

Upper Onny

Wildlife Group



Bird Group Report Survey Results 2020



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The Group was established in 2003, following a public meeting organised by the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership to find out what local people valued in their landscape, to work within the local community to find out more about the local populations of Lapwings, Curlews, Skylarks and other wildlife, and to help in their conservation.

The Group covers a total area of about 125 square kilometres, between the Long Mynd and the Welsh Border (from just north of Bridges, Pennerley and Shelve, as far south as Horderley and Bishops Castle). Most of this area is within the AONB, and is shown in Appendix 1.

There are about 70 members, who all live or work in the area, and are interested in its wildlife. New members are welcome, and membership is free.

A Breeding Bird Survey has been carried out each year since 2004, concentrating on Curlew and Lapwing. Farmers with nests on their land have been advised of their presence, and encouraged to take appropriate conservation measures. This includes joining one of Natural England's farm payment schemes, so farmers are rewarded financially for conservation.

As a result of the steep declines that were found, the Group proposed the Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project, which started in 2014, and we provided Curlew distribution maps from our surveys to help them to find and protect nests, to discover the causes of this decline, and try and reverse it, and we continued to provide this information to the successor project, *Curlew Country*, in 2018 and 2019.

We also encouraged the LPS to set up new Community Wildlife Groups in the Rea Valley, to the north of our area, and the Camlad Valley to the west, and these Groups now carry out bird surveys to complement the one described in this report.

The Group has diversified, and we have carried out plant surveys, particularly on potential Wildlife Sites, and operated a project to clear invasive species for several years.

Events are held to involve more people in this work, and training is provided.

Anyone can join who wants to actively contribute to local knowledge and conservation, and we need new people to help.

Communication with members is largely by email. An Annual Report is sent to members, and previous reports can be found on the Community Wildlife Groups website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk A Facebook Group will be established shortly. Contact details can be found on p.21.

Several projects organised by the Group have benefitted from support received from players of People's Postcode Lottery in 2020.



CURLEWS, LAPWINGS AND OTHER BIRDS SURVEY

Introduction

A bird survey has been carried out in the Upper Onny area annually since 2004, to monitor long-term population trends for key species, as well as establish the current population and distribution. The area is shown in Appendix 1.

The area was initially divided up into 30 tetrads (2x2 kilometre squares, each made up of four of the one-kilometre squares shown on Ordnance Survey maps). Two tetrads were subsequently added to this core area, covering Stapeley Common and Wildmoor, the sources of the Rivers west and east Onny respectively. These tetrads, and their reference code, are shown on the map in Appendix 1, while Appendix 2 shows the numbers that the Group uses. .

The survey normally consists of three visits to each of these tetrads, once during each of three specified two week periods, around 1st April, 1st May and mid-June. Plans were made to carry out the surveys in 2020 as normal, but the first and second surveys were cancelled after the Government's advice to people to stay at home to help prevent the spread of coronavirus, although some surveyors could do their square(s) within the daily exercise walk from home, complying with social distancing guidelines. Otherwise, surveyors were requested to choose daily exercise walks from home that enabled them to collect records of the main target species, in any survey square. They were requested to concentrate on Lapwing, Curlew and Kestrel, and any potential Red Kite breeding sites, and submit records on tetrad sheets or casual records maps, or by email, as appropriate.

However, particular efforts were made to continue to record Curlews, as “the Curlew situation is critical, with a 77% decline [in Shropshire] between 1990 and 2010, and a further decline since. There's probably only 120 pairs left in the whole of the County now, and we haven't got long to save them from local extinction. We can't afford a total loss of data on their population and distribution in 2020”. Therefore surveyors were requested to consider ways to continue to record Curlews, while still complying with the Coronavirus lockdown restrictions.

The lockdown restrictions in England were eased in mid-May, including allowing car journeys for travel to exercise, and no limit on the time spent exercising each day, so surveyors were requested on 15 May to resume survey work, and do a survey of their square(s) as soon as possible (the early May survey, a couple of weeks late), and the mid-June survey as usual. However, some members were not able, or willing, to resume survey work, because of their various personal circumstances.

At the same time, members were advised that “there have been more Cuckoo records than usual; it's not clear whether there are more Cuckoos about, or we're better able to hear them in the peace and quiet of staying at home”, so they were asked to submit all records of Cuckoo as well.

This report therefore summarises the records of Curlew, Lapwing, Kestrel and Cuckoo.

The coverage achieved in 2020 is set out in Table 1. Blanks mean no coverage. It will be seen that no records were received from seven of the 32 squares, and only casual records were received from a further one. Squares that had Curlews last year were well covered.

Previous reports have included a table, listing the square surveyors, the time spent on the surveys, and all records of all target species, together with an estimate of total time spent. In view of the limited coverage in 2020, this information has not been collated. For

comparison, in 2019, survey work was carried out in all 32 tetrads, and 31 members spent over 280 hours on it. The list of Other Target Species surveyed in a normal season is shown on page 11.

Table 1. Coverage in 2020

Square		First	Second	Second (late)	Third	Good Casual Coverage
No.	(Tetrad)					
0	SO39 E	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1	SO39 J			Yes	Yes	
2	SO39 P	Yes	Yes			Yes
3	SO39 U		Yes			Part
4	SO39 Z		Yes	Yes		Yes
5	SO49 E			Yes		Yes
6	SO39 I		Yes		Yes	Yes
7	SO39 N	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
8	SO39 T		Yes	Yes		Yes
9	SO39 Y	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
10	SO49 D			Yes	Yes	
10A	SO49 I	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	SO39 H					
12	SO39 M			Yes	Yes	
13	SO39 S			Yes	Yes	Part
14	SO39 X			Yes	Yes	

Square		First	Second	Second (late)	Third	Good Casual Coverage
No.	(Tetrad)					
15	SO49 C	Yes	Yes		Yes	
16	SO39 G	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	SO39 L			Yes		
18	SO39 R	Yes		Yes		
19	SO39 W					
20	SO49 B				Yes	
21	SO39 F					
22	SO39 K	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
23	SO39 Q			Yes	Yes	
24	SO39 V			Yes		
25	SO49 A					
26	SO38 J					
27	SO38 P	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
28	SO38 U					
29	SO38 Z					
30	SO48 E					Yes

Curlew

Curlew is the “most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK” (Brown *et al*, *British Birds* 2015), because the UK has an estimated 28% of the European, and 19-27% of the world population and is on the national *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern 4* (Eaton *et al*, *British Birds* 2015), because of a decline of 62% in the UK between 1969 and 2014. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found a 48% decline in the UK, and a 31% decline in England, over the 23 year period 1995-2018.



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The Birds of Shropshire

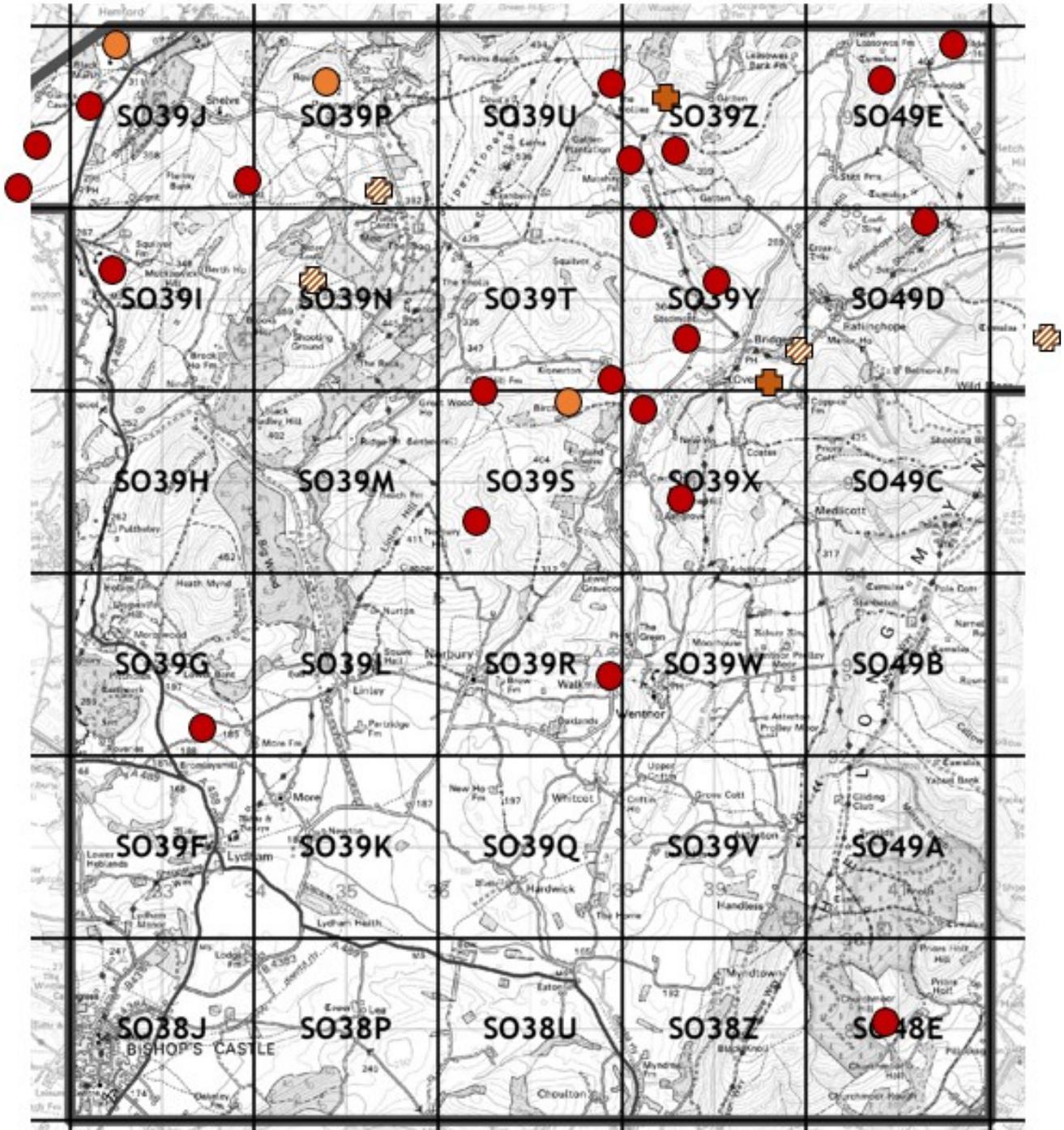
(Smith, 2019) showed a decline from about 700 breeding pairs in 1990 to 160 in 2010 (a loss of 77%), and it disappeared from 62% of the Atlas survey squares (tetrads) between 1985-90 and 2008-13. The decline has continued, and there were probably only 120 pairs left in the whole of the County in 2019. This is almost 30% of the total in southern England (*Saving England's lowland Eurasian Curlews* Colwell *et al* *British Birds* 2020). At the current rate of decline, the County population will halve in about 13 years, and become virtually extinct in 25. Curlew is on the *Red List of Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire*, recently published by Shropshire Ornithological Society.

