

Action Countryside – Scribbling Larks

Peter Thompson shares his enthusiasm for the yellowhammer, one of his favourite farmland birds



One of my favourite British birds has always been the yellowhammer. I can still vividly remember the day I found my first ever yellowhammer nest, hidden away in tangled bramble and grass in the bottom of a hedge that ran alongside a narrow lane in Worcestershire. I instantly realised as I looked down on the four creamy coloured eggs with random scrawled lines all over them, why the local keeper called these birds ‘scribbling larks’ – the eggs really looked as though someone had got a pen and scribbled over them.

The yellowhammer is a bird that classically loves mixed farming. They can make do without livestock on a farm, but somehow they always look most at home in winter when they flock around the cattle troughs or fly up from the lambing sheds to sit in small groups among the thorn hedge, waiting for you to leave so that they can once again return to forage between the animals. They were a very common bird on all the farms around my childhood home, where farmers planted whole fields of kale or stubble turnips (with weeds) to strip feed the cattle and sheep during the

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winter months. They then left the weedy stubbles in situ until March and routinely fed 'cake' to their stock out in the fields or in open fronted barns. There was an endless supply of readily available food on farms throughout the winter and spring. Come spring time, the air was filled with the song of yellowhammers. Even in the middle of summer, on hot sultry afternoons when the intense heat meant that most creatures had taken a low profile, you would always find a handsome bright canary coloured male perched on top of a hedgerow, singing the song that all country folk know so well, 'little bit of bread and no cheese'. The yellow amber as they were once called, slowly became the yellow'ammer, until nowadays they have the name that we all use of yellowhammer.



A yellowhammer fledgling and two scribbled eggs.

The young nestlings are fed on insects and it was common to see both parents arrive back with beaks brimming full with caterpillars and flies. I remember helping with harvest and being allowed to ride on the back of the grain wagons. When they arrived back in the farmyard and the tractor engine was turned off, the grain continued to move in the stationary trailer as it was a seething mass of bugs and creepy crawlies. If you take a look at the grain brought in nowadays, it is eerily still in comparison.

It is of course not only the insect numbers that have declined so alarmingly just in my lifetime, but in so many areas across the country, farm animals have disappeared and farmyards are now clean and tidy with sealed grain stores and outbuildings converted into offices. The weedy forage crops are no longer needed and overwintering stubbles are weed free, as modern herbicides have done their job so well. Life is tough for the modern day yellowhammer.

The yellowhammer is now a bird of concern and is classified as a Red data species, due to its numbers dropping by more than 50 per cent. But it is not all doom and gloom, as along with many other birds that frequent farms, we know that we can actually have modern, intensive farming and a healthy population of these quintessential farmland birds, by replacing the losses that I have mentioned above. We need to put a minimum of seven percent of the farm into different habitats that provide wild flowers, either perennial plants or annual arable species, both of which are rich in insect life in the summer months so that the chicks have a plentiful food supply to enable them to flourish. We need to grow big plots of wild bird seed mixes, which include cereals and millet, both of which yellowhammers love to eat and we also need to leave 'weedy' stubbles over the winter months. All of these options for helping yellowhammers can be funded under the Government's Stewardship scheme, but we need to put enough of them in over a wide area of our farmland if we are to increase numbers back to anything like they used to be in my childhood.

We know that yellowhammers will do well on farms that follow these guidelines. But we also know that there may still be a problem called the 'hungry gap' – a period between January and March when most of the food has been eaten. We are now looking at the supplementary feeding of birds, such as yellowhammers, spreading grain along tracks or putting out hoppers specifically for them. If trials show improved over-winter survival rates, we will then try to get this option funded as part of Stewardship. After all, they don't ask for much, only needing a 'little bit of bread and no cheese'.

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