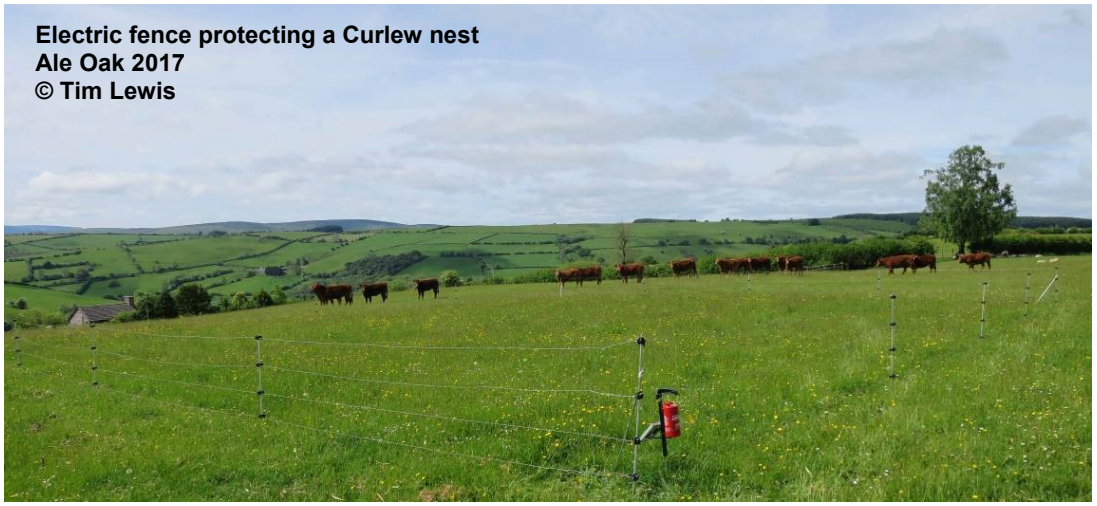
The Group will continue to promote its vision of a diverse, wildlife-rich landscape, and to collect the evidence that enables it to make authoritative representations for inclusions in Parish Plans, the

AONB policy and Management Plan, Natural England's Countryside Stewardship, the Environment Agency's work on river habitats, the Statutory Planning Process, and the policies of other statutory and voluntary organisations. Such influence is necessary if we are to help make a difference to the quality and diversity of wildlife habitats

CURLEW ACTION PLAN, & THE SWT / SOS "SAVE OUR CURLEWS" CAMPAIGN

The Wildlife Group has been surveying the Upper Clun for 13 years now, and working to reverse species declines by promoting the protection and restoration of habitat. It remains committed to such an approach as the only means of sustaining healthy species populations in the long term. However, Curlew has now declined so severely that it may follow Lapwing into local extinction before such measures can take effect. In an effort to prevent this, the Group launched an emergency *Curlew Action Plan* at the 2016 Annual meeting

Fieldwork suggests that fewer Curlew pairs are settling to nest, and the habitat at many of the traditional breeding sites is now marginal and requires landscape-scale conservation measures.



Electric fence protecting a Curlew nest
Ale Oak 2017
© Tim Lewis

Where pairs do manage to breed, nest and chick survival is extremely poor, and falls so far below the productivity needed to maintain the population that the situation is has become critical.

It has been shown that predation is now the major cause of breeding failure, though agricultural activities sometimes play a part; the same is likely to apply in the Upper Clun. Fencing nests has been shown to increase the chance of eggs hatching. Breeding success will not improve unless the immediate causes of failure are tackled directly, with close landowner involvement at all stages. Therefore, as part of the *Action Plan*, more effort was made in 2017 to locate nest sites, rather than territories. One nest was found, and protected by an electric fence. The eggs hatched, increasing the chances that young would fledge, although they did not.

Monitoring of Curlew populations by other Community Wildlife Groups has shown a similar rate of decline elsewhere. Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) have launched a "Save our Curlews" campaign, and a joint appeal to fund the nest monitoring and protection. Campaign work in the Upper Clun in 2018 and 2019 is described in the Bird Group work on page 6.

Similar work was carried out in the Clee Hill CWG area in 2018 and 2019. Detailed reports of the work in each of these two areas, and more information about the aims of the campaign, can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/ The Curlew distribution map from the County Bird Atlas 2008-13, overlain with the Community Wildlife Group areas, can also be found on the website, which is updated regularly.

SWT / SOS Save our Curlews Campaign

The identification of Curlew territories by the Community Wildlife Groups is the foundation of the campaign strategy – nests can only be protected once they are found. When local knowledge has located them sufficiently for a professional ornithologist to find several in a CWG area, it is intended to find them and protect them with an electric fence, and then radio tag the chicks that hatch, to gain information on how they feed, and the threats they face. The work to date has been funded by the joint SWT/SOS Appeal. This is a long-term project, so funding will be needed for many years.

