Rea Valley

Community Wildlife Group

Celebrating wildlife in the Pontesbury, Minsterley, Stiperstones and Hope Valley Area

Annual Report for 2020

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1. Introduction

This group was initiated by the Stiperstones-Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) in 2014, covering the area shown in Appendix 1, in order to:-

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

The LPS supported the Group over the four years 2014-17 but in 2018 it was formally established and independently constituted as the Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group.

Anyone can join who lives or works in the area, or has an interest in its wildlife, and who wants to actively contribute to local knowledge and conservation. Membership is free.

Communication with members is largely by email. To contact the group and find out how to get involved, e-mail reavalleycwg@gmail.com. A Facebook group has been established, Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group.

An Annual Report is published, and posted on the Community Wildlife Groups website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk. This report brings together information from different surveys which take place in the Rea Valley catchment area.

Several projects organised by the Group have benefitted from support received from those playing the People's Postcode Lottery.

Supported by players of PEOPLE'S POSTCODE LOTTERY

Awarded funds from POSTCODE EARTH TRUST

2. Curlews, Lapwings and Other Birds Survey

By Leo Smith, Bird Group Leader, February 2021

2.1 Background

A bird survey has been carried out in the Rea Valley Community Wildlife Group (RVCWG) area, shown in Appendix 1, since 2014. It complements surveys carried out by the Upper Onny Wildlife Group since 2004, and the Camlad Valley CWG, also initiated by the LPS in 2014. It is intended to repeat the survey annually, to monitor long-term population trends for key species, as well as establish the current population and distribution.

The area has been divided up into 26 tetrads (2x2 kilometre squares, each made up of four of the one-kilometre squares shown on Ordnance Survey maps). These tetrads, and their reference code, are shown on the map in Appendix 1.

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 for 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 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, it was recognised that some of them would not be able, or willing, to do so, for various personal reasons. 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.

The coverage actually achieved in 2020 is set out in Table 1. It will be seen that no records were received from 11 of the 26 squares, and only casual records were received from a further one. However, the normal survey work in two of the squares with resident Curlews (SJ30F and K) was

supplemented by further casual coverage, and these two squares actually had the best coverage ever.

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

In addition, the results of a new nest box scheme at the top of Habberley Brook are included, targeted primarily at Pied Flycatcher and Redstart. Similar schemes, started in earlier years at Resting Hill and Pontesford Hill, are also referred to, as well as a separate scheme at Earl's Hill SWT reserve.

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 except five of the 26 tetrads, and members spent over 180 hours on it. The list of Other Target Species surveyed in a normal season is shown on page 11.

Table 1. Coverage in 2020

Tetrad	Survey coverage				
	Tetrad surveys				Good casual coverage
	First	Second	Second (late)	Third	
SJ30 A	None				
SJ30 B	No	No	Yes	Yes	
SJ30 C	None				
SJ30 F	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
SJ30 G	None				
SJ30 H	None				
SJ30 K			Yes	Yes	
SJ30 L	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
SJ30 M			Yes	Yes	
SJ30 Q	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
SJ30 R	None				
SJ30 S	Yes	Yes		Yes	
SJ30 T	None				

Tetrad	Survey coverage				
	Tetrad surveys				Good casual coverage
	First	Second	Second (late)	Third	
SJ30 V	Yes	Yes		Yes	
SJ30 W	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
SJ30 X			Yes		
SJ30 Y	None				
SJ40 A			Yes	Yes	
SJ40 B	No				Yes
SJ40 C	None				
SJ40 D	None				
SJ40 F	No		Yes	Yes	
SJ40 G	None				
SJ40 H	None				
SJ40 I	None				
SO39 E			Yes		

A more detailed report on the results of the 2020 Bird Survey has been produced, and sent to all participants. This report can be found on the Community Wildlife Groups website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

2.2 Curlew

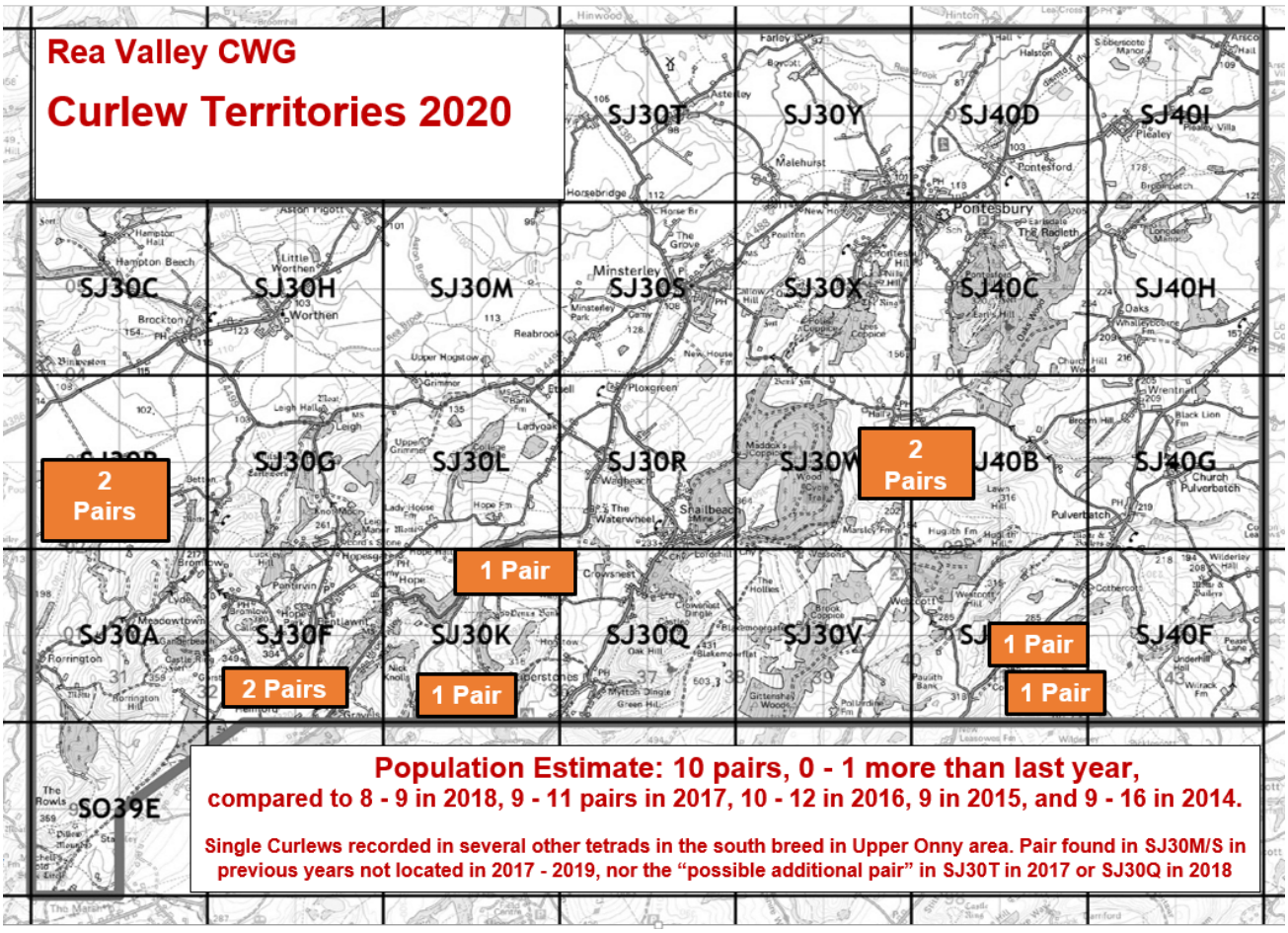
Curlew is the "most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK" (Brown *et al*, *British Birds* 2015), because the UK has an estimated 28% of the European, and 19-27% of the world population and is on the national *Red List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern* 4 (Eaton *et al*, British Birds 2015), 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.

