



Winter Newsletter

Wildlife Matters

Welcome to the Winter edition of Wildlife Matters. We have finally had our first decent frosts of the winter at Lower Pertwood. The frosts are an important part of winter that helps keep the natural balance of nature in Wiltshire, and are thus greatly appreciated, even if I did have to wear five layers to do a bird survey last week!

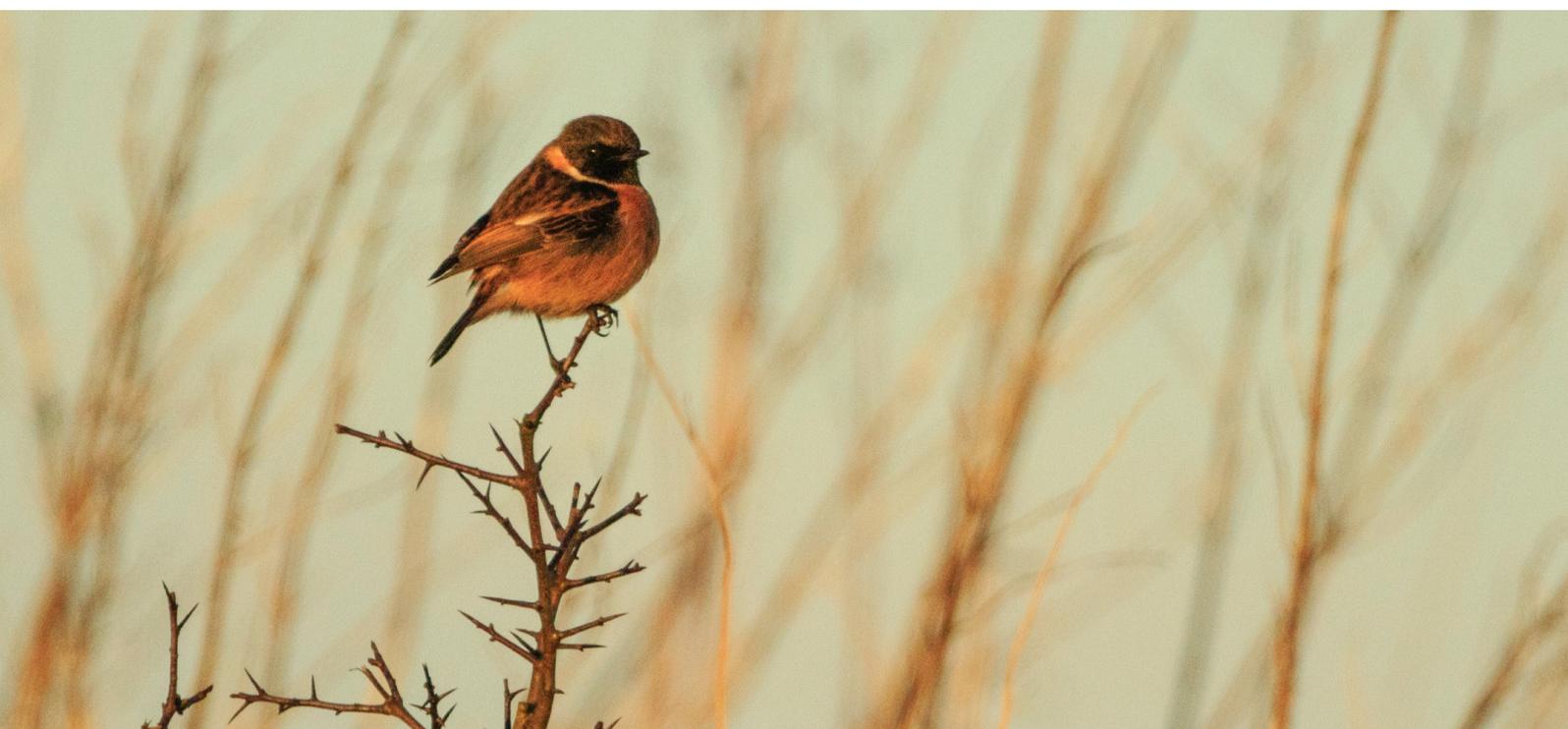
We have been producing these newsletters for over a year now, so if you were not able to read them all please check out our website where they are all available. So far we have been setting the scene, talking about the amazing wildlife we have at Lower Pertwood and the way our farming practices are inextricably linked to the wildlife. You will now start to notice that we will be shouting rather than talking about this, as we are keen for as many people to hear this message and talk to us about it. We are looking into new ideas from organisations and individuals that will help the wildlife further, which we can look at and possibly adopt at the

farm, hopefully spreading these ideas on to a wider reader base.