The UCCWG Curlew Action Plan will continue in 2020 and future years, as part of the wider campaign. Anyone who wants to help with locating Curlews next April and early May should contact Michelle Frater via the Group's website. If you see or hear a Curlew next spring, please tell Michelle immediately.

OTHER COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUPS

The first Group, the Upper Onny Wildlife Group, first surveyed Lapwing and Curlew in 2004, and has done so every year since. Upper Clun CWG started in 2007, Kemp Valley in 2009, Clee Hill CWG in 2012, and Rea Valley and Camlad CWGs (part of the Stiperstones-Corndon HLF funded Landscape Partnership Scheme) in 2014. Stretton Hills CWG was launched in 2012, and surveyed Lapwing and Curlew for the first time in 2017. All these CWGs are active in the Shropshire Hills. The Three Parishes CWG, covering Weston Rhyn, St. Martin's and Gobowen, north of Oswestry, undertook a Bird Survey in 2017, and new CWGs, covering Oswestry south (Tanat to Perry) and Severn-Vyrnwy Confluence, were launched in 2018. A further Group, centred on Abdon (near Brown Clee) also started in 2018, the initiative of a local resident.

Almost all these groups undertook Lapwing and Curlew surveys in 2019. Between them, they cover well over half of the County's breeding Curlews. They covered over 140 survey squares (tetrads), totalling over 560 square kilometres. There were over 270 participants, who spent a total of more than 2,400 hours on survey work, and 80 – 100 Curlew territories were identified. This is a clear indication of the concern that local people have for the decline of Curlew, and their willingness to support action to do something about it.

Further information can be found on the joint website for all the Community Wildlife Groups in the Shropshire Hills, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk The three CWGs in the north-west have also joined the website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DISTRIBUTION

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Most importantly, thanks to all the people who undertook the Survey work, and contributed additional information. None of the work would have been possible without their effort and commitment. Their names are listed below

Bird Surveyors
Brian Angell (s)
Elizabeth & Steve Blackman (s)
Geoff Clarke (r)
Colin & Sheila Davies (r)
Chris Evans (s)
Sue Evans (r)
Michelle Frater (s)
Elizabeth Johnson (r)
Tim Lewis (r)
John Lyden (r)
Derek Matthews (s)
Mark Measures (r)
Karen Mitchell (r)

Martyn Owen (s)
Katie Steggles (s & r)
Richard Whateley (r)
Jennifer Winter (r)

(r) = Resident (Continuous) Recorder
(s) = Map Surveys

Plant Recorders
John Clayfield
Susan Gardner
Ros Gillard
Fiona Gomersall
John Lyden
Tess Pearson
Rob Rowe
Janet Watkin

Butterfly Recorders
John Lyden
Rob Rowe

Casual records of Curlew and other species were provided by Yvonne Appleby, Gill Binks, Chris & Susan Blackman, Bob Braddock, Helen Brown, Geoff Clarke, David Custerson, , Sue Evans, Cheryl Foster, Tony Haighway, Jacky Harrison, Martin Hockly, Roger Hughes, Clive & Gill Lewis, Dave Lewis, Gerry Leyman, Derek Matthews, Reg Maund, Mark Measures, David & Frances Morris, Peter Morris & Josie Crompton, Mervin Mullard, Brian Roberts, Alan Sedgwick, Delphine Whateley, Luke Woodhead and Sue & Hugh Yarwood Smith.

Michelle Frater organised the bird surveys, liaised with the surveyors and kept them informed with an e-newsletter, and wrote the chapters on the work of the Bird Group. She also undertook additional Bird Survey work, particularly in determining the Curlew population.

Martyn Owen and Richard Moores of Biome Consulting found the Curlew nests.

Allan Bernau photographed the ringed Curlew at Llanfair Hill in 2017

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The Small Woodland Birds Nestbox Scheme was run by Marie Zenick, who collected the information for the Report. Hosts who provided data were Gill Binks, Fiona Gomersall, Jackie Harrison, Mervin Mullard and Marie Zenick.

Ross Jones monitored the Barn Owl nest boxes

John Swift made and installed the Dipper and Woodland Bird nest boxes up until 2011. Vince Downs has made the nest boxes since then.

Tony Cross carried out the Dipper nest monitoring and ringing.

Fiona Gomersall compiled and drafted the Chapters and sections on the work and results of the Plant Group, and she also organised the surveys and the training.

John Arnfield, who set up the website, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk, and trained the members of the Group who manage the UCCWG pages: this role has now been taken on by Chris Bargman. Rob Harris posted the UCCWG material on the website

The cover photograph of Curlew is © Leo Smith, and the Curlew photos are © Robin Bennett and Allan Bernau; the Dipper and Pied Flycatcher photographs are © John Swift and © Gareth Thomas. The plants photos on the cover, and in the Plants Chapter are © Fiona Gomersall. The Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary on the cover is © Stephen Lewis and in the Butterfly Chapter is © John Hughes. The photo of the electric fence is © Tim Lewis. Thanks to them all for permission to use them.