In Shropshire, it declined 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.

2.21 Survey results

The map summarises the estimated number and distribution of Curlew territories in the Rea Valley area in 2020.



Although the area as a whole was less well covered than usual, because of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions (see pp.5-6), the areas where Curlews were found in 2019 were as well, or better, covered in 2020. The results from 2020 can therefore be compared with those from earlier years.

There were again two pairs near Hemford (SJ30F), and two pairs near Cothercott Hill (SJ40A), which were found occupying two squares (SJ40A and F) in 2019. The pair at Upper Cothercott (SJ40A) has been found every year except 2015, but the pair in SJ40F had not been recorded before 2019, perhaps because this is one of the squares that has not been surveyed on a regular basis.

There were two pairs near Habberley (SJ30W and SJ40B) annually until 2017, but only one in 2018 and 2019, the loss of a pair. However, there were two pairs again in 2020, so perhaps the survivor recruited a new mate, or a new pair has moved in.

In SJ30K, the coverage in 2020 was the best yet. A casual record of a pair seen or heard frequently by a local resident, together with more thorough searching by another resident and monitoring by the usual surveyor, located the pair in the south, between Santley and Lower Santley, while the pair at Capsall was relocated, and a territorial dispute between these locations at the end of May confirmed two pairs were present. Two pairs have occupied the square on a regular basis, although previous reports have suggested different numbers in some years.

Two pairs were found in SJ30B, and the field containing one of the nests was located. Five birds were seen together in 2019, so the population in this square was estimated at 2-3 pairs last year, with the possible loss of a pair in 2020.

The 2019 report stated that "None were found in any of the other areas where there were "Possible Additional Pairs" in previous years. No records were received from these areas in 2020, so no further assessment can be made.

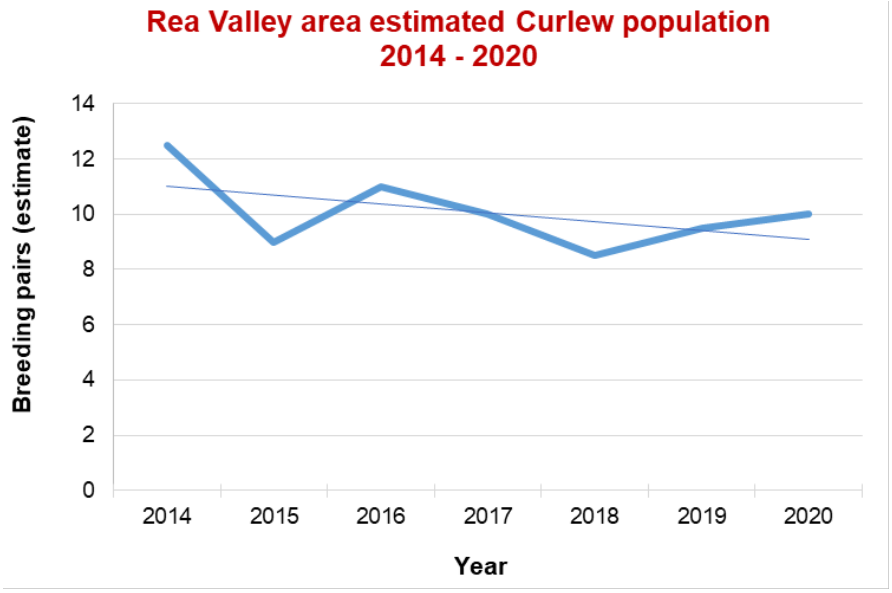
There is no evidence that any young Curlews fledged in the area.

2.22 Population Trend

Table 1 shows the estimated number of pairs found in each year since 2014, and the chart shows the annual trends. In most years the number of pairs has not been established precisely, so a range has been given, and the chart is based on the mid-point of each range. The apparent increase in 2019 is likely to be a result of better survey coverage of SJ40F, rather than a real increase in the population. The population did increase in 2020, as a second pair returned to the Habberley area.

Table 1. Curlew population 2014 – 20

Year	Number of Curlew pairs
2014	9-16
2015	9
2016	10-12
2017	9-11
2018	8- 9
2019	9-10
2020	10



Establishing trends is not easy, as some squares have not been surveyed every year, but it is known that two pairs have been lost in the area since 2014.

Local residents near Hemford (SJ30F) have been monitoring the return of Curlews to their breeding grounds for many years, but in 2015 only five, rather than the usual six, returned – the loss of a breeding pair. Two pairs have been found there in each year since.

Only three individuals, not four, returned to the Habberley area (SJ30W and SJ40B) in 2018, and there was only one pair there in 2019. However, a second pair returned to this part of the area in 2020.

This, taken together with the trend chart, suggests a net decline of one pair, around 10%, since 2014.

From the observations and analysis, it is estimated that the Curlew population in the area in 2020 was 10 breeding pairs, a gain since 2019 of one pair near Habberley, but a net loss of at least one pair since 2014.

2.23 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. 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.

2.3 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 a 43% decline in the UK and a 30% decline in England over the 23 year period 1995-2018.

In Shropshire, it declined 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.

The map below summarises the estimated number and distribution of breeding Lapwings in the Rea Valley area. It also shows the cumulative results of all six previous Surveys.