Survey results

The map summarises the estimated number and distribution of Curlew territories in the Upper Onny area in 2020. The location of all Curlews found during the surveys, or reported on Casual Record maps or by email, is shown on the map in Appendix 2.

Curlew Territories 2020

(All Surveys and Casual Records)



Population Estimate: 25 - 28, plus 2 in SO39E (Square 0) and 1 in SO49I (Square 10A)



The methodology requires observations of a pair together, or a territorial display, or a single bird on two of the three surveys, to confirm a territory. However, Curlews often have large territories, and may be seen a kilometre or more from their nest site, so interpretation of the observations is sometimes difficult, unless singing birds are seen or heard concurrently. If that does not happen, the methodology requires the analysis to produce the lowest population estimate consistent with the records, in this case 25-28 pairs in the core area, plus two in square 0 (SO39E), and one on Wildmoor (SO49I).

One new pair was found, in SO39G. This square has been well covered in previous years, and it is unlikely that it would have been overlooked if it had been there then. Neither bird was colour-ringed.

There were three “possible additional pairs” shown on the map.

- The one in the north of SO39J was definitely different from the other pair in the same square (they were seen concurrently), but they flew off northwards and were probably the pair that nested near Hemford, in the Rea Valley area.
- The one in the north of SO39P was seen and heard frequently, but it may have been a good feeding area, for the pair to the south, or the pair that nest to the north near Santley, in the Rea Valley area (or the territory boundary between the two).
- The pair in SO39S was probably at a favoured feeding site for the pair from Kinnerton, just over the brow of the hill.

All other pairs were at similar locations to last year.

One pair was lost: there were three pairs in SO49E last year, but only two in 2020.

On 1 June a post-breeding flock of about 20 Curlews was seen near The Stiperstones. This number represents about one-third of the total breeding population in the area, but little grass-cutting or other agricultural activities had occurred by that date. This suggests a continuing very high nest failure rate due to predation. After this date, the two found nests and the one on Wildmoor were also predated, and although adults at the other three nests defended them against crows or Buzzards, this activity did not occur after early June, and the adults became quiet, suggesting that these eggs (or, in one case, probably chicks) were predated too.

Most of the grass fields were harvested around 8-10 June, when any chicks that did hatch would still be very small and unable to escape the cutters.

There is no evidence that any young Curlews fledged in the area.

From the observations and analysis, it is estimated that the Curlew population in the core area of 30 squares in 2020 was 25-28 breeding pairs, with two more in square 0 (Stapeley Common) and one in square 10A (Wildmoor).

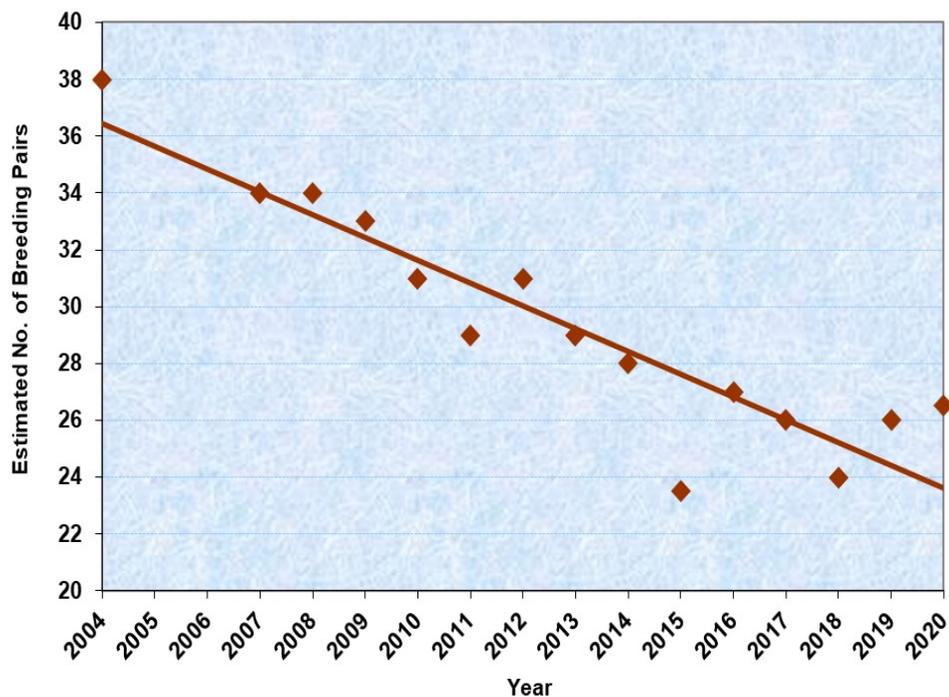
The survey will continue in future years, to continue to monitor the population and population trend

Population Trend

Table 1 shows the estimated number of pairs found in each year since 2004, and the chart shows the annual trends. In some years the number of pairs has not been established precisely, so a range has been given, and the estimate is the mid-point in the range.

**Table 1. Curlew population
2004 – 20**

Year	No. Pairs
2004	38
2005	
2006	
2007	34
2008	34
2009	33
2010	31
2011	29
2012	31
2013	29
2014	28
2015	23.5
2016	27
2017	26
2018	24
2019	26
2020	26.5



The population since 2016 appears to have been broadly unchanged. The weather in 2015 and 2018 were not helpful to Curlew. The spring was very cold and dry in the former, and strong winds and wet weather (“the beast from the east”) in the latter both restricted the availability of invertebrate food, and delayed the growth of grass to provide cover for nest sites, so it is possible in those years that some pairs delayed nesting, never tried, or moved on, and were overlooked.

Colour-ringing



Well over 150 wild Curlews have been caught and colour-ringed by the Mid-Wales Ringing Group since March 2015 at the Dolydd Hafren Montgomery Wildlife Trust Reserve on the River Severn near Welshpool. All the “headstarted” chicks released by Curlew Country since 2017 have also been colour-ringed (see p.16).

Several colour-ringed wild Curlews have been found breeding in the area in previous years, and in 2020 there were at least five, but most individuals were not observed closely enough to see whether they were colour-ringed or not. No headstarted Curlews were found. One was found in 2019 in SO49E, but it was not relocated. There were three pairs in this

square last year, but only two in 2020. Attempts were made to check these pairs for colour-rings. None were seen, but it is not certain that good enough views were obtained of all four birds to be sure that there were none.

Recording Curlew Nest Sites

To improve the value of CWG Curlew surveys, nest site habitat data is being collected to feed into the database being developed by the South of England Curlew Forum. Although nests are not searched for, they are found occasionally. More importantly, the field containing the nest can often be identified (by seeing the sitting bird from a distance, or from the behaviour of the adults defending the nest from potential predators), and as far as

defining the habitat is concerned, the precise location of the nest within the field is unnecessary.

Observers have been requested to complete a questionnaire for every case where a nest was found, or the field containing the nest was identified beyond reasonable doubt.

Some of the questions try to assess what farming activities take place in the field during the period before any chicks would fledge, up until early August (the full term if a pair nest late, or relay after the first clutch fails).

The questionnaire has been piloted this year, and comments on it (including any omissions) have been requested.

The six nest sites found in this area are shown on the Curlew Territories Map above. The two nests actually found, in SO39Y and Z, are shown as a cross with solid colour, while the four fields with a nest (in SO39N, P and Y, and SO49I) have hatched colour.