The great news is people that are already starting to listen, and we have a number of organisations interested in seeing what we do. In my quickly-filling diary I have pencilled in Butterfly Conservation, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, RSPB, NFU, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and the National Trust to name but a few. Quite a mix, and so I think we will all be taking away a few ideas that can enhance our approach. We have recently had a review of how the birds in the UK are doing, both locally and as part of their populations in the rest of the World, we have an article looking at how that might impact the focus of our work at Lower Pertwood.

We also have our usual species focuses which we hope you will find of interest.

By Nick Adams



KEEPING WARM IN THE WINTERY SUNSHINE. PHOTO BY DAVID WHITE

Wildlife updates for the quarter ended 31st December 2015

October

commenced with a full day at Lower Pertwood Farm with much going on!

Tim Ridgers-Steer and Richard Creighton were there before me, readying their site for some bird ringing. I was planning to survey the migrating birds, so I decided to do this from the ringing site.

This proved to be a good idea as I was able to help when things got a little busy. The main birds being caught were [chiffchaff](#) and [goldcrest](#); both species breed at Lower Pertwood so it would be easy to assume these birds were locals. However the ringing showed this was not the case. Some of the birds were in the right condition to migrate as they were carrying a fair bit of extra muscle and fat. We would expect a resident goldcrest to weigh 4-4.5 grams on an Autumn morning, but one of the birds we caught 7 grams, over 50% more than the resident bird!

Whilst this was going on, I was being distracted by the birds migrating over and onto the farm. Species like [skylark](#) and [meadow pipit](#) move from their upland strongholds further north in the UK, and come to the relatively warmer climes of Southern England. They were passing over in good numbers, the meadow pipits often stopping off to feed up in the red cover/rye-grass mixes on the farm. I later estimated there were circa. 100 in the Summerslade field alone.



REDWING

and clear skies above, until mists from the east started to roll over the top of where we were. This confused the birds passing at that moment who mostly dropped into Marriage's Gorse. Migrating birds will always err on the side of caution if they see their bolt holes to avoid predators disappearing, and will head for cover. About 25 redwing and [song thrush](#) drop out of the skies. Redwing are a small thrush that breed all across northern Europe with a few pairs breeding in Northern Scotland. They head south to winter in the UK and southern mainland Europe. Song thrush is one of the important Red-Listed species that breed at Lower Pertwood, but at this time of year continental song thrush head our way to bolster the numbers. The last four thrushes to arrive were a group of [ring ouzel](#), also

The last few [swallow](#) slipped by on a mission to get to South Africa for the winter, and the thrushes started to arrive. The weather was settled, with mist in the valleys

known as the mountain thrush. They are the upland version of the blackbird, looking fairly similar to their lowland cousin, except for a white crescent on their chest. They do breed on the uplands of the UK, however these were most likely Scandinavian birds heading south for the winter.

A walk around the farm with Simon Smart (Black Sheep Countryside Management) in the afternoon confirmed that the migration was still in full swing. By having many areas of organic stubble and red clover/rye-grass available at this important (but often overlooked) time of the year, many birds were using Lower Pertwood like a motorway service station on their various journeys to their wintering grounds. Other species recorded included a late [whinchat](#), two stonechat, and a flock of about 50 [yellowhammer](#) already finding the sacrificial oats and barley in Petersfield and Glebe to their liking.



