

## Farming policy a field to look at in climate plans

Vicki Swales says that government must act now to protect declining wildlife



Whether viewed from a global or Scottish standpoint, we face twin environmental challenges – preventing climate change and halting the loss of wildlife.

The consequences of not rising to these challenges are profound and will affect us all. Floods, droughts and rising sea levels are already with us, along with the extinction of once common species and loss of insects that pollinate our crops. Prospects can seem gloomy but Scotland has shown leadership in this field and has the potential to do much more.

In 2009, the Scottish Parliament approved landmark legislation to tackle climate change, setting ambitious targets to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that warm our climate. The conclusion of the Paris Agreement in 2016 limiting global temperature increases to 1.5C now means an even more ambitious response is required. To this end, the Scottish Government is bringing forward a new Climate Bill to align domestic targets.

Similarly, Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy sets out what we need to do to protect nature and stop wildlife declines by 2020. This is in line with targets agreed under the Convention on Biological Diversity in Aichi, Japan, in 2010.

So far, so good. But preventing climate change and saving nature requires action across many economic sectors. One stands out as having a large contribution to make, being both part of the problem and a major part of the solutions. That sector is farming.

Farming currently contributes almost a quarter of Scotland's total greenhouse gas emissions. If we are to become 'carbon-neutral' as a nation by mid-century we need farming to cut emissions. It is not possible however to grow food on the land without producing any climate harming emissions at all. So, we need to find a way to reduce farm emissions, and match these with actions which take carbon from the atmosphere and store it in trees, soil and wetlands.

The Scottish Government's recent Climate Change Plan requires farming to reduce emissions, but by only 9 per cent by 2032. This doesn't go far enough, fast enough. Farmers can do more if they have support for a fair transition to carbon-neutral farming.

Measures include using fertiliser more efficiently, protecting soils so they store more carbon, planting trees in the right places,

and promoting productive and profitable carbon-neutral farming – whether organic or mainstream. Reducing emissions and farming profitability need to be promoted as mutually supportive objectives. We have the potential to establish Scotland as a real leader in sustainable farming.

For wildlife, farming is both saint and sinner, able to create the conditions for nature to survive and thrive but also to lead to its demise. Think flower-rich field margins on the one hand and hedgerow removal on the other. Scotland still has an abundance of wildlife – including many species of national and international importance – and many of these depend on farmland. But many species such as wading birds and butterflies are in decline and climate change is adding further pressure.

Policy is a key influence on the day-to-day business decisions made by farmers and crofters. As part of the EU, it is the Common Agricultural Policy that currently determines what payments farmers in Scotland receive and for what. Without this framework, it will be for the Scottish Government to decide how to use public money to support the farming sector. RSPB Scotland wants to see farmers and crofters supported and rewarded for taking action to help nature on their land. We need to see the Scottish Government bringing forward its ideas for future farming policy now.

If we leave the EU and lose access to other funding and mechanisms that benefit the environment, even greater responsibility will fall on the Scottish Government to tackle climate change and halt the loss of wildlife. The obligation to do so is as much a moral one – if the interests of future generations are to be met – as it is tied to international agreements and treaties. Our government has shown leadership to date on the world stage and must do so again. Uncertainties created by Brexit must not get in the way of the Scottish Government bringing forward a strong Climate Change Bill and developing farming policy that tackles the big environmental challenges of our day.

Vicki Swales, head of land use policy, RSPB Scotland.



# Looking forward to more baby buntings



Alex Nairn is enthused by the work being done by estates in Fife to halt the fall in numbers of a once-common species

Scottish estate managers have a wide list of responsibilities – from managing holiday lets, to creating new social housing developments, to ensuring land is being managed – both by our selves and by our tenant farmers – in an environmentally efficient way.

While it is essential that we make ends meet, the role of an estate manager goes far beyond keeping the business running. A big part – and by far one of the most rewarding elements of the job – is responsible land management. That means doing our bit to protect the natural environment, including taking part in conservation initiatives.

In 2017, Elie Estate, along with the five other estates that make up East Neuk Estates – Kilconquhar, Balcarras, Balcaskie, Gilston and Strathlyrum – secured the Conservation Award at the Scottish Land and Estates Helping It Happen awards for our work to increase the rapidly declining corn bunting population.

This beautiful bird was once widespread but large declines led to extinction in Ireland and made the corn bunting one of the fastest declining birds in England and Scotland.

A late breeding season, a preference for nesting in growing crops, and the dependence on the availability of cereal seeds over the winter and large insects in summer, all made corn buntings especially vulnerable to modern agricultural practices. Numbers fell by 83 per cent in eastern Scotland between 1989 and 2007.