Lapwing

Lapwing was added to the national *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern* in 2009, and this status was confirmed in 2015 (Eaton *et al*, British Birds 2015), because of a decline in the UK of 63% between 1969 and 2014, and 57% over the previous 25 years. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 43% in the UK, 30% in England and 47% in the English West Midlands, over the 23 year period 1995-2018.

The Birds of Shropshire (Smith, 2019) showed a decline from about 3,000 breeding pairs in 1990 to 800 in 2010 (a loss of 73%), and it disappeared from 46% of the Atlas survey squares (tetrads) between 1985-90 and 2008-13. The decline has continued, certainly in the areas monitored by several Community Wildlife Groups. Lapwing is on the *Red List of Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire*. The decline is partly obscured by the much larger numbers seen in winter flocks, which comprise birds escaping from the frozen ground in northern Europe.

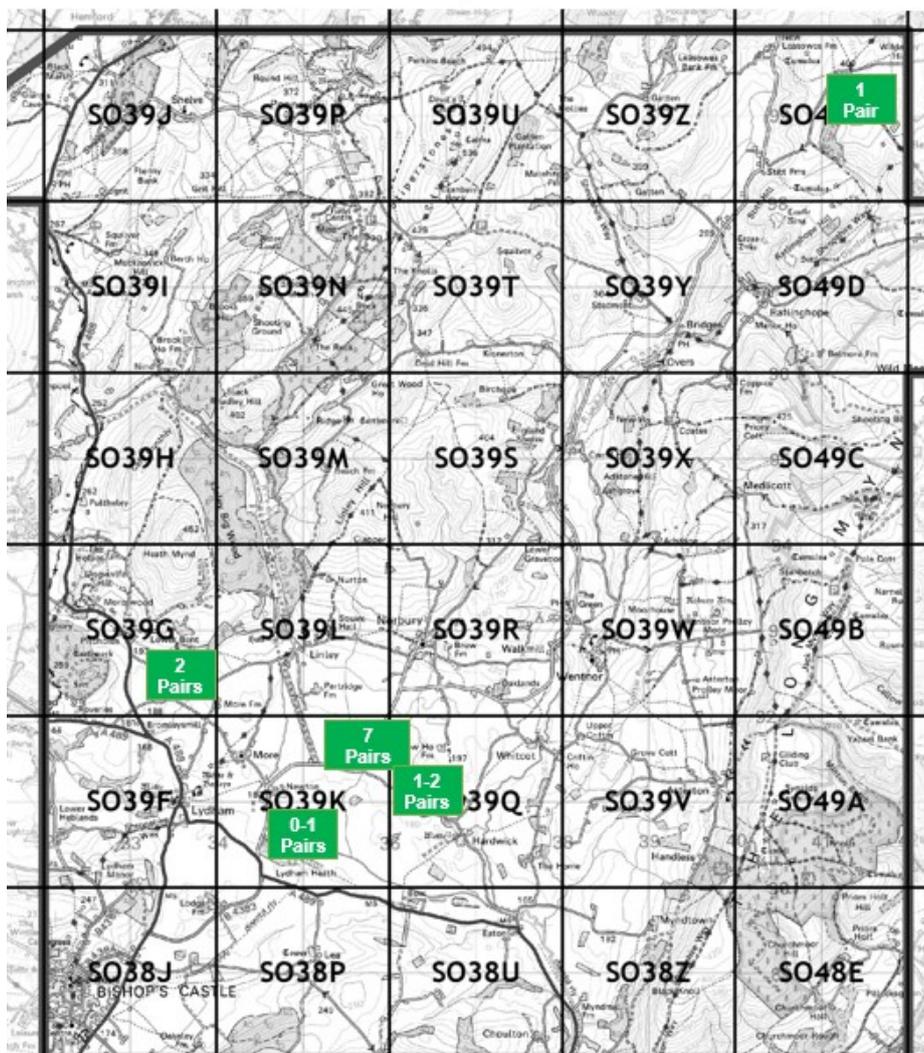


Lapwings are now restricted to about only five farms, with none at all on either of the two farms that previously held the bulk of the population, and the Group is still trying to work with farmers and Natural England to improve habitat and breeding success, to reverse the long-term decline.

The map summarises the estimated number and distribution of breeding Lapwings in the Upper Onny area.

Lapwing Records 2020

Records from all surveys and casual records



Total 11-13 pairs.

**c.f. 7 pairs last year (the lowest since UOWG started),
11 in 2018, 9 in 2017, 14 in 2016 and 13 – 17 pairs in 2015.**

The largest colony used 12 fields between Penhaligon Stud in SO39K and Hardwick in SO39Q. Counting pairs is difficult, because the females don't sit tight, predation and nest turnover is high, a repeat nest is often laid in a different field, particularly if the crop has become too tall for nesting, while broods of chicks were also moved into different fields for feeding. Also, the males often commute between several fields (often not including the one with the nest, which they don't want to draw attention to). However, 14-17 birds were seen concurrently, on 17 April, which probably didn't include a nesting female, perhaps sitting tight on the far side of the colony near Hardwick. The local farmer also provided valuable information about numbers and

movements, and put an electric fence round a nest. The colony is therefore estimated at 8-9 pairs. This is a considerable improvement on the estimate of up to five pairs last year, and four in 2018. A Lapwing that was probably a recently-fledged young was seen in late May or early June, but a small chick on the same date was taken by a crow.

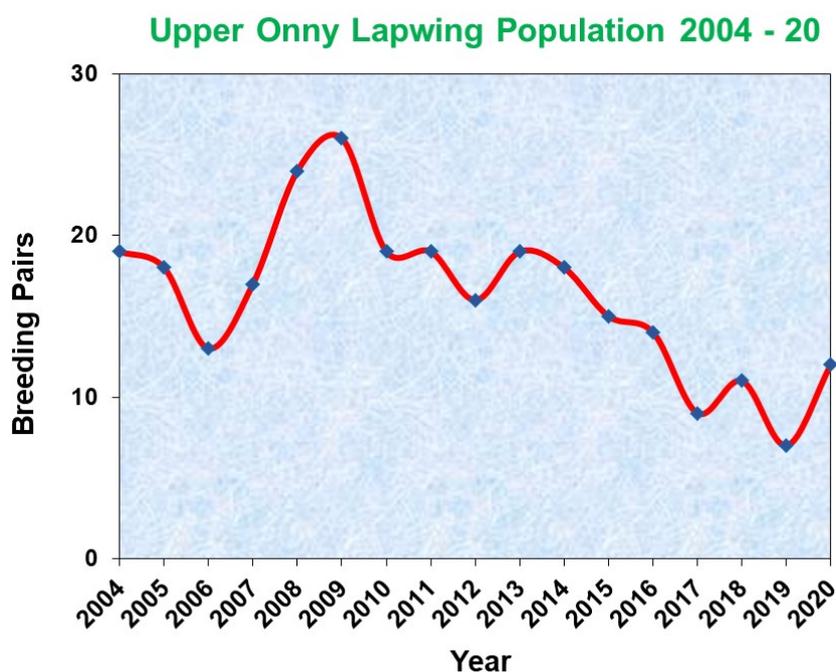
None were found on the HLS "Lapwing Field" in SO39K, for the second year running. There were none on any other part of Lodge Farm in April, but a pair moved onto a field north of Lydham Heath in May, probably a relocation of a failed pair from the colony to the north-east. If it was a relocation, it has already counted in the colony estimate.

Two pairs were defending nests against crows in SO39G on 22 April, and there was one pair in SO49E.

From the observations and analysis, it is estimated that the Lapwing population in 2020 is 11-13 breeding pairs

Population Trends

In the first three years of UOWG surveys (2004 – 06), the breeding population declined from 19 to 13 pairs. If that rate of decline had continued, Lapwings would have been lost within two more years. A Lapwing Recovery Project was therefore launched, which worked with several individual farmers and Natural England to reverse the decline. It was successful initially, and the population increased to 26 pairs by 2009, but loss of important habitat on a single farm that held half the population led to a further decline, and by 2010 numbers were down again to when the Group started. Further decline set in again in 2015, down to 9 pairs in 2017 and to the lowest number since 2004, only 7 pairs in 2019. Fortunately there was a slight recovery in 2020.



Anecdotal Evidence for the Decline of Lapwing and Curlew

The Group was established because residents who attended a Shropshire Hills AONB “Down to Earth” meeting in 2003 believed both species were in rapid decline. Members of the Bird Group who live in the area, and other local residents, have also said that Lapwings and Curlews are less common now than they used to be. In previous years, some members talked to local farmers in the course of their surveys, and they too said that Lapwings and Curlews are less common now than they used to be. When some farmers were told how many Lapwings the Group had found in the whole area, they said they used to have more than that on one field.

No attempt was made to talk to farmers or other residents in 2020.

Lapwings have apparently declined much more than Curlews.

Kestrel

Kestrel is on the national *Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern 4* (Eaton *et al*, 2015), because of a decline in the UK of 46% between 1969 and 2014, and 33% over the previous 25 years. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 35% in the UK, 21% in England and 35% in the English West Midlands region, over the 23 year period 1995-2018.