FEMALE STONECHAT

Late in the day we bumped into Tim Hewes, who was exercising his 3-month-old [goshawk](#) - a truly

stunning bird to examine up close. Tim reported the exciting news that he had seen both [barn owl](#) and [short-eared owl](#) hunting the fallow area in Bottom Gorse. Short-eared owls roost on the ground, and the cover is certainly long enough for a roost in Bottom Gorse, which is fantastic.



MALE LINNET

A week later we had a tour around the farm for the staff from [Alara](#). This is where most of our oats and yacon go to produce the range of [Pertwood organic cereals](#). In my experience it is much easier to understand

and talk about something if you have seen it on the ground, and now everyone will have their own memories of Lower Pertwood to work with. Whilst going around the farm we saw a flock of around 250 linnet, and another of about 50 yellowhammer, as well as lots of skylark and meadow pipit feeding in the fields and passing over. There were also a couple of [snipe](#) that squelched away when we got a little too close to them.

The best bird of the day however was a [woodlark](#) in Glebe. This species has the best song and call, please follow the link if you'd like to hear it.

A lot of the following updates are from the brilliant volunteers who help me out with looking for all types of wildlife on Lower Pertwood.

Firstly, we have some fungi records from Richard, who is one of the bird ringing team. He has been having a good look around Charlie's Copse and Merlins. They are amazing to look at - what colours!



The common names starting top left and working clockwise are tawny funnel, violet webcap, lilac bonnet and collared earthstar. Great names too! We hope to build up a nice list of the fungi on the farm in the different habitats over the coming years, so far we have about twenty.

Richard, Tim (the other bird ringer) and Alison (our owl and kestrel expert) have also been recording birds

seen whilst on the farm.

Birds of prey seem to be the order of the day. This is always great to see and a very positive sign, it shows that we must be getting the rest of the food-chain right if we are attracting predators from near the top of the chain. Everyone has been seeing merlin and peregrine. The merlin will be hunting small birds like meadow pipit and linnet and the peregrine is more likely to be after slightly bigger things like thrushes and anything up to [woodpigeon](#) size. Here are a couple of pictures of these birds I've taken in Wiltshire in the last year:



MALE PEREGRINE



MALE MERLIN TAKING A BATH



Unsurprisingly, there have also been a number of reports of smaller birds on the farm. The linnet flock is now well in excess of 400 birds and was last seen roaring around the Windy Ridge area. [Corn bunting](#) have started to become much more obvious, with a number of flocks being seen totalling around 300 birds. The biggest was around 150 birds by the Falconers entrance. Another bird who likes this field is the [goldfinch](#), as they feed readily on the weed-seeds in the cultivated margin.

Finally, Nic (Lower Pertwood Chief of Security) was lucky enough to see a [jack snipe](#) while crossing Bake Two. A little smaller than a snipe with a shorter bill, they are incredibly hard to see and even harder to flush. They sit incredibly tightly, and I have actually had them hit my foot as they fly up!

November came around, and thrushes were much in evidence with five species present: [blackbird](#), song thrush [mistle thrush](#), redwing and fieldfare.

Mistle thrush are not much of a migrant, and so most of the birds we see are either resident all year or moving from slightly higher ground on places like Salisbury Plain.

Blackbird are similar to song thrush, as previously mentioned, and the numbers of the breeding population are increased by wintering birds from Continental Europe. Fieldfare are the same as redwing in their habits. The vast majority are only with us for the autumn and winter months, feeding on the hedgerow berries we have, as well as working across the grasslands feeding on any invertebrates they can find. While feeding on the grasslands they are doing an important seed distribution service. Their droppings contain the undigested seeds of the fruit they eat which pass into the grassland to start growing.



FIELDFARE

Other birds arriving in good numbers from other parts of the continent onto the farmland at Lower Pertwood this year include [chaffinch](#) and [brambling](#). These are two relatively similar finches that feed in similar areas.

Chaffinch are similar to blackbird and song thrush in that our resident population is supplemented in the Winter with birds arriving from Mainland Europe. Brambling are the same as fieldfare and redwing, with next to no birds summering, and numbers arriving from Mainland Europe.



