



Species Action Plan

‘Skylark’



Author – Pete Ellis

Living Shetland Biodiversity Action Plan

May 2004

Species Action Plan

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Species profile

UK B/D status

Priority species

UK lead partners

RSPB

Shetland status

Locally common, Local Priority Species

Relevant HAP's

Farmland Birds (Grouped species action plan), AgriBAP, Community Biodiversity Action plans (Bigton, Bressay, Fetlar, Sandwick, Yell), Roadside Biodiversity Action Plan, Arable plants (Grouped species action plan)

Statutory Protection

The skylark is a Birds of Conservation Concern "Red list" species and protected under the EC Birds Directive. It is also specially protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Current Status

UK status

The skylark is one of the most widespread birds of the British Isles, with over two million breeding pairs, the resident population is joined in winter by a significant proportion of the northern European population - possibly up to 25 million individuals. Nonetheless, the UK breeding population of skylark on lowland farmland declined by 54% between 1969 and 1991. The population has also declined substantially in many other European countries.

Local Status

The skylark is a very common breeding summer visitor to Shetland and has been recorded in all months, most recorded between March and October. Previously, skylarks were found in abundance during the winter months in Shetland but due to a shift in agricultural practices from traditional crofting to sheep ranching.

There has been no attempt to census the entire breeding population of Skylarks in Shetland although censuses have been undertaken at several sites. On Fair Isle, census work undertaken by FIBO in 11 years between 1981 and 1993 found between 50 and 106 pairs, but a census in 2002 found just 32 pairs. Census work revealed 75 pairs on Noss in 1998 and 263 pairs on Hermaness in 2001. These surveys represent population densities of between five and 30 pairs per square kilometre, in line with published studies elsewhere in Britain, and suggest a total Shetland population of somewhere between 7,000 and 45,000 pairs. A breeding bird survey organised by Shetland Biological Records Centre in 2002, recorded Skylarks breeding in 46 of the 49 one-kilometre squares surveyed, and produced a population estimate of around 24,000 to 32,000 pairs. This represents between 1% and 1.5% of the British breeding population.

Culture and Folklore

The skylark is a renowned songster, frequently referred to in literature and music. A number of expressions such as "up with the lark" and "larking about" refer to the bird's perceived character. The Shetland name *laverek* – is from the Scots name and refers to the bird's call.

Ecology & Management

The Skylark, otherwise known as the *laverek* in Shetland is a bird characteristic of moorland and unimproved grassland that has an evocative song, and distinctive display. It is a common breeding summer visitor and passage migrant, although only small numbers over-winter in Shetland. Wintering numbers appeared to decrease during the 1990's, possibly due to reduced areas of winter stubble. Most return in late February/ early March.

Skylarks feed on invertebrates when breeding and they are found over much of the moorland and moderately grazed in-by land. In areas where grazing is heavy, they often nest in the only available longer vegetation, on roadsides. They feed mainly on seeds during the rest of the year. In autumn they often form flocks in stubble fields, feeding on fallen oats and barley. They will also eat weed seeds in neap fields.

Breeding takes place between April and August in short grass or crops. Due to high predation rates, skylarks need to produce 2 to 3 broods a season. Winter sown crops and silage fields are only suitable for a single brood, making set-aside and spring crops essential to maintain adult populations.

Some population data has been gathered on Fair Isle, and on RSPB and SNH reserves and by the Shetland Biological Records Centre (SBRC) for a series of widely distributed 1km squares.

Current Factors causing loss or decline

Skylarks are known to be vulnerable to a number of threats that can adversely affect their numbers, these include –

Intensive management of arable fields has reduced ephemeral weeds and insect prey through the use of agrochemicals. An increased trend to autumn-sown cereals on Mainland Shetland has reduced the number of essential winter stubble fields and may provide unsuitable habitat in comparison with spring-sown varieties. Reduction of arable hectareage in Shetland from 1,320 hectares in 1971 to 205 hectares in 1998 has probably contributed to the mass decline of birds and also the reduction of stubble and winter forage crops for skylarks in their wintering areas may have had a detrimental effect.

Increased stocking densities on grazing land have made the grass too short for skylarks, and increased the risk of nests being trampled. A switch from hay to silage has resulted in many nests being destroyed by the cutting machinery, since the period between cuts is often too short for successful nesting. The cutting machinery also destroys nests with eggs in and exposes skylarks to predators.

