

Biodiversity Information Pack



For Farmers

**A 'first-stop shop' information resource for
farmers and land managers who wish
to incorporate aspects of wildlife management
into their farm business practices**



Collated by the
Durham Biodiversity Partnership
with the support of the Tyne Tees Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
and the Durham Wildlife Trust





Durham **Biodiversity** Partnership

Action for wildlife in Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Darlington & County Durham

Dear Farmer/Land Manager,

Re. The Durham Biodiversity Partnership's 'Biodiversity Information Pack for Farmers'

The contents of this pack have been collated with the assistance of a variety of organisations but the concept of the pack was developed in partnership with the Tyne Tees Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and with the support of the Durham Wildlife Trust. All concerned with collating this pack are very much aware of the difficulties that many farmers are currently facing. We understand that whilst farmers are almost invariably interested in, and very often devoted to, wildlife, factoring that extra 'wildlife' element into your farming procedures can be difficult and sometimes time consuming when budgets are stretched. It doesn't have to be that way!

The purpose of this pack is very simple. It is a 'first stop' shop, attempting to bring together, in one simple folder all of the key pieces of information that you as a busy farmer might need to improve your farm for wildlife. Where it can not give you this directly, it attempts to provide you with the relevant contact information to the people and organisations that can help with expert advice, guidance and support. The pack attempts to make it easy for all farmers to help wildlife directly by applying some of the information in the guidance notes or by making it easy to get appropriate advice when needed.

The pack contains a wide range of relevant information, such as the excellent NFU/English Nature 'Five Point Plan for Wildlife-friendly Farming' leaflet. In addition, it should help you to get full information on Countryside Stewardship and other agri-environment schemes from the Rural Development Service of Defra, at Kenton Bar, Newcastle upon Tyne. The contacts list should provide you with the information you need to access almost any key organisation or person from whom you might wish to seek advice, and allow you to do so relatively easily without making lots of fruitless calls and incurring much frustration.

The funding to produce, collate and distribute this free pack to some 500 farmers in the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan area has been secured through the Durham Biodiversity Partnership. In addition, the process received considerable support from the Business Biodiversity Challenge Team of

Electrolux at Spennymoor. We are most grateful to them for their generosity, hard work and devotion to wildlife.

As well as a range of leaflets and information sheets relating to species and habitats, the pack contains a number of key components that we hope you will find useful, these are:

- the contacts information list
- the 'Through the Year with Wildlife' calendar - action points for wildlife-friendly farming
- information about the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan, and
- membership details for Tyne Tees FWAG and the Durham Wildlife Trust

We hope that you find the contents of this pack useful to you in your farming practices and in your efforts to improve your land management for wildlife. In the interests of minimising waste and saving resources, if you do not wish you use the information in this pack please do not throw it away but pass it on to a friend, colleague or neighbour who may be interested. We wish you every success with your efforts for wildlife on your farm.

Durham Biodiversity Partnership

The Biodiversity Information Pack For Farmers was produced using funds donated to the project by the 'Business Biodiversity Challenge Team' of Electrolux, Spennymoor. These funds were raised by the company work force as part of their support of the North East Biodiversity Forum's 'North East Business Biodiversity Week' in November 2002.

“Through the Year with Wildlife”

~

‘Month by Month Advice for Wildlife Conservation On Your Farm’

Acknowledgements

This month-by-month guide has been produced by distilling the information contained in the RSPB’s 2000-2002 Farming & Wildlife Calendars, with information from a number of other sources. The work of the authors of the text contained in these documents is duly and respectfully acknowledged, and thanks are offered to the Society for allowing this information to be used in this present format. Additional advice on the contents was provided by Simon Henderson, Tyne Tees Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Rural Development Service (Defra), Durham Wildlife Trust and the County Durham Hedgerows Partnership. The data was collated and edited by Frank Berney.

The month by month guide provides farmers in both arable and livestock sectors with a range of simple to follow ideas (as well as information that is relevant to any farming practice) that, if correctly implemented, will help to benefit wildlife on their land and holdings. These ideas are presented in the format of monthly bullet points, sector by sector.

Why not place this guide on your kitchen pin board or office notice board for easy reference throughout the year?

January

Livestock

- Restrict supplementary stock feeding to agriculturally improved land. Avoiding areas of high botanical interest, steep or wet ground, woodland and watercourses – thereby reducing poaching and nutrient enrichment.
- Reduce stocking rates on compacted/poached ground or areas with vulnerable vegetation (e.g. heather).

Arable

- Avoid soil phosphorous levels higher than needed for crop production. Test your soil and, if possible, reduce fertiliser inputs (and save money).
- Scatter surplus grain/tailings in farmyards, stubble fields or set-aside to help foraging birds.
- Retain old and ivy-covered trees and avoid ploughing near veteran trees (minimising root system damage). If they are not a safety hazard retain all dead and fallen trees.

Either

- To avoid pollution do not spread livestock manure when the soil is waterlogged, frozen, flooded or snow-covered, on steeply sloping fields or within 10m of a watercourse. Draw up a farm waste management plan following the DEFRA '*Code of Good Agricultural Practice*'.
- Trim hedges only on a 2-3 year staggered rotation to save time and money as well as to benefit wildlife. Cutting from January to early March leaves the fruit and cover provided by the hedge as late as possible.
- Do not plant trees on valuable wildlife habitats such as flower-rich grassland and boggy field corners. Seek advice before creating new ponds in wet areas – the existing area might already be valuable for wildlife.
- Try to create a network of wildlife corridors around the farm. Thick hedgerows can link woodlands, tracks and lanes.
- In all planting schemes (such as new hedges) use only species that are native to the area. If at all possible use locally sourced shrubs and trees.
- Move dirty water sprinklers regularly to avoid run-off, ponding and worm kills.
- Carry out swaling of heathland in suitable weather. See '*The Heather and Grass Burning Code*'.
- Transfer IACS eligible land in areas of high environmental value (e.g. next to woods, or watercourses) to non-eligible land of lower value.
- Avoid repairing dry stonewalls when there are frosty conditions – disturbance of hibernating reptiles such as common lizard, slow worm and potentially, adder. Funding is available for field boundary works through agri-environment schemes.

February

Livestock

- Maintain traditional stocking and cutting dates of grasslands as wildlife may depend on the continuation of such patterns – but be aware that recent tradition of stock densities are normally considered 'too high' to be compatible with wildlife.
- Avoid overstocking and poaching grassland in wet periods. This will reduce sward damage and colonisation by thistles and docks. Agri-environment grant aid is available in upland areas for stocking level control.

