

Upper Clun



Community Wildlife Group

Report 2023



UPPER CLUN COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUP

Report 2023

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

The Group has carried out Bird and Plant surveys each year since 2007, and Butterfly surveys since 2010. Well over 100 different people have been involved in these surveys. However, activities were severely curtailed in 2020, because of restrictions introduced by the Government to limit the spread of Coronavirus. No Annual Meeting was held, although an Annual Report was produced outlining the results of the limited activity that did take place. In 2021, survey work was resumed, although the Annual Meeting was cancelled because of a surge in infection rates in the autumn, and no Annual Report was produced. Survey work got back to normal, and an annual meeting was held in 2022, and a report produced. The report, and a short summary report, can be found on the website.

This report presents the results for 2023, and updates our knowledge of wildlife in the area where appropriate.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The Group will

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

AREA & MEMBERSHIP

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

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

All information is now sent to members by email, to avoid postage costs. We sent a postal mail shot some years ago to those people who hadn't provided an email address, informing them that they if they didn't do so, they would be removed from the members list.. That has now been done. If anyone wishes to join the mailing list, please supply an email address to the Secretary, Jacky Harrison (jackyharrison51@hotmail.com). Also please notify the Secretary if an email address is changed.

The membership list now includes email addresses for 145 people, plus representatives of various organisations.

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The Role of the Committee is to

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

The membership, and details of meetings in 2023, are set out in the Annexe to the Report.

PUBLICITY

To help recruit and involve new members, our activities have been publicised in the area, through posters and press releases, and articles in the *Clun Chronicle*. A recruiting leaflet is available in community centres and elsewhere. We put up a display as usual at the Newcastle Show in September 2023.

WEBSITE

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

FACEBOOK GROUP

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

The UCCWG Facebook group has attracted 68 members so far, up from 58 a year ago. The group provides timely communication with members, and they can post their wildlife sightings, photos, videos and questions.

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

It has promoted events and activities, and requests for records of Curlew sighting have been made. It also keeps non-members informed about UCCWG.

The group has shared relevant 'posts' from other affiliated organisations, such as the SWT and the Clun & Bishops Castle branch of the SWT, about other local activities and events. Information from other appropriate organisations, such as the RSPB, 'Curlew Country' and Butterfly Conservation on wildlife identification and suggestions on how to help local wildlife have also been shared.

Wildlife surveys such as the British Trust for Ornithology's 'Tawny Owl survey', Freshwater Habitats Trust's 'Spawn Survey', Butterfly Conservation's 'Big Butterfly count', Woodland Trust's 'Natures calendar' and RSPB's 'Big Garden Bird Watch' have been promoted too.

The web address for the group is:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/UpperClunCommunityWildlifeGroup/>

CO-OPERATION WITH FARMERS, LANDOWNERS & OTHER ORGANISATIONS

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

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

In 2010, we brought together the results of four years’ survey work to identify some of the best sites for birds, plants & butterflies in the Upper Clun. These sites have survived thanks to the way they have been managed, and we have subsequently worked with some of the land owners to help ensure that they continue to be managed in the same way. We have now made personal contact with almost all the farmers who own one of these high-quality sites, and we hope the information we have collected is useful to them. We worked with both farmers and Natural England to ensure that the best wildlife sites were incorporated into Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme (HLS) agreements in 2014 or earlier, so farmers received payments to continue managing them sensitively. Most of these agreements have recently been extended for another five years, so our work will have lasting benefit.

We made a successful joint application with Land, Life and Livelihoods for a Natural England Countryside Stewardship (CS) Facilitation Fund Grant in 2017 for a three-year project to support people and organisations that bring farmers, foresters, and other land managers together to improve the local natural environment at a landscape scale. This landscape scale approach can cover land under existing agri-environment and forestry/woodland agreements, common land and land not currently covered by a scheme. It builds on the principles of partnership working to deliver environmental benefits. UCCWG is represented on the Advisory Group to the Facilitator. The grant was extended to March 2023, but the project has now ended. For further information, see p#.

ACTIVITIES & SURVEYS

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

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

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

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

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

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

COVERING OTHER TYPES OF WILDLIFE

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

FUNDING

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

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

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

Grant Applications will be made when the opportunity arises. A successful application was made to the Garreg Llwyd Windfarm Community Fund to help finance the Curlew Nest Monitoring and protection project in Bettws-y-Crwyn parish in 2021, and another successful application was made to the same Fund for provision of Bird Nest Boxes in 2023.

CONSTITUTION

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

OTHER COMMUNITY WILDLIFE GROUPS

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

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

The Stiperstones – Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme (LPS), financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund, supported the development of two new CWGs, covering the Rea Valley and Camlad Valley, between 2014 and March 2018.

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

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

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

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

THE BIRD GROUP

BIRD SURVEYS

Introduction

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

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

The Methodology and Recording Instructions for the Bird Surveys were described fully in the 2011 Report (Appendix 1). Comparable information about arrangements in 2023 can be found in Appendix 1.

Participation and Coverage

This year 32 people sent in Curlew records, including members who reported regularly on particular territories, and responses to the public appeals for information. *Six nest box hosts sent in breeding results.*

Almost all observers who undertook surveys or continuous recording, or submitted nest box data, live within the survey area. Several are farmers, and many other farmers provided valuable information. The co-operation of landowners who allowed access to their land is gratefully acknowledged

LAPWINGS

Fieldwork Results

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

Local Extinction

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

CURLEW RECOVERY PROJECT

We worked in co-operation with the Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) "Save our Curlews" campaign between 2018 and 2022. During this period between six and 10 territories were found by CWG surveys each year, and 7 – 8 breeding pairs were located in 2022.

Project work aimed to find as many of the nests of these pairs as possible, and protect them with an electric fence. The fences protected the eggs from mammalian predators, but were less effective in keeping out avian predators. Altogether, 18 chicks hatched in nine fenced nests, three young fledged from one nest in 2021, but radio-tagging and tracking the other 15 chicks showed they were all predated.



The results of project work 2018 – 22 are shown in Table 1 (no work was undertaken in 2020, because of covid-19 restrictions).

Table 1. Results of Save our Curlews project work in the UCCWG area 2018-22.

| Year | Pairs Located | Nests Found | Nests Fenced | No. Eggs in Fenced Nests | Unhatched Eggs | Nests producing chicks | Chicks Hatched | Chicks Radio-tagged | Fledged Young |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| 2022 | 7 - 8 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| 2021 | 7 | 5 | 3 | 11 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 6 | 3 |
| 2019 | 6-10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2018 | 8-9 | 3 | 3 | 12 | 5 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 0 |
| Total | 28 - 34 | 12 | 9 | 32 | 14 | 6 | 18 | 16 | 3 |



Colour-ringed Curlew above Newcastle 2022

In 2022, chicks also hatched from three other nests that were not found and fenced. Five chicks were found when they were about a week from fledging, two in two broods and one in a third. Four were caught and colour-ringed, and at least three, possibly all five, of these chicks fledged. That includes the colour-ringed chick in the photo, which definitely did fledge.

The yellow rings each have a unique pair of letters, so each bird can be individually identified if it is seen again later in life. Finding out where they winter, and where they return to breed, is vitally important for

planning effective conservation measures.

Curlews are long-lived, but the breeding population will only be stable if there are enough young birds to replace the adults as they die. Until the last two years, there was no evidence that the local Curlews were producing any fledged young, let alone enough to maintain the population.

Curlews don't breed until they are two or three years old, so hopefully some of these birds will return to the area in 2024, giving the local population a much-needed boost.

The Save our Curlews project work did not continue in the Upper Clun in 2023. It moved to the Oswestry area, to ascertain if productivity is equally poor across the County.

The SOS Save our Curlews Campaign Report 2022, including the results in all areas for the years 2018-22, and an explanation of how release of tens of millions of gamebirds (mainly pheasants) across the UK every year has increased the populations of the main predators of Curlew nests and chicks (foxes, corvids and birds of prey), together with project results in 2023, can be found on the SOS website, www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

At the current rate of decline the Shropshire Curlew population will halve in 12 years, and virtually disappear in 25, so action to halt it is urgent.

Fieldwork Results 2023

In 2023, seven breeding pairs, possibly eight, were located, at similar locations to sites occupied in 2022.

The distribution of territories in 2023 is shown in Map 1.