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- Karen Mitchell, for publicising the Group's work, particularly via Clun Chronicle and posters, and setting up the Facebook Group
- Clun Chronicle, for publicising the Group's work
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Smith, L. *Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group Report* Annually since 2007

Smith, L. *Dippers in the River Teme Catchment* Annually since 2007

References and fieldguides used by the Plant Group for survey work include:-

- *The Wildflower Key* (second edition): Francis Rose & Clare O' Reilly
- *Wildflowers of Britain and Ireland*: Marjorie Blamey, Richard Fitter and Alastair Fitter
- *The Vegetative Key to the British Flora*: John Poland and Eric Clement
- *New Flora of the British Isles*: Third Edition Clive Stace
- *Sedges of the British Isles* Jermy, A.C., Simpson D.A., Foley M.J.Y., Porter M.S.
- *Guide to Grassland Plants 1*: FSC (Field Studies Council) publications
- *Guide to Moorland Plants FSC* Publications
- *Guide to Woodland Plants* FSC publications
- *Guide to* Orchids FSC publications

DISTRIBUTION

Paper copies of this Report are being distributed to the people listed above in the acknowledgements.

An electronic version of this Report, in .pdf format, will be supplied to the individuals and organisations listed below. Paper copies will be supplied to them on request.

Natural England

- Mike Robinson (Leader – Shropshire, Staffordshire, Birmingham and Black Country Landscape Team), County Hall, Spetchley Road, Worcester WR5 2NP
- Ceri Meehan (Natural England Lead Adviser responsible for the Clun area) Parkside Court, Hall Park Way, Telford, TF3 4LR
- Frances McCullagh (Ecologist, Midlands Land Management Team), Parkside Court, , Hall Park Way, Telford, TF3 4LR

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- Ian Grant (County Bird Recorder)

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- Emma Buckingham (Teme Catchment Project Officer)

THE REPORT

The Group's Report is printed on re-cycled paper.

Copies can be downloaded from the website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

Additional Copies (either paper or electronic .pdf files), or copies of any of the Reports since 2007, can be obtained from Leo Smith *Ornithological Surveys & Consultancy;* The Bryn, Castle Hill, All Stretton SY6 6JP (tel: 01694 720296, email leo@leosmith.org.uk)

CONCLUSION

The Group has covered the whole Upper Clun area with Bird and Plant Surveys since 2007, and knowledge of the numbers and distribution of target species is increasing. Butterfly Surveys have been carried out since 2010.

Some of the best grassland and wetland sites in the area, which contain good habitat for scarce Birds, Plants and Butterflies, have been identified. The Group has now started working with land owners to safeguard these sites. Most have been adopted as Local (County) Wildlife Sites.

The information we collected helped land owners apply for Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme agreements, and helped Natural England target these agreements for maximum benefit for wildlife in our area. Most of the best wildlife habitat in the area has been safeguarded through HLS Agreements that have 10 years to run, mainly from 2013 or 2014.

We have also worked with the local community, land owners, and the relevant Statutory and Voluntary Organisations, to raise awareness of conservation issues and influence decision-making bodies.

We have become increasingly involved in the land management issues which affect the water quality in the River Clun and its tributaries.

Planned survey work in 2020 will build on this knowledge, particularly in the wetlands, and enable us to extend the action to promote conservation of our target species and their habitats.

We will continue to implement our Curlew Action Plan, to try and save Curlew from local extinction as a breeding species, and work as part of the SWT / SOS "Save our Curlews" campaign.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Bird Survey Recording Instructions 2018

Appendix 2. Bird Survey Results

- **i) Curlew and Lapwing**
- **ii) Other Target Bird Species, and Wetland Surveys**
- **iii) Curlew, Reed Bunting, & Other Target Species: Explanatory Note to the Maps**

Appendix 3. Plant Survey - Target Indicator Species (Axiophytes)

Appendix 4. Curlews need farmers leaflet, produced for discussion with farmers through the Facilitation Fund Project

Annexe 1: The Management Committee

Appendix 1. Bird Survey Recording Instructions 2019

The maps and recording instructions for the Survey ("Operation Curlew, plus Lapwing & Other Target Species") have not changed since 2011, and are not reproduced here.

The survey is organised and administered via email, and all surveyors are sent reminders at key stages in the season, the first in late March.

Some returns are marked on survey maps, but most come from surveyors via email, as and when they have observations to report. This is particularly useful to collect all the observations of recorders who live in the area and hear Curlews frequently.