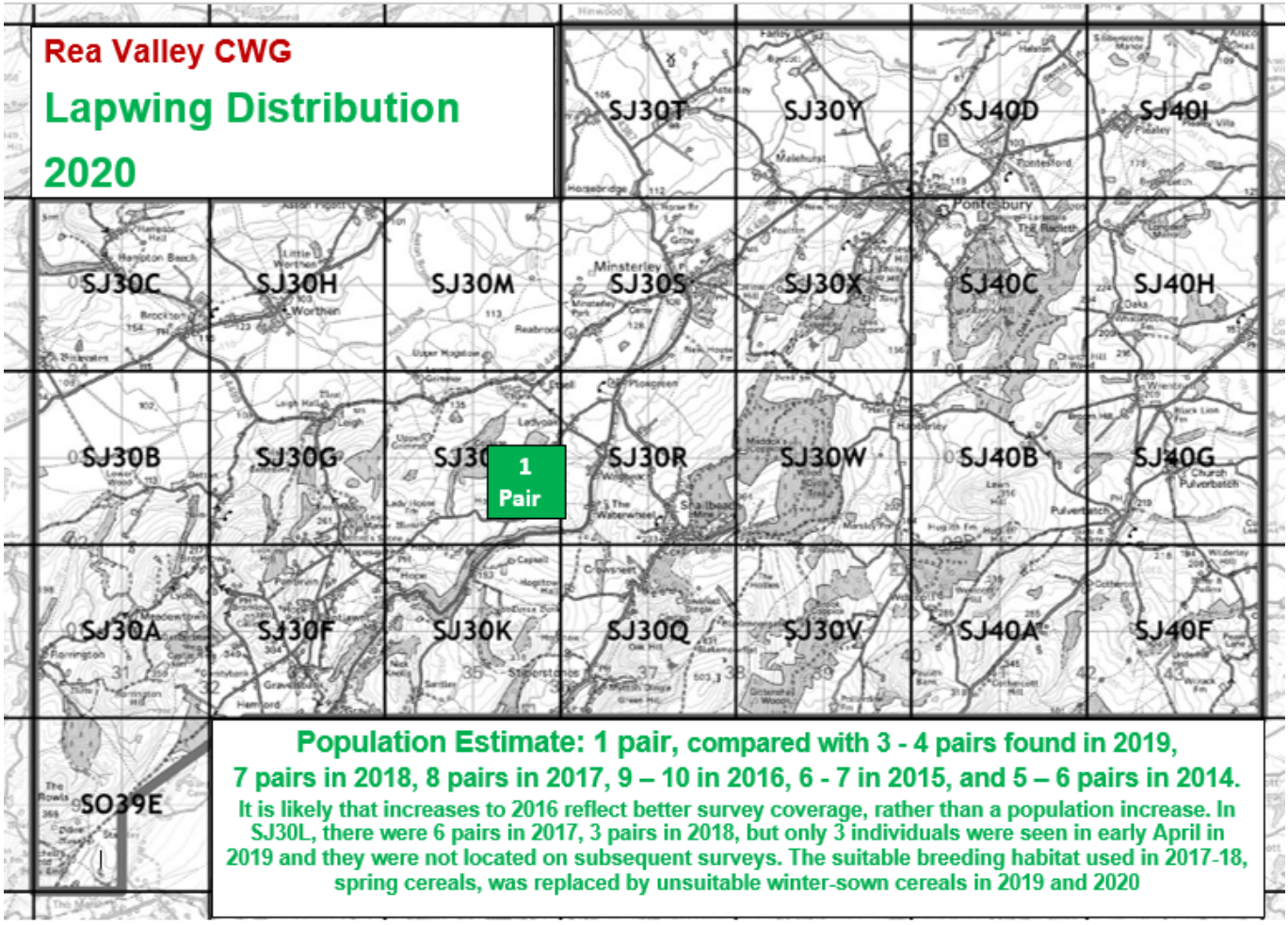
Lapwings need short vegetation or bare ground to nest on, and those that nest on arable land have to move round to follow the farm crop rotation. The regular breeding site in SJ30L was initially occupied by two pairs, and three pairs were seen at another site in the south-west corner of the same square, but only one pair remained to breed, displaying or defending territory at two different

nest sites in adjacent fields. There was no evidence of successful breeding, and there was a lot of disturbance due to tilling and drilling crops of grain.

The site in SJ30H, which was re-occupied in 2019, was again vacant as a result of changes on the farm.

These were the only two sites found to be occupied in the previous three years. However, it is possible that other pairs were overlooked because of the limited survey effort. In particular, pairs have been found in some years prior to 2017 north of Minsterley, but these areas were not covered in 2020.

The apparent increase in population, year on year up until 2016, is likely to be due to better survey coverage, rather than an increase in Lapwings. Some squares have not been covered every year, so establishing trends is difficult. However, it does appear that the population has declined since 2016, and the number found in 2020 was the lowest yet.



Only one breeding pair was found, but some squares that held breeding Lapwing prior to 2017 were not surveyed in 2020.

2.4 Anecdotal Evidence for the Decline of Lapwing and Curlew

Members of the Bird Group who live in the area, and other local residents, have 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. No attempt was made to talk to farmers or other residents in 2020.

Lapwings have apparently declined much more than Curlews.

2.5 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 a 35% decline in the UK and a 21% decline in England over the 23 year period 1995-2018.

In Shropshire, 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.*

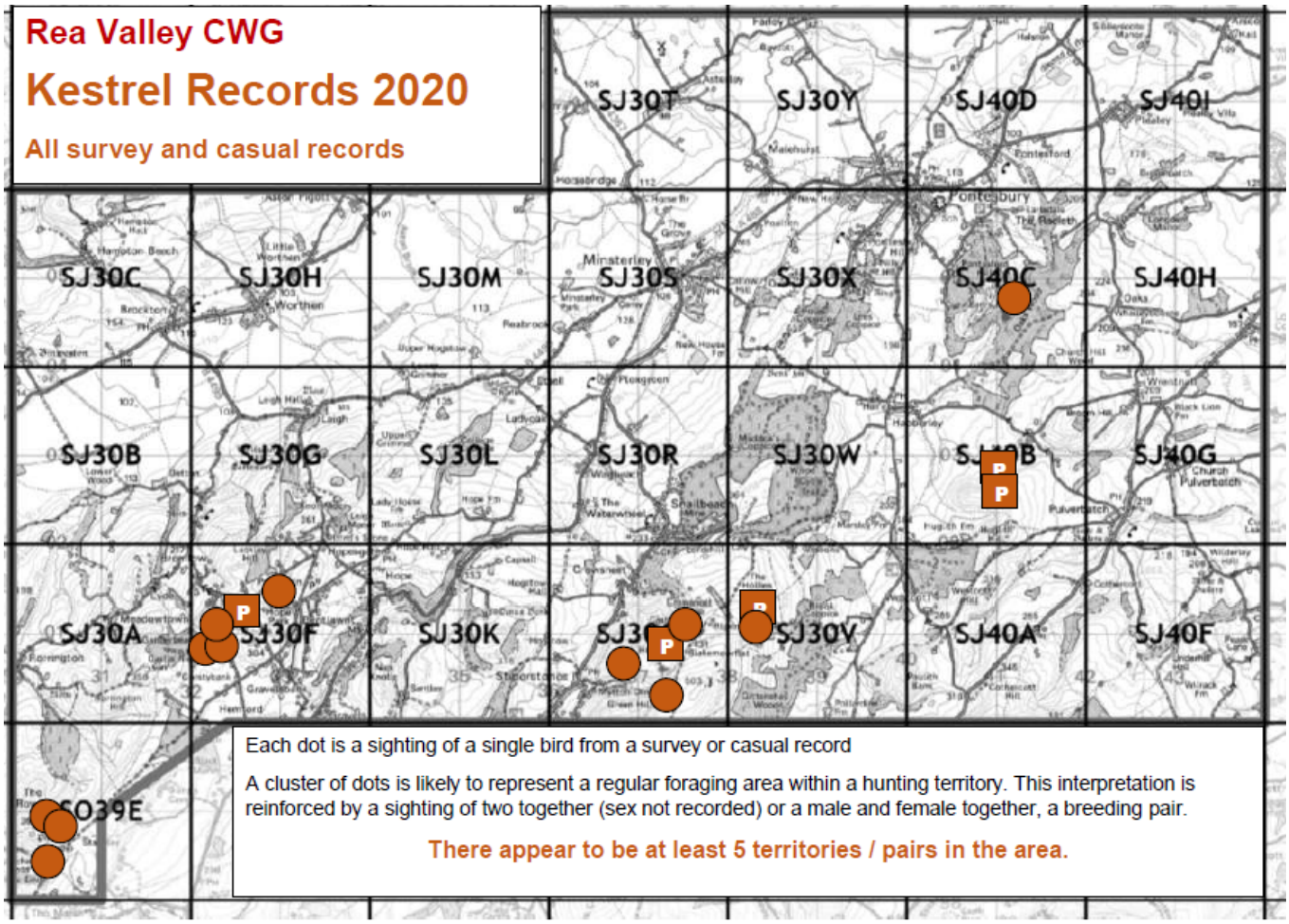
Kestrels defend a small territory around the nest, but their home range, where they find most of their food, is at least 1 km square, but can be as large as 10 km square. Most hunting is carried out within 1.8km of the nest, but the home range is often partly shared with neighbouring pairs.