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

Map 1. Approximate location of Curlew Territories 2023

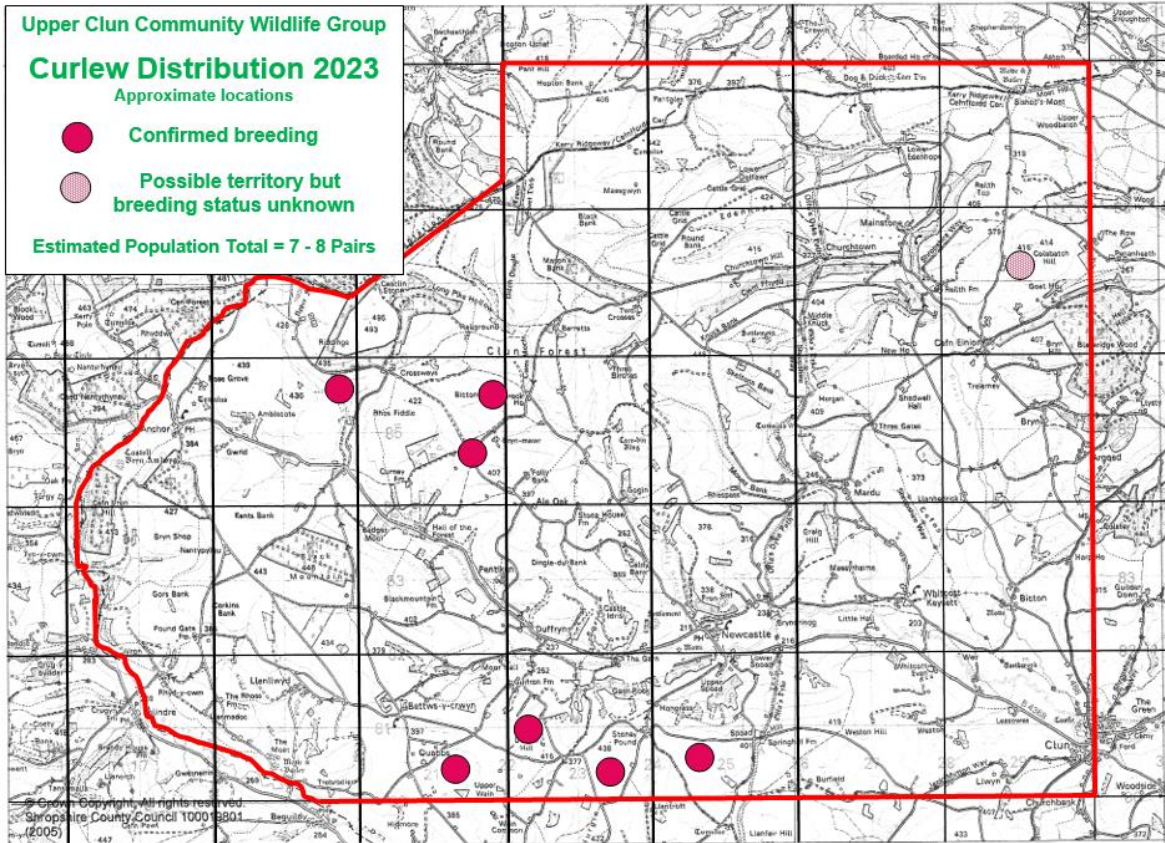
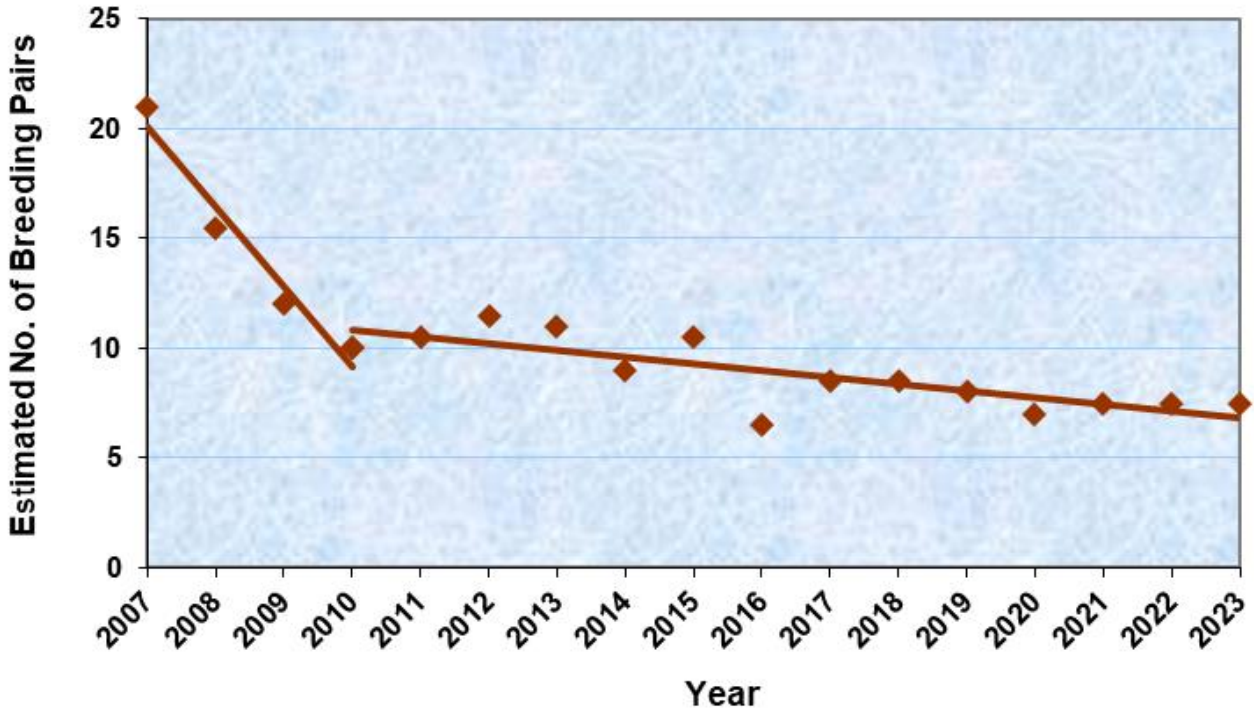


Figure 1. Decline of Curlew in the Upper Clun 2007 – 2023



In spite of a thorough search, there was no evidence of well-grown chicks or fledged young.

The rate of population decline appears to have slowed since 2010, following several years of steep decline, but no young are believed to have fledged between 2017 and 2020. Productivity in those

years was not sufficient to maintain, let alone rebuild, the population. However, three fledged young in 2021, and 3 – 5 in 2022, does provide grounds for local optimism.

Colour-ringing

The Curlew in the photo was colour-ringed at Dolydd Hafren (near Welshpool) on its way to breeding grounds in 2017, and found in the Upper Clun a couple of months later. In 2021, 2022 and 2023 it was found again, breeding near Llanfairwaterdine Turbary. If you see a Curlew on the ground in future years, please check it for colour rings. The orange on the right leg is conspicuous. If you see one, please contact Leo Smith (leo@leosmith.org.uk) immediately, so we can go and read the ring.



Habitat Requirements and Population Decline

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

The local decline has been accompanied by a sharp contraction of what was already a very limited range in a short space of time. The last pair of Curlew nesting in the “lowlands” of the Upper Clun has been lost: they occupied a territory north-west of Clun, in the Unk valley, but they were last recorded breeding there in 2010. The Curlew population appears now to be entirely confined to the very highest ground, with no known territory below around 350 metres.

In late 2015, Curlew, previously Amber-listed, was added to the *Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK*. It is also on the *Red List of Breeding Birds of Conservation in Shropshire*. Its national decline has been attributed primarily to agricultural intensification, in particular:

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

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

Curlews are loyal to nesting sites even if the habitat has changed over the years, so their choices may reflect historic conditions rather than those prevailing at present. However, the few remaining Curlew nest sites are all within 1 km of damp, rough or semi-natural areas, three of which are SWT reserves, and there is evidence that these are important for foraging. Sites which have themselves become marginal may continue to support Curlew by virtue of their proximity to such habitats.

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

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

Predation has now overtaken all other causes of decline, as shown by the SOS project and several others working elsewhere in the country. The main factor is now being increasingly understood, the impact of releasing large numbers of Pheasants into the countryside for shooting (see p. 25).

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

It is important to continue to monitor the population and productivity of the local population.

We therefore need more helpers to monitor Curlews next year, particularly in June and July, to establish the outcome of all breeding attempts.

SNIPE

SWT Rhos Fiddle Nature Reserve held an important local Snipe population, and four pairs were found by the Shropshire Snipe Survey 2009, compared with 3 – 4 pairs in 2004, but there have been no breeding season records there since 2010. The site has been visited most years, at dusk, to listen for drumming males, including 2021 and 2022. The Snipe populations at Long Mynd and The Stiperstones have both increased in recent years, as a result of re-wetting work and cutting rushes, and SWT have been recommended to undertake similar work at Rhos Fiddle.

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

BIRDS OF THE “WETLANDS”

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

A baseline survey of the major 'wetland' sites and their bird communities was made in 2010 and 2011, with the aim of resurveying the sites at approximately five-year intervals to monitor breeding species and assess the effectiveness of any conservation measures. Initially, priority was given to privately-owned farmland with potential for inclusion in HLS.

All survey records, and the maps based on them (Maps A2.1 and A2.2 in the 2011 Report, Appendix 2) were submitted via Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) to the Local (County) Wildlife Sites committee, co-ordinated by SWT. It was agreed that, where sites have been shown to support Lapwing, Curlew or Snipe, or at least four of the additional target species (Kestrel, Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Stonechat, Linnet, Yellowhammer & Reed Bunting), they qualify for adoption as County Wildlife Sites (CWS). (This work is described in the Chapter on Conservation Action later in the Report.)

The sites owned or managed by SWT (Lower Short Ditch, Masons Bank & Rhos Fiddle) are now included in the survey as a standard of comparison, and, since they are more extensive than the other sites, as a means of assessing the importance of site area.

Records were submitted annually to SOS, as evidence of the extent to which the sites continue to justify their status as Wildlife sites, but this work was disrupted by covid 19, and has not resumed.

