

Action Countryside – Silent Dawn

A combination of habitat management and predator control is the key to saving our songbirds, says Lord James Percy

Back in the day, say a century ago, things were very different in the countryside. There were mosaics of varying habitats across the country: heather moors and home county heaths, wetlands, bog holes, ant hills, overgrown hedges, clover leys, dirty root fields and scrubby birch bank sides. There were overwinter stubbles and inefficient threshing machines that left a weight of grain on the winter floor. There were grassy margins, native trees, rough corners that were home to seedy grasses, cowslips and campion, brambles, hawthorns and rosehips.

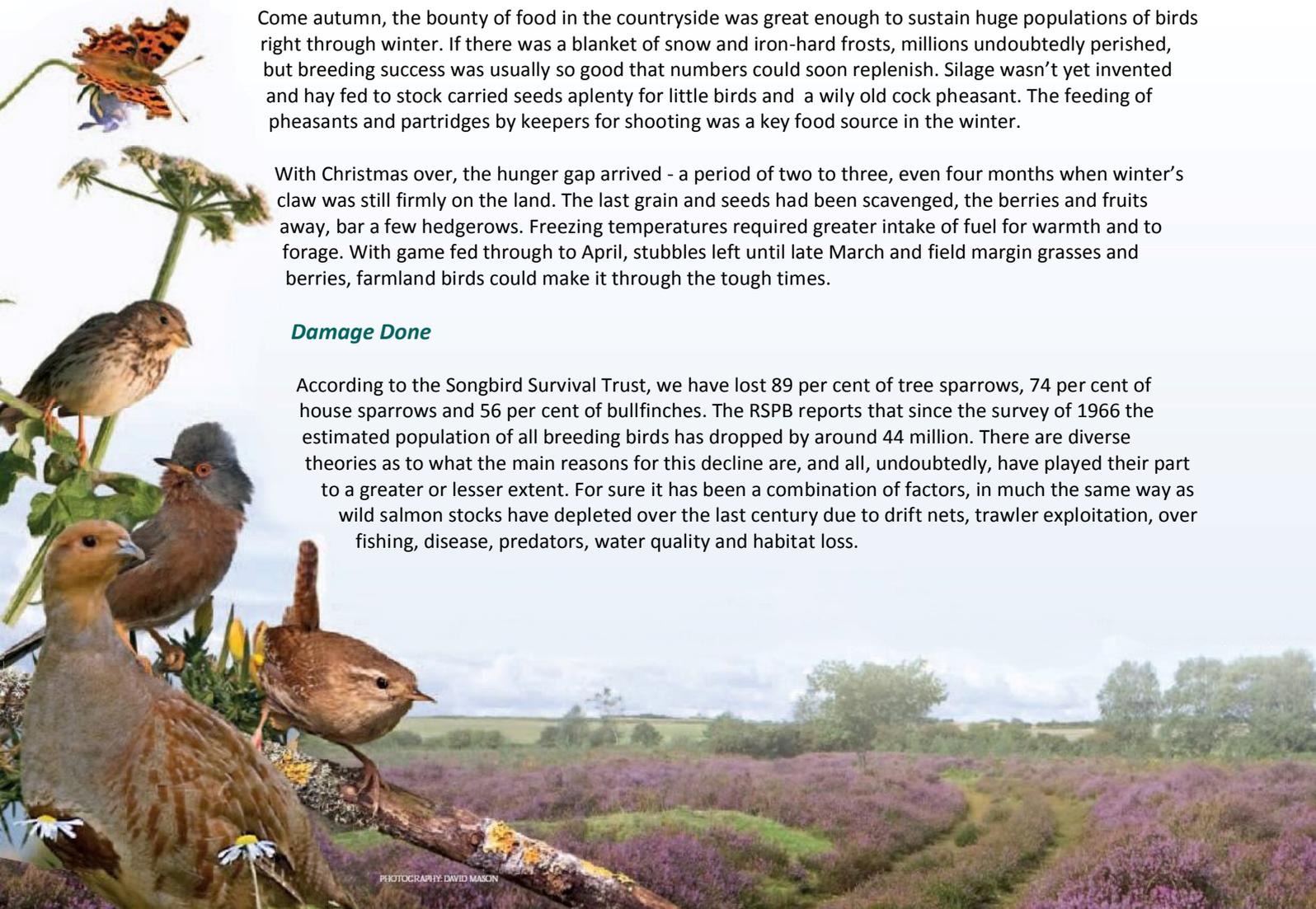
In the spring and summer, a beautiful day was filled to the point of deafening by the chirp of house sparrows, the pipe and whistle of skylarks, tits, finches, linnets and buntings. Lapwing and curlew out in the open fields. The sound of spring: full of hope and expectation. Larks shrilling in the short green corn. Insects, moths, spiders and beetles hatched by the billion and broadleaved weeds and undrained sieves provided breeding grounds and well-timed protein bars for chicks of every living species of bird in the British Isles.