The Birds of Shropshire (Smith, 2019) showed that records of confirmed or probable breeding declined by 46% in the 870 Atlas survey squares (tetrads) between 1985-90 and 2008-13, and the population probably halved in that time. Kestrel is on the *Red List of Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire*.

Kestrels defend a small territory around the nest, but their home range, where they find most of their food, is at least 1 km square, but can be as large as 10 km square. Most

hunting is carried out within 1.8km of the nest, but the home range is often partly shared with neighbouring pairs.

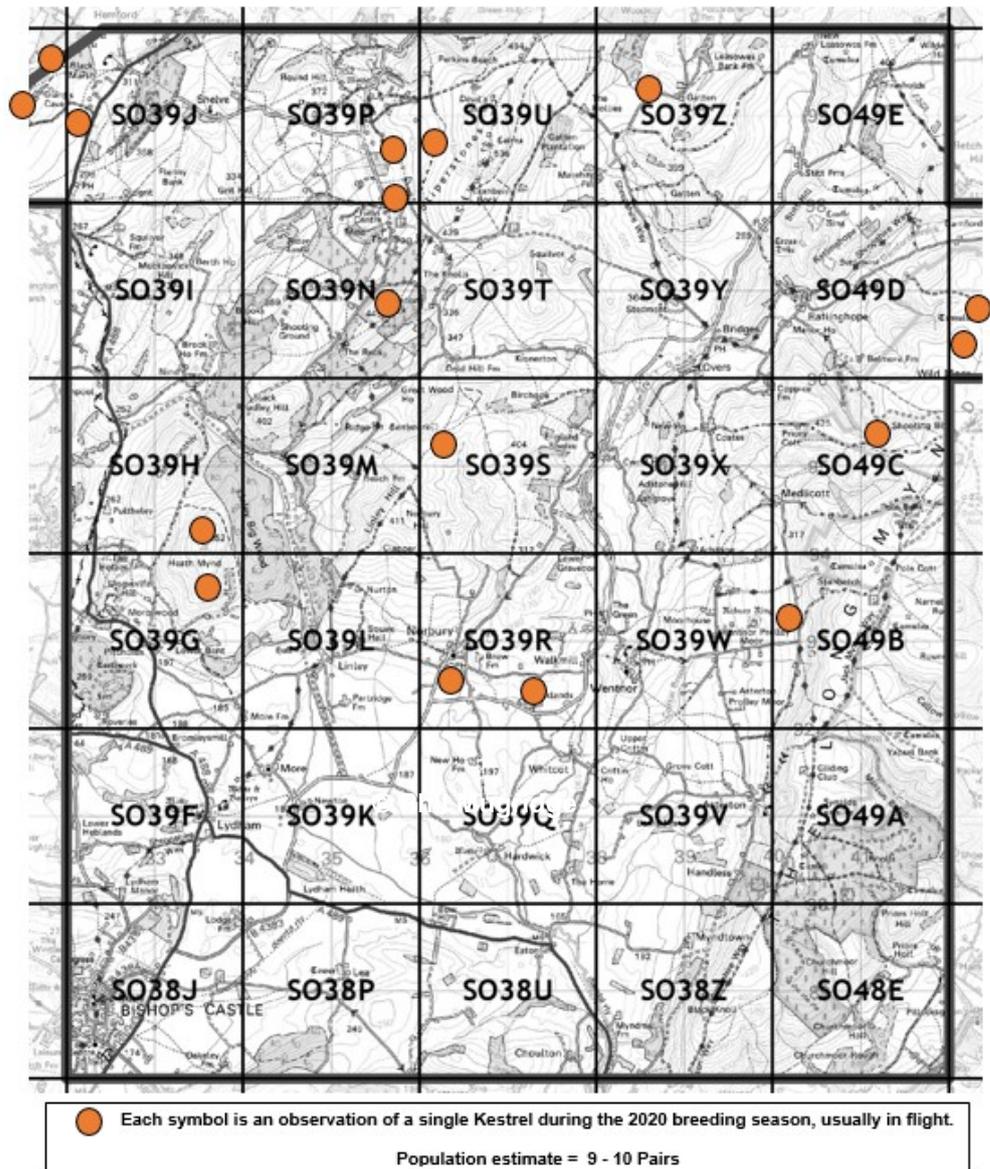
The local decline appears to have continued in recent years, and the Shropshire Ringing and Raptor Groups have launched a nest box scheme to help improve breeding success, and try and find out the reasons for the decline. To help get a better understanding of the population and distribution, members doing CWG surveys have been asked to make a special effort to record Kestrels.



© Phil Mugridge

The population varies from year to year, depending on prey abundance, mainly voles, but Kestrels are much more likely to be observed in good breeding seasons, when they have to spend more time hunting for food for chicks, and travelling to and from the nest. In 2019, the numbers of Kestrels seen were much lower in all the CWG areas than in 2018, suggesting that 2019 was a very poor year for them. 2020 appears to have been generally better. Clee Hill has a relatively high density, and the CWG found six nest sites, with the distance between two nests only about 1km, in 2020.

Kestrel Records 2020
(All surveys and Casual records)



Observations in the Upper Onny

area in 2020 are shown on the Map. Each symbol is an observation of a single Kestrel during the 2020 breeding season, usually in flight. Some of the dots will be different observations of the same individuals. However, it is likely that the clusters of dots represent 9 - 10 pairs. Kestrel has been poorly recorded in previous years, and this is the largest number of records since the first survey in 2004.

In addition, there were two known nest sites:-

1. Near The Bog (SO39N). Four young fledged (compared to five in 2018 and 2019, at the same site), and they were ringed and colour-ringed.
2. Near Norbury. The nest failed. The site has been used in previous years.

Kestrels were also seen leaving a suitable hole in a Beech Tree at the top of Linley Hill, but no nest was found.

On Long Mynd surveys, a pair were frequently seen hunting over Wildmoor, and this pair are believed to nest near Ratlinghope Church, and another pair frequent Bilbatch, and are believed to nest at the bottom of the Batch.

Other pairs frequent Stapeley Hill, Heath Mynd and Prolley Moor, and it is likely that almost all the dots on the map can be attributed to these pairs.

No fledged young were reported, although young would not have fledged until after the main survey period ended in mid-June.

The Kestrel population is estimated at 9 - 10 Pairs

Cuckoo

Cuckoo has declined considerably in recent years, and was added to the *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern* in the UK in 2009. By 2015 the decline had reached 60% in the previous 25 years. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 38% in the UK, and 71% in both England and the English West Midlands region, between 1995 and 2018.



In *The Birds of Shropshire* (Smith, 2019), comparison of the 1985-90 and 2008-13 Atlas distribution maps showed it had disappeared from 56% of the tetrads occupied in the earlier period. The population estimate for the later period published in *The Birds of Shropshire* was 90–95 pairs, less than half that estimated in the earlier Atlas.

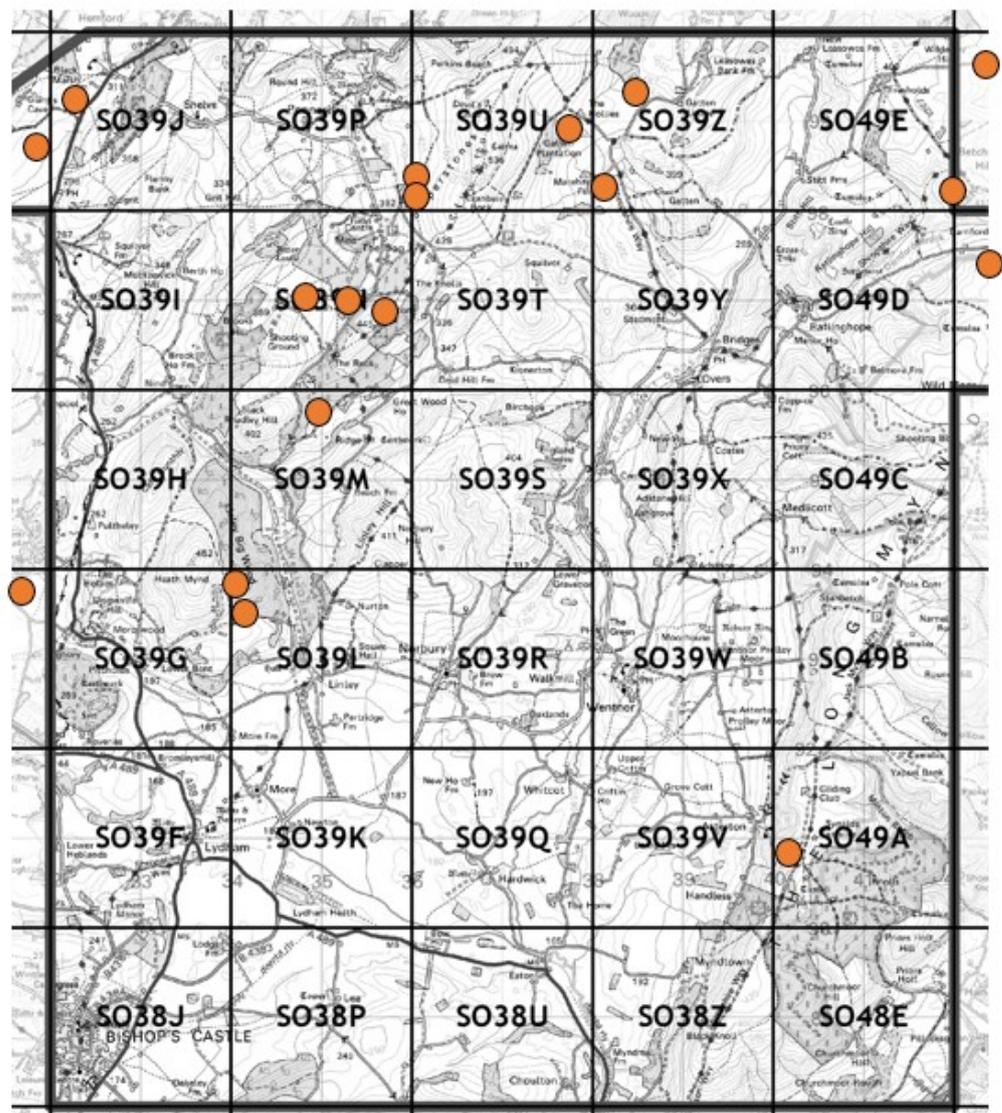
The characteristic Cuckoo call is made only by the male, and he defends a “song territory” to attract females and deter other males. The female has a different, rarely heard, “bubbling call”. Each male will chase other males out of his home patch, but the cuckoo isn't strongly territorial, and several males and females have been found to share overlapping ranges.