RED KITE

Eight Red Kite nests were monitored again this year. Both occupancy and productivity were better than last year, with seven successful nests producing at least eight fledged young. In common with recent years only one nest was confirmed as producing two chicks, with a second possible case where the nest could not be viewed. None of the nesting attempts is known to have failed, but the outcome of one nest was unknown, and one established site was unoccupied.

A tagged female in the Clun Valley has bred successfully at the same site for six years, producing one chick each year. She fledged from a nest in the Teme Valley in 2014, and is now nine years old, double the typical lifespan for Red Kite, though she has some way to go to take the longevity record that stands at over 25 years.

Please continue to report sightings of a Kite in the same vicinity on several occasions, or of two together, or of one going into a wood between January and July, which may indicate a nest site.

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

KESTREL PROJECT

The state of the Kestrel population has given rise to increasing concern in recent years. In response the Raptor Study Group, the Shropshire Ringing Group and the Mid Wales Ringing Group have begun a county-wide programme of nest monitoring. Nest boxes are being installed in areas of suitable habitat, such as rough grassland, heath and rushy areas, which have surviving Kestrel populations, in order to supplement scarce natural sites and to gather data on breeding and productivity.



There are now nine Kestrel nest boxes in the Upper Clun and surrounding area. One has been occupied for four successive years, this year producing four fledged young. At another site a Kestrel pair used a Barn Owl box, raising five young of which four fledged. No activity was recorded at the other sites, where several of the boxes were appropriated by other species, this year including Stock Dove.

Very few sightings of Kestrel were reported this year and most of those were probably connected with the active sites above. Its local status remains very precarious. While it is encouraging to have had two cases of successful breeding again this year, the loss of potential nest sites to other species may well be inhibiting further attempts.

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

Please report all Kestrel sightings to Michelle Frater, 01588 640909, or email UCCWG@shropscwqs.org.uk

DIPPERS

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



Nests are located directly above flowing water; natural sites are used, but man-made structures are preferred where available, and Dippers take readily to nest boxes. With landowners' permission, specially-designed nest boxes have been installed under bridges in the Upper Clun to increase nesting opportunities and breeding success, and facilitate population monitoring.

2023 Monitoring Results

- 27 potential nest sites were monitored, almost all nest boxes under bridges
- 14 sites were, or had been, occupied and 13 were vacant
- 12 active nests were found
- 26 chicks were ringed
- 15 colour-rings on breeding adults were read

Occupancy was comparable with recent years but still well below the peak of 25 sites in 2016. Productivity was rather low, just over two young per active nest, and no second broods.

Tony Cross has been monitoring Dippers in the Teme catchment since 1987, by ringing chicks at nest sites and counting birds at winter roost sites. Colour-ringing of adults started in 2011, and since then as many colour-rings as possible have been read during the breeding season, giving an important measure of adult movements and survival. An adult male ringed as a nestling in the Upper Clun in 2016 reached seven in April, a very good age, and was found again during winter roost monitoring.

Annual reports of this project, Dippers in the River Teme Catchment, have been produced since 2007.

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

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

NEST BOXES FOR SMALL WOODLAND BIRDS

The aim of the Nest Box Scheme is to increase the number of suitable nest sites, reduce the likelihood of predators taking eggs and young birds, and to collect data on different species breeding successes.

UCCWG was able to provide boxes for members with suitable garden habitat in the past, but this had not been the case for some years. Grant funding however was successfully secured from the Community Windfarm Scheme (PAVO) this year, which enabled the construction of 52 new nest boxes. Bob Harris who monitors and rings pied flycatchers and redstarts on several sites in the Upper Clun made 27 of boxes and the Men's Shed in Knighton were delighted to make 25 boxes for households taking part in the scheme. Half of the boxes have been erected in local woodlands by Bob Harris and the other half have been distributed amongst 7 Upper Clun households for placement on their land.



Female Pied Flycatcher with eggs

In 2023, results were submitted from four sites where householders check their own boxes, with occupied nest boxes on only two of these sites. Boxes had been erected quite late on the two sites with no results, as the funding was only confirmed in February, and it took time for the boxes to be constructed. The total number of young birds fledged is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of fledged young for each species (UCCWG Nest Boxes)

| Species | Blue Tit | Great Tit | Pied Flycatcher | Tree Sparrow | Redstart |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|--------------|----------|
| Number of young fledged | 74 | 32 | 22 | 21 | 0 |

There were Pied Flycatcher nests reported from only one site which had five nests in total. Only three of these successfully produced fledged young; in one, eggs failed to hatch and in a further box the juvenile chicks died.

No Redstart nests were found in boxes this year, although a number of members reported seeing Redstart activity in their gardens.

Tree sparrows did well in the nest boxes this year. There were no doubt further successes with occupied nestboxes, but the householder who regularly has tree sparrows visiting his garden was away and therefore unable to monitor his boxes in 2023.

Bob Harris and Gerry Thomas ring Pied Flycatcher at various sites in the Upper Clun and check productivity of the nests. Their results (productivity only) for the year are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Pied Flycatcher productivity for various Upper Clun sites 2023

| Site | No of nests | eggs | juveniles | fledged chicks |
|--------------------|-------------|------|-----------|----------------|
| Mainstone | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| Woodbatch | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| Clun outliers | 8 | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| Castlegate | 21 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| Hall of the Forest | 20 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| Newcastle | 22 | 6 | 4 | 1 |
| Folly Brook | 36 | 7 | 6 | 3 |

The figures given for eggs, juveniles and fledglings in the table are all averages for the individual sites.

The results are very worrying for sites like Newcastle, Hall of the Forest, Castlegate and Folly Brook. One of the main reasons for nest failure is the climatic changes we are experiencing. The insect food sources are now out of sync with the timing of Pied Flycatcher and other avian species breeding seasons. Another reason is acidic rain which affects protein production in leaves. This leads to a reduction in herbivorous insects feeding on the leaves which are the food of Pied Flycatchers and other insect eating birds.



The ornithologists also ring both adult and juvenile birds. Metal rings, fixed to the leg, are inscribed with a unique number recorded by BTO. If the bird is caught again or found dead and the ring details reported, the age of the bird and its movements can be worked out. Almost all we know about bird migration and longevity, is as a result of ringing programmes.

A training day on small woodland bird identification, nest box siting and monitoring, is to be held on Saturday 6 April 2024 at Mainstone Village Hall.

**If you live in the Upper Clun area and are interested in the training and monitoring of your own nest boxes or if you would like to help monitor Pied Flycatchers at other sites, please contact Fiona Gomersall
07539 752897 email Fionagomersall6@gmail.com**

BARN OWLS

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

In 2017 and 2018 there were active nests at two sites, though the final outcomes are unknown. No nest monitoring results have been received since 2018, and we need to find someone else to monitor the boxes. A monitoring licence will be necessary, but help will be provided in applying for this. If y



**If you see a Barn Owl, especially if you suspect it may be breeding, please tell Michelle Frater,
via 01588 640234 or email UCCWG@shropscwgs.org.uk**

**If you are interested in monitoring the Barn Owl nest boxes, please contact
Leo Smith (leo@leosmith.org.uk)**

OVERVIEW

Our survey work over 16 years has made a detailed assessment of the bird populations in the Upper Clun. During this period Lapwing appears to have become extinct as a local breeding species, and Curlew appeared to be heading the same way, although fledged young in the last two years has provided some grounds for optimism. The status of the other target species is more secure, largely because their habitat requirements are less exacting, and are met on the three SWT reserves and a few other sites of comparable quality.

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

The Bird Group has evolved over the years and the contribution of our network of resident recorders and other local people who send in records of the bird activity they see around them has greatly increased. Information is exchanged via an email distribution list. Records are submitted to the County Bird Recorder, and, where relevant, to BTO.

**We will increase our efforts to monitor the Curlew population,
particularly in June and July, to establish the
outcome of all breeding attempts.
We therefore need more helpers, please.**

**If you can help, or want further information, please contact
Brian Angell
07790325007 UCCWG@shropscwgs.org.uk**

THE PLANT GROUP

THE WILDLIFE SITE AND BOTANY SURVEY GROUP

INTRODUCTION

The Upper Clun and Teme Valley botany group (SO18, SO27 and SO28) has been active for seventeen years and continues to recruit and train new members. The group's focus is on recording and condition monitoring of local wildlife sites (LWS) of which there are seventy in the area. The LWS are important ecological strongholds for species and habitats, often linking with nearby nature reserves through hedgerows and streams and thereby forming good ecological networks.

The LWS survey work was supported by Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) in the past, but SWTs survey efforts with volunteers is currently on 'nature networks'. The Upper Clun botany group therefore pick up the much-needed site recording and monitoring of LWS but, as volunteers, are limited as to how many sites they can take on. The group responds to requests from farmers and land managers but otherwise chooses sites which have not been visited for several years. Three wildlife sites were surveyed in 2023.



Around 100 target species are usually recorded each year. These plants are the Shropshire 'axiophytes', the species which are good habitat indicators as they are relatively uncommon and indicate an unimproved and relatively unspoilt habitat. As a rule of thumb, the higher the number recorded, the better the site. The *axiophyte* lists cover the three key habitats: Rush Pasture/Purple Moorgrass, Blanket Bog and Meadows, and are shown in Appendix 2.