Come autumn, the bounty of food in the countryside was great enough to sustain huge populations of birds right through winter. If there was a blanket of snow and iron-hard frosts, millions undoubtedly perished, but breeding success was usually so good that numbers could soon replenish. Silage wasn't yet invented and hay fed to stock carried seeds aplenty for little birds and a wily old cock pheasant. The feeding of pheasants and partridges by keepers for shooting was a key food source in the winter.

With Christmas over, the hunger gap arrived - a period of two to three, even four months when winter's claw was still firmly on the land. The last grain and seeds had been scavenged, the berries and fruits away, bar a few hedgerows. Freezing temperatures required greater intake of fuel for warmth and to forage. With game fed through to April, stubbles left until late March and field margin grasses and berries, farmland birds could make it through the tough times.

Damage Done

According to the Songbird Survival Trust, we have lost 89 per cent of tree sparrows, 74 per cent of house sparrows and 56 per cent of bullfinches. The RSPB reports that since the survey of 1966 the estimated population of all breeding birds has dropped by around 44 million. There are diverse theories as to what the main reasons for this decline are, and all, undoubtedly, have played their part to a greater or lesser extent. For sure it has been a combination of factors, in much the same way as wild salmon stocks have depleted over the last century due to drift nets, trawler exploitation, over fishing, disease, predators, water quality and habitat loss.



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Unquestionably, the single most destructive factor has been the intensification of agriculture: the grubbing out of hedges, drainage of wet spots and the removal of rough corners. Add to this the increase in stock, block farming of arable land, winter-sown crops, the plough following the combine in early autumn (leaving no winter stubbles) and the practice of hedge trimming in autumn removing most of the berries. In Northumberland and the Borders, during the prolonged and deep snow of 2011/12 there were grouse seen on roadside hedges 20 miles from the nearest moors, driven by hunger due to the lack of any exposed heather.

Along with habitat loss, the chemical side of farming has been particularly brutal for birds. Apart from pigeons, corvids and birds of prey, young songbirds, gamebirds, waders and plovers will feed or be fed on invertebrates. As insecticides and, crucially, the herbicides that kill the weeds in which many insects breed have become more and more efficient, the vast insect banks have been depleted or virtually removed. The crucial early protein source, which is the key to chick survival, is missing.

As the diminishing populations of birds retreat to shrinking corners of suitable habitat, then endure poor breeding success due to sparse early spring forage, so they have fallen into the predator trap. With sparrowhawks on the increase, endless buzzards sitting in every tree, carrion crows, jackdaws, rooks and magpies uncontrolled, there is a pretty bleak outlook for farmland birds. Not to mention Britain's seven million cats that are labelled with the death of 100 million birds per annum! Stoats, weasels, rats, foxes, hedgehogs and badgers add to the constant attrition of ground nesting species.