Each female lays between 10 and 25 eggs per year, each in a different nest. Each female usually selects nests of a single host species, most frequently Meadow Pipit, Dunnock or Reed Warbler.

The home range of each female varies considerably, depending on the ease of finding enough nests of the host species (i.e. parts of the home range will not be suitable breeding habitat for the host species, and the home range needs to include feeding areas for the Cuckoo as well). Thus the females’ home range might overlap the song territory of more than one male, and she will mate with each of them (an estimate of “breeding pairs” would therefore be better termed “male territories”).

It is one of the Other Target Species that members have been asked to record each year, but in 2020 there were more Cuckoo records than usual. It was not clear whether there were actually more Cuckoos about, or that people were better able to hear them in the peace and quiet, or were at home rather than work, because of the coronavirus lockdown. Members were therefore specifically encouraged to submit Cuckoo records, and the results are shown on the map.

**Upper Onny Wildlife Group
Cuckoo Records 2020
(All surveys and Casual records)**



● Each symbol is an observation (sight or call) of a single Cuckoo during the 2020 breeding season,

Some dots will be different observations of the same individual, but they probably represent about eight different males.

Red Kite

The number seen each year has steadily increased, but six nests found is fairly typical of recent years. There must be other nests that have been overlooked, but in view of the limited coverage in 2020, no direct comparison with previous years can be made.

One nest failed, but the other five produced 10 fledged young.



Kite chicks were wing-tagged in the nest up until 2017. Three were found at nest sites in 2020. A female, near Bishop's Castle, has been breeding at the same site since 2014, and fledged from a site on the western slopes of Long Mynd in 2011, 8km to the north-east. Another female, near Norbury, has been at the same site for three years, only 200m from where she fledged in 2013. The third, also probably a

female, at a site 3km north-east of Bridges, came from the same site as the first, 6km distant, but in 2015. The movement of less than 10km from natal to nest site of all three are typical for this sedentary species.

Given the rapid spread and population increase (over 40 known pairs in Shropshire in 2019 – the first successful breeding for 130 years occurred as recently as 2006), it is likely that the number of nests will continue to increase

Other Target Species

Apart from the four main Target Species listed and mapped above, members are normally asked to record observations of 16 Other Target species. Very few records of any of them were received in 2020, because of the limited extent of the survey work.

The Other Target Species usually recorded are:-

Barn Owl
Bullfinch
Dipper
Duncock

Grey Partridge
Linnet
Red Kite
Reed Bunting

Skylark
Snipe
Spotted Flycatcher
Swift (nest sites only))

Tree Sparrow
Wheatear
Yellow Wagtail
Yellowhammer

Nest Box Schemes

The Group has been operating nest box schemes since 2005, for Dippers, Barn Owls and Woodland birds. All three schemes have benefitted from funding from the National Trust's Stepping Stones project, through support of players of People's Postcode Lottery.

Dippers



Colour-ringed Dipper © John Hanley

Dippers feed almost exclusively on larvae that live on the stony beds of fast flowing streams, and the Upper Onny is one of their strongholds in Shropshire. Some build nests on ledges on bridges, and they take readily to nest boxes. Each box must be located directly above the water, in a position where predators are unable to reach it. Since 2005, over 50 boxes have been installed, under most bridges.

Dippers usually nest early, so they would have almost all fledged by the time the Covid-19 restrictions were eased in mid-May, but ringing was still restricted by BTO. Therefore no monitoring took place.

In a more typical year, 2019, 23 sites were checked upstream from Horderley, 16 sites were occupied, and five pairs made second attempts (four successful). Of the 14 nests, 21 were in boxes. There were 14 broods (totalling 52 young, all of which were ringed); 13 males and 12 females of the 32 adults were colour-ringed. Totals were much higher than in 2018, when there was lower site occupancy and lower breeding success, due to high water levels.

Several of the boxes were washed away in the floods in the 2019-20 winter, and some of those originally put up in 2005-8 were showing signs of wear, and need replacement. Funding has been received for 12 new boxes, which should be installed before the 2021 breeding season.

Over several years, the project has shown that the nest box scheme has increased the population – there are more potential nest sites, and the pairs that nest in boxes produce more fledged young. This work is part of a wider project, *Dippers in the Teme Catchment*.

Barn Owls

The Group has provided special Nest Boxes to Farmers and Landowners with suitable habitat, and 31 have been installed altogether, mainly before 2010.

In 2020, many boxes could not be checked because of Covid-19 restrictions, but nine regularly-used ones were. Four broods were found, and a total of eight chicks were ringed.

This represents a poor year. In comparison, in 2019, 23 boxes were checked, and 8 nests were found (one a relay after the first clutch failed). Five were successful, and produced 14 fledged young, all ringed, better than the 11 in 2018, but not as good as 16 in 2017. The high failure rate, believed to be due to the exceptionally heavy prolonged rain in early June, brought the final total of successful nests down to a level more consistent with



previous years, but seven pairs is the most UOWG has recorded.

No natural sites are currently known.

Funding has been received for one replacement nest box, and for two at new sites.

A report is being prepared, analysing the use of the nest boxes since they were first installed. It will be supplied to Bird Group members, and put on the website, when available.

If you think you have a suitable site for a box, or if you see a Barn Owl, we'd like to know, please.

Small Woodland Birds

We have provided well over 300 nest boxes to people in our area, who agree to maintain them and provide us with a report, but many have been subsequently incorporated into the monitoring scheme at prime locations, described below. Otherwise, four members reported on five sites, three near Pennerley on the western side of the Stiperstones, one at the south-east end of the Stiperstones ridge, and one from a member who lives outside the area, at Affcott, covering 48 nest boxes. At least 17 (35%) of these were occupied. Blue Tits were recorded in 10 boxes, unidentified tits in four boxes, Coal Tits in one and Great Tits in two, although these last did not successfully rear young. One box was sealed by Nuthatch but not occupied, while another was used by bees.

At one site, five boxes were occupied, all by Blue Tits, but the success rate was poorer than in 2019. Another had quite a few dead chicks, including two boxes of Great Tits where all the chicks died as a result of poor spells of weather. The broods that did well were early, it was the later hatched ones that died. The third had four occupied boxes, all with successful nests, three of Blue Tit and a fledged brood of 10 Coal Tits.

The photos show a clutch of 10 Coal Tit eggs, chicks a few days old, and almost ready to fledge, and a brood of Blue Tits (all.© Belinda Murcott)



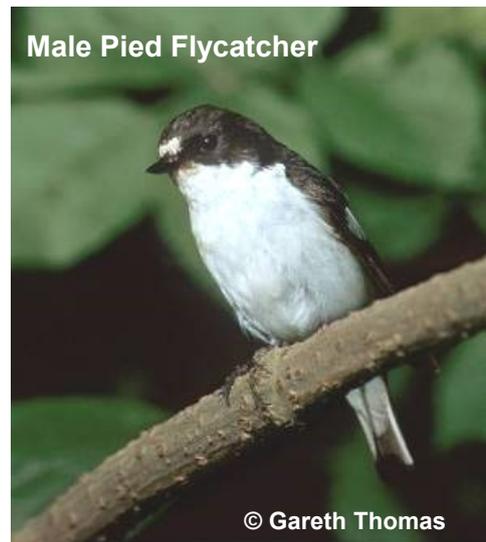
In addition, boxes have been installed at prime locations, including the banks of the East and West Onny. Pied Flycatcher (right), a summer visitor from Africa, is the main target species, and Redstart and Pied Flycatcher chicks in these boxes have been ringed as part of the BTO scheme.

Covid-19 visiting restrictions were lifted just in time, but BTO insisted that landowners permission was specifically renewed before ringing was allowed in 2020. All landowners agreed, and 42 visits were made to monitor 545 boxes at 20 different sites between 18 May and 11 June. This includes 60 new or replacement boxes funded by Stepping Stones.

