



# **Grouped Species Action Plan**

## **‘Arable birds’**



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**Living Shetland Biodiversity Action Plan**  
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# Grouped species Action plan

## Farmland birds

### Species profile

### UK B/D status

### UK lead partners

### Shetland status

### Relevant HAP's

AgriBAP, Wading Birds (Grouped Action Plan), Freshwater Habitat plan, Roadside plan, Roadside Action Plan, Community Biodiversity Action Plans (Bigton, Bressay, Fetlar, Sandwick, Yell), woodlands

### Statutory Protection

### Current Status

(P – National Priority Species, CC – Species of Conservation Concern (R=red, A=amber, G=green), L – Local Priority Species)

The farmland birds included here are four species of small passerine birds as well as starling and rock dove, which breed in Shetland and are dependent for at least part of the year on habitats created by agricultural activities.

#### **Twite** (Shetland name *lintie*) (CCR, L)

The twite has a disjunct world distribution from the Atlantic coasts of Northwest Europe, to uplands in western and central Asia. In the UK, it is found breeding on moorland in northern England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, where in the west and north it is mainly coastal. In Shetland, there was a huge decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a further decline in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The breeding population is believed to be still in decline and may now number only about 500 pairs. Many leave the Islands in the autumn, probably spending the winter in Caithness and Orkney.

#### **House Sparrow** (CCR)

This species is widely distributed throughout the Northern Hemisphere and has been introduced to North America and several countries in the Southern Hemisphere. In the UK there has been a rapid and widespread decline since the 1980s. In Shetland there have been local declines, associated with a reduction in the area of cereal production. The current Shetland population has been estimated at 1,500-3,500 pairs. This species is resident in Shetland.

#### **Skylark (Shetland name laverock)** (P, CCR)

Skylarks are widespread across Europe and Asia. They breed throughout the UK, but have suffered a widespread decline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Shetland, there is little evidence of a decline. The Shetland breeding population is thought to be 23,000-31,000 pairs. Most Shetland breeding birds leave the Islands in the autumn to spend the winter further south in the UK, but a few winter in Shetland, often in neap fields.

#### **Meadow Pipit** (L)

Meadow Pipits breeds over most of northern Europe including Faeroe, Iceland and southeast Greenland, and south to Italy and the Balkans. Most populations are migratory, wintering in southern and western Europe and North Africa. The Shetland population is thought to be 8,000-12,500 pairs. Almost all of the Shetland population leaves the islands in the winter.

# Starling (CCR)

Starlings occur over most of Europe and western and central Asia, and have been introduced to North America and many other parts of the world. The race that breeds over most of Europe has a subspecies been recent reports of declining populations and local extinctions in northern Europe, including called the Shetland Starling *S. v. zetlandicus*, which breeds in the Northern and Western Isles. There have the UK, possibly linked to agricultural change. In Europe, it is generally migratory in the north and east of the breeding range. The Shetland population is thought to be 10,000-20,000 pairs. In Shetland, most of the breeding population winters within the Islands, although many from Fair Isle move south to the north of Scotland.

## **Rock dove** (Shetland name *Doo*)

Rock Doves have an almost global distribution, due to wild and feral populations, with the race that occurs here found within the Western Palaearctic (region of Europe, North Africa and Asia, north of the tropics).

They are largely resident. Spring and autumn peaks on Fair Isle possibly involve Shetland birds that have emigrated for the winter. There is no evidence of birds moving to Shetland from elsewhere. The Shetland population has been estimated at 500-1,000 breeding pairs and is believed to be declining.

## Ecology and management

### **Twite**

During the summer, twite feed almost exclusively on the small seeds of wild plants, especially of native grasses (not perennial rye grass *Lolium perenne*). Ungrazed areas, late-cut roadsides, herb-rich meadows, lightly grazed pastures and cliff-tops are particularly important. Adults may fly several kilometres from the nest site to feed. In Shetland, twite mostly nest amongst heather on seacliffs, sometimes in small colonies, on small islands and very occasionally around crofts. They lay one or two clutches, each of four to six eggs from early May to early August. In autumn, 'weed seeds', especially charlock (called *runchie* in Shetland), are their main diet, in tattie and fodder rape crops, and during the autumn and winter in neap crops.