The use of toxic mercury seed dressings on Mainland Shetland may have killed adults in winter or affected breeding success.

Current Action

Agri-environment schemes, ESA, RSS, Neeps for Linties. These schemes are aimed at sensitive land management practices with biodiversity as a core element.

AgriBAP. This sectoral plan has been written by a number of individuals and organisations with both conservation and agricultural interests for Living Shetland and implementation will be in place by summer, 2004.

National awareness schemes, such as BTO and RSPB

Survey & research. Little action has been taken to help the skylark, as BTO census work has only recently highlighted its decline. Survey and research is now commencing to identify the causes of the decline, particularly the effects of habitat change on mainland Scotland.

A **Species Action Plan** has been prepared and agreed by RSPB for the National Biodiversity Network and other countryside agencies and is available on-line.

Action Plan Objectives, Targets and Actions

Encourage later silage cutting to protect breeding bird areas, media campaigns through Shetland Times, and BBC Radio Shetland. Ongoing. SCFWAG, SAC.

Encourage SBRC to extend the geographical coverage of monitored 1km squares. Ongoing. SBRC.

Maintain habitats, and promote awareness of the Skylark to farmers/schools. Schools week, Farm walks. Ongoing. (RSPB, SCFWAG, SAC, SNH)

Reduce grazing pressure on moorland and unimproved grassland. This is to be addressed in the implementation phase of the AgriBAP AgriBAP, RSS & ESA SCFWAG, SAC

Cut roadside verges later in season, or not at all in areas identified by local communities who are monitoring verges themselves in agreement with Shetland Islands Council Roadside BAP

Increase the amount of arable land. Ongoing AgriBAP, RSS & ESA, SCFWAG, SAC.

References.

- Johnston, J.L. (1999). *A Naturalists Shetland* T & A. D. Poyser, London
- Pennington.M, Osborn.K, Harvey.P, Riddington.R, D.Okill.D, P.Ellis.P, M.Heubeck.M. (2004). *Birds of Shetland* Christopher Helm Publishers London
- **Scott.W., Harvey.P., Riddington., Fisher.M. (2002) *Rare plants of Shetland*. Shetland Amenity Trust.**

Key Contacts

- **Living Shetland Officer**
Shetland Island's Council
Infrastructure Services, Grantfield, Lerwick
ZE1 ONT
Tel:01595 690832
Email: livingshetland@fwag.org.uk
- **Scottish Natural Heritage**
Stewart Building
Lerwick
ZE1 OLL
Tel: 01595 693345
Fax: 01595 692565
Email: northern_isles@snh.gov.uk
Website: www.snh.gov.uk
- **Shetland Biological Records Office**
Centre Manager
Shetland Amenity trust
Garthspool,
Lerwick
Tel: 01595 694688
Email: sbrc@zetnet.co.uk
Website: <http://www.nature.shetland.co.uk/>
- **Shetland Island's Council (SIC)**
Austin Taylor (Conservation Manager) Shetland Island's Council
Infrastructure Services, Grantfield, Lerwick
Tel: 01595 744833
Fax: 01595 695887
Email: austin.taylor@sic.shetland.gov.uk
- **Shetland Crofting and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (SCFWAG)**
Agricultural Marts, Stoney Hill, Lerwick. ZE1 0QW
Tel: 01595 692633
Fax: 01595 692633
Email: shetland@fwag.org.uk
- **Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department**
Charlotte House
Commercial Street
Lerwick
ZE1 0HF
Tel: 01595 695054
Fax: 01595 694254
- **Shetland Bird Club**
Secretary – reinoud Norde
Lindale, Bigton,
Shetland.
ZE2 9JA
- **RSPB**
North Isles Officer
Shetland Office
East House, Sumburgh Head Lighthouse
Virkie, Shetland
ZE3 9JN
Tel: 01950 460800
Fax: 01950 460801
Email: pete.ellis@rspb.org.uk
- **Scottish Agricultural College (SAC)**
Agricultural Marketing Centre
Staneyhill Industrial Estate
Lerwick
Shetland
ZE1 0QW
Tel: 01595 693520
Fax: 01595 693550

PE, April 2004