Appendix 2: Bird Survey Results

i) Curlew and Lapwing

There were no reports of Lapwings, so there is no Table of Lapwing Survey Results.

The Curlew Results in Table A2.1, together with the results of follow-up fieldwork and visits to local farmers and residents, and a few casual records, have been used to produce Map 1 (the approximate location of Curlew Territories) in the main body of the Report.

ii) Other Target Bird Species, and Wetland Surveys

Members have been asked to record Other Target Species since 2007. The list has been revised occasionally, and the current list is included in the *BIRDS OF THE "WETLANDS"* section in the Bird Surveys Chapter in the main body of the Report.

By the end of 2009 it became apparent that many of the Target Species were restricted to "wetlands" (mires, flushes and damp pasture) in the area. The best wetland sites were therefore targeted in 2010 and 2011, and were revisited from 2012 onwards only where incidental to other fieldwork. The results were shown on the *Curlew, Reed Bunting, & Other Target Species* maps for 2007-10, and for 2011, reproduced in the 2011 Report, while the similar map for subsequent years appeared in the relevant report. That for 2018 is on the page after next.

Because priority was given to recording Curlew, surveyors were not asked to record Other Target Species this year, although some contributed records voluntarily. This year's records are shown on Map A2.1. *Curlew, Reed Bunting, & Other Target Species 2015.* The map has been produced on the same basis as those in previous reports.

iii) Curlew, Reed Bunting, & Other Target Species: Explanatory Note to the Maps

The "Other Species" are Snipe, Cuckoo, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Stonechat, Linnet and Yellowhammer

Curlew, Reed Bunting and Kestrel are usually represented by one lozenge per record, although in some cases only representative Curlew records are shown, as some resident recorders were seeing or hearing them almost daily at some stages of the season. The presence of the other species is marked by a single lozenge which may represent multiple records.

At sites where Curlew records came mainly from local residents, no attempt may have been made to record the Other Target Species. These species will therefore be under-represented on the Map.

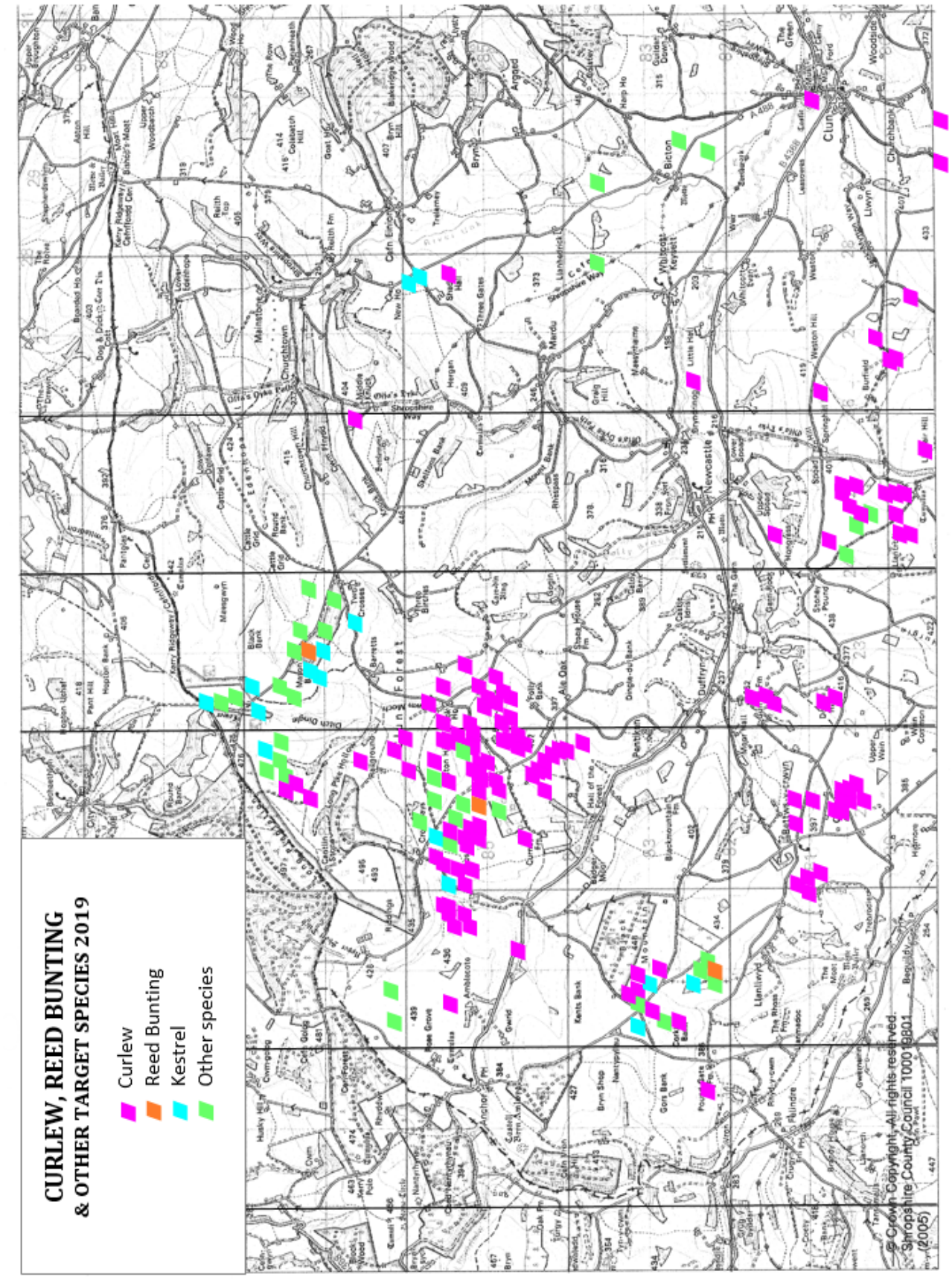
Fewer visits were made to some sites than others; this too will have affected the relative volume of records.