Species-rich hay meadows are measured using a different set of indicators since they may have few axiophytes but are nonetheless important priority habitats.

Since the start of the Community Wildlife Group in 2007, around 40 LWS are either completely new or are significant extensions to existing sites. These are included in the total of around 70 LWS in the Upper Clun and Teme), many of which have been surveyed since 2015. Around 70% are in a reasonably good condition, with this figure remaining relatively consistent year on year. The concern now is that due to SWTs lack of funding, the healthy cycle of LWS surveys will decline along with the support and advice given to farmers and landowners.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The Upper Clun and Teme have a core group of around seven skilled volunteers who over the years have carried out the LWS surveys. The group was supported by SWT initially but is now working independently.

Maps, network survey cards and botanical record cards were provided by Fiona Gomersall along with permission for site access.

All surveyors used recommended floras (listed under References).

The Local Wildlife Site or 'Nature Recovery Network (NRN)' survey form was used to record data, along with the species recording card used. (NRN forms for Woodland were also used).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Seven volunteers, including a new member, variously carried out the surveys in 2023, collecting valuable information on three sites. Good species lists were compiled along with useful information about the sites.

In 2023 a total of 54 different axiophytes were recorded on the 3 sites.

Some of the good ecological indicators (or axiophytes) recorded, including those which are in decline across the UK were: *Alchemilla xanthochlora* Intermediate Lady's-mantle, *Galium uliginosum* Fen Bedstraw, *Leontodon hispidus* Rough Hawkbit, *Leontodon saxatilis* Lesser Hawkbit, *Succisa pratensis* Devil's-bit Scabious, *Achillia ptarmica* Sneezewort, *Myosotis dubia* Meadow Forget-me-not, *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* Marsh Pennywort, *Dactylorhiza maculata* Heath Spotted-orchid and *Carex paniculata* Greater Tufted Sedge.

Using these axiophytes as indicators of good health, along with other attributes like vegetation species-richness and low levels of docks, nettles and thistles, the volunteers were able to locate good, healthy habitat in at least part of the three sites.



The Riddings, Anchor

This extensive LWS used to boast the most axiophytes in the Upper Clun. Sadly, the various habitats appear to have declined along with many of the axiophytes. There were pockets of good habitat but some of the better areas had declined like the anthill grassland, stream and mire. Most of the anthills had gone for instance, along with the species-rich acid grassland associated with them. The Riddings brook was muddied where it entered the site, with the source of the pollution clearly outside the LWS. The brook used to be crystal clear and had the highest number of freshwater crayfish in the Upper Clun. Also concerning was the condition of the mire which had all but dried out and which had been extremely species-rich on the last visit in 2016. It's possible that with very dry weather in 2022, the sites hydrology had altered and that a much smaller volume of water was now feeding the mire. The polluted stream was clearly affecting the vegetation south of the mire where course vegetation was now dominant. On another part of the LWS the large pond had been reprofiled and the *Sparganium emersum* Unbranched Bur-reed had disappeared. Canada geese were destroying other marginal vegetation here.

Thirty-nine axiophytes were recorded at The Riddings, Anchor on the day, twelve fewer than in previous surveys. However good species were still there like: *Aira praecox* Early Hair-grass, *Aphanes australis* Slender Parsley Piert, *Betonica officinalis* Betony, *Calluna vulgaris* Heather, *Carex caryophyllea* Spring Sedge, *Carex paniculata* Greater Tufted Sedge, *Carex pulicaris* Flea Sedge, *Equisetum fluviatile* Water Horsetail, *Eriophorum angustifolium* Common Cottongrass, *Galium uliginosum* Fen Bedstraw, *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* Marsh Pennywort, *Luzula multiflora* Heath Wood-rush, *Oreopteris limbosperma* Lemon-scented Fern, *Polygala serpyllifolia* Heath Milkwort, *Salix aurita* Eared Willow.

A yellowhammer was also recorded singing on the day.

The Cote, Beguildy

Janet Watkin, owner along with Alan Watkin of this lovely LWS, joined us for the survey. The site has a good mix of farm habitats including rush pasture, both acid and neutral grassland, flush, pond, stream and river. The habitats all appeared to be in good condition, particularly the species-rich flush and the dry bank with anthills on which the uncommon *Leontodon saxatile* Lesser Hawkbit grows. The pond had been dug since the last visit but was not holding water well. However, new species (to the farm) had colonised the new habitat here. There are several healthy veteran oaks on this farm too. We only found one *Impatiens glandulifera* Himalayan Balsam plant by the River Teme which we duly pulled out.

Twenty-six axiophytes were recorded on the day compared with thirty-three in 2017. It is unclear why fewer indicator species were found in 2023. The reasons could be climatic with the drier springs and wetter summers we are now experiencing affecting plant growth and development. There is also the issue of a high NOx and ammonia load in the atmosphere due to the large number of poultry units in Shropshire and Radnorshire and increased traffic on the roads. The resulting nitrogen deposition is known to be affecting most semi-natural habitats now as it leads to coarser vegetation growth at the expense of more delicate species, many of which thrive on nutrient-poor soils.

A Green Woodpecker was observed and a Song Thrush heard on the day.

Some of the other axiophytes recorded included: *Achillia ptarmica* Sneezewort, *Alchemilla xanthochlora* Intermediate Lady's-mantle, *Carex echinata* Star Sedge, *Carex panicea* Carnation Sedge, *Dactylorhiza maculata* Heath Spotted-orchid, *Danthonia decumbens* Heath-grass, *Hypericum humifusum* Trailing St John's-wort, *Pedicularis sylvatica* Lousewort, *Polygala serpyllifolia* Heath Milkwort, *Prunus padus* Bird Cherry, *Senecio aquaticus* Marsh Ragwort and *Succisa pratensis* Devil's-bit Scabious.



Pound Gate Meadows

There are two meadows forming part of this LWS, but time allowed for only the top meadow to be surveyed.

The meadow was in a favourable condition, with good species distribution and richness and very few weedy species, apart from encroaching hogweed which should be managed before it spreads throughout the meadow. Six meadow indicator species were recorded at high frequencies, meaning that the meadow satisfies the criteria for a species-rich meadow and LWS. These species were *Centaurea nigra* Common Knapweed, *Euphrasia agg.* Eyebright, *Rhinanthus minor* Yellow-rattle, *Lathyrus pratensis* Meadow Vetchling, *Conopodium majus* Pignut and *Leontodon hispidus* Rough Hawkbit. *Myosotis discolor* Changing Forget-me-not and *Lotus corniculatus* Common Bird's-foot-trefoil were also recorded. Otherwise, there was a good mix of meadow grasses and herbs. Six-spot Burnet, Meadow Brown and Ringlet were also recorded on the day.

Conclusion

It is terrific that that the Upper Clun Botany group is still going strong (with new members joining) and that some LWS continue to receive a health check from time to time. Where possible the group is happy to give advice to farmers on site management. The landowner involvement, interest and cooperation is excellent, and I hope that the data collected this year will be put to good use. We would like to thank the various farms for inviting or allowing the botany group on to their land this year. As always, the surveying was rewarding and enjoyed by everyone who took part. It is concerning that there is no dedicated Natural England adviser for the Clun area and no SWT conservation officer to advise on LWS management and farm subsidies. It was clear, following The Riddings survey, that good advice may well have averted some of the issues contributing to the decline of this site.

FURTHER WORK

Site survey work by the Upper Clun Botany group will continue in 2024. The group remains enthusiastic and welcomes new members. There is an element of training during the site surveys for those who are new to or learning botanical identification. The group is also open to requests from farmers and parish communities for help and advice on habitat management. There are plans for three to four site surveys in 2024.

If you want to get involved with the Plant Group, please contact
Fiona Gomersall
07539 752897 email Fionagomersall6@gmail.com

THE BUTTERFLY GROUP

INTRODUCTION

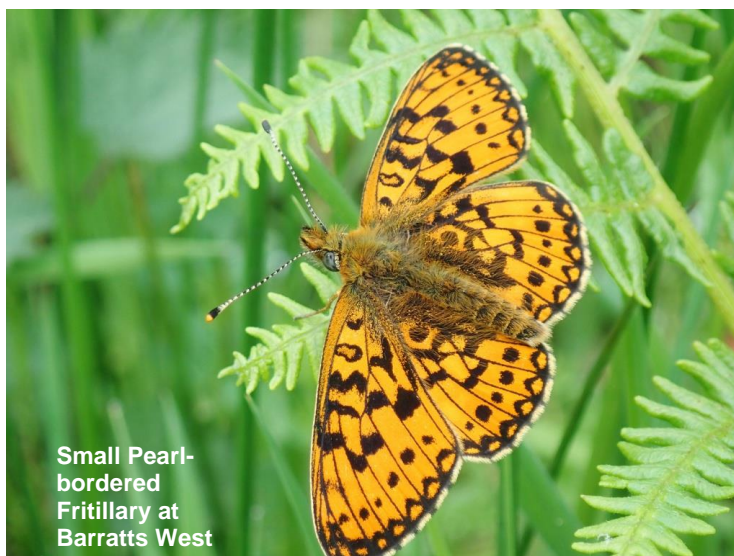
Members of the Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group have been surveying and recording butterflies since 2010, with particular focus on the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary, which, in our area, occurs in wet locations such as rush pasture, which is also a critical habitat for Curlew.

