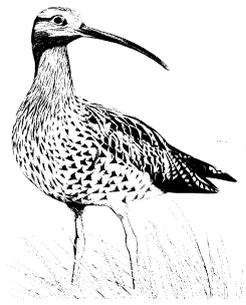


# THE UPPER ONNY WILDLIFE GROUP

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



## Report 2020

The Group was formed in 2003, to work within the local community to find out more about the local populations of Lapwings, Curlews, Skylarks and other wildlife, and to help in their conservation.

Members all live or work in the area. New members are welcome, and we need more people to help.

We cover a total area of about 125 square kilometres, between the Long Mynd and the Welsh Border (from just north of Bridges, Pennerley and Shelve, as far south as Horderley and Bishops Castle). Most of this area is within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

We have carried out a Breeding Bird Survey each year since 2004, concentrating on Curlew and Lapwing. Farmers with nests on their land have been advised of

their presence, and encouraged to take appropriate conservation measures. This includes joining one of Natural England's farm payment schemes, so farmers are rewarded financially for conservation.

We proposed the Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS) Ground-nesting Bird Recovery Project, and 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 have carried out plant surveys, and we are identifying potential Wildlife Sites. Events are held to involve more people in this work (see back page). The project to clear invasive species continued in 2020.

### *Curlew – Still Disappearing Fast?*



The bubbling call of Curlews is one of the first welcome signs of spring, and in 2004 we found close to 40 pairs. However, very few young birds fledge, and the older ones are dying off, so the

population has declined by about one pair per year, by almost one-third (30%) in 16 years.

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

Although land management has played a part in the long-term decline, the LPS project showed that predation is the biggest problem now, and understanding the reasons for poor chick survival is needed before an Action Plan can be developed to reverse the decline (see Curlew projects on page 3).

### *Lapwing – The fewest since we started*

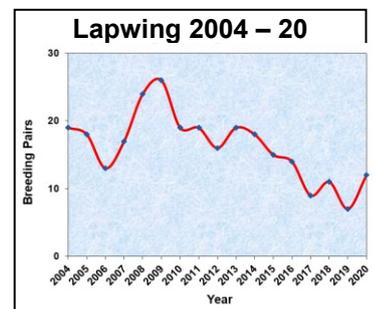


In our first three years 2004 - 06, the breeding population declined from 19 to 13 pairs. If that rate of decline had continued, Lapwings would have been lost within two years.

We launched a Lapwing Recovery Project, and worked with several individual farmers and

Natural England to reverse the decline. We were successful initially, and the population increased to 26 pairs by 2009, but loss of important habitat on a single farm led to a further decline, and by 2010 the

population was down again to when we started. Further decline set in again in 2015, down to the lowest number we've ever found since 2004, only 7 pairs in 2019, but there was a slight recovery to 11-13 pairs in 2020.



Lapwings are now restricted to about only five farms, with only one now on the two most favoured farms over the years, and we are still trying to work with farmers and Natural England to improve habitat and breeding success, to reverse the long-term decline.

A full report of the Bird Survey can be found on our website. It includes distribution maps and population trends for Lapwing and Curlew. Rapid and effective conservation action is needed for both species if they are not to disappear forever.

## Nest Box Schemes

The Group operates three nest box schemes, for Barn Owls, small woodland birds and Dippers. Breeding success varies from year to year, depending on

### 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 7 were occupied. 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

If 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, covering 48 nest boxes. At least 17 (35%) of these were occupied: Blue Tits (10), unidentified tits (4), Coal Tits (1) and Great Tits (2). One box was sealed by Nuthatch but not occupied, while another was used by bees.

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. In 2020, 545 nest boxes were checked and 44% were occupied: 53 Pied Flycatcher, 10 Redstart, 95 Blue Tit, 32 Great Tit, and 41 non-bird species. In total 74 adult Pied Flycatchers (48 female and 26 male) were caught, of

weather conditions at different stages of the breeding cycle, and the availability of food.