Arable

- Keep fertilisers out of hedges and ditches by driving further from edge when spring dressing headlands.
- Consider planting wild bird cover crops – this can be done under a set-aside option or under some of the options available through Countryside Stewardship. Defra recommend re-establishing such mixtures after 15 March to allow for the best use of the previous crop's seed.
- Select free-draining land when planning to grow late harvested crops. This avoids having to work wetland and the problems of soil compaction and run-off.
- When applying Nitrogen top dressing in excess of 150kg/ha or for any applications in early spring, the dressings should be split to maximise crop uptake and utilisation and to avoid excess leaching

Either

- Only cut hedges annually if they contain fast growing species such as ash or to ensure road safety. Trim hedges on a 2-3 year staggered rotation to save time and money as well as benefit wildlife by providing food and cover. Protect developing hedgerow trees against flailing.
- Maintain a 1-2m grass margin adjacent to hedges. Create or maintain sterile strips between the field margins and crop by cultivation or herbicide application. Complete this by early March to avoid damaging ground-nesting birds. Annual payments are available under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme for grass margin management.
- Complete swaling of moorland, heathland, scrub and rough grazing by mid March to avoid harming ground-nesting birds, insects and reptiles.
- Roll/harrow grasslands and arable fields before mid March to avoid damaging nests of ground nesting birds (especially lapwing which can nest early).
- Add barley straw to control algal blooms in new or recently restored ponds (seek advice from FWAG or RDS).
- Consider a Whole Farm Management Plan and/or Farm Biodiversity Action Plan to encourage the wildlife interest on your farm – consult FWAG or RDS for advice.

March

Livestock

- Maintain stock-proof walls as they provide places for lichens and nesting wheatear.

Arable

- Beetle banks can be created when cultivating large fields. Plough two furrows against each other across the middle of the field and sow the resulting bank with native tussocky grass-seed mix.
- Manage field edges which do not have a major grass weed or cleavers problem as conservation headlands (funding is available under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme). Apply no insecticides or broad-leaved herbicides after 15th March to encourage the growth of low-level broadleaved weed species and the insects which live on them.
- Conservation headlands - where cleavers is a problem, control it early with amidosulphuron (e.g. Eagle), this will allow other more valuable species to germinate in April.
- When cultivating large arable fields (spring cereals), sow grass mixes around the edges to create 'cultivated margins' a useful 'refuge' for arable plants. These are a very important habitat for invertebrates and the farmland bird species which feed their nestlings upon them – e.g. grey partridge, corn bunting and tree sparrow – and a source of seeds for them to eat later in the season. Countryside Stewardship can fund this.
- When using pesticides always follow the label instructions and DEFRA's *Green Code of Practice for the Safe Use of Pesticides on Farms and Holdings*. Observe Local Environmental Risk Assessments for Pesticides (LERAP) rules for "no spray" buffer zones next to watercourses.
- Leave winter stubbles unploughed until mid March if possible to allow birds to feed on seeds.

Either

- Hedge, scrub and woodland management season ends although laying old, difficult hedges may be easier at this time of year when the sap is rising and the stems are more pliable and less likely to snap.
- Leave cutting/scrub clearance until after August to allow birds to complete their breeding season successfully.
- Finish moorland and grassland burning by mid March to avoid harming breeding wildlife (follow local voluntary cessation dates).
- Keep fertilisers, insecticides and herbicides away from field margins and hedges. Follow Game Conservancy Trust guidelines for development of Conservation Headlands. Avoid broad-spectrum insecticides and herbicides as they kill beneficial insects and rare arable plants as well as the targeted species.
- In upland areas, avoid placing wire fences on ridgelines and flight lines so red and black grouse will be less likely to collide with them. Advice on reducing collision risk is available from the Game Conservancy Trust – if fences already exist consider marking them with appropriate devices to reduce collisions.
- Create wide grass buffer zones along watercourses – can be very important for water voles. This creates new wildlife habitats, improves fisheries, stabilises riverbanks and also reduces agricultural pollution and run-off from fields. Annual payments are available under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and set-aside allows for buffer zone establishment.
- Apply slurry to land in spring rather than autumn so the crops can use nitrogen and the risk of nitrate leaching is reduced. Do not apply within 10m of surface water such as ditches and ponds.
- Avoid having to work wet land, and the subsequent problems of soil compaction and run-off, by the selection of suitable free-draining land for any to be late-harvested crops.

April

Livestock

- Sheep dips, especially synthetic pyrethroids, are harmful to aquatic life. Locate dip baths away from watercourses and keep freshly dipped sheep away from streams and wetlands. Do not use soakaways for used dip disposal. Seek advice about necessary licenses from the Environment Agency.
- Reduce stocking densities on unimproved neutral pastures until mid-August to avoid damage to flora and ground nesting birds. Stocking rates and timings will vary according to the habitat and grazing in May/June may be necessary on rank vegetation to increase floristic diversity. Funding is available through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.
- Check empty silage silos for damage to avoid pollution through leakage. Do not store bags of fertiliser or place muck heaps within 10m of watercourses.
- Protect new hedges from stock grazing and control weeds around young plants.

Arable

- Avoid rolling seed beds when soils are wet as this increases soil compaction and run-off.
- Try to keep fertilisers out of hedge bottoms and ditches. When spring dressing headlands drive farther from edge or use a deflector plate. Take care with pesticides and follow label instructions.
- Do not apply pre-emergence herbicides to spring-sown crops.
- Apply specific targeted post-emergence herbicides to autumn-sown crops only where a real weed problem has been identified. Do not apply any broad-leaved herbicides (except for cleavers) in the conservation headlands.
- Do not apply top dressing of nitrogen in the conservation headlands. Only apply Phosphate and Potassium to the main crop where it is needed, based on a soil analysis.

Either

- Bird nesting season – ground-nesting birds are vulnerable to rolling, harrowing and high stock densities (especially lapwing and skylark which can nest early).
- Delay cutting of set-aside until August to avoid harming breeding wildlife. Only spray if it is necessary to control problem weeds and leave headlands unsprayed.
- Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme application window closes 30th of April.

May

Livestock

- Field silage should not be made within 10m of any watercourse. If systems for handling silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oil are to be built or substantially altered, follow the design standards stipulated in the control of pollution regulations. Tell the Environment Agency 14 days before using such systems. **Ring 08459 556000 for a free copy of DEFRA's Water, Air and Soil Codes Summary.**
- Before ensiling make sure the silage effluent tank is empty. After ensiling check the tank level regularly to avoid overflow and pollution.
- Try to leave at least 7 weeks between cuts for silage to allow successful fledging of any ground nesting birds – e.g. grey partridge. A more varied flora and vegetation structure can develop if some fields are changed to hay production. The Countryside Stewardship Scheme provides grant aid for the creation of hay meadows.
- Water bowsers and new troughs can be sited to help spread the distribution of grazing over field units and minimise erosion – if barn owls are in the area ensure that troughs have mechanisms in place to stop accidental drowning (e.g. floating, upturned plastic bread tray).
- Leave a mower's width uncut round silage fields to provide rough grass for barn owls and brown hares.
- Late spring grazing of traditionally grazed field margins, to remove the previous year's growth, will provide ideal conditions for flowering plants in summer.