MALE CHAFFINCH

The number of both species that arrive, and where they end up feeding, is dependent on a number of factors. Given half a chance the birds would stay close to their breeding sites, so they make a decision about the available food - is there enough for the winter? Their preferred food is [beechmast](#), the fruit from beech trees. If the crop has failed they will move, and that is when we get good numbers in the UK. When they arrive they ask the same question - is there enough beechmast for the winter? Unfortunately, around the areas of Wiltshire I have been recently, I can tell you the beechmast crop has pretty much failed completely.



FRONT VIEW OF A BRAMBLING

BRAMBLING SHOWING ITS WHITE RUMP



This means the finches have to find another food source as there is nowhere much else to go, hence they move to the Wiltshire farmland and we have our fair share picking through the various stubbles and areas of tailings. Its great to see so many birds on the farm already, and hopefully we will have enough food for them all!

December is always an interesting time of the year. A



TO VIEW MORE PHOTOS ON THE PERTWOOD INSTAGRAM, CLICK ON THE PICTURES ABOVE. PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITE

December is always an interesting time of the year. A lot of the conservation work we do on Lower Pertwood for birds throughout the year is geared toward this critical time of the year. We need to ensure we have sufficient food for the wildlife that chooses to spend the winter with us.

Given the mild and damp weather this year, we have plants still growing and flowering that normally would be dormant at this time of the year. They might well flower, but without many insects to pollinate them the chances of producing seeds are slim. The good news is birds and mammals will graze the tips of the growing plants where most of the nutrients are, and get a great feed that way.

As we mentioned before, we grow a lot of spring oats on the farm. Our spring crops are indeed truly sowed in the spring, compared to a fair amount of the conventionally farmed ‘Spring crops’ which will start to go in the ground in January and February. This means that as I type the stubbles are being sprayed off and then ploughed. At Lower Pertwood, we start to plough stubbles in mid-January, this gives the frosts (should they arrive) the chance to kill off some of the more vigorous grass roots that have grown over the year. This in turn then gives the oats as well as the less vigorous arable plants a chance to grow, some of the vigorous species will always be there as well. This is a gradual process and some stubbles will still be present well in March and being organic the fields will not be sprayed. This means we will have lots of arable plants there for the wildlife, and as anyone who weeds their own garden knows, as hard as you try there will always be some plants growing! So should we have a cold snap in the next couple of months there’s a food source available.

We have even more food available that we are holding onto should the weather be particularly bad. This food is our “safety net”, as a high-wire trapeze artist would

have in the circus. If you are the one swinging on the trapeze, you would always want a safety net. You’d hope that you would never need it and more often than not you wouldn’t, but it is there when needed as without it you are in deep, deep trouble. Besides the wildbird covers that are waiting for the birds, the other safety net we have is a lot of tailings being stored. Tailings are the by-product of cleaning our oats after harvest, and contain all the seeds from the other plants harvested with the oats, so is a great source of food. We are keeping them nice and dry and, when needed, we can put them out in the wildbird covers or on hard-standings.

On to the wildlife!

I checked around some of the stubbles and there were a lot of birds. We have at least five flocks of [linnet](#), the biggest being about 500 birds, the others have c300, c200, c150 and c120 – so over a 1000 linnet total! They like weedy areas to feed in with lots of small seeds, and our stubbles are perfect for that. A lot of these birds will have come here for the winter from uplands in the North of the UK. Chaffinch and brambling numbers are increasing week-on-week, with over 500 and 100 respectively at the moment.



SKYLARK

We have a lot of [skylark](#) too; near Cowdown and Westcombe there are around 100 each spread across the stubbles and a lot of other fields have 20 – 50 birds, so very hard to count – what a great problem to have!

[Corn bunting](#) are acting in a similar way, well spread out across the stubbles, and they will flock up if they feel threatened. This is something I have not particularly noticed before elsewhere, as usually these species are in bigger flocks. Presumably because there is so much available habitat here the birds are able to freely choose what they prefer. Linnet seem to like flocks, as they tend to be busier feeders, moving up, down and around which would attract predators, and thus being in a flock raises their chances of not being the one eaten. Oposingly, skylark like to hide where they feed to avoid predators, so in this case it is better to not be with a load of your mates who might give you away.