All visits were made by the ringer, Andy Spencer. In previous years he has been helped by volunteers, who check all the boxes to identify which ones contain the target species, so only those need a ringing visit. However, only four volunteers assisted with the initial check of some boxes, and two assisted in the erection of some of the new boxes. Training of new ringers or volunteers was also very limited.

Of the 545 boxes, 238 (43.7%) were occupied, as follows:

Species	Number	% of all boxes
Birds		
Blue tit	95	17.4
Great tit	32	5.9
Pied Flycatcher	53	9.7
Redstart	10	1.8
Nuthatch	7	1.3
Other		
Hornet	1	0.2
Wasps	28	5.1
Wood mouse	4	0.7
White tailed bees	8	1.5
Total occupied	238	43.7



All the bird species except Great Tit and Coal Tit have increased, compared with 2019. Three Flycatcher broods perished between visits, probably due to predation of an adult at each nest.

In total 74 adult Pied Flycatchers (48 female and 26 male) were caught, of which 47 were ringed for the first time, and 11 males and 16 females were recaptured, all of which had been ringed in the area in previous years. A further 297 nestlings were ringed, an average of 5.6 chicks per brood ringed.

Three adult females and two males that had been ringed in previous years at sites outside the area were caught:-



Adult females:

- One caught at Bridges on 18 May 2020 was ringed as a chick at Shobdon Hill Wood, Leominster on 11 June 2018
- One caught at Bridges on 20 May 2020 was ringed as a chick at Newcastle upon Clun on 11 June 2016
- One caught at Gatten on 22 May 2020 was ringed as an adult female at Llanfyllin, Powys on 13 May 2019

Adult males

- One caught at Linley on 4 June 2020 was ringed as a chick at The Gogin, near Newcastle upon Clun, on 5 June 2018
- One caught at Bridges on 2 June 2020 was ringed as a chick at Lake Vyrnwy, Powys on 11 June 2017

For Redstart one male and two females were caught and ringed, all for the first time, and 38 nestlings were ringed, the highest total for this project to date

To date, there are no reports of any birds ringed here being found outside of the area.

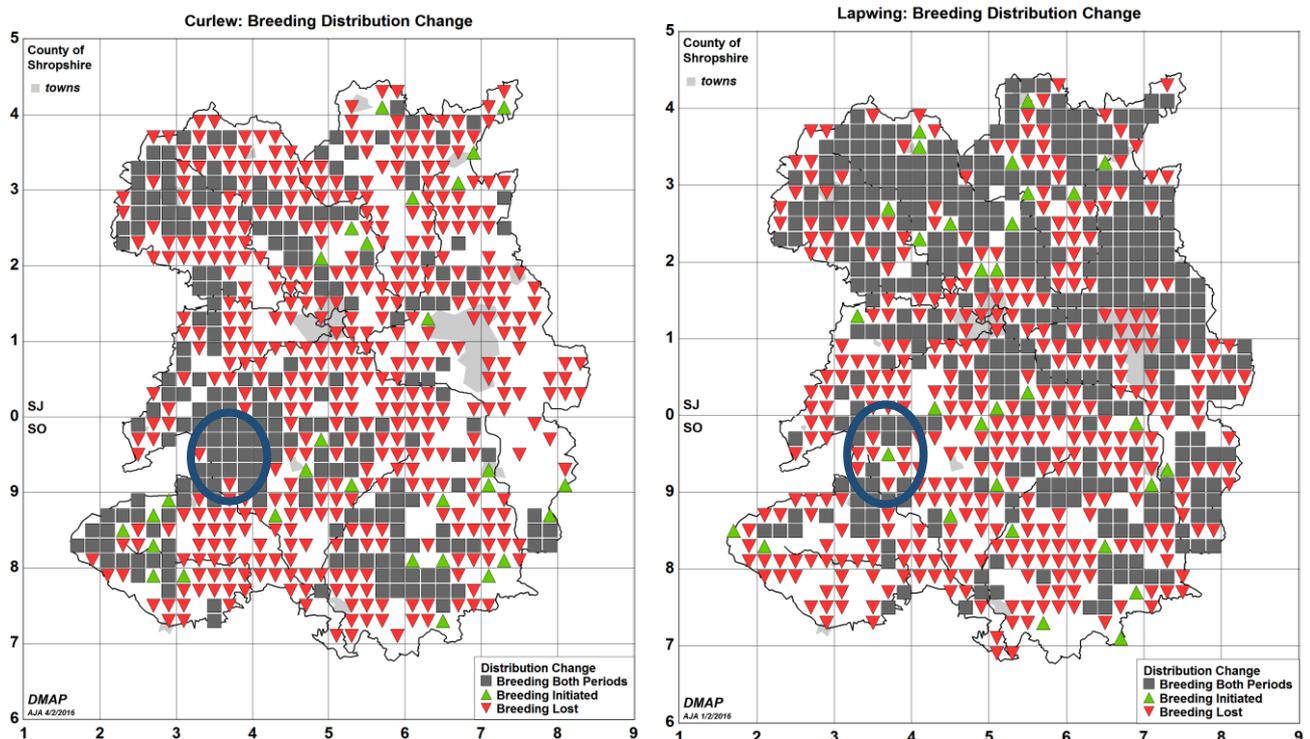
If you would like to participate, please let us know.

CONSERVATION OF CURLEW AND LAPWING

Decline of Lapwing and Curlew

Lapwing and Curlew are in decline, across the UK, in England and in Shropshire. Objective evidence for the local decline comes from Bird Atlas work. The distribution maps showing the results of the recent 2008-13 Bird Atlas, published in *The Birds of Shropshire* (2019), can be compared with the maps in *An Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Shropshire*, based on six years fieldwork 1985-90, and published in 1992. Both sets of maps have been compiled on the same basis, with similar amounts of fieldwork effort, so the massive decline is undoubtedly real.

The maps show tetrads where each species was found in both Atlas surveys (grey squares) and tetrads where it was found in the earlier period, but not the more recent period (red downward triangles). The Upper Onny area is shown approximately by the blue ovals.



Surveys including counts complement these maps. The county Lapwing population has fallen from about 3,000 pairs in 1990 to only about 800 now. The Curlew population has fallen from about 700 pairs in 1990 to about 160 pairs in 2010 (a decline of over 73% for both species).

Other evidence for the decline of Lapwing and Curlew, including the BBS results quoted above, can be found on the website of the British Trust for Ornithology www.bto.org

Conservation Action is also being taken nationally to reverse the decline of these two species. Both have been designated as UK Biodiversity Priority Species by the Government, as part of its commitment to international biodiversity targets, precisely because of the rapid decline, and both species are now on the *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern 4*, published in December 2015.

Both species nest on farmland, and recent and current agri-environment schemes (part of the system of payments to farmers through the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union) included rewards for farmers for sensitive management of habitat on their farms, and

providing other environmental benefits. Farmers applying to join had to take into account the habitat requirements of a number of birds, including Lapwing and Curlew, if they bred on or near the farm, or used land there for feeding. Many farms in the area will benefit from HLS agreements for 10 years from the date of signing, the last in 2014.

However, the funds available for current agri-environment schemes have been reduced, and the procedures are more bureaucratic, proving fewer benefits for birds. Future arrangements to protect birds and their habitats on farmland, after the UK leaves the EU at the end of 2020, are not clear, and will not be introduced for some years.

Recommendations

Natural England is recommended to encourage farmers with breeding Lapwing or Curlew on or near their land, to join the appropriate agri-environment scheme, utilising the options to maintain and enhance the habitat for these priority species

Conservation Action

To complement the Group's work with farmers and Natural England, to create and manage habitat for Lapwing and Curlew, two leaflets were produced many years ago:-

- *Please Conserve our Curlews*
- *Lapwing Recovery Project: Case Study & Fact Sheet*

In view of the current interest amongst farmers in managing farmland to benefit wildlife, generated by Government trials for the next round of Agri-environment schemes, promotion of Nature Recovery Networks, and the publication of draft Parliamentary bills on the Environment, and Agriculture, these leaflets are being updated.

They will be published on the website, and be available for Group members to hand out to farmers they meet while undertaking surveys, and if possible discuss with them.

It is intended to revise these leaflets as necessary in the light of feedback from farmers.

Curlew Country

The Stiperstones-Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) operated a Curlew Recovery Project in the area from 2014 to 2017. Fieldwork research established that almost all nests were predated (more than half by foxes), and when the nests were protected with electric fencing, most nests survived but productivity didn't improve because the chicks were predated before fledging.

The LPS ended in March 2018, but the Curlew project has continued, under the name "Curlew Country". It has concentrated on the trialling of "headstarting". This involves removing eggs from Curlew nests, incubating them artificially, rearing chicks in captivity, and then releasing them into the wild after they fledge, at or near a potential breeding site. It is considered to be a short term measure to try to boost the Curlew population while discovering the appropriate measures to improve breeding success to the level needed for recovery. Under a Natural England licence, seven Curlew chicks were reared and released in 2017, 21 in 2018 and 33 in 2019. All headstarted birds were colour-ringed, so they can be identified if they return.