Arable

- Keep fertilisers, insecticides and herbicides away from field margins, hedges and watercourses. Tilting the distributor or fitting a deflector or boundary disc can avoid fertiliser drift. Observe Local Environmental Risk Assessments for Pesticides (LERAP) rules for "no spray" buffer zones next to watercourses.
- Apply specific targeted post-emergence herbicides to spring-sown crops only where a real weed problem has been identified. Do not apply any broad-leaved herbicides (except for cleavers) in the conservation headlands.

Either

- Transfer IACS eligible land in areas of high environmental value (next to woods, watercourses and archaeological sites) to non-eligible fields of lower value.
- Countryside Stewardship Scheme applications must be received by DEFRA by 31st of May for 1st of October start (30th of April 2003).

June

Livestock

- Where necessary, control bracken with a first cut or crush from mid June and again six weeks later for at least three years. Check for nesting birds first and delay bracken control if they are present. Leave some bracken to provide cover for birds and food for butterflies and moths.
- Take care with silage liquor and check the effluent level in the tank. Wilting silage for 24 hours before gathering reduces effluent by more than 60%.
- Delay cutting flower-rich meadows and set-aside until July/August to allow plants to flower and set seed. Leave a 2m margin uncut as habitat for invertebrates.

Arable

- Use a contained, impermeable base for mixing concentrate and filling sprayers. Surface waters and soil can be contaminated by even small splashes. Avoid spray drift onto field margins and hedges and observe LERAP 'no spray' zones near watercourses.
- Consider conversion of intractable areas of arable land to permanent grassland or woodland to improve its conservation value. Grant aid may be available (ESA and Countryside Stewardship schemes or Farmland Woodland Grant schemes). IACS eligibility can be retained or transferred.
- Only apply insecticides on the main crop if aphids reach threshold levels and then use only compound containing pirimicarb (e.g. Aphox). Do not apply any insecticides in the conservation headlands.

Either

- Bird nesting season – Ground nesting birds are still vulnerable to damage and disturbance at this time of the year.
- Safeguard field margins, ponds, hedges and unimproved grassland to provide insects with a variety of plants. Insects are an important food source for birds and other animals and some, such as hoverflies, bees and butterflies, can be useful. Over the summer check for these insects and if they are scarce then changes might be required to provide the food they need.
- Delay pond and riverbank maintenance until autumn to avoid disturbance to breeding wildlife – especially water voles.
- Consider a Whole Farm Management Plan for your land. Seek advice on managing important wildlife habitats and species and about agri-environment schemes.

July

Livestock

- Before hay cutting allow wildflowers to set seed.
- Keep sheep dipping and freshly dipped stock well away from watercourses as Pyrethroid dips kill invertebrates and can severely damage aquatic ecosystems.
- Bracken – second cut or crush six weeks from the first treatment in June. Do not cut if nesting birds are present (e.g. whinchat). Spraying with a specific herbicide can control bracken but do not spray if rare ferns are present. Consult Environment agency before using aerial sprays or spraying near watercourses. Scrub management grants are available through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Arable

- When planning for next year, consider how to reduce chemical control of weeds by making best use of set-a-side as a fallow in the rotation
- Switching from autumn sowing to spring sowing will help in reducing the amount of herbicide required.

Either

- Bird nesting season – Delay cutting set-aside, meadows and less productive grasslands until late July/August to avoid damage and disturbance to nesting birds.
- Avoid cutting hedges in summer as it removes flowers and fruit and is harmful to nesting birds. Annual hedge cutting should be avoided except where it is needed for road safety reasons and then should be done in the most sensitive manner possible.
- Apply for Woodland Grant Schemes and tree felling licences (may be applicable to hedgerow management) now. Protect veteran trees (over 100 years old) from operations such as ploughing and retain ivy-clad and old trees.
- Leave some grassland areas and field margins uncut every other year. This is good habitat for over wintering insects.
- Use water sparingly and consider building a winter storage reservoir to avoid summer abstraction (obtain abstraction licence and planning permission).
- Identify and tag some saplings in hedgerows for promotion to hedgerow trees.
- Plan any scrub removal to maintain flower-rich meadows. Scrub can be cut and treated with herbicide (ensure herbicide does not damage grassland) over winter.

August

Livestock

- Seek advice on alternatives to the prophylactic use of internal parasite helminthicides. It poses a threat to invertebrate life and has knock-on effects further up the food chain.
- Graze unimproved and herb-rich grassland to remove coarse growth, leave a varied sward and allow less competitive species to flourish next season.
- Plan rotational coppicing of woodland and scrub (November-mid March). Cutting adjacent sections in subsequent years will produce a variety of age ranges and structures suiting a wider range of species. Cut scrub on rotations of 10-20 years and coppice on rotations of 10-15 years. On flower-rich grassland aim for about 20% scrub to 80% open grassland. Grant aid is available under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme for scrub and woodland management and through the Woodland Management Grant (Forestry Commission).

Arable

- Leave stubbles over winter to provide food for declining bird species such as skylarks, yellowhammers, tree sparrows and grey partridges.
- Consider introducing grass into arable rotations to improve soil structure.
- Spray to control 'orange wheat blossom midge' only if threshold levels are reached. Do not spray in the conservation headlands.
- Do not apply pre-emergence herbicides to autumn-sown crops.

Either

- Bird nesting season is largely over but some species such as snipe and corn bunting might be rearing late broods.
- Delay hedge trimming until February to allow wildlife to find food and cover over autumn and winter.
- Cut grass margins after seed set. Leave some margins uncut every other year to provide invertebrates with over wintering habitat. Top linear grass banks/beetle banks but leave grass tussocks to provide winter shelter for wildlife. Cut tussocky banks and field margins on a rotation of 3-4 years to prevent scrub encroachment.
- Cut alternate sides of grass verges and woodland rides each year to leave cover for wintering insects. For access, only cut the centres of rides and roadside strips annually.
- Leave uncut margins next to woodland and hedgerows. 25% of set aside can be left uncut for up to 3 years and 10% can be left permanently uncut. If cutting non-rotational set-aside, mow in strips to create a range of grass heights.
- Leave some corners and strips of rough grass uncut until the end of summer to provide areas for butterflies, bees and small mammals, and feeding sites for barn owls.