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.

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.

Observations in the Rea Valley area in 2020 are shown on the Map. Some of the dots will be different observations of the same individuals. However, it is likely that the clusters of dots represent around five pairs, compared to around three last year. No nest sites were found, nor were any fledged young reported, although young would not have fledged until after the main survey period ended in mid-June. A traditional nest site on the western edge of SO39E was not visited.

There were two confirmed, and five probable, breeding records in these tetrads in the Shropshire Bird Atlas 2008-13.



2.6 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 a 71% decline in both England and the English West Midlands region between 1995 and 2018.

In Shropshire, 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.

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.

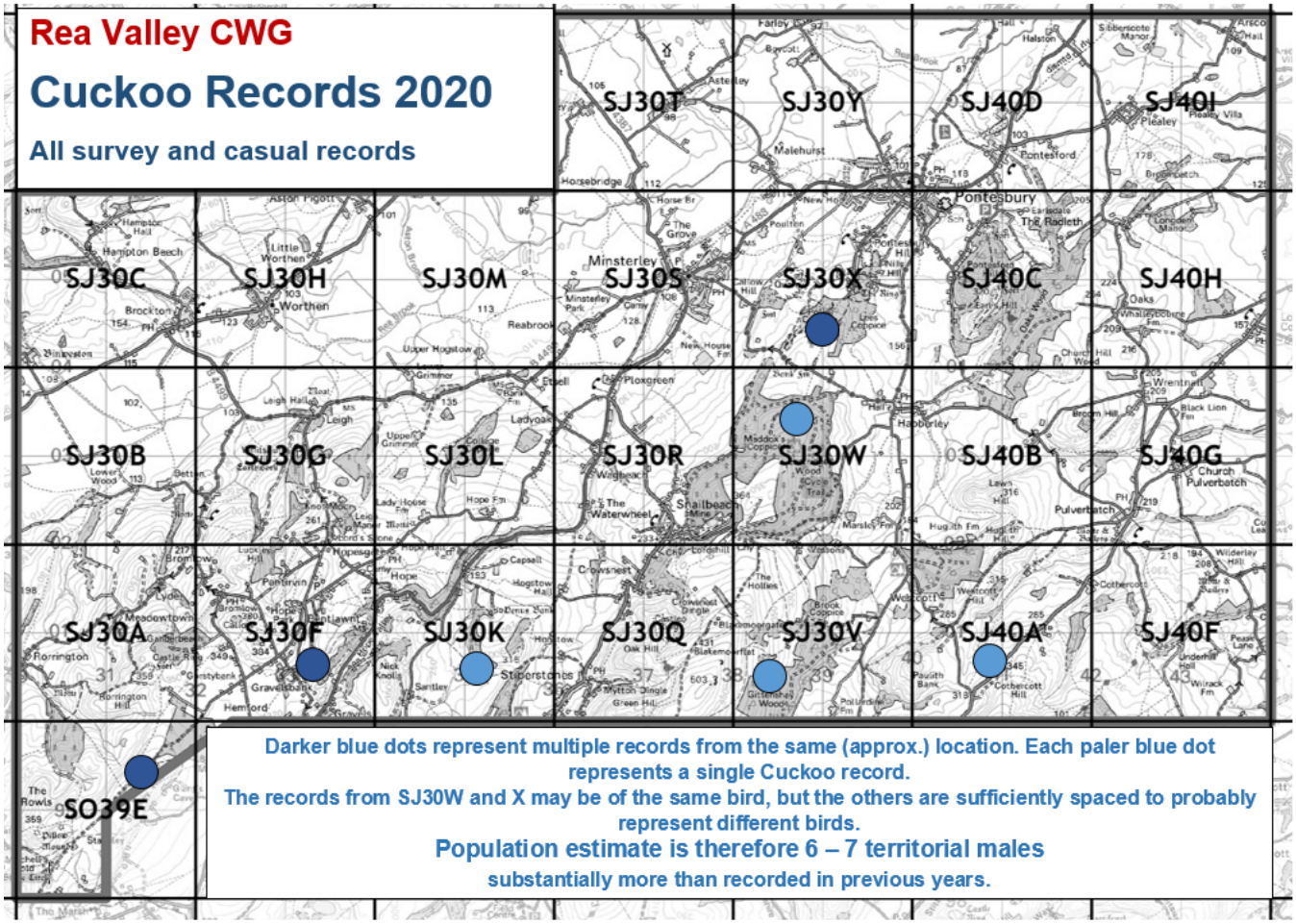
The characteristic Cuckoo call is made only by the male, and he defends a “song territory” to attract females and deter other males. The female has a different, rarely heard, “bubbling call”. Each male

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").

Darker blue dots represent multiple records from the same (approx.) location. Each paler blue dot represents a single Cuckoo record. The records from SJ30W and X may be of the same bird, but the others are sufficiently spaced to probably represent different birds. The population estimate is therefore 6 – 7 territorial males, substantially more than recorded in previous years.



In 2019, a casual record was received of one heard somewhere in the vicinity of Upper Vessons Farm, in SJ30V. In 2018, only one was recorded, in SJ30F; while one was recorded in each of two tetrads in 2017, one in 2016 and two in 2015.

2.7 Red Kite

Red Kites were seen in several tetrads, reflecting the spread of this species. However, in view of the limited coverage, no comparison with previous years can be made. The local site occupied for the previous three years 2017-19 was again occupied, but there was a second nest nearby, at a site not previously occupied. Three young fledged at each site.

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 breeding will become a regular occurrence in the near future.

2.8 Other Target Species

Apart from the four main Target Species listed and mapped above, members are normally asked to record observations of 19 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	Linnet	Snipe	Wheatear
Bullfinch	Meadow Pipit	Spotted Flycatcher	Whinchat
Dipper	Red Kite	Stonechat	Yellow Wagtail
Dunnock	Reed Bunting	Swift (nest sites only)	Yellowhammer
Grey Partridge	Skylark	Tree Sparrow	

2.9 Nest Box Schemes

The Group initiated a Barn Owl project in 2015, with the intention of installing nest boxes at locations where owls were seen, but very few reports were received in the five years 2015-19, so the effort to systematically seek out Barn Owl records has been abandoned.

2.91 Resting Hill

A nest box scheme for woodland birds, particularly Pied Flycatcher, in the Stiperstones valleys at Resting Hill, has been developed since 2015, initially with funding from the Landscape Partnership Scheme. A full separate report on this project appears elsewhere in this Annual Report.

2.92 Pontesford Hill

Another nest box scheme has operated on Pontesford Hill since 2016, which is now supported by the Friends of Pontesbury Hill and Earls Hill, but is run by those doing the work. No monitoring was done in 2020, because of Coronavirus restrictions, but three volunteers cleared out the boxes in late October. Of

the 17, 8 had the remains of nests. One of those had two eggs, indicating a failed attempt, whereas the other 7 nests appeared to show that the young had fledged. Unfortunately the remains were insufficient to allow the species to be identified. It is hoped to put up some more boxes and resume monitoring in 2021.

