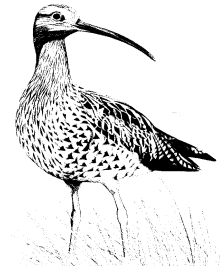


# THE UPPER ONNY WILDLIFE GROUP

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



## Report 2023

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 with their conservation.

New members are welcome, and we need more people to help with our projects and surveys, please.

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 Protected Landscape (previously known as the 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. We have helped some of them to join a Government farm payment scheme, so they 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 have continued to provide this information to the successor project, *Curlew Country*, since 2018.

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 2023.

The Dragonfly and Damselfly Monitoring project (see page 3) started in 2022, and continued in 2023.

### 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 more than one pair per year, by 33% in 19 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 regionally and nationally important 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 – No breeding pairs found in 2023



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.

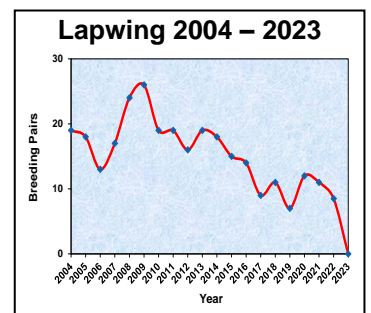
We launched a Lapwing Recovery Project, and worked with several individual farmers and

Natural England to reverse the decline. Initial success raised the population 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, and has continued since, but 2023 is the first time we have found no breeding pairs. Only one individual was seen, near Hardwick.

In recent years, Lapwings have been restricted to very few

farms, and there is very little suitable habitat left. We are still trying to work with farmers and Natural England to improve habitat and breeding success, to reverse the long-term decline.



A 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 over 30 have been installed altogether, mainly before 2010.

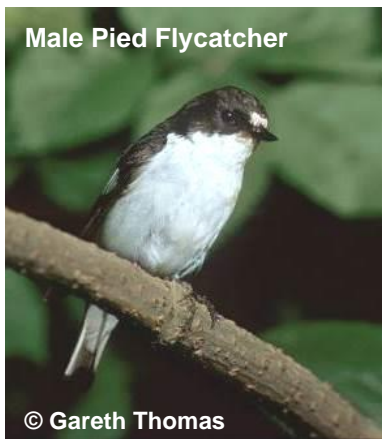
A review of the results over the 12 years to 2022 showed that there has been a fairly regular breeding population of around 6 pairs of barn owls in the area, with some annual fluctuations, and some pairs use more than one box. Seven pairs is the most that has been recorded, with 16 fledged young in 2017. The review can be found on the website.

Results are shown for 2023, and preceding years:

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boxes checked	13	9	12	16	11
Nesting attempts	5	5	3	6	3
Chicks ringed	14	7	6	14	8

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.

In addition, over 500 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.

For several years, all the ringing was done by Andy

*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. Since 2005, over 50 boxes have been installed, under most bridges. Over several years, we have shown that the nest box scheme has increased the population – there are more potential

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

The number of boxes checked was quite low in comparison with the previous few years, mainly due to pressure on volunteer time. It is a high effort survey (transporting and carrying the ladder around so many boxes is really hard work and requires a vehicle with a roof-rack) and it was also difficult to co-ordinate volunteer availability.



2023 was a fairly poor year, and one of the most reliable sites drew a rare blank (this has only happened once before).

No natural sites are currently known.

Spencer, but from 2022 he continued ringing at two sites, around Bridges and Linley Estate, and responsibility for the remainder has passed to Shropshire Ringing Group.

2023 was a good year overall, and it was good to see Pied Flycatchers bounce back from their disaster year in 2022.

Numbers of all species were comparable to the 5-year average between 2017-2021 with Blue tit and Great tit having a better than average year all round.

Results for 2023 are shown in the Table.

Area	Ringer	Pied Flycatcher	Red-start	Blue Tit	Great Tit	Tit spp*	TOTAL
Stedment	AS	8	2	10	5	0	25
Linley	AS	23	5	14	12	0	54
Bridges	SRG	7	1	18	5	0	31
Onny	SRG	20	2	17	18	2	59
Lower Onny	SRG	7	0	12	9	1	29
Total		65	10	71	49	3	198

\* Was not identified to species but definitely a tit species.

AS = Andy Spenser, SRG = Shropshire Ringing Group

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*.

There are usually about 14-16 breeding pairs. Most of the regular sites were occupied in 2023, but the regular monitoring report is still awaited. It will be posted on the website when available.

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 “Curlew Country” project is 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.

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

Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) continued its “Save our Curlews” Campaign and appeal, which funded a nest finding and protection project in three other Community Wildlife Group areas, Strettons area, and Tanat to Perry, and Three Parishes, both around Oswestry. Tracking the chicks to find out how they use the landscape, their fate, and the reasons for low levels

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. So far there is no evidence that many do.