September

Livestock

- Graze unimproved and herb-rich grassland to remove coarse growth, leave a varied sward and allow less competitive species to flourish next season.
- When ploughing ley grassland leave 1-2m grass margins next to hedges and ditches. Countryside Stewardship funds wider buffer and wildlife strips against improved grassland.
- When sowing winter cereals or oil-seed rape do not apply fertilisers in the conservation headlands. Only apply fertilisers to the main crop as needed, based on soil analysis.

Arable

- Sow grass margins around arable fields to create cultivated margins and (in the middle of fields) beetle banks when cultivating large fields (this can also be done in spring). Plough two furrows against each other across the middle of the field and sow the resulting bank with native tussocky grass-seed mix. Countryside Stewardship can fund this.
- Where there is a low weed burden, or on soils susceptible to capping, consider using tines or discs instead of ploughing after harvest to protect the ground with chopped straw and other residues and increase organic matter near the soil surface. Seek advice from an agronomist.
- On sandy soils prone to erosion try to drill winter cereals as early as possible to minimise the potential for erosion. Avoid excessive tillage if this produces a very fine seedbed.

Either

- Follow the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Water. Advice is available from the Environment Agency.
- Plan for replanting/gapping up and order planting stock from tree nurseries to ensure good quality trees of uniform size. Use native trees, found locally and avoid planting on habitat that is of greater value such as species-rich grassland.
- Regularly check soil for compaction and plan remedial action if necessary. Break up compaction in tramlines and harvest tracks.
- An application of Roundup before hedge-planting can improve the success of the hedgerow and reduce weed control problems the following season.

October

Livestock

- Autumn grazing of herb-rich grasslands, water margins and wetlands benefits finer grasses and herbs and creates a tussocky sward for the next breeding season.
- Begin any necessary scrub clearance on moorland and mires.
- Minimise soil compaction, sward damage and colonisation by aggressive weeds by avoiding overstocking grasslands in wet periods.

Arable

- Avoid spreading slurry and farmyard manure on arable land in autumn and early winter. Spreading in early spring makes the best use of nutrients in manures and reduces the risk of nitrate leaching.
- Consider sowing crops in spring and leaving winter stubbles. The seeds in winter stubbles are an important food source for many birds including buntings, finches and larks. Nesting success of larks and lapwings is also higher in spring-sown crops than in autumn sown ones.
- Take care with pesticides. Follow instructions and observe LERAP.
- Apply specific targeted post-emergence herbicides to autumn-sown crops only where a real weed problem has been identified. Do not apply any broad-leaved herbicides (except for cleavers) in the conservation headlands.

Either

- Carry out necessary pond clearance before frogs and toads begin winter hibernation. Only clear a third of the pond and pond edge each year to retain some habitat for amphibians and wintering dragonfly larvae. Seek advice on pond management.
- Autumn/winter ditch cleaning causes least disturbance. Clean stretches of ditch on a rotation of several years, leaving one of the banks for a further year. Avoid dumping spoil on unimproved vegetation or near bank side.
- If appropriate, seek derogations from DEFRA for special management of set-aside for farmland birds (contact RSPB) and rare arable plants (contact FWAG). Multi-annual set-aside provides more opportunities to benefit wildlife.
- Transfer IACS eligible land in areas of high environmental value (next to woods, watercourses and archaeological sites) to non-eligible fields of lower value.
- Leave all hedges uncut until the New Year, and some until February/March to provide wildlife with seeds, fruits and shelter. Do not cut mature hedges annually.

November

Livestock

- Fence watercourses against livestock to prevent overgrazing and trampling of riverbanks. This will provide valuable habitat for otters and water voles.
- Heather and grass on moorland areas can be legally burnt over winter. Finish burning by mid March to avoid harming wildlife and seek advice from DEFRA to confirm it is the best way of managing the land.
- Continue scrub clearance on areas of grassland and heathland.
- If areas are 'sacrificed' to limit the overall extent of winter poaching, locate them away from watercourses so pollution from run-off does not occur.

Arable

- Avoid spreading slurry and farmyard manure on arable land in autumn and early winter. Spreading in early spring makes the best use of nutrients in manures and reduces the risk of nitrate leaching.
- Encourage bank side vegetation along watercourses as buffer zones from arable fields. 2m or 6m grass margins to buffer ditches and streams can be funded under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and set-aside allows for establishment of 10m buffer strips.

Either

- Begin traditional hedge laying, gapping-up and coppicing where necessary to maintain thick hedge bases and encourage growth. Check for gaps in hedges and plant up or alter the management to restore the hedge.
- Tree and hedge planting season starts. Roots will settle by spring if planting is done on frost-free days in early winter.
- Autumn/winter ditch cleaning causes least disturbance. Clean stretches of ditch on a rotation of several years, leaving one of the banks for a further year. Avoid dumping spoil on unimproved vegetation or near bank side.
- Riverbank erosion can be reduced by well-managed trees however, do not plant trees where water voles or rare plants are present. Coppice willows on a rotation, leaving some uncut trees to provide cover for wildlife.
- Retain patches of rough vegetation, scrub and weedy corners as well as standing and dead wood in and adjacent to woodlands.

December

Livestock

- To avoid pollution, do not spread livestock manure when the soil is waterlogged, frozen, flooded, snow-covered, on steeply sloping fields or within 10m of a watercourse. Draw up a farm waste management plan following the DEFRA *Code of Good Agricultural Practice*. Delay application of slurry until early spring to reduce nitrate leaching.
- Try to avoid localised poaching, smothering of grassland and nutrient enrichment when supplementary stock feeding on species-rich grasslands. Out-wintering should be avoided on species-rich grasslands.

Arable

- Countryside Stewardship payments are available to reduce inputs of pesticides and fertiliser in field margins and, in some areas, for spring-sown cereals/winter stubbles, conservation headlands, arable field margins and wild bird seed mixes.

Either

- Delay hedge and scrub management until February as uncut hedges provide food and cover for wildlife during winter.
- Autumn/winter ditch cleaning causes least disturbance. Clean stretches of ditch on a rotation of several years, leaving one of the banks for a further year. Avoid dumping spoil on unimproved vegetation or near bank side. Some sections can be left permanently where flooding is not a risk.
- Retain access points, ledges and roofs of farm buildings as they are important for roosting bats and nesting birds such as house martins, swallows and barn owls. Nest boxes may be helpful. Grant aid for traditional farm building restoration is available through The Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.
- Repair dry stonewalls. Grant aid is provided through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme.
- Seek advice on appropriate protection and control methods if deer are damaging farm woodlands.
- Create a network of wildlife corridors around the farm with field margins and hedgerows.



