

Is the lark still ascending?



Iconic birds such as skylarks and lapwings have thrived on Britain's farms for millennia, but they are becoming harder to find. Urban birdwatcher **David Lindo** leaves the city to try to track down these classic birds of the countryside

I was born and bred in London, yet as a kid I was consumed by an inexplicable passion for nature. Sadly, for this inquisitive six-year-old, it was a struggle. No one in my family circle had the remotest interest in nature or any desire to take me to see wildlife.

I was always told that there was no wildlife to be found in cities, and a visit to the countryside would be akin to stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia. So I developed a vision that the countryside was a wilderness inhabited by tweed-wearing folk and, more importantly, hordes of animals. My daydreams also featured farmers working the land amid flocks of feeding finches and roving partridges – all under the gaze of swooping swallows. These were birds I never saw in London and so this imagined countryside held as much magic as Middle Earth.

Rose-tinted rural vision

And perhaps if I'd visited the countryside in the 1930s, my imaginings would have been reality. But in the 1970s and 80s, my vision of life on our British farmland was rose-tinted. When I finally made it into the rural realm, I did track down many of the birds that I had dreamt about, but I also discovered that they were fast disappearing.

It is well reported that changes in farming practices – and in all of our lives – have had a huge and often negative impact on our landscapes and the wildlife that inhabits them. This change has been on the

cards since the Industrial Revolution, but accelerated after the Second World War as farming intensified to make Britain less vulnerable in times of future conflict.

Certain birds, such as the corn bunting, a dumpy finch that I used to call the 'Essex Bird' because I thought it proliferated in that county, have all but disappeared from areas where they were once common. Once common skylarks and yellowhammers are localised and scattered. The wonderful turtle dove, whose purring call brought magic to many a hedgerow, orchard or copse, has almost vanished.

Yet birds have had an attraction to farmland since humans first put a plough to the earth. Grassland species such as the stone curlew and quail, and wetland species such as lapwings love the open landscapes of pastures and arable land that humans have created, realising that they were a good substitute for their natural wetland/meadow habitats.

Thus began a long association, which is reflected with affection in our folklore and traditions. The skylark is a classic example, a species that has thrived as a direct consequence of agriculture and has been celebrated endlessly in poetry and music. Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* has regularly been voted the nation's favourite piece of classical music.

Surprisingly, I know quite a few birders who mistakenly feel that farmland landscapes are not natural enough to be worth exploring. Well, farmland can be surprisingly rich in birdlife and should never be overlooked. But it helps to have a basic understanding of how to find the birds.

Pasture versus arable

If you are not lucky enough to live in the country, then many of the things that you take for granted will be totally alien to many city folk. I did a straw poll among some of my London-based friends, asking them whether they knew the difference between arable and pastureland. None had a clue. But the differences are key to the species of bird they attract.

There are several different definitions of arable land, but broadly speaking it comprises large fields that are ploughed, sowed and harvested on an annual basis. When I think of arable counties, I think of the wide landscapes of Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Wiltshire and Yorkshire's East Riding. Spring and summer see birds such as skylarks and stone curlews nesting within the thickly growing crops, while autumn and winter see roving bands of finches, buntings and sparrows feeding on the seeds left after harvest.

“This imagined country held as much magic as Middle Earth”

DAVID'S FAVOURITE FARMLAND BIRDS

Common whitethroat

This scrub-loving summer visitor has made a comeback after a population crash in the 1990s. The males can regularly be seen flinging themselves into the air from a perch on a bush to deliver their scratchy song. Look for it in areas with low bushes and shrubs at the edge of fields.



Kestrel

The windhover is now Britain's only decreasing raptor. Formerly the most common bird of prey, it has now been overtaken by buzzards and sparrowhawks. A characteristic falcon often to be seen hovering over the verges of fields near copses, spinneys or hedgerows although it now seems more at home on the verges of motorways.



Turtle dove

The lovely purr of this, our only migratory dove, is now scarcely heard. It is smaller than the far more common collared dove, with a more frantic flight action and generally darker plumage. This turtle tends to dislike being too near human habitation – look for it in open lowland woods, copses and overgrown hedges.



Linnet

These beautiful finches bounce across fields uttering a metallic pinging call. The males have a gorgeous suffusion of pinky-red on their chests during the summer. This bird prefers farmland with scrubby areas, hedges or low trees. In winter it joins impressively large roving flocks with other finches.



Photos: Malcolm Hunt/rspb-images.com, John Hawkins/FLPA, Brian Bewan/ardae.com, M. Watson/ardae.com, Simon Litten/FLPA

Stock dove

Often overlooked and confused with feral and wood pigeons, the subtly beautiful stock dove is actually quite a common farmland bird. Look for the distinctive black wing edges when it is in flight and the gentle-looking face and yellow bill when perched. Often seen in the company of wood pigeons, these shyer birds love well-grown trees with hollows for nesting in.



Yellowhammer

Increasingly hard to find in many parts of the country, the yellowhammer is still common where the land is farmed sympathetically. Look out for the very yellow-looking males and their distinctive 'little bit of bread and no cheeeese...' song that they perform from the tallest bush in the hedgerow. This chirpy bird absolutely loves hedgerows and paths flanked by trees and bushes.