Table A2. 1. Results of Curlew Survey

UPPER CLUN CURLEW SURVEYS 2019

Site name	Observer	Breeding status	Comment
Amblecote	Colin & Sheila Davies (r)	No	Curlew heard beginning of season, nothing after that; not believed to have bred
Bicton Hill	C Evans (s) Katie Steggles (s&r)	Probable	Constant activity to end June, probable nest, may have hatched young, outcome unknown
Black Mountain	T Lewis, S Evans, D Matthews (s)	Possible	Regular calling early in season at previous nest site; possible nest, likely to have failed
Cwm Moch/Railground	K Steggles (r) Martyn Owen (s)	Probable	Activity through season, probable nest area identified, outcome unknown
Folly Bank	Tim Lewis (s) Karen Mitchell (r)	Unknown	Pair active 2017 nest site early on then regular activity Folly Bank area; breeding status unknown
Llanfairwaterdine Turbary	B Angell (s) M Frater (s)	Confirmed	Nest located, failed; evidence pair relaid, activity to around mid-July then ceased
Llanfair Hill area	Chris Blackman (r)	Confirmed	Occupied territory Llanfair Hill; adult & chick on adjacent land for c10 days to 19/07
Quabbs	R Whately (r) S Evans (r)	Probable	Territorial behaviour at regular site from end March, peaks of activity beginning & end June
Quabbs West	Jennifer Winter (r)	Unknown	Regular activity through season, breeding status unknown
Riddings &/or Rhos Fiddle	C & S Davies (r) John Lyden (r)	Probable	Territorial pair(s) until mid-May or later; defensive behaviour late June suggesting hatched young
	(s) surveys		
	(r) resident recorder		
Further records from:	Clun Valley, Dowke Hill, Knuck Bank, Mainstone, Rockhill, Stoney Pound, Unk Valley & Weston Hill		

Map A2. 1. Approximate location of Curlew and Other Target Bird Species 2019



Appendix 3. Plant Group – Sites Surveyed 2019

Site name	Site Code	Grid Reference	Habitat 1	Condition	Habitat 2	Condition
Bettws y Crwyn	SO18.05	SO194808	Semi-natural woodland	declining & part-destroyed		
Llanfair Hill	SO27.15	SO258792	Mesotrophic grassland	no change	Wet flushes	no change
Fron Wood	SO28.19	SO276876	Semi-natural woodland	good		
Wern Tanglas	SO28.51	SO238839	Mesotrophic grassland	good		
Myndtown	SO28.54	SO262847	Acid grassland	good	Sucessional scrub	good
Long Leasows, Lower Knuck	SO28.69	SO272873	Mesotrophic grassland	good	Acid grassland	good

Appendix 4. Target Plant Indicator Species in the Upper Clun (The "Axiophytes")