March 2003 - Durham Biodiversity Partnership

(based on original information produced by the RSPB)

Durham Biodiversity Action Plan Farm Biodiversity Contacts List

NATURAL ENGLAND – FARMING ADVICE AND AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEMES

For general advice on agri-environment schemes (such as Countryside Stewardship) and other farm advice contact Natural England. Farm advice can be obtained from:

Sue Harrison Natural England, The Quadrant, Newburn Riverside, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE15 8NZ
Tel. 0191 2295500 email iss.newcastle@naturalengland.org.uk
Susan Haswell Natural England, The Quadrant, Newburn Riverside, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE15 8NZ
Tel. 0191 2295500 email iss.newcastle@naturalengland.org.uk
Web site <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/>

TYNE TEES FARMING AND WILDLIFE ADVISORY GROUP

For specific advice on and support with agri-environment scheme applications, the production of Farm Biodiversity Action Plans and 'whole-farm' schemes to help wildlife. One to one appointments can be arranged with an individual advisor on your farm for 'bespoke' advice.

Jennie Stafford Farm Conservation Adviser, Tyne Tees FWAG, Enterprise House, Harmire Enterprise Park, Barnard Castle, Co Durham, DL12 8XT Tel 01833 696634 email jennie.stafford@fwag.org.uk
Web site <http://www.fwag.org.uk/>

THE COUNTY DURHAM HEDGEROW PARTERSNHIP

For specific advice on hedge planting and maintenance, as well as access to advice on grant aid and support mechanisms for both hedgerow work and dry-stone walling. Detailed technical guidance packs and grant aid leaflets are available.

Simon Chivers Natural Environment, Regeneration and Economic Development, County Hall, Durham County Durham, DH1 5UQ Tel 0191 383 3426 email: simon.chivers@durham.gov.uk

NATIONAL FARMERS' UNION

NFU, Agriculture House, 207 Tadcaster Road, YORK, YO24 1UD
Web site <http://www.nfuonline.com/x147.xml>

DURHAM BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

The local biodiversity action plan covering the geographical area of County Durham, Darlington, Gateshead, South Tyneside and the City of Sunderland.

Helen Ryde Implementation Officer – Durham BAP, c/o Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING, Tyne & Wear, DH4 6PU Tel. (0191) 584 3112 helenryde@durhambiodiversity.org.uk

FORESTRY COMMISSION

For advice on tree planting and management. This includes schemes for farm woodlands and general grant aid and support for tree planting. Also information about tree/woodland legislation, felling licences and so forth.

North East England Office, 1, Walby Hill, Rothbury, Morpeth, Northumberland, NE65 7NT
Tel : 01669 621591 Email : fc.nee@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Web site <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-farmwoods>

KEY CONTACTS IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Terry Coult County Ecologist, Durham County Council, County Hall, DURHAM, Co. Durham, DH1 5UQ
Tel. 0191 383 3359 terry.coult@durham.gov.uk

Peter Bell Countryside Officer, Planning and Environmental Strategy, Development and Enterprise,
Gateshead Council, Civic Centre, Regent Street, GATESHEAD, NE8 1HH Tel. 0191 433 3443
peterbell@gateshead.gov.uk

Matt Hawking Senior Countryside Officer, South Tyneside Council, Department of Development Services,
Town Hall, Westoe Road, SOUTH SHIELDS, Tyne and Wear, NE33 2RL Tel. 0191 4247422
matthew.hawking@s-tyneside-abc.gov.uk

Rob George Head of Parks and Countryside, Darlington Borough Council, Town Hall, DARLINGTON, DL1
5QT Tel. 01325 388648 Robert.George@darlington.gov.uk

Andrew Bewick Countryside Officer, City of Sunderland, Civic Centre, Burdon Road, Sunderland, Tyne & Wear,
SR2 7DN Tel. 0191 553 2000 Andrew.Bewick@sunderland.gov.uk

RSPB - NORTHERN REGIONAL OFFICE

The RSPB provides advice on managing farm habitats to benefit wildlife.

UK adviser: Arable farming systems and lowland farmland birds

Richard Winspear, Agricultural Adviser, Tel: 01767 680551, email: richard.winspear@rspb.org.uk

UK adviser: Uplands and livestock farming systems and upland birds

Gethin Davies, Agricultural Adviser, Tel: 01767 680551, email: gethin.davies@rspb.org.uk

Web site <http://www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/>

OTHER AGENCIES

The Environment Agency are responsible for enforcing a raft of environmental regulations that are pertinent to the farming sector. They can also provide expert advice on fishery and watercourse management issues.

Jim Heslop Technical Fisheries, Recreation & Biodiversity Team Leader, Environment Agency, Tyneside House, Skinnerburn Road, Newcastle Business Park, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, NE4 7AR
Tel 0191 2034068 jim.heslop@environment-agency.gov.uk

WILDLIFE ORGANISATIONS/CHARITIES/SPECIALISTS

Jim Cokill Director, Durham Wildlife Trust, Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING, Tyne & Wear, DH4 6PU Tel. (0191) 584 3112 jcokill@durhamwt.co.uk

Mark Richardson Reserves Manager, Durham Wildlife Trust, Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING, Tyne & Wear, DH4 6PU Tel. (0191) 584 3112
mrichardson@durhamwt.co.uk

Dave Wainwright Regional Officer, Butterfly Conservation, Low Barns, Witton le Wear, Bishop Auckland, County Durham, DL14 0AG Tel: 01388 3789216

RSPCA <http://www.rspca.org.uk/>

Gary Haley The Woodland Trust, 31 Alexandra Street, Pelton Lane End, Pelton, Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham, DH2 1NT

Game Conservancy Trust – the Trust provide a number of excellent leaflets and publications particularly relevant are those on the grey partridge - 'Conserving the grey partridge' - and brown hare – 'Conserving the brown hare'. These are available from: Dept. of Public Affairs, the Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire, SP6 1EF Tel. 01425 651021

POLICE WILDLIFE LIAISON OFFICERS – DURHAM CONSTABULARY

Durham Constabulary HQ, Aykley Heads, Durham, DH1 5TT Tel. 0345 60 60 365

Durham Biodiversity Action Plan Fact Sheet 2002



WHAT IS BIODIVERSITY, WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

The word biodiversity comes from biological diversity i.e. the variety of life. It embraces all species (from flowering plants to birds, from butterflies to mosses) and the variation within them (i.e. genetic variation). It refers to all the wildlife found within a habitat or area; not just rare or threatened species but all life, from the commonplace to the greatly endangered.



Badger

Biodiversity contributes fundamentally to our quality of life. It affects our lives both aesthetically and spiritually and it can help to boost the economy of the region. Through the air we breathe, the food we eat and the many species we depend upon biodiversity ensures our survival.

Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) This is a plan that sets out how to conserve or re-create biodiversity. The term may be used to describe the whole process by which this happens, the 'biodiversity action planning process'.

WHAT IS THE DURHAM BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN?

Action for Wildlife — the Durham Biodiversity Plan (or DBAP) is the local biodiversity action plan covering County Durham and the unitary authorities of Darlington, the City of Sunderland, South Tyneside and Gateshead.

Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) are plans drawn up to prioritise and direct action for locally threatened species and habitats, and to promote the locally relevant actions laid out in 'Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan'. They are the key mechanism by which the Government will meet the national biodiversity targets.

WHAT IS THE DURHAM BIODIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP?

The Durham Biodiversity Partnership steers the work of the DBAP. The steering group comprises representatives from: Durham County Council, Durham Local Action 21, Darlington Borough, Gateshead Council, City of Sunderland, South Tyneside Council, Northumbrian Water, Durham Wildlife Trust, English Nature, RSPB, Tyne Tees FWAG, DEFRA and the Environment Agency.

The Steering Group, which meets regularly, manages the project through the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan Implementation Officer.



Marsh saxifrage



May Lily

WHAT IS CONTAINED IN THE DURHAM BAP?

Action for Wildlife's first set of plans (January 1999), included habitat action plans (HAPS) with conservation objectives and targets for nine habitats in Durham, including juniper scrub, magnesian limestone grassland and coastal ash woodland, as well as 23 species action plans (SAPS) referring to 26 species.

The 51 second tranche plans and statements were launched in February 2001, and include a number of priority habitat plans e.g. 'reebeds' and 'upland hay meadows', as well as plans for habitats for which we wish to see improvements for biodiversity e.g. 'transport corridors'. A third set of 'Coastal and Marine' plans were published in spring 2002.

Barn Owl Fact Sheet

The Barn Owl, *Tyto alba* has perhaps the most widespread distribution of any land bird in the world. It is found on all continents except Antarctica and uses an extremely wide range of habitats across the globe. Although it belongs to the owl family, the Barn Owl has no particularly close relatives in Britain.

What does the Barn Owl look like? Undeniably they are beautiful birds, with ghostly white underparts and honey brown upperparts and wings. It has a distinctive heart shaped facial disc with black eyes. Its manner of flight is light and airy, and it is nocturnal - although it can occasionally be seen hunting at dusk, in winter or during the day when feeding young. Its voice, an eerie hissing shriek, is distinctly different from the more widely recognised "ke-wick" and "whoo" calls of the considerably more common Tawny Owl. The Barn Owl is a bird of open country and farm land, unlike the Tawny Owl which is very much a woodland bird.

Threats to Barn Owls and Declines in Numbers.

The Barn Owl has undergone a drastic decline in the British Isles during the latter half of the 20th Century. In Victorian times the "white owl" was our commonest owl and only a few decades ago it was still a well-known sight across the countryside. Writing of Northumberland and Durham, in 1874, Hancock said, "A common resident species, but gradually diminishing in numbers like other birds of prey and from the same cause". During Victorian times the species was considered the commonest of breeding owls in Durham, although a decline was noted as early as the 1860's and 1870's. Work by the Hawk and Owl Trust, during the early 1980's suggested that there were as few as 18 pairs of Barn Owl left in the whole of the County and the bird's status was described as "critical". Only 50 years earlier there were an estimated 150 pairs, a decline of over 80% in five short decades. There is some evidence of a stabilisation in numbers since the 1980's, as shown by a local survey carried out in 1992. This work suggested a population of 35 to 40 pairs. Project Barn Owl, the most recent national census, undertaken during the mid-1990's, suggested a national population figure of around 4000 pairs.

Where is the Barn Owl Found in the Durham area?

The local distribution of the Barn Owl might be summarised as "sparse but widespread". Despite its widely dispersed nature, nowhere is the species present at high densities. It effectively avoids the western uplands.

Threats to the Barn Owl

- Loss of suitable habitat, i.e. vole-rich rough grassland.
- Loss of suitable nest sites.
- Increased deaths from road accidents.
- Pesticide poisoning, which suppresses breeding performance.
- Harsh winter weather.

Farming for Barn Owls

The presence of barn owls around your farm may be revealed by the presence of: black, regurgitated pellets (glossy black when fresh) about the size of your thumb; moulted pale brown or white feathers; white droppings splashed against walls or beneath regular perches.

Feeding Habitat for Barn Owls

The Barn Owl feeds on small mammals, mainly the short-tailed vole but it also takes shrews, wood mice and brown rat as well as, on occasion, other prey such as frogs. Suitable prey occur at their highest density in permanent grassland that has not been recently mown or heavily grazed, and which

is long enough for the movement of small mammals through the grass to be concealed. Large areas of such habitat e.g. meadows and pastures, are ideal for barn owls but strips of grassland along woodland edges, roadsides, ditches or field boundaries are all suitable for hunting. Habitat on agricultural land might be improved through the adoption of set-aside or some elements of the Countryside Stewardship scheme. Tyne Tees Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group can provide advice on the management and creation of habitats for Barn Owls under such schemes and can advise on the grants that may be available (see below).

Safe nesting and roosting sites are required for successful breeding. In areas where there is sufficient habitat but a lack of nest sites, the provision of Barn Owl nest boxes can help to increase or establish a breeding population.

Location of your Barn Owl Box

Choose a relatively undisturbed out-building which has free access for the owls (e.g. a hole in the roof space, an unglazed window etc.). Alternatively, the box can be placed in a roof space or loft, as long as there is an opening of at least 25 by 22 cm, for access. The box can be located on a beam, the top of a wall or resting on floorboards. In modern Dutch barn buildings, the box should be located in the quietest area of the building, high up on a supporting beam, and in a sheltered location. Ideally, this should be away from areas where vehicles are frequently moved in and out. A good location is to the rear of, but not amongst, hay bales or stored silage. The entrance of the box should be orientated so that owls can fly in and out with ease (e.g. do not abut it close to a gable wall). Boxes are more likely to be successful if positioned high up. Attempt to minimise disturbance in the area around the box.

The Barn Owl & the Law

The Barn Owl is protected under Schedules 1 & 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Schedule 1 prohibits disturbance and interference with its nest, eggs or dependant young. Schedule 9, makes it an offence to release captive-bred Barn Owls without a licence.