2.93 Habberley Brook / The Rea

With the support of players of People's Postcode Lottery, and permission from the landowner, a new nest box scheme was initiated alongside the upper reaches of Habberley Brook, primarily aimed at Pied Flycatcher and Redstart. Fifty-six boxes were made, and installed before the start of Coronavirus restrictions.

Fortunately the restrictions were lifted just in time for use of the boxes to be monitored Half were occupied, by Blue Tit 17 (30.4%), Great Tit 5 (8.9%), Pied Flycatcher 4 (7.1%) and Redstart 1 (1.8%). Thirteen Pied Flycatcher pullus (nestlings) were ringed, together with three adult females and one adult male, and six Redstart pullus were ringed.

One of the adult female Pied Flycatchers had been ringed previously, caught as an adult at Llanfyllin, Powys on 13 May 2019, 375 days earlier and 32 km to the south-west. The other three adults were not previously ringed.

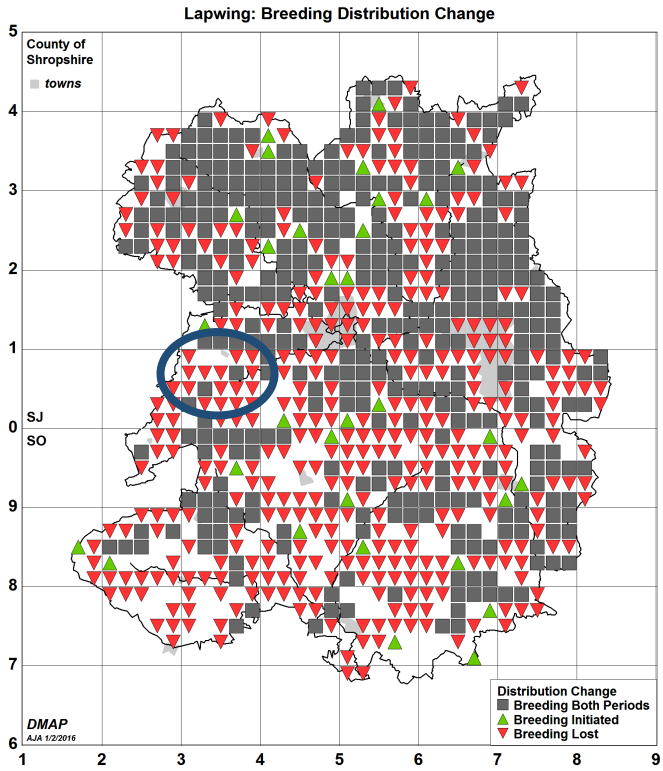
Agreement has been reached with three more landowners to extend the scheme next year, along the Habberley Brook and in adjacent areas, with around 80 new boxes.

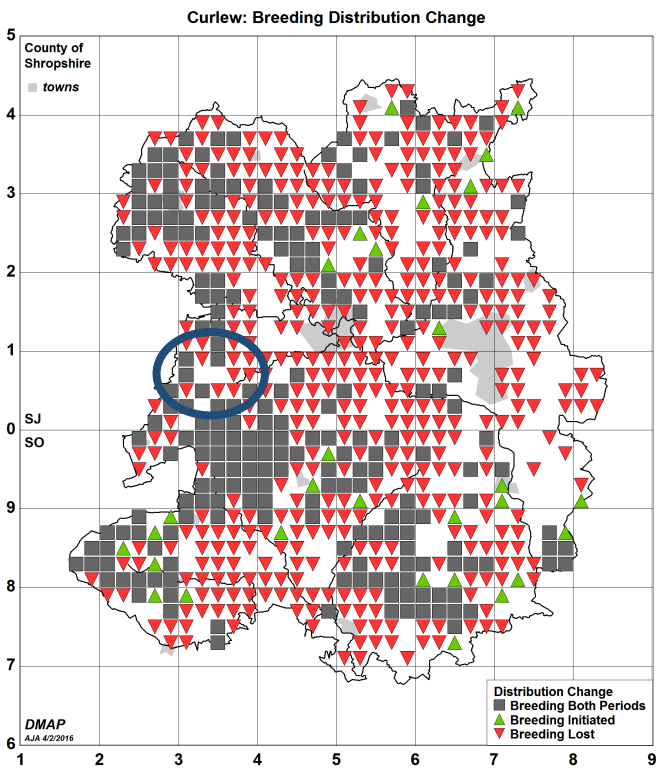
2.94 Earl's Hill SWT Reserve

There is another nest-box scheme in the area, on the SWT reserve at Earl's Hill, operated by a different ringer. The CWG has no direct involvement in this scheme, but some members help with this scheme too. Its results are summarised here for completeness. Thirty-five boxes were available. The overall occupancy this year was 60% which is very good.
Pied Flycatchers had a much better year with eight pairs recorded, of which seven were successful, producing 41 chicks, all of which fledged. Four adults were caught but none of these were previously ringed.

2.10 Decline of Lapwing and Curlew

Lapwing and Curlew are in decline, across the UK, in England and Wales, 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 Rea Valley CWG 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 breed on or near the farm, or use 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.

2.11 Recommendations

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

2.12 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 "head-starting". 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 head-started 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 head-started 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, the only new pair in the Rea Valley area, at Habberley, may possibly have included head-started birds, but it is not known if they were colour-ringed or not. A new pair was found in the Upper Onny, but neither bird was colour-ringed. Two pairs were found 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 head-started. It is not known when the other bird was colour-ringed, so it may possibly have been head-started.

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.

2.13 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 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 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 .

2.14 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 abandoned in 2020 because of Coronavirus restrictions.

The Rea Valley CWG 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.

2.15 Curlews and Pheasant Release

The RSPB announced last October 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 game-birds 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 game-bird 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 Red 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/

2.16 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.

2.17 Acknowledgements

Most importantly, thanks to the Group members who undertook the survey work, as square surveyors or casual recorders:-

Richard Allen, Julian Bromhead, Kevin Heede, Alison & Paul Holmes, Howard Key, Steve Oates, Liz Penrose Janet Radford, Siobhan Reedy, Leo Smith, Luke Walker, Paul Wilcox, David Wilson and Anne Yeeles.

Eight other members agreed to survey squares, but were unable to do so because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Andy Spencer, a qualified BTO bird ringer, organised the new Habberley Brook/ The Rea Nest Box Scheme: he made the boxes, obtained permission from the landowner to put them up, monitored their use, and ringed the Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts.

Thanks to Jane and Lizzie Hulton-Harrop for permission to install these boxes, and for help in putting them up.

Thanks to Gareth Richardson for the report on the separate nest box scheme on the SWT Earl's Hill reserve.

The Bird Survey, and the nest box schemes, have benefitted from support received from players of People's Postcode Lottery.

2.18 Plans for 2021

The Bird Group intends to repeat the Bird Survey in 2021. New participants are needed, so we hope to recruit new members. Anyone interested in birds will be very welcome. Normally we hold a briefing meeting in March, but that won't be possible this year. However, we will hold an outdoor socially-distance training meeting in late March or early April for new members who feel that it would be helpful. If you are interested in helping with the Bird Survey, please contact Leo Smith (leo@leosmith.org.uk).

The nest box schemes will also carry on.