While this has been a successful technique for other species, it is not known whether our local Curlew chicks will survive and return to their natal area to breed. However, if it does work it is expected to lead to a significant short-term increase in the local Curlew population. While it is important to continue the trial, the whole project was suspended in 2020 because of Covid-19.

The whole of the Curlew Country area is within the area covered by three CWGs, Upper Onny, Rea Valley and Camlad Valley.

Curlews generally stay on their wintering grounds during their first year, and return to their natal areas to breed when they are two years old. About 36% of the fledged young survive until they are two (Rob Robinson, BTO, *pers.comm.*), so if headstarted Curlews survive at the same rate as wild Curlews, then around 2-3 of the 2017 cohort should have come back last year, and 7-8 of the 2018 cohort should have returned in 2020. Only one is known to have returned, last year, in the Upper Onny area.

In 2020, a new pair was found in the Upper Onny, but neither bird was colour-ringed. The only new pair in the Rea Valley area, at Habberley, may possibly have included headstarted birds, but it is not known if they were colour-ringed or not. Two pairs were found at a site in the Camlad area, where only one pair was found in previous years. One bird in each pair was colour-ringed. One was definitely caught and colour-ringed at Dolydd Hafren in 2020, so neither bird in that pair was headstarted. It is not known when the other bird was colour-ringed, so it may possibly have been headstarted. While it is possible that new pairs returned to areas that were not monitored in 2020, all the squares in all three CWG areas that held Curlews in 2019 were well covered, except one.

It will be interesting to see how the number of returns in 2021 compares with the expected number (about 11-12) from the 2019 cohort. Numbers found so far from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts are not encouraging. The location of any pairs of Curlew found by the Bird Survey will be passed on to the Curlew Country fieldworkers to check for colour-rings.

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. Strettons Area CWG was launched in 2012, and surveyed Lapwing and Curlew for the first time in 2017. The Three Parishes CWG, covering Weston Rhyn, St. Martin's and Gobowen (north of Oswestry), also undertook a Bird Survey in 2017. All these groups continued with a Lapwing and Curlew survey in 2018, when they were joined by new CWGs covering Oswestry south (Tanat to Perry) and Severn-Vyrnwy Confluence. A further Group, centred on Abdon (near Brown Clee), also started in 2018, the initiative of a local resident.

All these groups (except Kemp Valley, which has no breeding Curlews) continued with their surveys in 2019. Clee Hill and Abdon extended their areas, to close the gap between them and monitor known additional Curlew territories. Between them, the 10 groups cover around three-quarters of the County's breeding Curlews. They covered 267 survey squares (tetrads), totalling 1,048 square kilometres. There were 320 participants, who spent a total of more than 2,350 hours on survey work, and 94 - 115 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.

The Curlew distribution map from the County Bird Atlas 2008-13, overlain with the Community Wildlife Group areas, and their 2019 results, can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

The Groups all also survey Lapwing, but they monitor a much smaller proportion of the County population, which is concentrated in north and north-east Shropshire.

In 2020, all these groups did some Curlew survey work, but it was truncated because of the Coronavirus restrictions. These results are still being analysed, and will be supplied separately to Bird Group members when they are available.

Further information can be found on the joint website for all the Community Wildlife Groups in Shropshire, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

The SOS Save our Curlews Campaign

Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) launched its *Save our Curlews* campaign in February 2020, with the intention of building on, and supporting, the Curlew monitoring work of the CWGs, and working initially with CWGs in the Upper Clun, Clee Hill and Strettons area to find nests, put an electric fence round them to protect the eggs, and then attach radio tags to the chicks just after they hatch, to track them to see how they use the landscape and what happens to them. Unfortunately, although the CWGs were able to monitor and map their populations, the nest protection project and radio-tracking had to be postponed because of Coronavirus restrictions.

The Upper Onny Curlew results, together with those from other CWGs, are fed into the monitoring of the County Curlew population by SOS, which then form part of the County data forwarded to the South of England Curlew Forum and the national Curlew Species Recovery Group, hosted by RSPB, and help make the case for Government-sponsored conservation work, including future Agri-environment schemes.

This is a long term campaign, and it is hoped to extend the nest protection and chick monitoring work to other CWG areas in future years. A lot more information can be found about the Campaign, including project work in Shropshire and elsewhere to find out the causes of the decline, and reverse it, on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

A contributory factor to the decline is now being increasingly understood, the impact of releasing large numbers of Pheasants into the countryside for shooting.

Curlews and Pheasant Release

The RSPB has just announced the results of the review of its policy on game bird shooting, which it undertook partly because of the effect of releasing large numbers of Pheasants on the landscape and other wildlife. It is now seeking improved environmental standards, a reduction in the number of gamebirds released and better compliance with existing rules about reporting releases. The RSPB is committed to working with the shooting industry over the next 18 months to bring about this change. If substantial reform is not forthcoming in this period, then the RSPB will press for tighter regulation of large-scale gamebird releases. For further information see www.rspb.org.uk/gamebirdreview

The number of Pheasants and Red-legged Partridges released in the UK EACH YEAR has increased from 4 million in 1961, the first year for which there are figures, to almost 60 million now. Only 35% are shot, and the remainder don't live very long, so they provide a year-round supply of food for every other predator and scavenger. While the number of

Pheasants released since 2004 has increased by one-third, the number shot has not increased since the 1990s.

In Shropshire, 726,000 Pheasants were released in 2018 alone, so predation of Curlews (collateral damage from foxes hunting Pheasants) is very high, and the Curlew population is heading for extinction (down 80% since 1990). Conversely, the feral breeding population of Pheasants increased by 62% between 1997 and 2014 (County BBS results), and it is now the tenth most common breeding species in the County (and far and away the biggest in terms of biomass). They have spread from the release sites to virtually every part of the County now.

BTO has published research showing a disproportionate increase in the Buzzard and Crow population in areas with a high number of released Pheasants (Pringle *et al* 2019).

The massive increase in Pheasant carrion has allowed Buzzard and Raven to spread eastwards across most of England since 1990, and is undoubtedly the food source that has allowed Kites to spread into, and right across, Shropshire in only 15 years.

In 2014 there were an estimated 44,000 pairs of breeding pheasants, all descended from previous releases (Pheasant is an introduced species), compared to 160 pairs of Curlew and 800 pairs of Lapwing.

Again, further information about this can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

Use of CWG Survey Results

In addition to feeding into the monitoring of the County population by SOS, and helping the Curlew Country fieldworkers, the survey results are made available to Natural England.

They show the importance of particular areas for these species, which will hopefully encourage farmers to manage their land more sensitively, and provide Defra with objective evidence to judge individual farm applications to join agri-environment schemes in future, enabling them to target the use of their limited resources more effectively.

The results also reinforce and supplement the results from other Community Wildlife Groups operating in the Shropshire Hills, which together now cover well over 500 square kilometres, around two-thirds of the Shropshire Hills AONB. These results help inform the AONB Management Plan, which has now been revised to cover the five years 2019 – 24.

Coupled with the results of other surveys, the results may also contribute to the identification of potential new Local (County) Wildlife Sites. These sites are monitored by Shropshire Wildlife Trust, which encourages the landowners to manage them so they retain their value for wildlife.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & REFERENCES

Acknowledgements

Most importantly, thanks to the Group members who undertook the survey work, or sent in casual records:-

Steven Abbey, Paul Baddeley, Bob Berry, Simon Cooter, Dave Cragg, Rachel Downs, Alison Gouldstone, Steve Griggs, Pat Holbourn, Peter Jackson, Jonathan & Pippa Middlemiss, Angela Middleton, Belinda Murcott, Steve Oates, David & Janet Poynton,

Mike Richards, Mike Sillence, Richard & Alyson Small, Leo Smith, Tom Wall and Mike Woodmansey.

Nine other members initially undertook to survey particular squares, but were unable to do so as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Thanks also to:-

- Tony Cross for monitoring nine Barn Owl Nest boxes, and ringing eight chicks in four broods
- Richard Small, for co-ordinating the woodland bird nest box schemes
- Rebecca Burrell, Belinda Murcott, David Poynton and Richard Small for hosting the nest box schemes, and providing a report.
- Belinda Murcott, for the photos of inside the boxes.
- Leo Smith (Curlew) and John Harding (Lapwing) for permission to use the photos on the cover. The other photos are credited (where known): again, thanks for permission to use them
- Andy Spencer, for monitoring 545 nest boxes, including making and installing 60 new ones, and ringing the Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts
- Steve Oates, David Stafford and Dave Whiteman for helping Andy erect the nest-boxes
- Angela Middleton, Richard & Alyson Small and David Stafford for helping Andy to monitor the boxes.

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Plans for 2021

The Bird Group intends to repeat the Bird Survey next year. New participants are needed, so we hope to recruit new members.

Consideration will be given nearer the time to holding a Bird Group meeting next March, primarily to plan the bird survey, but current Covid-19 restrictions are unlikely to have been eased by then. We will therefore need to develop new ways of promoting our work in the local community. New members, anyone interested in birds, will be very welcome.