Rush Pastures

Scientific name	Common name
Achillea ptarmica	Sneezewort
Anagallis tenella	Bog Pimpernel
Briza media	Quaking Grass
Carex curta	White Sedge
Carex demissa	Common Yellow Sedge
Carex echinata	Star Sedge
Carex hostiana	Tawny Sedge
Carex panicea	Carnation Sedge
Carex pilulifera	Pill Sedge
Carex pulicaris	Flea Sedge
Comarum palustre	Marsh Cinquefoil
Dactylorhiza incarnata	Early Marsh-orchid
Dactylorhiza maculata	Heath Spotted-orchid
Dactylorhiza purpurella	Northern Marsh-orchid
Dryopteris carthusiana	Narrow Buckler-fern
Epilobium palustre	Marsh Willowherb
Equisetum sylvaticum	Wood Horsetail
Erica tetralix	Cross-leaved Heath
Eriophorum angustifolium	Common Cottongrass
Eriophorum vaginatum	Hare's-tail Cottongrass
Galium uliginosum	Fen Bedstraw
Isolepis setacea	Bristle Club-rush
Juncus foliosus	Leafy Rush
Menyanthes trifoliata	Bogbean
Molinea caerulea	Purple Moor-grass
Myosotis secunda	Creeping Forget-me-not
Narthecium ossifragum	Bog Asphodel
Pedicularis sylvatica	Lousewort
Pinguicula vulgaris	Common Butterwort
Polygala serpyllifolia	Heath Milkwort
Pulicaria dysenterica	Common Fleabane
Scutellaria minor	Lesser Skullcap
Succisa pratensis	Devil's-bit Scabious
Trichophorum cespitosum	Deergrass
Triglochin palustre	Marsh Arrowgrass
Valeriana dioica	Marsh Valerian
Veronica catenata	Pink Water-speedwell
Veronica scutellata	Marsh Speedwell
Viola palustris	Marsh Violet

Blanket Bog

Scientific name	Common name
Anagallis tenella	Bog Pimpernel
Apium inundatum	Lesser Marshwort
Calluna vulgaris	Heather
Carex demissa	Common Yellow Sedge
Carex dioica	Dioecious Sedge
Carex echinata	Star Sedge
Carex laevigata	Smooth-stalked Sedge
Carex pilulifera	Pill Sedge
Carex pulicaris	Flea Sedge
Dactylorhiza incarnata	Early Marsh-orchid
Dactylorhiza purpurella	Northern Marsh-orchid
Drosera rotundifolia	Round-leaved Sundew
Eleocharis multicaulis	Many-stalked Spike-rush
Eleocharis quinqueflora	Few-flowered Spike-rush
Erica tetralix	Cross-leaved Heath
Eriophorum angustifolium	Common Cottongrass
Eriophorum vaginatum	Hare's-tail Cottongrass
Hypericum elodes	Marsh St. John's-wort
Isolepis setacea	Bristle Club-rush
Juncus bulbosus	Bulbous Rush
Juncus foliosus	Leafy Rush
Lythrum portula	Water Purslane
Melampyrum pratense	Common Cow-wheat
Menyanthes trifoliata	Bogbean
Molinea caerulea	Purple Moor-grass
Myosotis secunda	Creeping Forget-me-not
Narthecium ossifragum	Bog Asphodel
Pedicularis palustris	Marsh Lousewort
Pedicularis sylvatica	Lousewort
Pinguicula vulgaris	Common Butterwort
Potamogeton polygonifolius	Bog Pondweed
Ranunculus omiophyllus	Round-leaved Crowfoot
Scutellaria minor	Lesser Skullcap
Trichophorum cespitosum	Deergrass
Valeriana dioica	Marsh Valerian
Veronica scutellata	Marsh Speedwell
Viola palustris	Marsh Violet

Species-rich Meadows

Scientific name	Common name
Alchemilla filicaulis	a lady's-mantle
Anancamptis morio	Green-winged Orchid
Betonica officinalis	Betony
Botrychium lunaria	Moonwort
Briza media	Quaking-grass
Carex caryophyllea	Spring Sedge
Carex pallescens	Pale Sedge
Carex panicea	Carnation Sedge
Carex spicata	Spiked Sedge
Colchicum autumnale	Meadow Saffron
Euphrasia officinalis agg.	Eyebright
Filipendula vulgaris	Dropwort
Genista tinctoria	Dyer's Greenweed
Linum catharticum	Fairy Flax
Myosotis discolor	Changing Forget-me-not
Myosotis ramosissima	Early Forget-me-not
Neottia ovata	Common Twayblade
Ophioglossum vulgatum	Adder's-tongue
Pimpinella saxifraga	Burnet-saxifrage
Rhinanthus minor	Yellow-rattle
Serratula tinctoria	Saw-wort
Silaum silaus	Pepper-saxifrage
Succisa pratensis	Devil's-bit-Scabious
Trisetum flavescens	Yellow Oat-grass

Appendix 5

Clun Forest Farmers

Curlews need farmers - Information & Discussion Paper

This note has been prepared to help farmer groups discuss ways of helping to improve Curlew breeding success, which is the first step in reversing their population decline. It follows discussions at a Facilitation Fund event on 27th February 2019 for farmers to find out more about what is being done to protect and encourage Curlews to nest in the Clun Forest, and how they can help. The ideas in this note need adapting to reflect the experience of the farmers concerned, and to fit into the regime and terrain on their farms. Curlews have big territories, so hopefully farmers will be able to co-operate to produce suitable conditions over a sufficiently large area.