Members continue to record both butterflies and moths in the area, with particular focus on two butterfly species whose local populations are nationally significant.

Once again, the 2023 recording season was atypical (perhaps 'atypical' is becoming the new 'typical') with weather being a large factor.

SMALL PEARL-BORDERED FRITILLARY

The Upper Clun valley is an important location for the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary in Shropshire. This fritillary is a UKBAP Priority Species, of High Conservation Priority, which has suffered long term decline across the UK. In our area the species is associated with rush pasture, where the caterpillars feed on Marsh Violet, *Viola palustris*. The most important sites are: Barretts West (Masons Bank West Wildlife Site), Pant-y-Lidan LWS and Gors Bank LWS. Surveys of Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries started in 2010 and have continued to be conducted annually.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary at Barratts West

The 2023 flight season occurred earlier than most years, which reduced the number of sites visited. Despite this, the limited records appear promising. Numbers recorded at Barretts West were healthy, the largest single count (50 individuals) recorded at the site. In addition, a healthy population was recorded at a new site at Cwm, near Llanfair Waterdine. The Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary generally exists in small colonies, so any record in double figures is very promising. No other sightings have been recorded yet, although it is possible that some records will be entered on iRecord over winter, when some recorders tend to transcribe their notebooks.



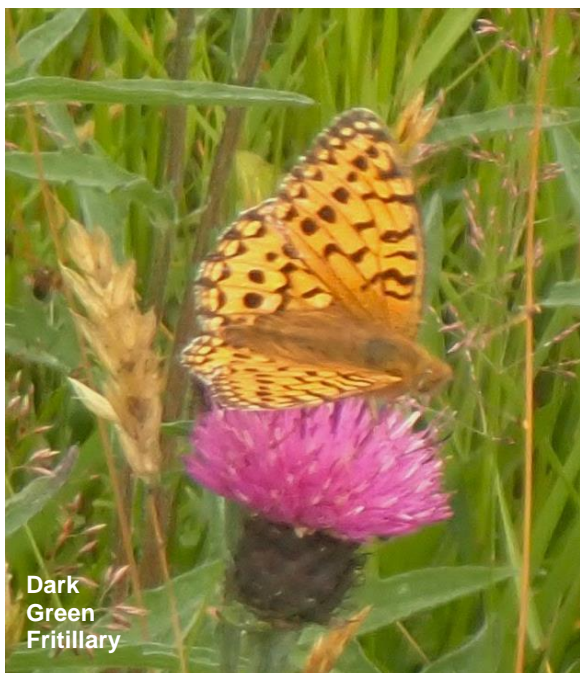
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary – under wing

As in 2022, a single sighting of a second brood Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary has been reported, although not yet recorded, from a farm near Cefn Einion. This may be an indication of generally warmer conditions in the earlier part of the summer.

FRITILLARY CONFUSION?

Another Fritillary species, the Dark Green Fritillary, occurs regularly in our area, generally spotted flying strongly and rarely seeming to stop. Like the Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary,

the caterpillars feed on violet plants, in this case Dog Violets, *Viola riviniana*, which are pretty widespread in woods, hedgerows and permanent pasture in the Upper Clun Valley.



Dark
Green
Fritillary

The Dark Green Fritillary is significantly larger than the Small Pearl Bordered and is far more purposeful in its flight.

A third species may also be colonising the upper Clun. This is a little larger than the Dark Green and appears quite distinctive, particularly the male, with dark lines on the forewings. Another strong flier, it has been recorded from two sites in our area this summer – easily within range of its local stronghold at Bury Ditches. Like the Dark

Green, the Silver Washed Fritillary uses Dog Violet as a foodplant, but the female makes her offspring work for their food, laying the eggs in bark crevices and leaving the caterpillars to find their own foodplant in the spring.



Silver
Washed
Fritillary

WOOD WHITE

This delicate beauty is a Nationally Endangered species whose population is increasing, against the trend, in the West Midlands. Bury Ditches and the neighbouring woodlands just east of our area are home to a flourishing population of Wood Whites, nurtured by sensitive habitat management by Forestry England and Butterfly Conservation volunteers. Blakeridge Wood, in our area, continues to support a healthy colony of the butterflies and there is reason to be optimistic that the species can continue to spread into other nearby woods, provided there is sufficient bird-foot trefoil along the forest tracks and edges. There have been no Wood White records this year, although there has been an anecdotal report of a sighting near Cefn Einion.



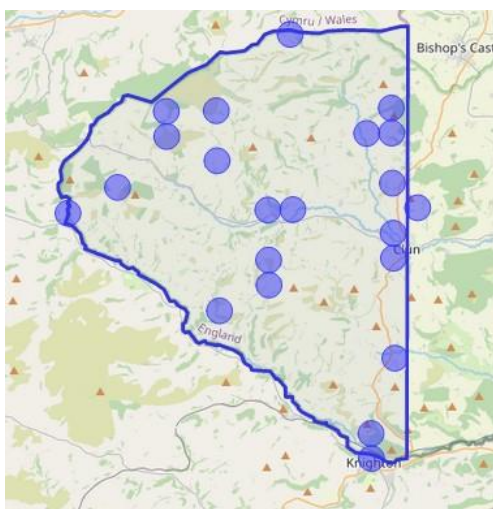
Wood White

MIGRANTS, INCLUDING A RARE ONE!

The year has seen large numbers of migrant insects, including both butterflies and moths, generally arriving from the south when conditions are suitable. Many of the 'usual suspects' like Large White butterflies and Silver Y moths have been recorded, along with good

numbers of Hummingbird Hawkmoths and large numbers of Red Admirals. Although the Hummingbird Hawkmoths and Red Admirals generally attempt to return south in the autumn, there have been records of both species over-wintering successfully in southern England in recent years. At the time of writing this report (October) there are still a handful of Red Admirals around and they have been seen tucked away in outbuildings, possibly attempting hibernation.

A rather unusual migrant from North Africa and the Mediterranean was recorded this year, coinciding with the arrival of Saharan sands on the wind, coating cars and washing. The Olive Tree Pearl, *Palpita vitrealis* has only been recorded in Shropshire a handful of times in the past hundred years. The larval foodplant is Olive, and occasionally Jasmine, so there is little chance of raising young here.



LEPIDOPTERA RECORDS ON iRECORD

iRecord remains the recording method of choice for most of the national recording schemes and the UCCWG 'activity' on iRecord continues to be well used. Between January and mid-November 2023, 29 butterfly species and 244 moth species had been reported by 13 recorders from 23 widely distributed sites around the Upper Clun Valley, shown on the map.

SAFEGUARDING HABITAT

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

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

FUTURE PLANS - VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

We need more surveyors to monitor all the important sites in the area.
If you can help, please contact
John Lyden
01686 671263 jalyden59@gmail.com

MAMMALS

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

CO-OPERATION WITH FARMERS

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

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

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

CONSERVATION ACTION

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

The Group has successfully

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

LOCAL (COUNTY) WILDLIFE SITES

Survey results presented in previous reports demonstrated that 'Wetland' sites which support many of the target birds are also key habitats for plants and butterflies. Data were collated across the three survey groups, and used to make the case that sites that were not already Local Wildlife Sites should if possible be adopted. These sites of wildlife interest in the Upper Clun in 2018 are shown in the Local Sites Map on page 19. They include Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites and Candidate Sites. All the proposals have been accepted in principle by the LWS Committee, but formal adoption requires landowners' consent, and this is still being sought in some cases, shown as "Candidate Sites" on the map. The map also shows the deleted (red) sites. The wildlife attributes of these sites were lost when they were ploughed, fertilised, built on, planted on, felled or destroyed in some other way, usually more than 10 years ago.

HLS AGREEMENTS

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

Most farmland in the Upper Clun was previously covered by Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) agreements, but these all expired in 2014 or earlier. Natural England (NE) had to consider which of the land covered by ESA Agreements should be incorporated into HLS Agreements. The Group's

strategy was therefore to identify the best wildlife sites, make survey information freely available to the land owners and to Natural England, and ask for the species-rich habitats most likely to benefit bird, plant and butterfly species to be included in the scheme. Our detailed proposals to Natural England have been described in previous Reports. The strategy was successful, as our data was taken into account.

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

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

COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP

HLS was replaced by a Countryside Stewardship Scheme in 2016. It aimed to implement the proposals of the Lawton Report, which recommended reducing habitat fragmentation through a more integrated approach to land management. It was supposed to be more simple than HLS, but it was much more bureaucratic and less well funded, and was administered by Defra, rather than Natural England. There is little evidence that this scheme benefitted this area.

NEW ENVIRONMENTAL LAND MANAGEMENT SCHEME

All agri-environment schemes for many years were part of the European Union Common Agricultural Policy. Given the Government's decision to leave the EU, it has been consulting on options for a new "Environmental Land Management Scheme" to replace previous schemes for several years. It finally announced its introduction in 2023, to start in 2024. However, not all options have yet been published, and it is not yet clear whether it will be easy to operate, or be sufficiently attractive to farmers, to be of widespread benefit.