As mentioned all these birds will attract predators, which is a great indicator of a healthy ecosystem. At present on the farm you could see some or all of the following: [hen harrier](#), [merlin](#), [peregrine](#), [sparrowhawk](#), [kestrel](#), [buzzard](#), [barn owl](#), [little owl](#), [tawny owl](#) and [red kite](#).



FLOCK OF LINNET

In the woodlands and scrubby areas, there seem to be an awful lot of [bullfinch](#) busily feeding on the last few berries and rosehips, as well as starting to turn their attentions to the many buds that are starting to swell. There are also a number of [marsh tit](#), staying on their territories ready for the breeding season, which is a great sign for a species that is firmly Red-Listed, with a 71% decline in numbers across the UK in the last 25 years. We hope to do more for this species in the future, so keep watching this space...

Corn Bunting Breeding Season 2015



The more perceptive of you, who have been reading these newsletters for a while, might have noticed that we like corn bunting at Lower Pertwood. It is then of no surprise that this was the species of bird targeted for a full farm breeding survey in 2015.

There is a standard method to survey corn bunting, which involves identifying 50 ha. areas and visiting each three times (once in May, June and July), and counting the males. You then take the maximum recorded number on any visit to be the best estimate of the population. With corn bunting you do not tend to see nests as they build them in the crops. There is the added problem that the males are polygamous, so may

have more than one female, or none, and so it is easier to just record male territories.

We have around 500 ha. of potential habitat in any one year at Lower Pertwood, which would in theory mean ten surveys a month for three months. Sadly, I am not allowed to just look at corn bunting, so I set up six survey routes that covered the area and I managed a couple of surveys for each over the period May – July – a pretty decent effort! Each route took several hours to complete as there were a lot of corn bunting and they are feisty characters. There is a lot of argy bargin in the breeding season, lots of chasing around after females, and sometimes after other males!

On the next page is a map of the territories I recorded in the surveys- all 134 of them. Thanks to the RSPB for preparing a digital version for us.

