

## THE CONTRASTING FORTUNES OF BRITAIN'S BREEDING BIRDS

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*David Leech, Humphrey Crick and Stephen Baillie report on the findings in the latest Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report.*

### CONTRASTES EN EL ÉXITO DE LAS AVES REPRODUCTORAS DEL REINO UNIDO

David Leech, Humphrey Crick y Stephen Baillie informan sobre los resultados del Informe sobre Aves Reproductoras en Areas Rurales (Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report).

The Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report (WCR), first published in 1998, brings together the findings of all BTO long-term population monitoring projects for breeding birds (Table 1). This report presents the results of the BTO/JNCC Integrated Population Monitoring programme, for 112 of the UK's breeding bird species.

The WCR provides a detailed summary of trends in the abundance, productivity and survival rates of a large proportion of the British avifauna over a broad range of habitats, including farmland, woodland, reedbeds, scrub and waterways. Basic population data such as these are vital when planning and implementing conservation initiatives. The importance of the BTO's monitoring programme has been recognised by the

Government Biodiversity Steering Group report, which states that such schemes are essential if the broad aims and specific targets of Biodiversity Action Plans, drawn up after the Rio Summit in 1992, are to be achieved.

Analysis of the most recent data set is now complete. The report, containing the latest population trend details, Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside: Their Conservation Status in 2001, is published on the internet — see the BTO web site <http://www.bto.org/birdtrends/>.

### POPULATION TRENDS AND BREEDING SUCCESS

At first glance, the figures published in the latest WCR appear to be encouraging for conserva-

TABLE 1. Monitoring schemes included in the latest Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report.

Scheme	Data available
Common Birds Census (CBC)	1966-2000 34 yrs
BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)	1994-2000 6 yrs
Waterways Birds Survey (WBS)	1974-2000 26 yrs
Heronries Census	1928-2000 72 yrs
Nest Record Scheme (NRS)	1968-2000 32 yrs
Constant Effort Sites Scheme (CES)	1983-2000 17 yrs

TABLE 2. Species exhibiting long-term declines of greater than 25%.

Farmland and woodland habitats CBC		Waterways (rivers and canals) WBS	Reedbeds and Scrub CES
Grey Partridge	Willow Warbler	Little Grebe	Song Thrush
Woodcock	Spotted Flycatcher	<b>Redshank</b>	Lesser Whitethroat
Lapwing	Marsh Tit	Grey Wagtail	Whitethroat
Turtle Dove	Willow Tit	Yellow Wagtail	Willow Warbler
Cuckoo	Starling	Pied Wagtail	Spotted Flycatcher
Skylark	Tree Sparrow	Reed Bunting	Willow Tit
Tree Pipit	Linnet		Linnet
<b>Yellow Wagtail</b>	Lesser Redpoll		Lesser Redpoll
Dunnock	Bullfinch		Yellowhammer
Song Thrush	Yellowhammer		Reed Bunting
Mistle Thrush	Reed Bunting		
Whitethroat	Corn Bunting		

*(species in bold type added to list in the latest WCR)*

Removed from the latest WCR: Blackbird and Meadow Pipit

tionists. The previous WCR reported that, according to CBC data, bird species which had exhibited a population decline of 25% or more since the late 1960s totalled 25, whereas the latest WCR indicates that this total has fallen to 24.

However, the population sizes of many farmland and woodland species, including Skylarks, Song Thrushes, Willow Tits and Tree Sparrows, are still at least 25% lower than they were 30 years ago (Table 2). In addition, the two species which have been removed from this category in the 2001 WCR, Blackbird (see Figure 1) and Meadow Pipit, have not shown increases in abundance of sufficient magnitude to suggest that the apparent improvements in their conservation status are ecologically significant.

Also of concern is the addition of another species, Yellow Wagtail, to the list of significantly declining species, due to a continued, steady decline in the size of the population (see Figure 2). Drainage of wet meadows and the increasingly intensive management of grassland for silage and stock may be responsible for the decreasing abundance of Yellow Wagtail. Interestingly there seems to have been a population shift towards arable areas and a pilot study by the BTO (funded by Anglian Water) that aims to investigate the breeding and feeding ecology of Yellow Wagtails in arable farmland is currently underway.