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.

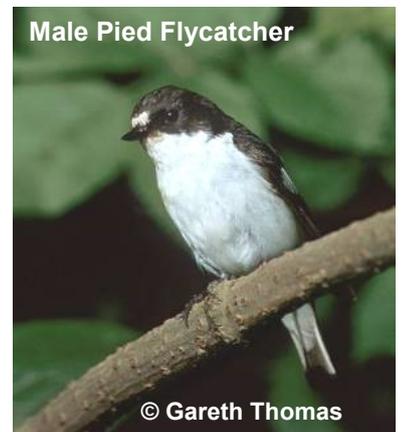
Funding has been received for one replacement nest box, and for two at new sites.

A report is being prepared, analysing the use of the nest boxes since they were first installed. It shows that there have been six regularly used territories. It will be put on the website, when available.

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.

Four 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.



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

### Dippers



Dippers feed almost exclusively on larvae that live on the stony beds of fast flowing streams, and the Upper Onny is one of their strongholds in Shropshire. Some build nests on ledges on bridges, and they take readily to nest boxes. Each box must be located

directly above the water, in a position where predators are unable to reach it. Since 2005, over 50 boxes have been installed, under most bridges.

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.

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

We want to involve more local people. Enthusiasm and interest in wildlife is more important than expertise. Training is provided for anyone that wants it. We have proved that local people can make a difference, and we can do even more with your support. Please help.

## ***Curlew Country***

The LPS finished at the end of March 2018. The Ground-nesting Birds project did excellent work in gaining the support of farmers and landowners, monitoring nests to identify the causes of poor breeding success, and protecting them against predation, particularly by foxes. Its work has continued as the “Curlew Country” project, now concentrating on the trialling of “headstarting”, which involves removing eggs from Curlew nests, incubating them artificially, rearing chicks in captivity, and then releasing them into the wild after they fledge. 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. About 60 fledged young have been released since 2017.

## ***SOS “Save our Curlews” Campaign***

Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) continued its “Save our Curlews” Campaign and appeal, which will fund a nest finding and protection project in three other Community Wildlife Group areas, Upper Clun, Clee Hill and Strettons area. This work too was suspended in 2020, but will restart in 2021.

Tracking the chicks to find out how they use the landscape, their fate, and the reasons for low levels of

One of seven released in 2017 returned in 2019. See the Curlew Country website

The project was suspended in 2020 because of Covid-19 restrictions. If the local Curlew chicks had survived and returned to their natal area to breed, several released in 2018 should have returned in 2020, but there was no evidence that any did.

However, if headstarting does work it may lead to a significant short-term increase in the local Curlew population, and it is important to evaluate the trial, particularly by assessing whether any young Curlews do come back. Continued monitoring of the size of the local population by UOWG will make a major contribution to this evaluation.

chick survival, is the key to an effective conservation plan. We need to know why so few young fledge.

SOS is continuing with the campaign and appeal. Details, reports on the projects, and how the work feeds into national and regional work to convince the Government of the need for effective Curlew conservation measures, can be found on the SOS website [www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/](http://www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/)

## ***Curlew monitoring by other Community Wildlife Groups***

There are now 10 Community Wildlife Groups in Shropshire, including UOWG, monitoring local populations in the areas where most were found during the 2008-13 Bird Atlas.

The work of some Groups was severely curtailed by the Coronavirus restrictions, but even so, collectively they found 93-111 breeding pairs, about three-quarters of the County population, more clear evidence of community support for saving our Curlews.

## ***Invasive Plant Species***

Himalayan balsam and Japanese Knotweed are non-native invasive plants that are colonising many rivers and streams. Funding from the Severn Trent Water Authority 'Boost for Biodiversity' fund ensured that the project to eradicate them where possible continued in 2020.

Himalayan balsam was originally found right at the top of the West Onny just into Wales at White Grit, in a tributary near the Bog, and there were large amounts along the Crifftin Brook. Pulling it up has been the major part of the project. We have now worked downstream to the A488 bridge near Horderley, and

many areas are now clear.