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

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership is awarding grants to farmers and land managers in England's protected landscapes (AONBs & National Parks), and is for one-off farming projects that can demonstrate benefits to climate, nature, people and place.



The programme is part of the government's Agricultural Transition Plan which is shifting from direct payments to farmers, to rewarding environmentally-friendly practices and has been extended until March 2025.

CLUN FOREST FARMERS FACILITATION FUND

Land, Life & Livelihoods (LLL) secured a Facilitation Fund grant from 2018 until February 2023 from Natural England, then Defra (through a joint application with the Wildlife Group), to help farmers and other land managers to work together and find ways to conserve soil, water, wildlife and landscape and to improve farm viability. The area covered by the Clun Forest project comprises the parishes of Mainstone, Newcastle, Bettws-y-Crwyn and Llanfair Waterdine, and part of the Redlake valley, and is shown on the map.

The Fund helped farmers and land managers in the Clun Forest to come together to find ways in which they can manage their land to conserve, enhance and link up valuable areas for nature:

- Protect and manage land, soil, and water, and conserve rare and threatened plants and animals, e.g. white clawed crayfish, mountain pansy, small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly, curlew, haymeadows and wet flushes
- Link up areas across the catchment that are important and valuable for wildlife, biodiversity & flood/water management
- Increase farm viability and care for our special landscape
- Achieve new and improved environmental schemes
- Meet together to discuss, problem-solve and act
- Obtain encouragement, technical, and personal support
- Find funds, advice and practical help so that these aims/objectives can be achieved

The Fund provided free specialist advice on farm practices that help to conserve soil and biodiversity, and prevent water pollution, which may attract future financial support, particularly important in challenging upland areas like our own. This will include assistance with existing grant schemes and helping shape new schemes to combine high quality livestock and food production with environmental benefits, or, in the new jargon, “public goods”.

“Curlews need Farmers” events were held in February 2019 and March 2022, and a leaflet, “Curlews Need Farmers”, drawn up using information and comments from the February 2019 curlew event was drafted and circulated for comment, discussed at the second curlew event, and will be revised and distributed to all farmer/landowners in due course. The current version is attached as Appendix 3 on p37.

Leaflets have been produced on many of the other events made possible by the Facilitation Fund, and they will be collated and sent to farmers/landowners in spring 2024, and then put on the LLL website

An event will be held by LLL for farmers to review the work carried out through the Facilitation Fund, and the best ways of building on it, probably in January 2024. The Shropshire Good Food Partnership have agreed to fund this meeting since they want to consult them on their needs to help transition to agroecological farming systems e.g. organic farming.

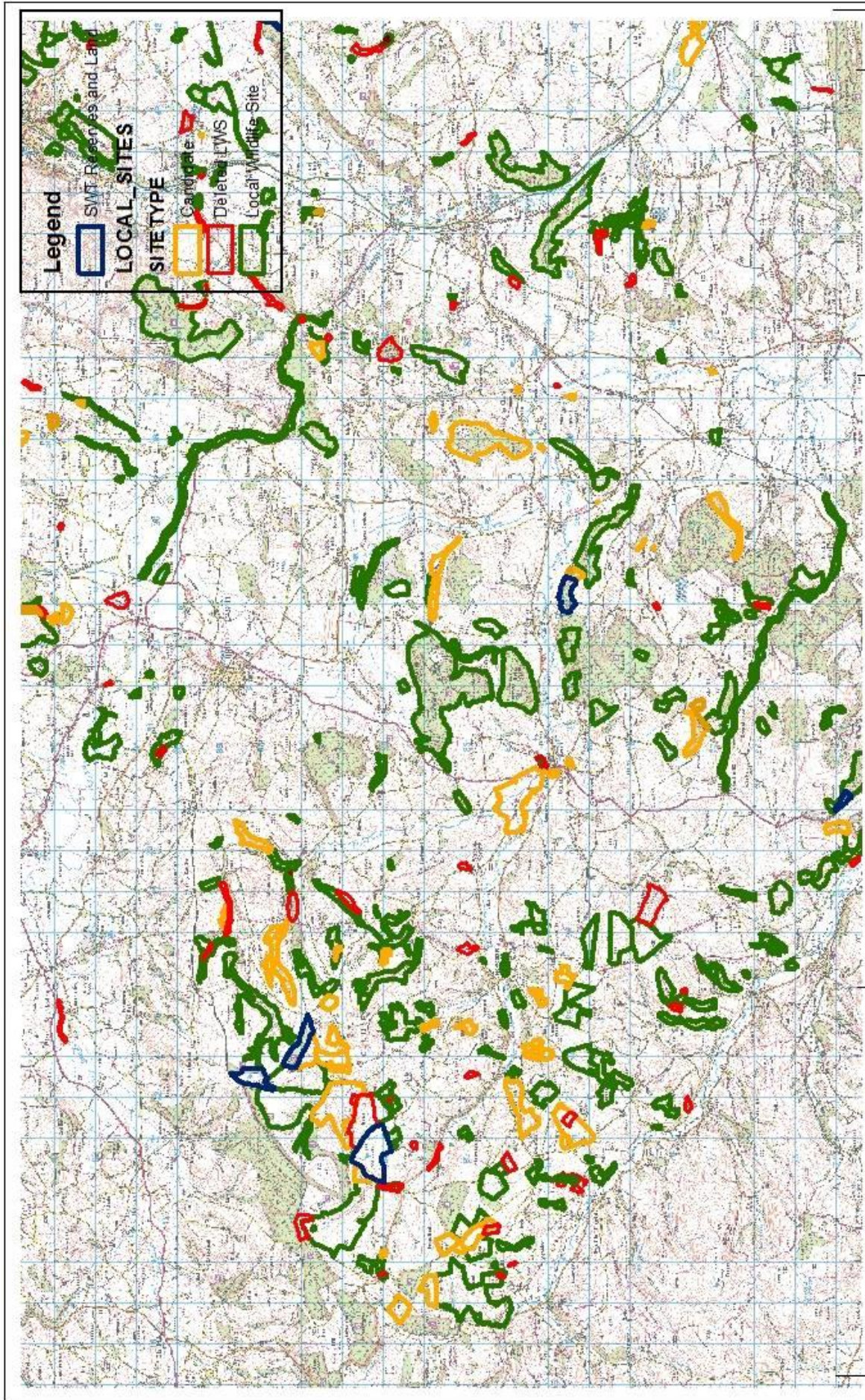
Lack of information on the future of environmental schemes and agricultural support after Brexit has limited the initiatives and commitments that farmers and other landowners have been willing to make up until now, but the Government has at long last announced that the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) will be launched in 2024, and another event will be held to brief local farmers, and help them take advantage of it. Bringing farmers and other landowners together in this way provides an ideal opportunity to try and meet the needs of many of the Wildlife Group’s priority wildlife species and habitats, and UCCWG will continue to work with LLL, and local farmers, to achieve these objectives.

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

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS FOR TARGET SPECIES

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

Unfortunately, little management work has been carried out in recent years to ensure that sites retain their value for wildlife, but hopefully the new ELMS will provide funding for such work, and



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Local Sites in Upper Clun area 2018

Shropshire
 Wildlife Trust



lead to beneficial changes in farming practice such as rush management, growing hay rather than silage, creating shallow pools and muddy patches, and managing livestock in the vicinity of nest sites.

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

PEATLAND RESTORATION

Peatlands are a national asset, as they retain carbon, and therefore help reduce climate change. They are also a valuable wildlife habitat. The upper reaches of the Clun Valley, particularly around Rhos Fiddle, have extensive areas of shallow peat. Mike Kelly made a presentation about the benefits of this, and potential for peatland restoration to the Group's public meeting in November 2022.

Since then, SWT has been working on a funding bid with the AONB Partnership to investigate opportunities for re-wetting sites (both the Trusts and private landowners) through the Farming in Protected Landscapes Grant scheme.

A specialist peatland consultant has now been appointed to investigate the current condition of peat soils and associated hydrology at Rhos Fiddle, Mason's Bank and Lower Shortditch, plus adjoining NRW and some adjacent private land, with a view to scoping out the feasibility and indicative costs of re-wetting the peat/peat soils. In recognition of the potential wildlife benefit, the name of the grant scheme is "Carbon for Curlews in the Clun".

It is hoped the work will lead to extensive rush management and re-wetting on Rhos Fiddle, and allow breeding Snipe to re-colonise. Similar work has taken place on Long Mynd, Stiperstones, and Whixall Moss NNRs in recent years, facilitating an increase in breeding pairs at both the first two sites, and recolonisation of the NNR, where the species had been lost.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT LEAFLETS

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

1. *Please Conserve our Curlews*, requesting farmers to make changes in the way in which grassland is managed and grazed, in 2007. This is based on a similar leaflet produced by the Upper Onny Wildlife Group. This leaflet was superseded by a replacement, *Curlews Need Farmers*, produced following the Facilitation Fund event in February 2019. The current draft of this replacement is included as Appendix 3.
2. *Please Help Hedgerow Birds*, requesting all landowners to make small scale changes to the management of hedges, verges, field margins and scrub, in 2008.
3. *Managing Wetlands for Wildlife*, to benefit birds, plants and butterflies, in 2009.
4. *Management of Rush Pasture*, also to benefit birds, plants and butterflies, in 2013.