Useful Reference Material for Barn Owl Friendly Farmers

Action for Wildlife: The Durham Biodiversity Action Plan (DBAP Partnership 1999)
The Barn Owl in Britain - Its past, its present and its future (1987) Colin Shawyer, Hawk & Owl Trust
Birds in Durham (1988-1999) Armstrong A.L. Durham Bird Club
A Summer Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Durham (2000) - Westerberg S. & Bowey K., Durham Bird Club

Useful Contacts

British Trust for Ornithology - Mr. D. Sowerbutts (local rep.), 9 Prebends Field, Gilesgate Moor
Durham DH1 1HH
Durham Bird Club (and details of County Ornithological Recorder) – Paula Charlton (Secretary), 14,
Bywell Road Cleadon SR6 7QT (0191) 537 3178
Durham Wildlife Trust - Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear
DH4 6PU Tel. 0191 584 3112

Tree Sparrow 1000 Information Sheet

The Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*, is a cousin of the more familiar House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. It is similar in size and shape to the House Sparrow but has a warm chestnut coloured cap, as oppose to grey, a whitish collar with black bib and an obvious black spot on its white cheeks.

It is, predominately, a farm land bird the distribution of which is closely linked to the presence of arable land with mature hedgerows. The species feeds on weed seeds, particularly arable weed seeds, whilst its nestlings are fed on small invertebrates. It nests in isolated pairs or colonially, usually in holes in trees though occasionally in farm buildings. In many areas, the loss of mature hedgerow trees has meant that there are now fewer nest sites available to Tree Sparrows. The provision of boxes, in some situations, may overcome this limitation. The species is quite widely, but not uniformly, distributed in the lowlands of the County of Durham but is, effectively, absent from the uplands.

In the winter it joins finches, such as Linnet and Greenfinch, and buntings, such as Yellowhammer, in large mixed feeding flocks where abundant food, i.e. seeds are available. Good winter habitats for Tree Sparrows include, winter stubble, setaside land and game crops, such as kale.

Threats to Tree Sparrows: Declines in Numbers

Historically, Tree Sparrow numbers have been subject to major fluctuations. The population in Britain increased four fold between the 1950's and 1970's before declining in the early 1990's, by some 40-50%.

These large declines have been associated with changes in farming practices, such as increased use of pesticides and a rise in the cutting of grass for silage, which have led to the loss of invertebrates and, particularly, small weed seeds from the wider countryside.

Traditionally, winter stubbles were an important winter feeding habitat but the use of autumn sown cereals has led to a significant decline in the availability of such habitat.

It is believed that, at present, there are circa. 400 to 700 pairs of Tree Sparrow between the Tyne and the Tees.

Useful Reference Material

The Durham Wildlife Audit (Durham County Council 1996)

Action for Wildlife: The Durham Biodiversity Action Plan (DBAP Partnership 1999)

The Summer Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Durham (1999) - Westerberg S. and Bowey K. Durham Bird Club

Useful Contacts

British Trust for Ornithology - Mr. D. Sowerbutts (local rep.), 9 Prebends Field, Gilesgate Moor
Durham DH1 1HH

Durham Bird Club (and details of County Ornithological Recorder) – Paula Charlton (Secretary), 14,
Bywell Road Cleadon SR6 7QT (0191) 537 3178

Durham Wildlife Trust - Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear
DH4 6PU Tel. 0191 584 3112

'Tree Sparrow 1000' the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan project to construct 1000 nestboxes for Tree Sparrows has been supported with funding by English Nature and the Durham Bird Club and facilitated by Bishop Auckland College. The purchase of timber for nest boxes was sponsored by A. Thompson & Sons of Sunderland.

This leaflet has been produced by the Durham Biodiversity Partnership c/o Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear, DH4 6PU, Tel 0191 5843112

Spotted Flycatcher - Fact Sheet

The Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata* is widespread across much of Europe and most of the British Isles. It belongs to a family of insect eating birds the flycatchers and, as the name implies, their principal source of food is flying insects. It is a species of open woodlands, preferring woodland glades and features like streams and riversides. It is also found in parks, cemeteries and gardens. In natural situations, it nests in cavities in trees or rot holes which have developed where branches have fallen off.

Spotted flycatchers are relatively small (14-15cm) nondescript birds with greyish-brown upperparts and off-white underparts, a streaky forehead and diffuse streaking on their breast (the spots of their name). For a small song bird it has a relatively long, quite broad-based beak, and dark, relatively large, bead-like eyes. One of its most distinctive features is its upright carriage. When perched, it 'sits' almost straight up and down, unlike most small song bird species which tend to sit 'across the branch'. Very characteristically, when hunting it finds an exposed location and flies out to catch or pursue insects, before returning to the same or a nearby perch. The species has an unremarkable song and a squeaky "eez-tik" call.

Decline in Numbers

The Spotted Flycatcher has undergone a drastic decline in the British Isles during the last twenty to twenty five years of the 20th Century. In the early 1970s there were an estimated 250,000 pairs in the UK but by the beginning of the 21st century, this had fallen to around 90,000 pairs.

Threats to the Spotted Flycatcher

- Loss of suitable habitat, i.e. open woodland and insect-rich gardens/parkland
- Loss of nest sites in hedgerow trees and hollow trees in woodlands
- Reduced availability of insect prey, possibly as a result of the increased use of pesticides
- in gardens and the wider countryside.

Where is the Spotted Flycatcher Found in the Durham area?

The local distribution of the spotted flycatcher might be summarised as "remaining common and widespread, but increasingly scarce in some areas". Its main strongholds are the middle and western dales, especially where these become more upland in character i.e. Weardale and, especially, Teesdale.

How to Make Your Garden a Spotted Flycatcher Haven!

Spotted Flycatcher Friendly Gardening

Put up spotted flycatcher nest boxes as part of the 'Spot the Flycatcher' campaign.

Plant a range of blossom-bearing shrubs and nectar-rich flowers around your garden borders, walls and fences in order to attract a wide variety of different insects. Native shrubs such as hawthorn and elder are especially useful as part of shrubberies and hedges. You should aim to have a range of blossom and nectar sources throughout the summer season (particularly May-July), which will attract a range of flycatcher food. Design your garden to create open, but sheltered glades which are sunny yet protected from the wind, these make ideal feeding locations for flycatchers.

Try not to use insecticides in your garden - the spotted flycatchers will feed on some of the pests.

Whenever possible use wildlife friendly-methods of pest control. Avoid pesticides generally, try using watered down, biodegradable detergent to attack pests such as green-fly.

Set up a compost heap in a corner of your garden (for kitchen waste and garden refuse). If this is an open heap, rather than a closed bin-type, it will allow the flycatchers to benefit from some of the insects which help to break down the compost.

Allow a small corner of your garden to run wild, with plants such as bramble and nettles, these will provide potential foraging sites for spotted flycatchers and their prey.

Plant climbers such as honeysuckle and ivy which provide cover for nest sites and boxes, as well as attracting insects for flycatcher food.