It was possible to work with some volunteers [7 days in total] although the large number of National Trust volunteers we had available in previous years could not come in 2020.

A full report can be found on the website.



Himalayan Balsam

## ***Annual Report***

This short report summarises our work in 2020. It will be widely distributed in the area. Previous Reports, a 2020 Bid Survey report, a list of Committee members, and the Accounts, can be found on the website.

## ***Support***

We have the support of the AONB Partnership, Natural England, RSPB, National Trust and the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, all of whom who have previously funded our work. The HLF Landscape Partnership Scheme provided funding 2014-17. Several projects in 2020, including the Bird and Plant

Group surveys, and the nest box schemes, benefitted from support received via the National Trust Stepping Stones project from players of People's Postcode Lottery.

## ***Website***

There are now seven Community Wildlife Groups in the Shropshire Hills, and three more in the north-west, that all share a website. The Upper Onny Programme, including Bird and Plant walks, and Notice of Events and Meetings, are posted on the website. Please look at it.

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

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

UOWG initially concentrated on Birds, but it has also carried out a considerable amount of survey work on Wild Flowers and plants. A separate Plant Group was established in 2013, to organise and develop this work. When the LPS started promoting Community Wildlife Groups (CWGs) in the Rea and Camlad Valley areas in 2015, we decided to run the three CWG plant groups together, and this has continued up to, and including, 2020.

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

A series of outings and training days started in 2014, with backing from Natural England. The outings are designed to record the plants at each site, and provide informal training for participants to improve their knowledge and identification skills, and then, if they wish, carry out their own survey work. They are open to anyone interested in plants, whether a complete beginner, an experienced botanist or somewhere in between.

A programme, produced with the help of Cassy Clayton from Natural England, was distributed widely, including through the three Community Wildlife Groups, and the Shropshire Hills AONB. There were 12 events, with a total of 80 attendees, the same as last year. There is a more detailed account on the website.

As an example (see photo), a day was spent surveying the wet flushes on the east side of the Stiperstones.

In response to the Coronavirus restrictions, some events were repeated two or three times, because more people wanted to come than were allowed within a single group, and two short roadside verge and four meadow ID videos were made and sent out to Plant group members.

A similar programme will be run in 2021, and we will continue looking for and surveying unimproved meadows, working with the Marches Meadow group and the Middle Marches Community Land Trust

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

These surveys started in 2015, and approximately 170 kilometres of verges in the Upper Onny area, 130 km in the Rea Valley area and 80 km in the Camlad Valley area had been completed by 2018. This information is now on the Shropshire Council GIS data base.

The work helped lead to the formation of the Restoring Shropshire's Verges Project [RSVP], which is now a constituted body and continues to work with

volunteers and with Shropshire county council.

If we can find the remaining species rich verges we can feed this information to Shropshire and Powys Councils who, hopefully with the help of local Parish Councils (some of whom have already expressed interest), will manage these verges in a more sympathetic way.

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

In addition to the above outings and surveys, one survey was done on behalf of Shropshire Wildlife Trust on Stapeley Hill. The different habitats were mapped (with reference to plant communities where possible), the condition of each habitat was assessed, and a full plant list was produced, other species of interest were noted, and a photographic record was made.

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

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



Cotton grass in a wet flush on the Stiperstones



Surveying Stapeley Hill

Plant Outings were organised in 2020, to introduce new people to the fascinating wildlife of our spectacular area. The Bird Walk had to be cancelled. More walks and outings will be organised in 2021. All welcome.

If you want any further information about these events, or about the Group, or a copy of the Group's previous Annual Reports, look on the website [www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk)

You can contact us, or join, through the website or via the Secretary  
Pippa Middlemiss, Nant Argoed, Argoed, Clun, Craven Arms SY7 8NW  
[middlemisspippa@gmail.com](mailto:middlemisspippa@gmail.com)