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

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

SURVEYING WILDLIFE SITES

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

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

RIVER CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Water quality in the River Clun and its tributaries has declined as a result of silting up of the river bed and pollution from people, transport and farming practices. This was being addressed by statutory organisations in compliance with the EU's Water Framework Directive (WFD), which was incorporated into UK law, under which The Environment Agency (EA) was charged with getting all rivers into 'good ecological condition'. None of the waterbodies in the Clun catchment are currently in "good condition" – all are "moderate". It is now understood that the Government will not be using WFD methodology in the next assessment, but will be using its own, as yet undisclosed, methodology to assess river health. However, the legislation to allow this was defeated in the House of Lords, and future plans are unclear.

Part of the lower Clun is designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive, also now incorporated into UK Law. It is one of only three such designations in England, because it supports a threatened population of Freshwater Pearl Mussels. The designation requires the statutory organisations to protect the mussel population. The pearl mussel remains in a critical situation, and action is urgent: the population is less than 1000, and monitoring suggests that if the current rate of decline continues, the population will be extinct within the very near future. A translocation project is being attempted at two sites, but they are still sub-optimal and translocation is now dependent on reducing pollutants from upstream.

Initiatives now underway include:

- AONB practical work in the Clun Catchment continues through an EA funded "Unmuddying the Waters" project, and tree planting through Woodland Trust funding. Work continues to address problems at source, restore/naturalise riparian habitats, wetland creation, and intercept runoff pathways.
- A Water Environment Grant (WEG), hosted by AONB and delivered by Severn Rivers Trust, is funding Teme, Clun and Onny Farm Advisors to assess the impact of individual farms on water quality and freshwater habitats. Each farm receives a plan which highlights issues and recommends methods to address them. Soil health assessments are also undertaken.
- The Clun is a High Priority area for the Catchment Sensitive Farming initiative, a partnership between Defra, EA and NE, which provides training, advice and grant support for farmers and land managers to reduce water and air pollution from agriculture.
- A Clun Nutrient Management Plan is being implemented by EA and NE (in partnership with farmers, conservation agencies, water companies and other bodies)
- A Crayfish Survey has been completed. No non-native signal crayfish were identified. A new Crayfish Ark site has been secured and a number crayfish translocated to it by EA.
- Dippers in the Teme Catchment project, with UCCWG involvement, collects data on a species with similar habitat requirements to the Mussel

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

SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN

The AONB has a statutory obligation to produce a Management Plan every five years. Conservation and enhancing Biodiversity are important elements of the Plan. The current plan for 2019-24 can be found on the AONB website, and work is underway to update the plan for 2025-30.

SHROPSHIRE NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY

Shropshire Council have been selected by the government to lead on the production of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, with the support of Natural England and Telford & Wrekin Council. At the time of writing, (the LNRS website

(shropshire.gov.uk/environment/ecology-and-biodiversity/shropshire-and-telford-wrekin-local-nature-recovery-strategy/) says

We will work together with partners, stakeholders and the public to develop and produce a LNRS which will pull together data to show where our most valuable areas for nature currently are, and explore the opportunities to restore, enhance, create and link wildlife throughout the area.

Our LNRS will provide the overarching plan of priorities to restore nature in our area and where this is best to happen, whilst also delivering wider environmental benefits such as better water quality and resilience to flooding. Organisations and individuals can then use the strategy to join together to deliver the overall plan in a coherent way.

The LNRS will help to direct government funding streams including for farmers and landowners as well as feeding into Local Plan development and informing where biodiversity net gain would be best placed. [Biodiversity net gain](#) is a new requirement for most planning applications to ensure habitat for wildlife is in a better state than it was before development.

There will be opportunities for public engagement at various stages through the process which will be widely publicised.

A Steering Group has been convened and terms of reference agreed. Members of the Steering Group are:

- Shropshire Council (the Responsible Authority)
- Natural England (Supporting Authority)
- Telford and Wrekin Council (Supporting Authority)
- Country Land and Business Association
- Environment Agency
- Forestry Commission
- National Farmers Union
- Shropshire Hills AONB
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust

The Wildlife Group has registered an interest in being actively involved in drawing up the strategy, which will be used to prioritise and target conservation funding across the County.

CONSERVATION ACTION

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

The Group will continue to promote its vision of a diverse, wildlife-rich landscape, and to collect the evidence that enables it to make authoritative representations for inclusions in Parish Plans, the AONB policy and Management Plan, Natural England’s Countryside Stewardship, the Environment Agency’s work on river habitats, the Statutory Planning Process, and the policies of other statutory and voluntary organisations. Such influence is necessary if we are to help make a difference to the quality and diversity of wildlife habitats.

CURLEW ACTION PLAN, & THE SOS “SAVE OUR CURLEWS” CAMPAIGN

The Wildlife Group has been surveying the Upper Clun for 18 years now, and working to reverse species declines by promoting the protection and



restoration of habitat. It remains committed to such an approach as the only means of sustaining healthy species populations in the long term.

However, Curlew has now declined so severely that it may follow Lapwing into local extinction before such measures can take effect. In an effort to prevent this, the Group launched an emergency *Curlew Action Plan* at the 2016 Annual meeting



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

Fieldwork suggests that fewer Curlew pairs are settling to nest, and the habitat at many of the traditional breeding sites is now marginal and

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

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

The Group has worked with the SOS Save our Curlews campaign since 2018, to find and fence nests, and radio-tag and track chicks to find out what happens to them. Results are shown in Table 1 on p#.

Similar work was carried out in the Clee Hill CWG area in 2018-22, in the Strettons area since 2021, and in the Oswestry area this year, and detailed reports can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/.

Monitoring of Curlew populations by other Community Wildlife Groups has shown a similar rate of decline elsewhere.

SOS Save our Curlews Campaign

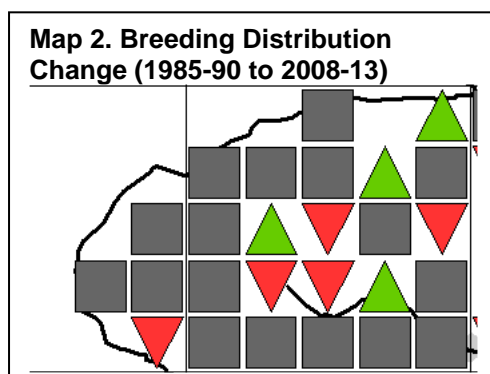
The identification of Curlew territories by the Community Wildlife Groups is the foundation of the campaign strategy – nests can only be protected once they are found. As and when enough have been located for a professional ornithologist to find several in a CWG area, it is intended to find them and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

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

Decline in the Upper Clun since 1985-90

Figure 1 on p.7 shows a 66% decline in the Upper Clun Curlew population since 2007 found by UCCWG. There are no population estimates from before that date, but the Shropshire Bird Atlas

2008-13 repeated the 1985-90 Atlas work, and achieved similar levels of coverage across the County as a whole. *The Birds of Shropshire* (2019) published a breeding distribution change map, comparing the results of the two Atlases.



In this area, the recent Atlas benefitted from the increased coverage provided by the Group's more intensive survey work. The Atlases did not count the Curlews in each square, but recorded the level of breeding evidence found. Map 2 shows the change in breeding distribution for the same survey squares shown in Map 1 on p.7 (the Curlew distribution in 2023). In the grey squares, there was breeding evidence of Curlew in both Atlas periods, in the green upward triangles, Curlews were found in 2008-13 but not 1985-90, almost certainly as a result of the Group's intensive efforts. In the red downward triangles, Curlews were found in 1985-90, but not 2008-13, in spite of the

Group's efforts to find them. It will be seen that Curlew had apparently disappeared from five of the 22 squares (23%, almost one-quarter) where it was found in 1985-90.

It will also be seen from Map 1 that there was evidence of breeding Curlew in only six of these squares in 2023, so the range has decreased by 65% since 2008-13, comparable to the reduction in population of 66%.

Curlews and Pheasant Release

Local fieldwork research by the Stiperstones-Corndon Landscape Partnership Scheme 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 almost all chicks were predated before fledging (i.e. protecting nests makes little difference to productivity in some areas - it results in the chicks getting eaten, not the eggs). So why are there so many foxes?

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

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

The massive increase in Pheasant carrion has allowed Buzzard and Raven to spread eastwards across most of England since 1990, and is undoubtedly the food source that has allowed Kites to spread into, and right across, Shropshire in only 17 years.

In 2014 there were an estimated 44,000 pairs of breeding pheasants, all descended from previous releases (Pheasant is an introduced species, not a native one), compared to 160 pairs of Curlew and 800 pairs of Lapwing.