Curlews are slowly heading for extinction here because of poor breeding success. Adults live for many years, so the decline is slow, but not enough young birds fledge to replace the older ones as they eventually die off. In the Upper Clun, the population has declined from 20-22 pairs in 2007 to 6-10 in 2019. Most Curlews nest on farmland, so the help of farmers is vital if this decline is to be reversed.

Curlews nest on the ground. Eggs take around 4 weeks to hatch, and another 5 - 6 weeks before the chicks are able to fly, from late June onwards at the earliest. If nesting is delayed by the weather, or pairs have re-laid after losing their first clutch, many chicks can't fly until late-July or even later.

Nesting Time

Curlews usually return to their breeding areas in March, and start laying eggs towards the end of April. Laying is usually delayed if stock are present on the chosen nest field, to avoid the risk of eggs being trampled. Nests are usually in fields with damp patches, which are being used as rough pasture, or for growing grass to make hay or silage. Cattle pasture is preferred to sheep fields, as the uneven sward provides better cover and camouflage for nests, and retains moisture better, providing better feeding habitat. Laying is usually delayed until the grass is at least 6" (15 cm) tall.

Nests are destroyed if rolling or harrowing occurs after eggs are laid. Occasionally, some farmers find nests and mark their location, so they can avoid them later. Unfortunately, there is a risk that an obvious marker placed close to a nest, or a small part of a field which is treated differently from the rest, will attract inquisitive predators. It's not possible to pick up the eggs, and then put them back in the nest, as Curlews are very sensitive to disturbance, and will desert such nests. Also, it's illegal.

Farmers can help by:

- ***Removing stock by mid-April from fields that will remain uncut until July***
- ***Leaving stock for as long as possible on fields that will be cut earlier, to encourage Curlews to nest elsewhere***
- ***Grazing fields suitable for nesting Curlew with cattle, rather than sheep***
- ***Completing rolling, harrowing and any other field preparation by mid-April, or as soon as possible thereafter, and certainly before late April***
- ***Retaining and restoring damp areas.***

Reducing Predation

Nest monitoring and radio tracking of chicks, in the Upper Clun and elsewhere, has shown that predation of nests and chicks, mainly by foxes but also by Crows, is now the biggest threat to Curlew survival. Finding the nest, and putting an electric fence round it, protects the eggs from mammalian predators (and trampling by livestock).

Farmers can help by:

- ***Controlling predators through legal means***
- ***Reducing the availability of sheep carrion and afterbirth, which is a rich food source for foxes and avian scavengers and predators***
- ***If a nest is found, erecting a 20m square electric fence around it, with the lowest strand only 11cm off the ground, to stop foxes getting underneath it***
- ***Otherwise, calling Tim Lewis, who lives in the Upper Clun, and has extensive experience of fencing Curlew nests, who will do it for you (01588 640102, mobile 07966 180289, email: tim.p.lewis@gmail.com***
- ***If fencing is not possible, leaving any found nest undisturbed, and leaving the surrounding area the same, so the nest is not advertised to potential predators.***

Curlew chicks are not fed by their parents. They leave the nest within a day or two of hatching, and feed themselves, mainly on insects, spiders and worms. They may move several hundred metres. They are then vulnerable to Buzzards and other avian predators, as well as foxes and crows. They may stay in long grass or rushes, or move onto shorter pasture. It is important that there is lots of food, so chicks don't have to spend a lot of time in the open, and energy, looking for it, and plenty of cover for them to hide in when necessary.

Farmers can help by:

- ***Using little or no pesticides or veterinary medicines, which reduce the insects and invertebrates which the chicks feed on***
- ***Planting a greater diversity of leys***
- ***Grazing less intensively, so there is plenty of cover***
- ***Increasing the size and number of damp patches, to provide more food and avoid chicks being concentrated in a few small areas.***

Grass Cutting Time

Chicks feed mostly in the wetter areas of a field, and usually stay in deep cover. Unfledged chicks will be killed if they are in a field when the grass is cut, perhaps only a few days before they are able to fly to safety. Farming has become much more efficient, so fields are often cut earlier than they used to be, and modern machines complete the job in a day or two, rather than taking several days or weeks. Fewer chicks escape now. This has been one of the main reasons for the decline in breeding success.

If Curlews are known to be in the area, farmers can help by:

- ***Delaying grass cutting as late as possible, preferably into early August or later***
- ***Checking for the presence of alarming adults in fields about to be cut, and, if they are present, delaying or calling for assistance.***
- ***Cutting each field over several days, to allow the chicks to move***
- ***Leaving the wetter areas uncut.***

Longer Term Action

Curlews often nest in the same places year after year, so the best way of helping them is by planning to avoid agricultural operations in known nesting areas between early April and mid-July or into August.