Continued monitoring of the size of the local population by UOWG will make a major contribution to this evaluation.

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

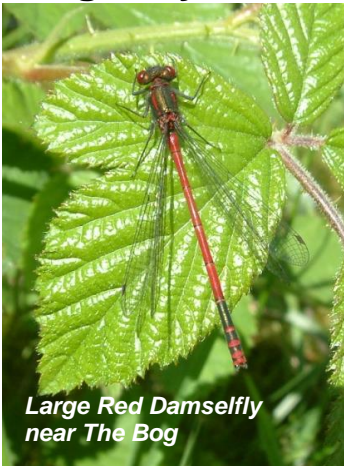
Details, reports on the projects, and how the work feeds into national and regional work to convince the Government of the need for effective Curlew conservation measures, can be found on the SOS website [www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/](http://www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/)

## ***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.

Collectively the groups found around 100 breeding pairs, about three-quarters of the County population, more clear evidence of community support for saving our Curlews.

## ***Dragonfly and Damselfly Monitoring***



*Large Red Damselfly near The Bog*

After the training course run in 2022 this was the first year UOWG members could put their new identification skills to the test. Unfortunately August, usually the busiest month for dragon- and damselfly recorders, was something of a washout.

Nevertheless, thirteen species were recorded over the summer, mostly at Shelve Pool and at The

Bog (see table). There are about 20 species of dragon- and damselflies in the area, but distributions of many species are widening, so more species may be expected.

Perhaps the most exciting of the 2023 records are the Beautiful Demoiselle, Black-tailed Skimmer and Black Darter, which all have relatively scattered records in the area, and Golden-ringed Dragonfly, which is a declining species nationally. As a group, upland dragonflies

(which are most at risk from climate change) are included in the Stepping Stones species recovery project, so over the next two years there may be opportunities for practical steps to help these species.

Thanks to Simon Cooter for his records and Sue Rees-Evans (County Recorder for Odonata) for confirmation of some of the records.

If you want to help with this project, please contact Richard Small at the email address on the website.

Species	Location(s)
Beautiful Demoiselle	Woodland ride near The Bog
Large Red Damselfly	Pool at The Bog, Woodland ride near The Bog
Azure Damselfly	Shelve Pool, Pools at The Bog
Common Blue Damselfly	Shelve Pool, Pool at The Bog
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Shelve Pool
Southern Hawker	Shelve Pool, Nipstone, Woodland ride near The Bog
Brown Hawker	Shelve Pool, Pool at The Bog
Four-spotted Chaser	Pool at The Bog
Broad-bodied Chaser	Pool at The Bog
Black-tailed Skimmer	Shelve Pool
Black Darter	Woodland ride near The Bog
Common Darter	Shelve Pool
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	Stream below Ritton Castle

## ***Annual Report***

This short report summarises our work in 2023. It will be widely distributed in the area. Previous Reports, and a 2022 Bird Survey report, other activity reports, a list of Committee members, and the Accounts, can be found on the website.

## ***Support***

We have the support of the Protected Landscapes Partnership, Natural England, RSPB, National Trust and the Stepping Stones project, and Shropshire

Wildlife Trust, all of whom who have previously funded our work.

## ***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 since.

## Plants & Wild Flowers



Marsh Violet

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.

There was no programme in 2023, but it will resume in 2024. We will continue looking for and surveying unimproved meadows, working with the Marches Meadow group and the Middle Marches Community Land Trust, and we will monitor Stepping



Mountain Pansy

Stones Action Plan species.

## 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 separate constituted body which works with volunteers, other local organisations, and Shropshire county council.

## Invasive Plant Species

Himalayan balsam and Japanese Knotweed are non-native invasive plants that are colonising many rivers and streams. Funding from the Shropshire Hills Protected Landscapes Conservation Fund ensured that the project to eradicate them where possible continued for an eighth year in 2023.



Himalayan Balsam

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. We have now worked downstream to the A488 bridge near Horderley, and many areas are now clear.

Most work was undertaken by Rob Rowe, but 32 hours were contributed by volunteers. It consisted, as usual, of pulling HB by hand. No tools were used. In most places this had worked very well in previous years.

Firstly, the West Onny was cleared, followed by the confluence of the Crifftin Brook and the River Onny down as far as the A489 bridge on the Plowden Estate. Also work was done on a site at the Bog.

In three places the river has been fenced off recently, two on the Linley estate and one at Myndtown farm. Balsam has been fairly sparse in these areas previously, but with the grazing removed it has suddenly appeared in some quantity. Although the fences are gated to allow animals in, this does not seem to happen often. This needs to be talked about with the owners.

Funding is being sought to continue the work in 2024.

A full report can be found on the website .

Plant Outings, and a Bird Walk on the Stiperstones, will be held in 2024 to introduce new people to the fascinating wildlife of our spectacular area.

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)