Another big killer of songbirds is the motor vehicle. You will all know the sad little scene that unfolds in front of your bonnet: mother chaffinch or thrush has spotted a juicy crane fly flapping on the road, critically injured from the car before. She dives out in the certain knowledge of a big fat protein meal for her hungry nest of three or four little open beaks. She nails the bug but is aware of your approaching car, so drops the fly and, startled, makes to escape. But the instinct to feed her chicks is too strong and she flutters back to the prize. Too late, she takes off again only to thud into your windscreen. You hope that it is just a glancing blow but in your mirror you see her last pathetic dying pirouette to the tarmac. Another songbird dead, another nest of chicks orphaned and dead within a few hours.

The AA reports that there are as many as 40 million vehicles in the UK. I am not sure of the percentage who travel the country roads (seemed like all of them the last time I went to Cheltenham), but say a quarter, and if each of those ran into and killed just three birds per year, that would be another 30 million little birds to add to the death list every year.



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Reversing the Decline

Luckily, the picture is not quite as desperate as it could have been. As people started to realise that a whole range of factors were contributing to the cataclysmic decline in many species, so the government was persuaded to act, to encourage, to cajole, to legislate in favour of farmland birds.

The GWCT demonstrated that methods of agricultural production by the late 1980s had created a countryside that was more or less sterile in terms of natural flora and fauna. A suite of agri-environment schemes has been developed over the last 20 or so years. There were flashes of misguided success. Many will remember 'set-aside' where farms were paid to put a minimum of 15 per cent of their arable land into a type of fallow to reduce production and help the market. Quickly, these unsprayed fields were populated with returning green plover and even a few broods of grey partridges and wild pheasants – it was ideal, fragmented habitat, with tussocks and open areas. But when the preceding year's fallen seeds of wheat, barley or rape germinated, Brussels decreed that it must be topped in July to prevent farmers taking a harvest off the field and receiving a double payment. And so all the chicks were chopped up and we were back to square one.

Wild bird mixes in strips across the farm were the next good idea – and of some value they were – except that their food value ran out by Christmas. 'Conservation headlands', leaving a 12m or 24m unsprayed strip in the crop around the chosen fields, started to address the insect dearth and are now one of the key measures. As are varied width mixed grass strips running up the remaining hedgerows bolted onto the mandatory 1m grassy compliance strip either side of a ditch or hedge. As we have slowly worked out, bit by bit, what it is that farmland birds need, so the Stewardship schemes available to farmers through Natural England provide options to enhance fields with every sort of measure. The handbook is the depth of your outstretched fingers and a paragraph in here cannot do it justice. But as a land manager you can put in – and be paid for – wild bird cover mixes for feed and shelter and nectar mixes to enhance bee, butterfly and insect production. You can plant native woodlands, restore wetlands, plant miles of hedges, leave over-winter stubbles and nurture species of grass and weed that have more or less disappeared.

Among others, a seed company from Lincolnshire called Kings has developed from offering highly successful game crop mixtures to providing a wide choice of specialised mixtures for the different applications and prescriptions within the Entry Level and Higher Level schemes. They sell mixes of wild flowers, cereals, seed bearing plants and broadleaf cover crops with carefully chosen species to cater for differing soil types and owner or scheme requirements, whether that be game cover, insect rich plants, bee-attracting flowers or a mixture of all. They have taken the original thinking of providing food and shelter to offering crop mixtures that



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provide small seeds, big seeds, seeds that appear over a long period of time, all mixed in with other plants that give structure to the crop, holding up the weaker seed bearing plants over the winter period. They have scientifically worked out the chemical care of these specialised crops – suppressing the grasses and weeds that would reduce the success of the crop – while simultaneously combining mixes that respond to that chemical care, maturing at different times in the year to give maximum benefit to wildlife. Products such as Covey's Delight and Campaign Mix tell their own stories with mixes of plants and flowers from millet to linseed to Gold of Pleasure, from phacelia to buckwheat and sunflowers. There must be 100 or more different species to choose from with the advice to back it up from a passionate and highly informed, practical management team as well.