If you have a pet cat make sure that it is always well fed, that it wears a bell (so that birds know where it is) and consider having it neutered/speyed, which may reduce its urge to hunt.

If you have a pair of nesting spotted flycatchers in your garden make sure the information is recorded and passed on to the County Ornithological Recorder (see list of useful contacts - Durham Bird Club). The 'Spot the Flycatcher' Campaign - this attempts to help spotted flycatchers by matching locations with good supplies of insects to the provision of additional nest sites i.e. nest boxes. The project has constructed 500 spotted flycatcher nest boxes which are being located across the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan area. A large proportion of these are being situated in Northumbrian Water's Sewage Treatment Works whilst Teesdale District Council are distributing over one hundred and fifty nest boxes to local people and organisations in Teesdale. Partners in the 'Spot the Flycatcher' campaign include: English Nature, Northumbrian Water, the Prince's Trust and Teesdale District Council, as well as the Durham Biodiversity Partnership.

Useful Reference Material on Spotted Flycatchers

Action for Wildlife: The Durham Biodiversity Action Plan (Durham Biodiversity Partnership 1999)
A Summer Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Durham (2000) - Westerberg S. & Bowey K., Durham Bird Club

Useful Contacts

British Trust for Ornithology - Mr. D. Sowerbutts (local rep.), 9 Prebends Field, Gilesgate Moor
Durham DH1 1HH

Durham Bird Club (and details of County Ornithological Recorder) – Paula Charlton (Secretary), 14,
Bywell Road Cleadon SR6 7QT (0191) 537 3178

Durham Wildlife Trust - Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear
DH4 6PU Tel. 0191 584 3112

The production of this fact sheet has been supported with funding by English Nature, it has been produced by the Durham Biodiversity Partnership c/o Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear, DH4 6PU, Tel 0191 5843112

Song Thrush Fact Sheet

The Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*, is a member of the thrush family, it is a resident and winter visitor to the British Isles. Typically, it is a bird of scrub and woodland edge, although it is widely found in suburban and urban habitats, including gardens, where there is sufficient cover for nesting and open ground for feeding. Its closest relatives in Britain are the Blackbird and the Mistle Thrush. You are likely to see all of these birds in your garden.

Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush, How to Tell Them Apart?

The Mistle Thrush is the larger of the two species, almost a third as large again as Song Thrush. Its back and wings are a greyer tone of brown than the pale, warm brown of the Song Thrush. In flight, the under wings of a Song Thrush are warm orange in hue, those of the Mistle are greyish white, and the larger bird has a white flash on either side of its tail. A key difference is the call. The Mistle Thrush has a hard chattering trill, very like an old-fashioned football rattle, whilst the song thrush emits a gentle "tsip". The song of the Song Thrush is sweet and melodic with a series of repeated notes and whistles. Both birds have whitish breasts and under parts, with blackish spots. The dark marks on the breast of the Mistle Thrush are round, and appear to have been spotted on with a neatly pointed brush, whereas those of the Song Thrush are slightly elongate and appear 'dashed on', with a 'square-ended' brush.

Threats to Song Thrushes: Declines in Numbers

In the last twenty years Song Thrush populations in Britain have declined by as much as 50%. Current research indicates that this may be related to the poor survival of newly hatched birds during their first winter.

Other factors causing the decline are unclear, though the severe winters of the 1980's have been implicated.

Changes in agricultural practices, including hedgerow destruction and the increased use of pesticides which target snails and slugs (these are called 'molluscicides'), have probably also been negative factors.

Song Thrushes and Magpies - Magpies will take both the eggs and young of nesting Song Thrush. However, research indicates that, in most situations, this does not negatively affect the breeding populations of Song Thrushes.

Drought - Very dry conditions for prolonged periods of time can result in lean pickings for Song Thrushes which specialise in soil invertebrates, especially snails and slugs which, during droughts, burrow deep into the earth to find moisture.

Making Your Garden a Song Thrush Friendly Zone!

Song Thrush Friendly Gardening

Plant a range of berry bearing shrubs, especially native ones such as hawthorn in your garden. Other useful species for Song Thrush include rowan, elderberry and bramble.

Don't trim your hedges or berry bearing shrubs in the autumn, leave this job until the New Year. This gives birds (not just Song Thrushes) the maximum amount of time to consume the berries.

Try not to use slug pellets in your garden unless they are guaranteed 'wildlife-friendly'. When ever possible use wildlife friendly-methods, such as slug deterrents and beer traps (see text box) or pick off the most obvious slugs and dispose of humanely. Avoid pesticides generally, try using watered down detergent to attack pests such as green-fly.

Allow a small corner of your garden to run wild, with plants such as bramble and nettles, these will provide potential nesting and foraging sites for Song Thrushes (especially in dry periods) and places for butterflies to lay eggs.

Feeding birds during the winter can be a very effective way of helping them to survive adverse conditions. For Song Thrushes provide ripe apples, sunflower seeds and fat. This should be

presented on the ground, away from direct cover and hiding places for cats. Alternatively, or in addition, place some food on a raised, flat bird table.

If you have a pet cat make sure that it is always well fed, that it wears a bell (so that birds know where it is) and consider having it neutered/speyed, which may reduce its urge to hunt.

If you have a pair of nesting Song Thrush in your garden make sure the information is recorded and passed on to the County Ornithological Recorder (see list of useful contacts).

Making a Beer Trap for Slugs

A beer trap can be made very simply. Take a shallow plastic container (e.g. margarine tub) and empty into it the dregs of a bottle of beer or cider. Locate this amongst your plants, in a shallow depression in the soil, so that slugs can get easy access. Ideally the container should be covered in some way (e.g. an inverted margarine container on a tripod of short bamboo sections) so that the alcohol in the beer is not watered down by rain. The beer attracts the slugs which, on drinking it, succumb. Don't forget to empty the trap of dead slugs and old beer on a regular basis, to avoid unpleasant smells. Top up the trap, with fresh beer on a fortnightly basis throughout the growing season. A few traps around the vegetable patch should ensure that slug problems are minimised. Alternatively, a small amount of milk can be used instead of beer, but the contents of the trap must be emptied more regularly to minimise smells.

Remember, though you may not have Song Thrushes nesting in your garden, it might be a crucial part of a pair's foraging territory - don't assume your garden isn't important for local Song Thrushes and always do your best to help them.

Useful Contacts

British Trust for Ornithology - Mr. D. Sowerbutts (local rep.), 9 Prebends Field, Gilesgate Moor
Durham DH1 1HH

Durham Bird Club (and details of County Ornithological Recorder) – Paula Charlton (Secretary), 14,
Bywell Road Cleadon SR6 7QT (0191) 537 3178

Durham Wildlife Trust - Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear
DH4 6PU Tel. 0191 584 3112

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