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

3. Resting Hill Nestbox Scheme 2020

By Amber Bicheno, Chair RVCWG and Jonathan Groom, BTO Regional Representative for Shropshire.

Year 6

3.1 Introduction

Resting Hill Wood is located on the slopes of the Stiperstones National Nature Reserve (NNR) above Snailbeach village. It is an actively managed, coppiced oak woodland and as such has some sections that are much more open than others.

The scheme is aimed at providing nesting opportunities in the form of nesting boxes in the wood for Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca)* and Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus)*, two species of migratory bird that usually rely on cavities to nest in. Pied Flycatchers are on the British Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern, whilst Redstarts are on the Amber list. Loss of habitats with suitable mature trees is one of the main causes of decline for these two species.

These boxes also provide homes for other native species such as; Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus)*, Great Tit (*Parus major*) and both are recorded on this site. Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*), Marsh Tit (*Poecile palustris*), and Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*) have been known to use similar nest boxes in the area, though never on Resting Hill. Since the scheme's inception in 2015, 10 more boxes have been added to the site bringing the total up to 64.

The boxes were erected and are monitored in accordance with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Nest Record Scheme methodology. Data is submitted to the BTO as part of the scheme to contribute towards their long-term population trends.

2020 presented its own set of challenges to people around the world, with the global Covid-19 pandemic putting limits on movement and gathering. Fortunately thanks to the dedicated volunteers that live locally to Resting Hill, checks of the nest boxes continued. Precautions were taken for all visits, with volunteers keeping 2 meters distance and surveying different sections of the site to ensure everyone's safety.

3.2 Summary Headlines

The project continued in 2020 thanks to local recorders, monitoring the nesting success of 3 species within the woodland; Pied Flycatcher, Blue Tit and Great Tit.

- Overall box uptake 54%
- Pied Flycatcher numbers up by 7 nests
- Blue Tit numbers increased by 3
- Great Tit numbers up by 1 nest.
- Redstart were not found in the wood this year.
- Overall success rate for Pied Flycatcher was 86% (nests with at least 1 fledged young), 14% were complete successes.
- Blue Tit nest success rate 92%
- Great Tit nest success rate 88%

3.3 Results

3.31 Box Uptake

Figure 1: Proportional uptake of boxes by species

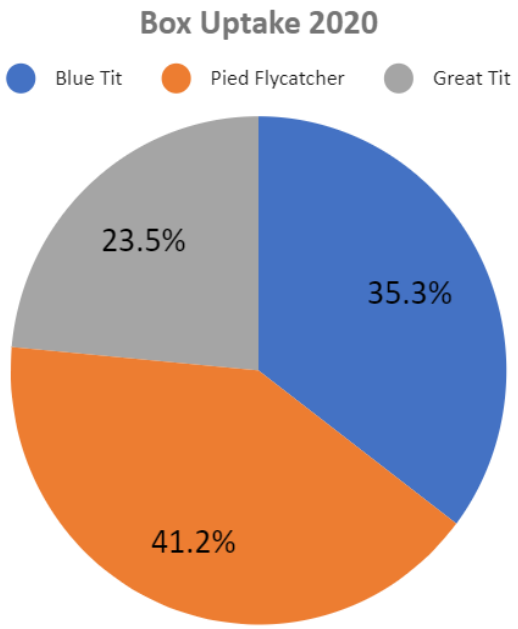
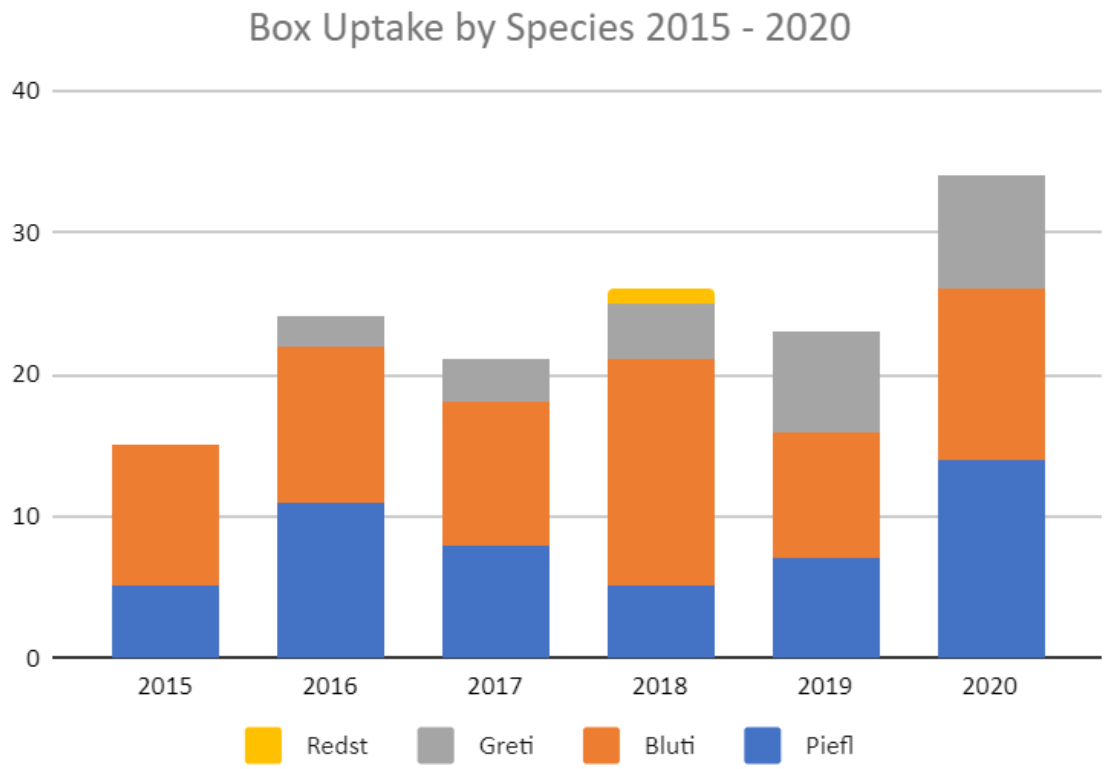


Figure 1 shows the uptake of boxes by each species. Surprisingly, this season, Pied Flycatchers overtook Blue Tits for the highest box uptake. The number of flycatcher nests in 2020 has doubled since 2019, the highest number recorded since the scheme began. Figure 2 shows how this has changed over the scheme's duration. 2020 had the highest overall box occupation since the scheme began, with 34 of the 63 boxes used for nesting by one of the three species recorded.

Figure 2: Species breakdown of box uptake 2015 - 2020



3.32 Nest Success Rates

The failure rate for all species during 2020 was relatively low compared to previous years. The success rate was high for all three species this year, as can be seen in Table 1 below. Success is measured as any nests that fledged at least one chick; complete success is measured as nests where all young successfully fledged. Complete success rates were lower than we have seen previously at this site, with more nests failing to fledge their entire clutch.

Table 1: Species Nest Success Rates

Species	No. of clutches	Success	Complete Success
Blue Tit	12*	92%	25%
Great Tit	8	88%	0%
Pied Fly	14	86%	14%

* This includes a mystery clutch of tit eggs that failed before species could be identified. Blue tit is most likely.