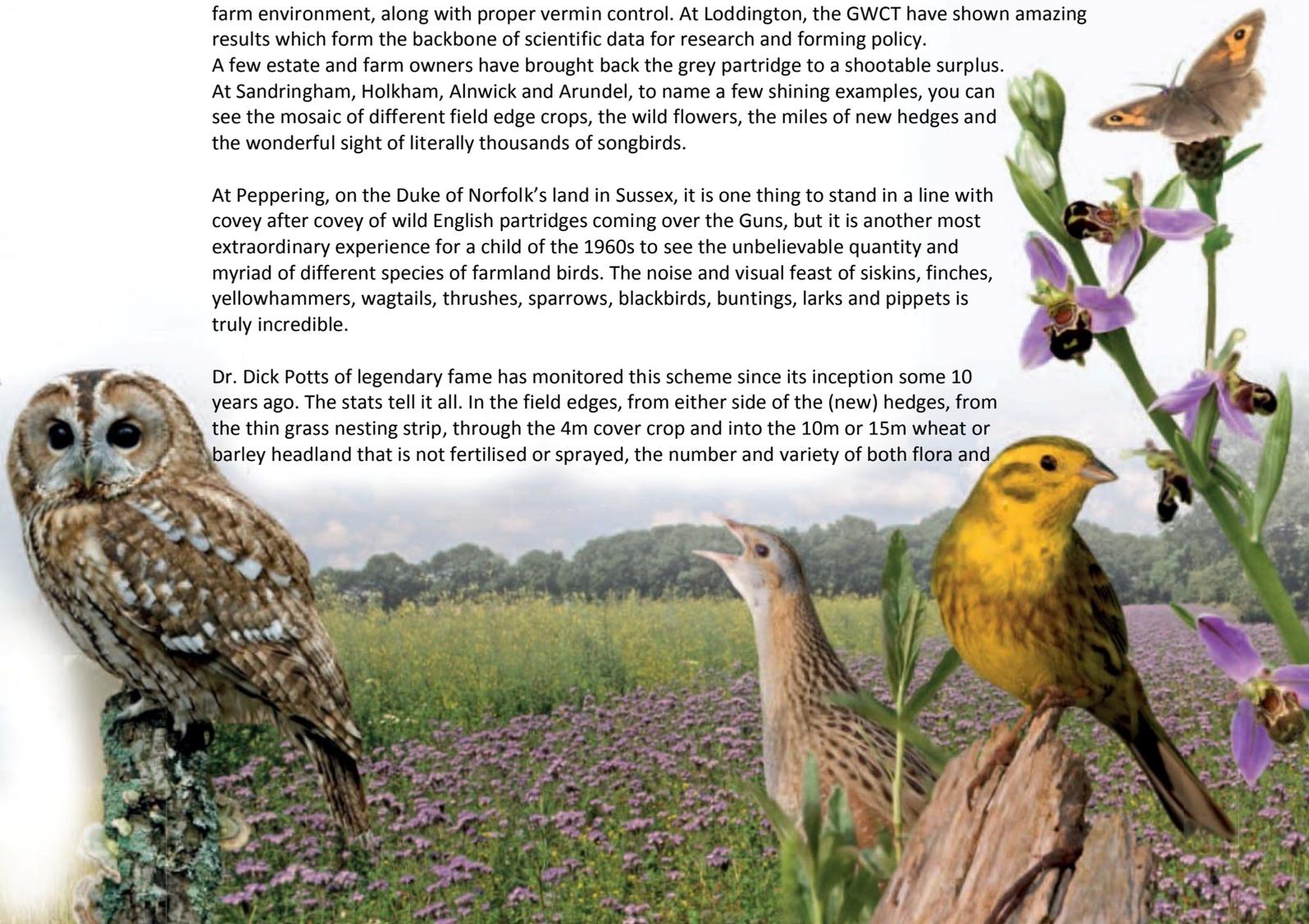
The Benefits of Shooting

So far the greatest landscape-scale achievements in reversing the decline of songbirds have been on the estates and farms where there has been a passionate dedication to recreate wild bird habitat within a modern working farm environment, along with proper vermin control. At Loddington, the GWCT have shown amazing results which form the backbone of scientific data for research and forming policy.