Details can also be found and downloaded from the joint website for all the Community Wildlife Groups in the Shropshire Hills, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk,

Contact us

You can keep up with our activities through the website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

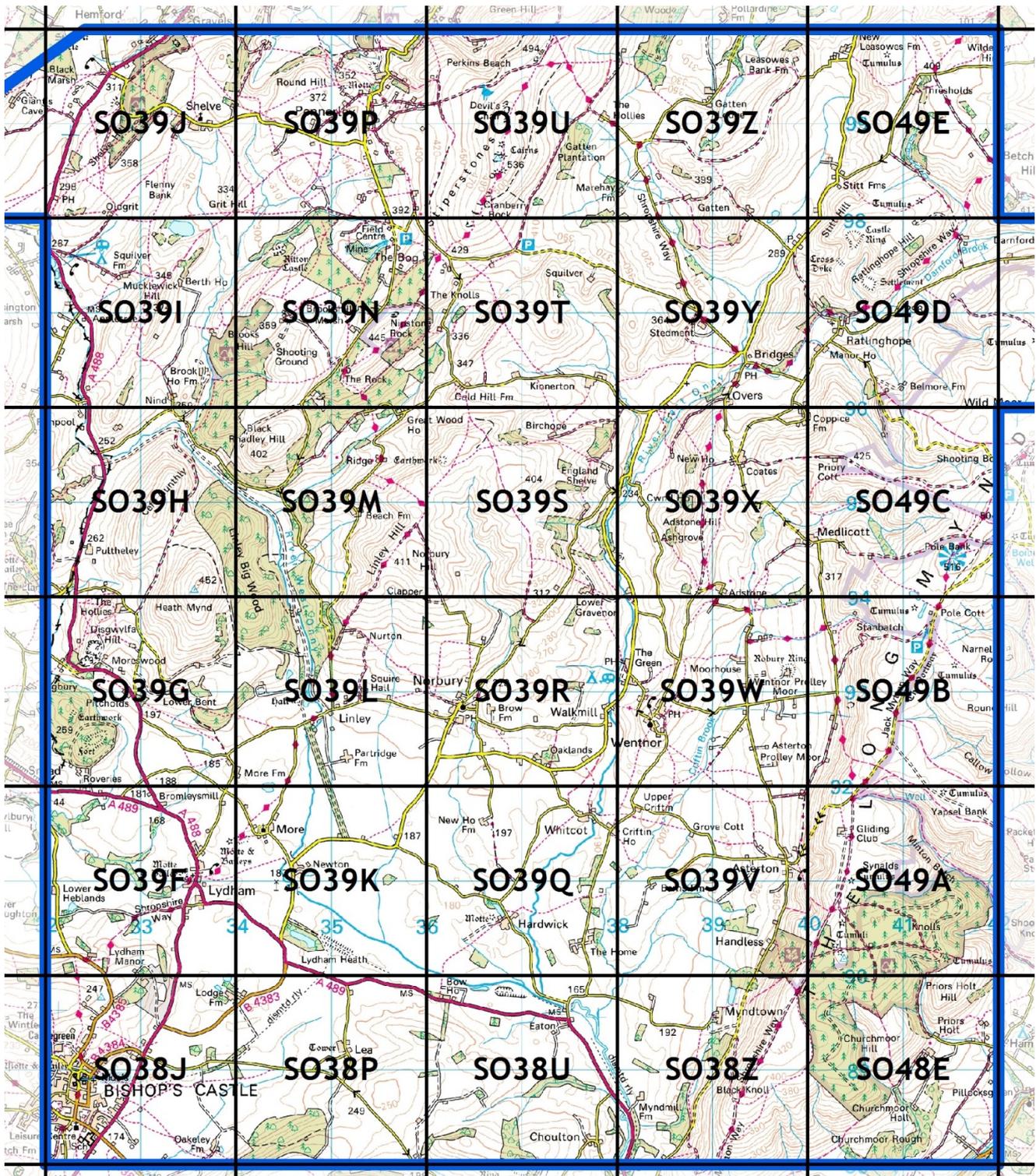
You can contact the Group through the website, or by email at UOWG@shropscwgs.org.uk

The Group Secretary is Pippa Middlemiss, Nant Argoed, Argoed, Clun, Craven Arms SY7 8NW. Mobile phone 07955805987 email middlemisspippa@gmail.com

If you want to help with the Bird Survey, or want any further information about the content of this report, contact Leo Smith, Bird Group Co-ordinator leo@leosmith.org.uk 01694 720296.

Leo Smith
December 2020

Appendix 1. Map of the Upper Onny Wildlife Group Survey Area, showing Square Boundaries and Tetrad Codes



Each square (“tetrad”) on the map is 2x2 kilometres, using gridlines marked on Ordnance survey maps. Total core area: 30 tetrads = 120 square kilometres.

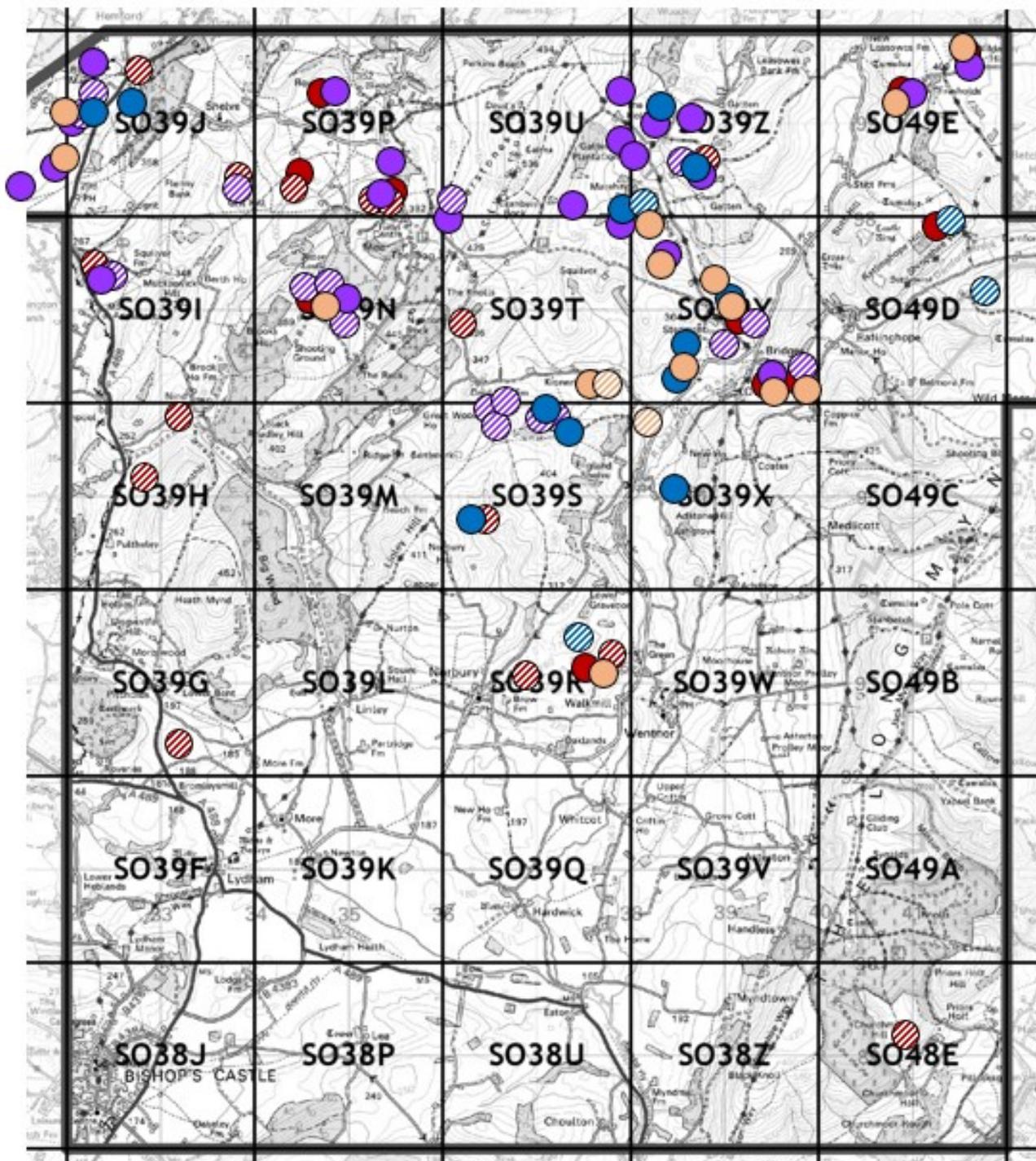
The part of SO39E in the Onny catchment (to the west of SO39J), Stapeley Common, the source of the River West Onny, and the whole of SO49I (to the east of SO49D), Wildmoor, the source of the River East Onny were subsequently added to the Group’s area.

Appendix 2. Map of the Upper Onny Wildlife Group Survey Area, showing Square Boundaries and Numbers



The core area shown in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 are identical. The squares were initially numbered 1-30, as shown. The areas of square 0 and square 10 are also shown. The ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area Agri-environment scheme) was wound up in 2014. The tetrad codes shown in Appendix 1, and the square numbers above, are used interchangeably.

Appendix 3. All Curlew Records Received 2020



Survey Period:	First (Up to 7 April)	Second (8 April – 5 May)	Second (late) (15 May onwards)	Third (8 – 23 June)
Survey Observation				
Casual Observation				