The 2000 WCR listed Yellow Wagtail as one of

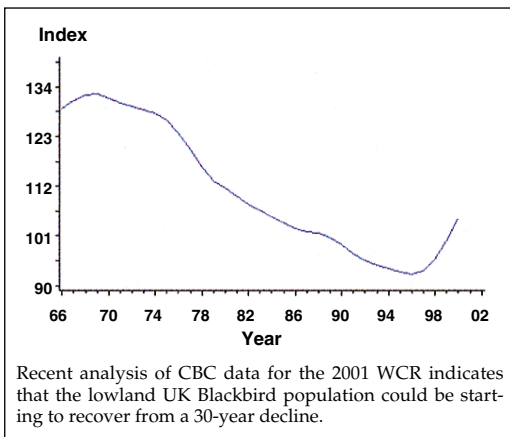


FIGURE 1. Blackbird — CBC all habitats 1966–2000.

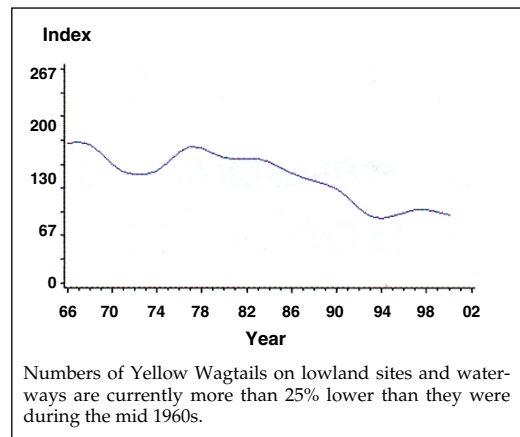


FIGURE 2. Yellow Wagtail — CBC all habitats 1966–2000.

TABLE 3. Species exhibiting long-term population increases of greater than 100%.

Farmland and woodland habitats	Waterways (rivers and canals)
Mute Swan	Mallard
Shelduck	Oystercatcher
Mallard	
Tufted Duck	
Sparrowhawk	
Buzzard	
Stock Dove	
Little Grebe	
Collared Dove	
Green Woodpecker	
Gr Sp Woodpecker	
Nuthatch	
Reed Warbler	
Blackcap	
Magpie	

the five species that had declined by more than 25% along the UK's rivers and canals, together with Pied and Grey Wagtail, Little Grebe and Reed Bunting. The equivalent list in the 2001 WCR (Table 2) includes the Redshank, a species that may be similarly affected by the continued drainage of wetland areas. The BTO's Breeding Waders of Wet Meadows scheme, funded by RSPB, English Nature, the Environment Agency and DEFRA and initiated in 2002, aims to investigate the nature of population trends demonstrated by Redshank and other wader species breeding in wetland habitats.

On a more positive note, the 2001 WCR also indicates that the populations of some British birds are increasing rapidly, with numbers of 16 species more than doubling since the beginning of their respective monitoring schemes (Table 3). The observed increases in Sparrowhawk numbers reflect a population recovery following severe declines in the 1960s associated with the harmful effects of organochlorine pesticides. Decreased persecution by gamekeepers may have benefited raptor species and Magpies,

whilst the increased availability of *Brassica* crops may explain the increases in abundance of several dove species, including Woodpigeon, Collared Dove and Stock Dove. The factors responsible for the population increases observed for a number of resident woodland insectivores, such as Great Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch, and for a variety of waterfowl species, including Mallard, Tufted Duck and Mute Swan are currently unclear. The apparently contradictory trends in Little Grebe abundance indicated by WBS and CBC data may be due to the small sample sizes available for this species in the latter scheme. CBC trends for Little Grebe abundance are therefore unlikely to be representative of the population as a whole.

The latest results from the Nest Record Scheme (*BTO News* 239) and Constant Effort Sites scheme (*BTO News* 240) highlight both improvements and declines in the breeding performance of a wide range of species in differing habitats. Identification of such trends is extremely important when determining the factors responsible for population change (see Spotted Flycatcher article, *BTO News* 229).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The latest WCR is the fourth in a series produced as part of the BTO's work carried out under its partnership with the JNCC. The WCR provides a detailed, up-to-date summary of changes in the abundance and breeding success of Britain's birds and is therefore a vital source of information to conservationists. Without the incredible amount of time and effort invested in monitoring schemes by BTO volunteers, publication of such a report would not be possible. We would like to take this opportunity to thank anyone who has ever taken part in any BTO recording scheme; every one of you has contributed directly to the latest WCR. Keep up the good work in 2002.