A few estate and farm owners have brought back the grey partridge to a shootable surplus. At Sandringham, Holkham, Alnwick and Arundel, to name a few shining examples, you can see the mosaic of different field edge crops, the wild flowers, the miles of new hedges and the wonderful sight of literally thousands of songbirds.

At Peppering, on the Duke of Norfolk's land in Sussex, it is one thing to stand in a line with covey after covey of wild English partridges coming over the Guns, but it is another most extraordinary experience for a child of the 1960s to see the unbelievable quantity and myriad of different species of farmland birds. The noise and visual feast of siskins, finches, yellowhammers, wagtails, thrushes, sparrows, blackbirds, buntings, larks and pippets is truly incredible.

Dr. Dick Potts of legendary fame has monitored this scheme since its inception some 10 years ago. The stats tell it all. In the field edges, from either side of the (new) hedges, from the thin grass nesting strip, through the 4m cover crop and into the 10m or 15m wheat or barley headland that is not fertilised or sprayed, the number and variety of both flora and



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fauna is back to pre-1930 numbers. There are 450 pairs of skylarks, 60 pairs of corn buntings and 45 pairs of lapwing. There is every type of raptor and owl, 90 taxonomic groups of insects and over 60 species of broadleaf weed.

From an economic point of view, the Higher Level Stewardship just about covers the income forgone to achieve the habitat and food requirements to deliver the first foundation stones. The field margins only cover 10 per cent of the farmed area, and the rest is farmed to pay the wages and feed the world. From the first tramline to the centre of the field there is not a weed, barely an insect, not a flower nor a bird. It shows what we have done to the countryside for the last 40 years, but at least we now know how to create a balance. What about totally organic farming with rigorous vermin control? That really would be something.



While the habitat and food sources are the foundation stones for this resurrection, crucially, the third leg of the stool is solid, relentless and legal control of predator species. The driver for this, no different to the wonderful conservation flagships that are the managed grouse moors in the uplands, is the chance of some shooting to take a harvestable surplus of gamebirds in beautiful surroundings. Wonderful, traditional, nostalgic to an extent, and an incredibly important piece of the jigsaw. Without this predator control, success is limited.

While the RSPB does fantastic habitat work on its reserves, lapwing breeding success was only between 0.1 and 0.4 chicks raised per pair. At Peppering, however, it stands at between two and three chicks raised per pair. As a population of birds that return year after year and can live to 20 years old, the percentage success has to be greater than 0.7 chicks just to maintain the status quo. The difference is the level of predator control. If Higher Level Stewardship could deliver all of the habitat that it does now, but could also somehow enable, contribute to, encourage or insist upon a level of predator control, it would deliver far greater success than it is currently achieving. Whether this is practical is entirely another matter!



A hundred years ago, the moment that the first streaks of light appeared on a summer's dawn, the countryside used to come alive with the chorus of a million birds. Now, in many parts, you only hear the harsh chatter of a magpie or carrion crow. You are part of a generation that has lived through years of silent dawn. With the right input, education and passion, it could change and, whether you have 10 sq ft or 10,000 acres, the principles are the same: create the right habitat, provide the right food, shoot and trap the magpies, rats, crows, stoats and grey squirrels with everything you have got. Then, and only then, might you wake to the dawn chorus that our fathers and grandfathers would have heard.

To push back the silence of the nuclear dawn to a dark corner of our memories would be a triumph, Britain's countryside would be a richer place to be for all to enjoy, and a wonderful legacy to hand on to future generations.

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