Over the past few years, East Neuk Estates have worked with farmers and land managers in Fife on a range of measures to provide safe nesting places, insect-rich summer foraging and winter seed food to help increase the corn bunting population.

Measures have included grow-

ing plots of a cereal-based bee and bunting seed mix which are left unharvested over winter, delaying silage harvest to avoid nest destruction, and improving the habitat on a wider scale, for example by introducing conservation headlands, leaving land fallow after stubbles or managing some fodder crops extensively.

Recent figures from the RSPB showed that corn bunting numbers are now increasing and last year we saw the highest increase in Fife in any single year since monitoring began. The birds have recolonised farms in Angus and Fife where they hadn't been seen in years. Together with a first local range expansion in the East Neuk, this gives hope that the species may start to spread once again.

Yvonne Stephan, conservation advisor for RSPB Scotland, with whom we worked closely, found this record breaking increase amazing and told us that she wouldn't have dared to dream of such fantastic results in such a short time.

Our work with the corn buntings is only one aspect of our conservation activity. We have an ongoing focus on environmental issues with emphasis on increasing the diversity of wildlife through the creation of grass margins, hedge planting and pond creation. A red squirrel conservation project at Balcarras Estate is also delivering encouraging results.

This year Elie Estate is working with Butterfly Conservation to increase the Common Blue butterfly population along the coastline from Elie to Ardross.

As recently as five years ago, the Common Blue could be seen in this area during June, July and August. However, recent winter storms have caused coastal erosion and loss of plants for them to feed on. In conjunction with Scottish Natural Heritage,



Fife Coast & Countryside Trust and volunteers from Butterfly Conservation, we are planting a huge number of wild flowers and butterfly-friendly plants to encourage its return, including birdsfoot trefoil, thyme, buddleia and thrift. We are also encouraging walkers along the Fife Coastal Path to stick to the designated trails rather than walking on the dunes to help protect their natural environment.

We also have large areas of game cover, which is utilised by many species. Last summer did not make things easy for ground-nesting birds like grey partridge, which rely on thick grass for camouflage while nesting and use the same grass to

forage for cereals and insects with their chicks.

Sadly, the grey partridge has been in decline for several years due to a lack of chick food, a shortage of food in the winter, also a characteristic of the modern farmed landscape, and increased pressure from predators. Since 2012 we have been working with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust on their grey partridge project. This involves, among other things, counting partridges in the spring and autumn to determine the total population and productivity.

These are just some of the examples of work we are undertaking to preserve the delicate balance of wildlife

and conservation on our estates. Other estates are doing fantastic work – from black grouse preservation and wildcat counting to bat protection and nesting initiatives. Perhaps this year one of them will be recognised in the Scottish Land and Estates Helping It Happen awards too.

To nominate, people can share how their local estate, farm or rural business has made a positive contribution to their area. Entries can be submitted via the Helping It Happen website – [www.helpingithappen.co.uk](http://www.helpingithappen.co.uk) – before 13 July. The awards, sponsored by the MacRobert Trust, will be held in Edinburgh on 3 October.

Alex Nairn, trustee of Elie Estate.



↑ The corn bunting was once widespread in Scotland and Ireland but modern farming practices have put populations under pressure

that were drawn to the abundant food source with one of the local sparrowhawks also putting in an appearance.

The survey nationwide included important environmental features such as hedges, woodland, ponds, grass margins, ditches and trees.

Some survey sites were next to wintered cereals, grassland and overwintered stubbles, and provide a good demonstration of the variety of habitats present in farmland across the UK.

The Big Farmland Bird Count is a snapshot of the success of wild birds on our farmland and informs farmers about the excellent work they are doing to keep farmland



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They all count – survey can tell us a lot about how farm practice affects birds

Dr Dave Parish urges more land managers to get involved

The Game & Wildlife Trust Big Farmland Bird Count takes place every year in February. For this survey GWCT encourages farmers, gamekeepers and land managers to spend just 30 minutes in one day that month noting what birds they see over the ground they manage and their approximate numbers.

In Scotland, 43 farmers took part, recording 79 different species across 32,424 acres. This year the ten most commonly seen species were woodpigeon, blackbird, pheasant, chaffinch, buzzard, robin, blue tit, carrion crow, great tit and house sparrow.

A total of 18 red-listed species were

seen with four of these making it into the top 20: house sparrow, starling, yellowhammer and fieldfare.

Overall, the ten most counted birds recorded this year in Scotland were woodpigeon, rook, chaffinch, common gull, jackdaw, greylag goose, starling, house sparrow and pheasant.

GWCT publishes output from the survey in two ways. Most commonly seen ranks species by the percentage of respondents that recorded them on their land and most counted ranks species by the total number of that species recorded across the whole count.

A lot of the work we are doing directly benefits farmland birds.