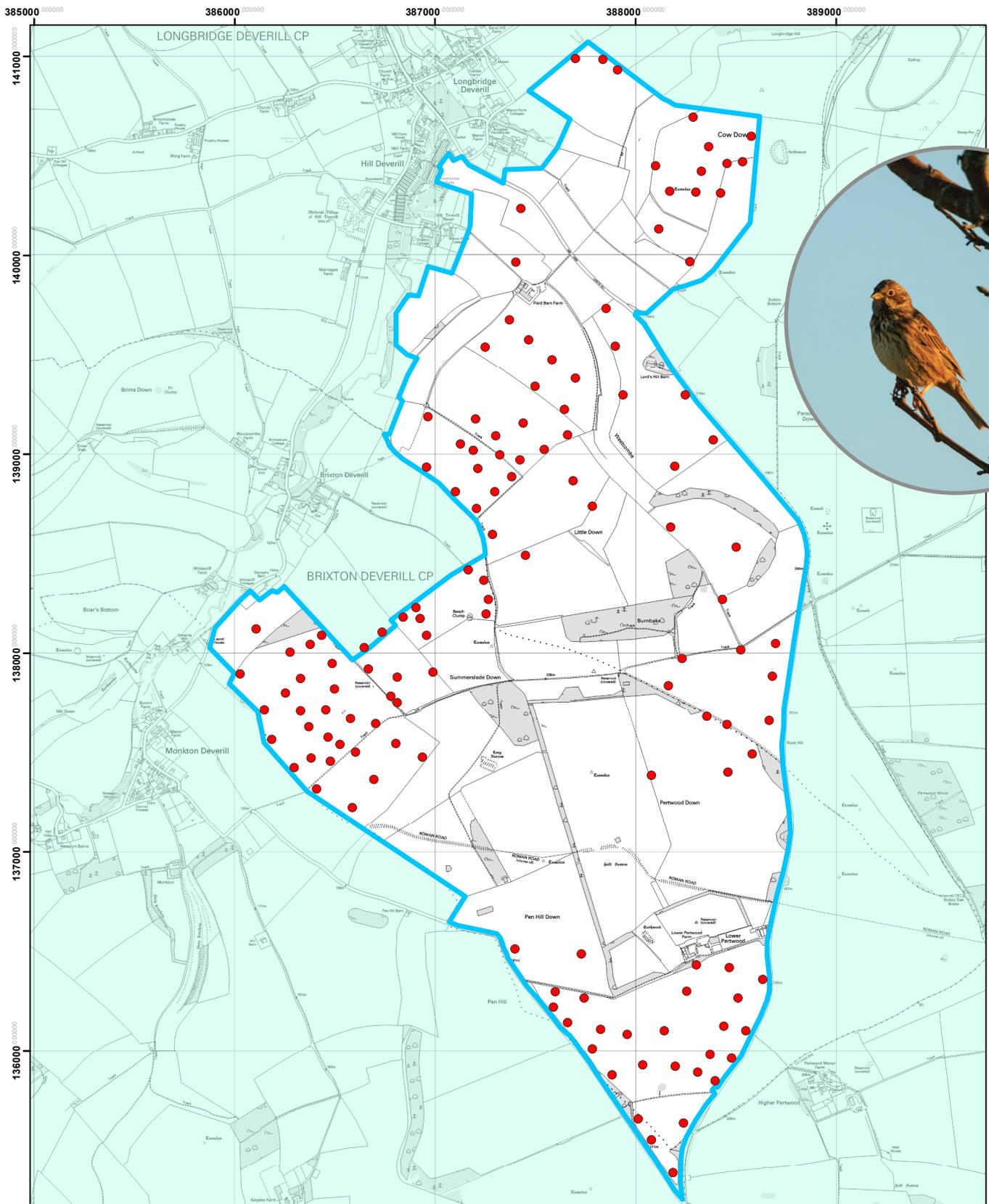
The birds are concentrated in the arable areas, as the grassland towards the centre of the farm tends to be too short and therefore not suitable for breeding, although it can be a great feeding area.

Going forward I will be able to keep a handle on the population trend by repeating one or two of the survey routes each year.

To put this in a UK context, the last breeding population estimate was c11,000 territories. This was with data up

until 2010. Evidence suggests the population across the UK has continued to decline, so it is perhaps prudent to go with a figure of 10,000 territories in the UK at present. In this light, Lower Pertwood has about 1.3% of the UK breeding population, and we are an incredibly

important site for breeding corn bunting. In the winter, the numbers are swelled by other local breeding birds that winter with us, which increases the number to about 350 birds- ultimately closer to 2% of the UK population.



Lower Pertwood Farm corn bunting survey 2015

● Singing male corn buntings

Scale = 1:18,000
Central Grid Reference: ST877382

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Bird of Conservation Concern (BoCC)

With the recent weather not being particularly conducive to surveying birds, or even ducks, I thought I would take the chance to think about the birds we are getting at Lower Pertwood and how important the work we are doing for them is at a national and international level.

Most of you will have noticed me mentioning Red-Listed and Amber-Listed bird species in my various posts. This refers to a grading system for birds known as Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC). This is a bit like a set of traffic lights: the **Red-Listed** birds are those of highest conservation concern so we should stop what we are doing, as it does not appear to be working, and do something else to help them as soon as possible.

Amber-Listed species are of conservation concern, and we need to keep a close eye on these, proceed with caution, and should be considering stopping what we are doing and upping our game for them.

Green-Listed species are of low conservation concern, so we can carry on as we are, but with a level of caution, as it might be that some great work we have done has led to an improvement in the fortunes of this particular species, and that needs to continue.



TREE SPARROW
STILL FIRMLY ON THE RED LIST

There are a number of reasons why a species might be classed as Red-Listed, but the most common ones are a **more than 50% decrease** in their range and/or numbers over the last 25 years. An amber listing usually means a **decline of 25 - 50%** in range and/or numbers and a green-listed species has **at worst a decline in range/numbers of up to 25%** and of course could be increasing in numbers.