Lapwing

The classic black and white plumage and rounded wings are the diagnostic features of this distinctive wader. They are particularly vociferous during the spring when they indulge in their floppy display flights. They can be found on flat or gently undulating arable fields or pastureland that enables them to have unbroken panoramic views of their territory.



Grey partridge

This scarce and unobtrusive game bird is disappearing at a frightening rate. The males sport a ruddy-brown belly patch. A ground-lover, it likes to lurk in fields with vegetation not taller than its head, flanked or interspersed with denser cover such as hedgerows.



Reversing the decline

David reports on a big plan to revive the fortunes of farmland birds in south-west England

The alarming decline of some of our familiar farmland birds over the past 30 years is largely due to the intensification of cereal and livestock farming practices. Some of the figures make for gloomy reading: tree sparrows down 94 percent, corn buntings down 90 percent and starlings down 68 percent. Add to mix the changing climate and – in the cases of the migratory turtle dove (down 89 percent) and yellow wagtail (down 73 percent) – the added pressures of being hunted while on migration and the loss of suitable winter habitat in their sub-Saharan wintering areas.

Over recent years, there have been many initiatives implemented to encourage farmers to support farmland birds. The latest plan is the South West Farmland Bird Initiative, a four-year partnership project that has been organised to help reverse declines across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Dorset. Its main target is to increase the numbers of the six most threatened farmland birds – grey partridge, lapwing, turtle dove, yellow wagtail, tree sparrow and corn bunting – sexily dubbed as the 'Arable Six'.

The nuts-and-bolts of the project are that across the three counties, four sister projects will work together, each led by a different partner



Wiltshire farmers are at the forefront of efforts to help farmland birds

organisation that includes Natural England, the RSPB, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB. A dedicated project officer offers practical advice to participating farmers on how best to use the Defra-run Environmental Stewardship Scheme to help farmland birds and the other fauna and flora associated with the arable landscape. The main focus is to provide the three basic requirements: safe nesting habitats, summer food and winter food.

The good news is that the declines in some of

our best-loved species appear to be reversing on the farms where this scheme has been implemented. To date some 4,000 hectares of lifesaving land management has been put in place and the results are beginning to show. Corn buntings are now breeding in nesting habitats on farms where they have never bred before. This is such a beacon of hope. The more farmers that get involved in the project, the healthier the populations will be of the Arable Six, as well as other common species such as chaffinches, yellowhammers and swallows.

» Meanwhile, pasturelands are effectively areas of grassland inhabited by domestic livestock who spend their days grazing. Such farms tend to have smaller fields and there are more hedgerows, which are loved by birds such as whitethroats, chaffinches and yellowhammers. But the field vegetation is at a much lower level than arable land due to grazing, and this brings in a different array of bird species. Birds such as lapwings, yellow wagtails, meadow pipits and oystercatchers like the short grass, as this allows them to see approaching enemies from a long distance away.

In addition, the animals' dung attracts invertebrates, which leads to that perfect sight of swallows swooping to catch insects that the cattle or sheep disturb.

As with all wildlife watching, the best way to observe farmland birds is to stand or sit quietly at the corner of a field and wait to see what emerges. The most obvious birds in high summer will be the swallows and house martins. The former love to nest in barns, while the latter build their hardened mud nests on the eaves of farmhouses.

Skylarks will flutter high above open areas, singing almost from dawn to dusk. They'll occasionally be joined by lapwings swooping up out of nowhere to drive off crows that have entered airspace above their nests in the grass. Turn your attention to the field margins and you'll hear the scratchy warble of a common whitethroat emanating from the scrubby hawthorn hedge.

The added bonus during spring and autumn is that almost any migrant could turn up as they travel to their breeding or wintering grounds. For example, if you visit a farm in the west during the spring then you might bump into a migrating pied flycatcher or redstart in the woods. Whereas a lucky visit to a northern hill farm in May might provide you with visions of dotterels, if you are very lucky. These weird-looking waders will be en route to mountaintop breeding areas in the Cairngorms and even further afield in Scandinavia.

The winter months can be very rewarding, especially if the farm you visit has stubble. This invariably attracts mixed flocks of finches, sparrows, buntings and

thrushes such as redwings and fieldfares. Winter also sees maximum numbers of pheasants and, in the southern and eastern farms especially, red-legged partridges.

So despite the well-documented decreases in many of our farmland birds, they still remain a major component of farm life. The good news is that work is being done to reverse the declines (see box, above).

I discovered this for myself recently when I walked through a farm in Cheshire. Yellowhammers abounded in the hedgerows and I was delighted to find a small flock of tree sparrows (which have declined by some 90 percent in 30 years) around the cowsheds.

Let's hope that more farmers leave sections of their land for wildlife and that it will become standard practice across the nation. With a bit of luck, my childhood vision might come true again. ☺



David Lindo is a birder and author. Turn to page 107 to order his book *The Urban Birder*. Reader price £7.99, subs price £6.99, code C0811/7.