Farmers can help by:

- ***Preparing potential or known nest sites by removing stock early, so the grass is long enough for nesting by mid-April***
- ***Delaying grass-cutting in known nesting areas until mid-July***
- ***Joining (or amending) an appropriate Agri-environment Scheme, to get financial help for management changes which benefit Curlews.***

Financial Help, and Advice

Farmers in schemes should be able to get them extended. Other farmers can apply for money for action to help Curlews on their land. Advice can be obtained from Natural England and the Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group. Trials are being carried out to make future schemes more Curlew-friendly.

Annexe 1. The Management Committee

Membership

The following people were elected at the Annual Meeting in November 2018

- Leo Smith (Chair)
- Jacky Harrison (Secretary)
- Mervin Mullard (Treasurer)
- Fiona Gomersall (Plant Recorder)
- Rob Rowe
- Joy Greenall
- Rob Harris
- John Lyden
- Karen Mitchell (Publicity Officer / Facebook Group)
- Katie Steggles
- Trevor Wheeler
- Marie Zenick (Bird Group rep) (Marie resigned during the year, for personal reasons).

Fiona Gomersall represented the local Branch of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust until the end of August, and Trevor Wheeler also represents the Clun Forest *Land, Life and Livelihoods* project Steering Group.

The Committee, and the Bird and Plant Group, have the support of Professional Advisers

- Fiona Gomersall (Shropshire Wildlife Trust) actively supports and co-ordinates the Plant Group
- Leo Smith actively supports and helps co-ordinate the Management Committee and the Bird Group

Meetings

The Committee has met once since the last Annual Public Meeting, on 30 October 2019. Much of the meeting was concerned with speakers and arrangements for the Annual Public Meeting.

The Group is represented on the Advisory Committee to the Land, Life and Livelihoods Facilitation Fund project by Leo Smith, Jacky Harrison and Fiona Gomersall. Rob Harris and Trevor Wheeler are also involved through their work with LLL, and Joy Greenall is facilitator. The project aims to encourage farmers largely on the high ground in the area to work together to provide “joined up management” to improve key upland habitats.

Otherwise, most of the practical work of the Group is carried out by the Bird and Plant Groups, and the organisers report to, and are overseen by, the Management Committee. In practice this means that it is not necessary to have frequent meetings of the Committee.

Most of the issues discussed at Committee meetings relate to the conduct and results of surveys, mailings to members, publicity and getting more people involved, engaging with farmers and landowners, relations with Land Life and Livelihoods and the Clun & Bishop’s Castle SWT branch, Conservation Action & *Wildlife Habitats & Landscape* Policy, the increasing attention being paid to land management issues in the whole catchment, as they affect the water quality in the river, and other matters which are fully described in this Report.

Minutes of Committee meetings have been kept, and can be obtained from the Secretary.

Funding and Bank Account

The Group had a Bank Account with HSBC in Bishop’s Castle, the only branch of any bank convenient for the area.

Each cheque requires two signatures from four nominated Committee members: the current Officers, and Rob Rowe

Up until 2011, all the costs of the Group were met through various grants to Leo Smith. From October 2011 to June 2013, all costs were met by the LEADER Community Wildlife Groups Project, administered by the Shropshire Hills AONB and part financed by the European Union Regional Development Fund, with the National Trust as Banker. These grants were listed in the Acknowledgements in the various Reports, and all of them were accounted for to the funding body.

Most grants are for the financial year ending 31st March, so the Constitution has set the financial year as 1st April – 31st March, and accounts will be audited accordingly.

Financial Report and Accounts

In 2018-19 the only income was receipts from the 2018 Annual meeting. Expenditure was hire of hall and refreshments for the meeting, speaker's travel expenses, and expenses for Group mailings (mainly postage), and UCCWG's share of the cost for the website.

Income and Expenditure for 2018-19

Last year's report noted Expenditure of £12 on the website, and a balance of £451.71 on 2 October 2018. Transactions since then are summarised in the table below.

OPENING BALANCE 31/10/18		**451.71**
INCOME		
AGM (Raffle and food sales)	139.10	
TOTAL INCOME	139.10	
EXPENDITURE		
AGM HALL HIRE	32.00	
POSTAGE STAMPS	77.84	
SPEAKER'S EXPENSES	48.60	
CLUN MEMORIAL HALL	20.00	
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	178.44	
CLOSING BALANCE 31/03/19		**412.37**
OPENING BALANCE 04/01/2019		**412.37**
INCOME	**10.00**	
EXPENDITURE		
MAINSTONE VILLAGE HALL	**25.00**	
CLOSING BALANCE 31/10/2019		**397.37**

Audited by Cath landles (AONB Community Officer) 13/11/18

Members

Any volunteers for membership of the Committee will be very welcome.

All the current Committee members are willing to stand for re-election. Existing and new members are all subject to election at the Public Meeting

Leo Smith (Chair)
Mervin Mullard (Treasurer)
November 2019