Table 2: Change from 2019 by species

Species	Bluti	Change from 2019	Piefl	Change from 2019	Greti	Change from 2019
Total Broods	12	+3	14	+7	8	+1
Total successful	3	-1	2	-4	0	-2
Success rate	100%	66%	86%	0%	88%	17%
Complete successes	3	+1	2	-2	0	-2
Complete success rate	33%	+11%	14%	-43%	0%	-29%
Total Eggs laid	92	+13	102	+55	63	+14
Average clutch size	7.7	-1.1	7.3	+0.6	7.9	+0.9
Total Eggs hatched	71	+22	86	+41	50	+5
Total young fledged	66	+35	57	+22	42	+13
Overall Success rate	72%	+33%	56%	-18%	67%	+8%

**Success rate is measured as nests with at least 1 fledged young*

*** Complete success rate is measured as the number of nests where all young fledged*

****Overall success rate is measured as total eggs that made it to fledge chicks*

3.33 Blue Tit Productivity

Blue Tits on site had a better year, with a slight increase in occupancy. As seen in Table 2 above, almost all their nests fledged at least one chick, and their overall success rate increased by 33% from the previous year. 33% of nests managed to fledge all their young, an increase of 11%. The spring weather was beautifully warm and sunny, which may have helped spur on the better success rates for Blue Tits this season. The average clutch size has declined from 2019, down to 7.7, as shown in table 2.

3.34 Great Tit Productivity

Great Tits remained on site in 2020 and improved on their uptake, with 8 nests in total, 1 more than in 2019. Although their complete success rate is down by 29%, table 2 shows that their success and overall success rates have both increased. With the higher box uptake considered, Great Tits have had their most productive year on site with 42 fledged young out of 8 broods.

3.35 Pied Flycatcher Productivity

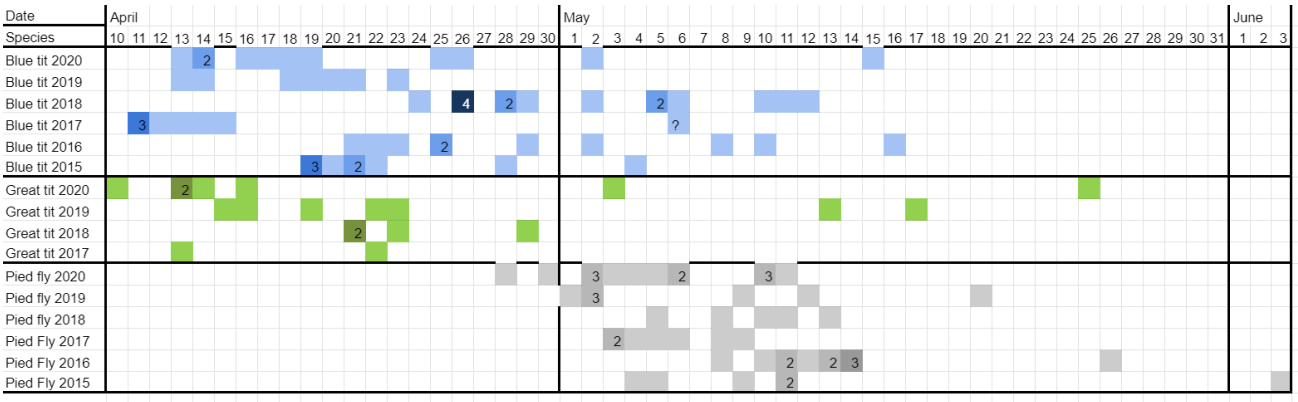
2020 has seen the highest number of Pied Flycatcher nests on site since the scheme began in 2015. This is fantastic to see after lower numbers were recorded in 2018 and 2019. Despite the increase in nests, the success rate stayed at 86%, and the sadly the complete and overall success rates both decreased quite substantially. It is likely that the Pied Flycatchers were affected by very hot weather in early June, and recorders removed 20 dead young from nests.

3.36 Redstart Productivity

Redstarts did not return to the site in 2020. This means 2018 remains the only year where Redstarts have been found using nest boxes on site.

3.37 Timing of 1st Egg Laying Dates

Table 3: 1st Egg Dates by species 2015-2020



This chart is starting to show some really interesting patterns. 2020 was another 'early' year with tit species beginning to lay as early as the 10th April (our earliest on record). This is similar to patterns seen in 2019 and 2017 but on average earlier by about a week or so from that seen in 2018, 2016 and 2015.

Pied Flycatchers remain fairly consistent though again we have seen our first April eggs on the site this year, the earliest we have on record.

A couple of late Great Tit nests could be entirely in-keeping with second 're-lay' attempts following some of the failed clutches.

3.38 Distribution of Nests

BTO Research has shown Pied Flycatchers will often choose boxes based on their proximity to active Blue Tit nests and their success is higher when closer to them, however Resting Hill has not yet repeated this trend. Though the sample group is small, Resting Hill has frequently shown the opposite to be true. This could be a point of further analysis for the more years of data we are able to collect.

3.39 Ringing

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown rules, ringing of the Pied Flycatcher broods did not go ahead in 2020. We hope that Andy Spencer will be able to return in 2021 to ring the broods and to record the adults on site.

3.4 Resting Hill Long-term trends

We now have 6 years of data for this fantastic project which has shown the effectiveness of nest-box schemes in the right area. Pied Flycatchers no longer bred at the site before boxes were erected and now we are seeing a high density of nesting pairs.

Table 4: Long-term trends at Resting Hill 2015-2020

Species	Statistic	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
All	Total number of boxes occupied	15	24	21	25	23	34
Blue tit	No. of nests	10	11	10	16	9	12
	Overall success rate	63%	61%	90%	52%	39%	72%
	Average clutch size	9.3	8.6	8.6	7.6	8.8	7.7
	Fledged young	59	58	79	33	31	66
	Average fledged per nest	5.9	5.3	7.9	2.1	3.4	5.5
Great tit	No. of nests	0	2	3	4	7	8
	Overall success rate		71%	86%	55%	59%	67%
	Average clutch size		7	7	8.3	7	7.9
	Fledged young		10	18	18	29	42
	Average fledged per nest		5.0	6.0	4.5	4.1	5.3
Pied flycatcher	No. of nests	5	11	8	5	7	14
	Overall success rate	91%	73%	85%	85%	74%	56%
	Average clutch size	6.4	7.1	7.25	6.8	6.7	7.3
	Fledged young	29	52	50	29	35	57
	Average fledged per nest	5.8	4.7	6.3	5.8	5.0	4.1

The overall take-away from this 6-year trend is that the nest-box scheme has been a success and the populations of all three species seem to be increasing. There is annual fluctuation and surely the climatic events, certainly of the past three years or so, must have had an effect, but the bottom line is that during 2020, box occupancy and numbers of fledged young were at an all-time high for the site.

It is a little concerning to see that despite the highest number of Pied Flycatchers yet recorded on site, their success levels were significantly lower than normal. This is most likely due to the very changeable weather with heavy storms and a heatwave in June, following the driest May on record.