### **House sparrows**

House sparrows feed on food sources associated with human habitation, especially waste human food, and in autumn and winter grain such as oats and barley and on the seeds of wild plants. However, young chicks are fed largely on invertebrates. Most nests are under roofs and in holes in buildings and they will use nest boxes. House sparrows produce one to three broods, which usually fledge from early June. Sparrows can cause problems due to fouling of stored animal feed and crops when they roost in farm buildings and due to loss of grain from crops, especially from small rigs and stacks.

### **Skylarks**

Skylarks feed on invertebrates when breeding, when they are found over much of the moorland and moderately grazed in-by land. In areas where grazing is heavy, they often nest in the only available longer vegetation, on roadsides. They feed mainly on seeds during the rest of the year. In autumn they often form flocks in stubble fields, feeding on fallen oats and barley. They will also eat weed seeds in neap fields.

### **Meadow Pipit**

Meadow pipits breed widely on in-by and moorland, feeding on invertebrates all year round. They are not so widespread as Skylarks, being concentrated along physical features such as the sides of burns and steep banks. Meadow Pipits nest on the ground amongst heather or grasses. In areas where grazing is heavy, they often nest in the only available longer vegetation, on roadsides. Most clutches are laid in late April or early May, with most young fledging in late June. Some pairs raise two broods in a year.

**Rock doves**

Most Shetland rock doves breed in caves on seacliffs, although, a handful of pairs breed in abandoned buildings in Delting. They lay two eggs and can have more than one brood each year. Food is seeds and other vegetable matter. In autumn and winter, cereal stubbles, stooked and stacked cereals, weed seeds in neap and tattie crops and winter feed put out for sheep are important sources of food.

**Starling**

Starlings feed mainly on invertebrates, which they obtain by probing in short swards in in-bye and hill land. They may be of benefit to agriculture in feeding on leatherjackets ('storie worms' - the larvae of crane flies, which can damage the roots of grasses). They will also eat waste human food and stacked and spilt grain.

**Current factors causing loss or decline****Twite**

In Shetland, the main reasons for the decline in the breeding population are probably loss of feeding habitat, in summer, due to overgrazing, reseeding and early cutting of hay, silage and roadsides, all of which reduce the supply of the small seeds of wild plants. In winter, a decline in arable cropping, particularly of neaps has reduced the supply of weed seeds.

**House sparrow**

The population has declined locally due to a reduction of arable cropping, particularly of cereals.

**Skylark**

Breeding habitat is restricted in many areas due to overgrazing. The loss of arable cropping may also be having some effect on the population. Early cutting of roadsides may also reduce breeding success by destroying nests.

**Meadow Pipit**

The population is not known to be declining, but numbers may be limited by lack of nesting cover in areas that are very heavily grazed.

**Starling**

The population is not thought to be in decline.

**Rock doves**

The population is believed to have declined due to a reduction of arable cropping, particularly of cereals.

**Opportunities & Current Action**

Population censuses are needed to identify the current breeding population and distribution and to form a basis for long term monitoring. Research work to provide information on breeding habitat requirements and factors affecting distribution and breeding success is also needed. The RSPB is about to begin a research project on breeding twite in Scotland. Although this is not directly relevant to Shetland due to research being done outwith the Isles, the results may show trends that could be applicable to Shetland. (RSPB, SBRC, SBC)

Encouragement should be given to agri-environment schemes that reduce grazing pressure on both moorland and in-bye land. Arable cropping should be encouraged, both of cereals and neaps. (SCFWAG)

The cutting of roadsides should be carried out later unless necessary for road safety, so that wild plants can set seed to provide cover and a food source. (SIC, SCFWAG)

Crofters, farmers and other land managers should be encouraged to leave some ungrazed weedy areas where wild plants can set seed, unless there is a legal requirement to control certain weed species. (SCFWAG, RSPB)

## **Action table**

### **Objectives & Targets Box**

#### **Objective 1**

To prevent further declines in the breeding populations of farmland birds, including twite, house sparrow, skylark, meadow pipit, starling and rock dove.

#### **Target**

No net loss during the period covered by this plan.

#### **Objective 2**

Improve the condition and extent of farmland bird habitats.

#### **Target**

Increase the area of arable crops, herb-rich meadows, lightly grazed pastures, ungrazed areas and late cut roadside verges to produce more wild plant seeds, invertebrates and nesting cover.

### **References box**

### **Key contacts**

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