There is a review every five years, and we have just had such a review, and it is worth discussing how this impacts the species at Lower Pertwood, and perhaps how we target our work.

We have recorded 96 bird species in the last couple of

years or so. Here is a table showing the numbers of Red, Amber and Green listed species based on the old and new lists, and I have also split out the 53 species confirmed to be breeding.

	All Species		Breeding species	
	Old BoCC	New BoCC	Old BoCC	New BoCC
Red-listed	21	28	11	12
Amber-listed	36	19	13	10
Green-listed	39	49	29	31

On the complete list of species 27% are Red-Listed. We have just over 29%, so the species we are working with are important ones. 23% of the breeding species are of high conservation concern – species like [corn bunting](#), [linnet](#), [yellowhammer](#), [spotted flycatcher](#) and [skylark](#) are all red-listed.



SPOTTED FLYCATCHER
STILL OF HIGH CONSERVATION CONCERN

Personally I find the extra “non-breeding” 16 red-listed species of interest, as these are species that we help on their spring and autumn passage. These include the likes of whinchat, tree pipit and ring ouzel or ones that choose to winter with us such as [redwing](#), [fieldfare](#), [merlin](#), [woodcock](#) and [hen harrier](#). Long story short, we are helping a lot of important species all year round.

There has been quite a drop in the number of the species recorded that are Amber-Listed (ie: of conservation concern). There are two main reasons for this change. Firstly, some are doing better than before: species like [red kite](#), [green woodpecker](#), [little egret](#) and [woodlark](#). Secondly, the UK population of the species is not as important now as it was in the past, so the population here might be stable or slightly declining, but is doing well elsewhere, which means the UK population is proportionately less: these include [barn owl](#), [wheatear](#) and [jack snipe](#). It seems odd to think of barn owl as a species of low conservation concern, as they still need

our help in making sure that there are areas of grass for them to hunt, and nest boxes where there are no suitable natural nesting sites. Consequently, they fall very much into my definition of a Green-Listed species, in that we need to carry on the great work that is already being done for them.

All-in-all, we are still working with a lot of important species that nationally are showing significant declines. Hopefully one day the species that we are working with like corn bunting, yellowhammer and linnet will move towards the Amber and Green lists. If we did our own Birds of Conservation Concern classifications, I am pretty sure the corn bunting would be Green-Listed on Lower Pertwood!



**GREY WAGTAIL
IS ON THE NEW RED LIST**



THE SUN RISING OVER THE PERTWOOD DOWNLANDS. PHOTO BY DAVID WHITE

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Please visit www.pertwood.co.uk to read more about our Wildlife Matters!

Species Spotlight: Marsh Tit

This is a species that we have mentioned a few times in this year's newsletters. Certainly not a particularly well known species, you would be very lucky to get these chaps coming to your birdtable with the blue, great and coal tits.

Marsh tit are very much a woodland species, breeding in pieces of deadwood. They rarely make a nest-hole from scratch and usually find something already started, and enlarge it to their requirements.

Their call sounds like a sneeze - a 'pitchoo' noise. Interestingly, they often pair for life. Sadly, they are one of the many woodland species that has been doing poorly in recent years, with their numbers having decreased by 71% in the last 25 years. Recent research suggests this is due to a loss of connectivity between the woodlands they nest in, which is contributed to by human activities such as removal of hedgerows. A marsh tit will not travel across open land of 500m, and would probably get a nose-bleed if it crossed 200m of open ground.

We currently have five territories on Lower Pertwood. Most areas they have chosen have lots of great mature scrub with bits of rotten wood in for nesting and we make sure to always leave this essential habitat alone when carrying out work. We are planning to create some more habitat when we do some tree-thinning work by leaving tall stumps of up to 6 feet, splitting



the tops, wedging a stone in the crack to allow water in faster, and thus accelerating the decaying process. All the hedgerow planting that we have done in recent years has created a marsh tit "motorway" linking out territories to more habitat in the north, so as the years pass we hope to see an increase in numbers.