The RSPB announced the results in October 2022 of the review of its policy on game bird shooting, because of the effect of releasing Pheasants on the landscape and other wildlife. It is now seeking improved environmental standards, a reduction in the number of gamebirds released and better

compliance with existing rules about reporting releases, through tighter regulation of large-scale gamebird releases. For further information see www.rspb.org.uk/gamebirdreview

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

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) have continued with their surveys since 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 have been around 300 participants each year, apart from 2020 when coronavirus disrupted the work, and participants have spent a total of over 2,000 hours each year on survey work. 88 – 98 Curlew territories were identified in 2023, down from 94 – 115 in 2019. This consistent effort 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 results, can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DISTRIBUTION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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Mandy Ford
Chris Amass
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Mark Measures
Sue Meeks
Karen Mitchell
Peter Morris
Lynn Parker

Richard Shaw
Katie Steggles
Clun Valley Blacksmiths
Mike Wagg
Richard Whatley
Delphine Whatley

Plant Recorders

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Tommy Davies
Rachel Glover
Fiona Gomersall
Moira Hurley
Sarah Jameson

Tess Pearson
Katie Steggles
Janet Watkin

Butterfly Recorders

John Lyden

Casual records of Curlew and other species were provided by Stephen Abbott, Glennis Adams, Steven Ferris, Martin Fittall, Bernard and Olive Jefferies, Roni Mitchell, Heather Moody, Ros Patching, Alan Sedgwick, Judd Spears, Sarah Waterfield and Paul Westwood.

Brian Angell organised the Curlew recording, liaised with the surveyors and kept them informed with an e-newsletter.

Michelle Frater wrote the sections on Red Kite, Kestrel and Dipper in the work of the Bird Group

Allan Bernau photographed the colour-ringed Curlew at Llanfair Hill in 2017

The Small Woodland Birds Nest box Scheme was run by Fiona Gomersall, who collected the information for the Report. Results were provided by Gill Binks, Fiona Gomersall, Rob Harris, Mervin Mullard and Katie Steggles.

Bob Harris and Rachel Bromley maintained the nest boxes at Woodbatch and Mainstone, and undertook the Bird Ringing.

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

Tony Cross carried out the Dipper nest monitoring and ringing.

The Chapter on the Plants Group was written by Fiona Gomersall

Sarah Jameson and Joy Greenall provided the content for the Clun Forest Farmers Facilitation Fund,

John Arnfield, who set up the website, www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk, and trained the members of the Group who manage the UCCWG pages: this role has now been taken on by Chris Bargman. Rob Harris posted the UCCWG material on the website. The website was upgraded by Lizzie Hulton-Harrop in 2021.

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Thanks to Rory McCann for the Lapwing, Curlew and Snipe drawings

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- Farmers and landowners who accepted nest-boxes on their land, for their cooperation and hospitality

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- Karen Mitchell, for publicising the Group's work, particularly via Clun Chronicle and posters, and the Facebook Group
- Clun Chronicle, for publicising the Group's work
- The National Trust, for admin support.

THANK YOU ONE & ALL

DISTRIBUTION

This report has been posted on the Community Wildlife Groups website www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk, and can be downloaded from it.

An electronic version of this Report, in .pdf format, will be supplied to the organisations listed below.

- Natural England
- Environment Agency
- Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
- *Land, Life and Livelihoods in the Clun Forest*
- Shropshire Wildlife Trust
- Shropshire Council
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (Conservation Officer, Shropshire and Staffordshire)
- British Trust for Ornithology (Shropshire Regional Representative)
- Shropshire Ornithological Society (County Bird Recorder)
- Severn Rivers Trust

THE REPORT

A short report will be presented to the Public Meeting on 24 November 2023, and will be circulated to the membership, and interested individuals and Agencies.

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

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

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Mosses and Liverworts of Britain and Ireland. A Field Guide. 2010. Atherton, I., Bosanquet, S., Lawley, M. (eds.).

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

Planned survey work in 2024 will build on this knowledge, and enable us to extend the action to promote conservation of our target species and their habitats.

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

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Bird Survey

Appendix 2. Plant Survey - Target Indicator Species (Axiophytes)

Appendix 3. Curlews need farmers leaflet, produced for discussion with farmers through the Facilitation Fund Project

Annexe 1: The Management Committee

Appendix 1. Bird Survey

There were no detailed instructions for Bird surveys in 2023. All members, particularly those living near Curlew territories, were encouraged to submit records to Brian Angell, who compiled maps of records, which identified the occupied territories. Articles in Clun Chronicle, and “wanted” posters displayed on notice boards around the area, also asked for Curlew records.

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

No wetland surveys were carried out, so there are no records or map of “Other Target Species” (Snipe, Cuckoo, Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Stonechat, Linnet and Yellowhammer)

Appendix 4. 2 rget Plant Indicator Species in the Upper Clun (The "Axiophytes")

Rush Pastures

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

Blanket Bog

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

Species-rich Meadows

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

Curlews need farmers - Information & Discussion Paper

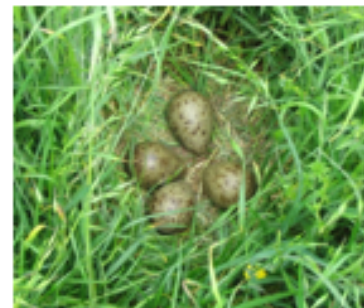
This note has been prepared to help farmer groups discuss ways of helping to improve Curlew breeding success, which is the first step in reversing their population decline. It follows discussions at a Facilitation Fund event on 27th February 2019 for farmers to find out more about what is being done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



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

Curlews nest on the ground. Eggs take around 4 weeks to hatch, and another 5 - 6

weeks before the chicks are able to fly, from late June onwards at the earliest. If nesting is delayed by the weather, or pairs have re-laid after losing their first clutch, many chicks can't fly until late-July or even later.

***Nesting Time***

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

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

Farmers can help by:

- *Removing stock by mid-April from fields that will not be cut (or grazed) until July*
- *Leaving stock for as long as possible on fields that will be cut earlier, to encourage Curlews to nest elsewhere*
- *Grazing fields suitable for nesting Curlew with cattle, rather than sheep*
- *Completing rolling, harrowing and any other field preparation by mid-April, or as soon as possible thereafter, and certainly before late April*
- *Retaining and restoring damp areas.*

Reducing Predation

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

Farmers can help by:

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

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

Farmers can help by:

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

Grass Cutting Time

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

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

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

Longer Term Action

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

Farmers can help by:

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

Financial Help, and Advice

Farmers with a current HLS agreement can request an extension in the year prior to it expiring, while others can apply for Countryside Stewardship to fund action to help Curlews on their land. The Rural Payments Agency (RPA), Natural England and the Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group will all provide advice. Trials are underway to make future schemes more Curlew-friendly.

Annexe 1. The Management Committee

Membership

The following people were elected for one year by the Annual Meeting on 24 November 2022

- Leo Smith (Chair)
- Jacky Harrison (Secretary)
- Mervin Mullard (Treasurer)
- Fiona Gomersall (Plant Recorder)
- Joy Greenall
- Rob Harris
- John Lyden (Butterfly recorder)
- Karen Mitchell (Publicity Officer / Facebook Group)
- Katie Steggles

Brian Angell (Bird recorder) was invited to join the committee (co-option)

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

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

Meetings

The Committee met once, on 17 October, mainly to plan the Annual Meeting. Some decisions earlier in the year, were taken via email correspondence, and recorded in the minutes of the October meeting.

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

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

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

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

Funding and Bank Account

The Group had a Bank Account with HSBC, originally at the Bishop’s Castle branch, and then, following closure of that branch, in Newtown. HSBC notified the Treasurer that they would start charging a fee on the account, which was previously free. The fee would have wiped out the balance in less than a year. The Committee looked into several other possible banking arrangements, and eventually the Treasurer, Mervin Mullard, identified Virgin Money as a suitable bank, and made the necessary arrangements to open an account. Cheques are to be signed by two signatures from four nominated Committee members: the current Officers, and Katie Steggles.

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

The Garreg Llwyd Windfarm Community Fund awarded grants of £1,000 for the Curlews project in 2021, and £700 for nest boxes in 2023, for work in, or benefitting, Bettws-y-Crwyn parish..

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

The main source of funds now is donations, mainly for refreshments, and a raffle, both at the Annual Meeting.

Financial Report and Accounts
Income and Expenditure for 2022 -23

| | | |
|--------------------------|----------|---------------|
| OPENING BALANCE | 01/10/22 | 449.87 |
| <u>INCOME</u> | | |
| AGM COLLECTION | | 135.30 |
| <u>TOTAL INCOME</u> | | |
| | | <u>135.30</u> |
| <u>EXPENDITURE</u> | | |
| WEBSITE | | 10.00 |
| HIRE VILLAGE HALL AGM | | 25.00 |
| <u>TOTAL EXPENDITURE</u> | | |
| | | <u>35.00</u> |
| CLOSING BALANCE | 31/03/22 | 550.17 |
| OPENING BALANCE | 01/04/22 | 550.17 |
| <u>EXPENDITURE</u> | | |
| BIRD BOXES | | 325.00 |
| <u>INCOME</u> | | |
| WIND FARM GRANT | | 660.00 |
| <u>CLOSING BALANCE</u> | | |
| | | <u>885.17</u> |

Audited by Cath Landles (AONB Community Officer) 13/10/2023

Candles

13/10/23

Page 1

Members

Any volunteers for membership of the Committee over the next year will be very welcome. All the current Committee members are willing to stand for re-election. Members of the Committee are elected at the Annual Public Meeting,

Leo Smith (Chair)
Mervin Mullard (Treasurer)
November 2023