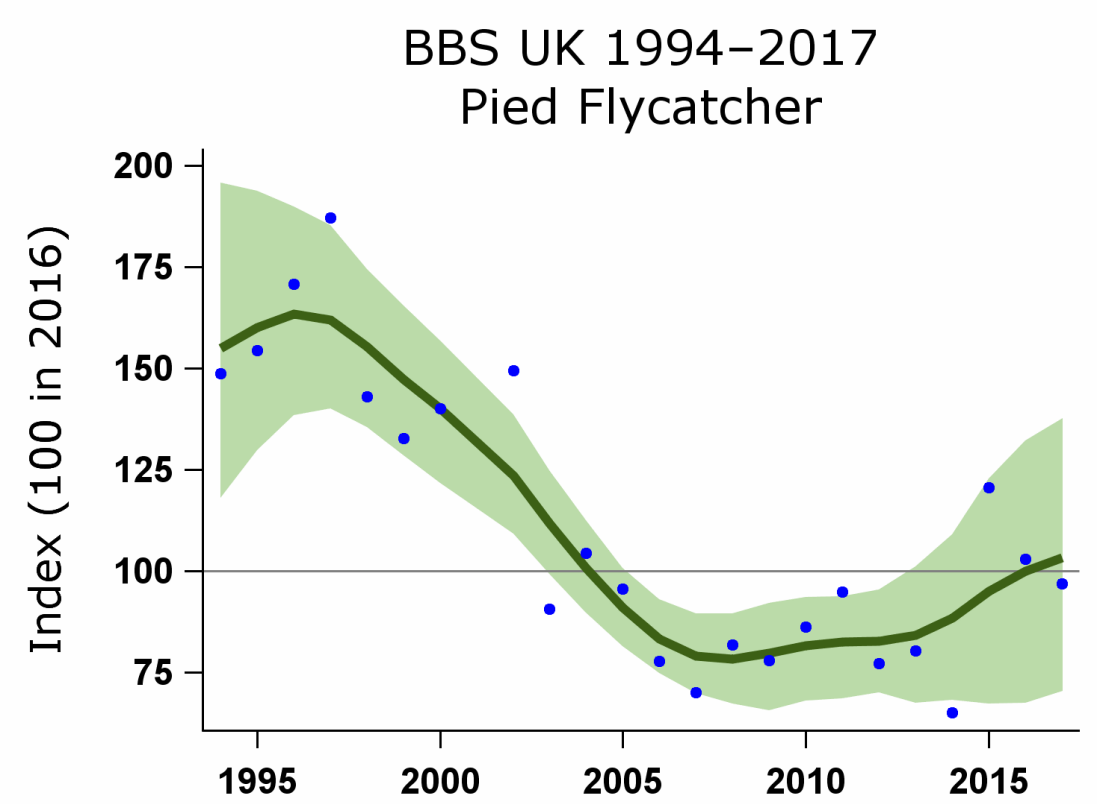
Blue Tits seemed to have bounced back from two very poor years in 2018 and 2019 (also probably weather-related) and Great Tits continue to increase, with success rates remaining reasonably

consistent. This is an interesting contrast to the very low levels of productivity calculated from across the UK by the BTO (https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/ringing-scheme/ringing-surveys/constant-effort-sites/ces-results/preliminary-1) and poor numbers in other nest box schemes (anecdotal accounts from Jonathan Groom).

The level of data collected by this project continues to be enlightening and interesting!

3.5 BTO Long Term Population Trends

The BTO's Nest Record Scheme is the largest and longest running of its type in the world. They now hold over 1.3million nest records, of which the Resting Hill results are a part! The primary aim of these schemes is to gather breeding performance data, with reports periodically published by the BTO.



BTO/JNCC BirdTrends Report

3.6 Acknowledgements

Thank you to all our volunteers for their continued help:

- With special mention to Julian Bromhead for organising socially distanced checks during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Natural England for allowing access to their site
- Jonathan Groom for his continued guidance and support with this project

4. Plant Group Report 2020

By Rob Rowe, Plant Group Leader, February 2021

4.1 People and Plants

Twelve events took place within the areas of the Camlad, Rea Valley and Upper Onny Wildlife Groups and were open to anyone interested in plants, whether a complete beginner, an experienced botanist or somewhere in between.

A publicity leaflet was produced with the help of Cassy Clayton from Natural England. These were distributed as hard copies and electronically and the events were advertised through the Community wildlife groups and the Shropshire Hills AONB.

As well as plants, the participants recorded birds and insects where possible.

These sessions were very popular, with a total of eighty attendees, the same as for 2019.

I am particularly grateful for funding from the Stepping Stone project through the People's Postcode Lottery.

We had a very full programme of events planned for 2020 which was run in conjunction with the Verges Group and Marches Meadow Group.

4.1.1 Winter tree ID workshop

The Winter tree ID workshop on 6th March went ahead as planned before lock down, from the Natural England office on the Stiperstones. Eight people attended and we spent a pleasant day outside and in puzzling over a multitude of twigs!
Little did we know…

4.1.2 Verge ID sessions

By the end of May we were wondering what we could do within the lockdown restrictions as there had been road verge ID sessions planned for this time. With the help of Lizzie Hulton-Harrop we produced two short road verge and four meadow ID videos. These were produced with no previous experience and were sent out to Plant group members for comment. We received much useful feedback about these small tutorial videos, which hopefully improved as we progressed!
These are now available on the MMCLT website, middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk
This culminated in a separate and very professional film made by Caring For Gods Acre about road verge management.

4.1.3 Meadow Plant ID sessions

In June with the partial lifting of lockdown I started doing some events which were limited to 6 people in England and 12 in Wales. The response to these was quite moving with up to 30 people wanting to come on an event. So some of the events were repeated two or three times. Twelve 'live' events were run in total, some in collaboration with the Marches Meadow Group where we did some basic meadow plant ID at two meadows in Pennerley and one near Stiperstones village.

4.1.4 Wet flushes surveys

The day surveying the wet flushes on the East side of the Stiperstones went ahead as planned
We held three events around the Stapeley Hill/Corndon area on the Welsh side of the border where we had 10 or 12 people on each event.
Many of these events had a much more informal feel than 'normal' years and judging by the uptake of all these events I believe that it played a significant part in the participant's wellbeing.

4.1.5 Invasive Plant project

The Invasive plant project went ahead much as planned with full funding from the STWA Boost for Biodiversity fund. It was possible to work with some volunteers [7 days in total] although we didn't have the large numbers of National Trust volunteers as in previous years.

4.1.6 Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project [RSVP]

Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project is now a constituted body and continues to work with volunteers and with Shropshire County Council.

Finally, one survey was done on behalf of Shropshire Wildlife Trust on Stapeley Hill.

Hogstow - socially distanced botanists

5. Treasurers Report for year end 31st March 2020

By Geoff Brown, Treasurer, February 2021

REA VALLEY COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

Year end accounts to 31st March 2020

INCOME		EXPENDITURE	
HSBC BALANCE @ 08/04/2019	241.86	Contribution to website cost	12.00
Meeting receipts	78.50	Hall hire	20.00
Uncleared cheque	20.00	AGM Speaker	100.00
Totals	340.36		132.00
NET BALANCE		208.36	
HSBC statement balance @ 08/04/2019		208.36	

As can be seen from the accounts there was not much financial activity to report and it was fairly straightforward.

The current year has been more active with the money for the Stepping Stones Project received in three stages and totalling £3000. £2065 has been spent and the remaining allocation has been carried over into 2021 as allowed, due to the problems caused by Covid-19.

I have asked that the members at the AGM consider a change to the financial year end in order to make the annual accounts more relevant (less historical!) The suggestion is to change the year end from 31 March to 31 January.

Appendix 1: Map of Survey Area, showing Square Boundaries and Tetrad Codes