



**NORTHERN
IRELAND**

FARMING TOGETHER WITH NATURE EAST COUNTY DOWN FOCUS AREA

Farmland Bird Survey Spring - Summer 2023



© Jonny Andrews

Yellowhammer, Jonny Andrews (RSPB NI volunteer)

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ECD/OrlockFarm NT

COUNTY DOWN FARMLAND BIRD SURVEYS

Seed-eating farmland birds have experienced significant declines in Northern Ireland. For example, it is estimated that just 5,000 pairs of yellowhammer remain. This represents an alarming decline for a species which had a population of 32,000+ pairs as recently as 1991.

In N Ireland, these seed-eating species are largely dependent on the presence of seed and cereal fields, making the large arable regions of County Down a stronghold. This is why RSPB has a long and established history of working with farmers in Co. Down as a focus of our conservation efforts.

East County Down is Northern Ireland's RSPB Farm Advice Focus Area. We also facilitate the County Down Farmland Bird Initiative (CDFBI) - a group project within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS).

The overall aim of our efforts is to halt and reverse the decline of some of N Ireland's most iconic farmland birds.

This year, over 30 farms were surveyed. The results of these surveys will help to generate tailored advice to farmers and landowners on how to enhance, create and manage suitable habitats for wildlife on their farms.

Within Co. Down, RSPB has identified a number of priority farmland bird species including lapwings, skylarks, yellowhammers, reed buntings, tree sparrows and linnets.

We aim to survey each farm every three years. Surveys take place in the spring - summer breeding season, to measure the number of priority species present and holding territory on the farm. During this period, each farm receives four separate visits from an RSPB surveyor, with a minimum of two weeks between each visit, from the 15th of April until the end of June.

The key aims of the surveys are to:

- Establish the overall farmland bird species present on the farm and estimate how many breeding pairs of priority species are holding territory
- Assess changes in the populations of priority species over time
- Identify any potential areas of the farm to enhance current habitat or introduce new habitat for priority bird species. The surveys help generate tailored conservation advice specific to your farmland.

This report outlines the results of the surveys carried out on your farm. All bird species seen or heard on each survey visit are listed on the species list (see page 3).

If any breeding pairs of priority species were recorded, these will be highlighted in an attached species map of your farm. A priority species pair / territory consists of at least two registrations on different visits in the same area of the farm OR a single registration of any bird seen carrying food, with unfledged young, or on a nest.

The species paragraphs overleaf contain information for fulfilling the needs of any priority species present on your farm, as well as information on other additional species of interest.

The species list provides a good indication of the range and population of species present during the breeding season, but this is not definitive. The list also shows which category of conservation concern each species currently falls into in the UK and Ireland. The species that we are most concerned about are the red and amber listed species (see notes on your species list for definition).

If you have any queries please contact Conservation Officer, Michelle Duggan on **07703 607626** or email **michelle.duggan@rspb.org.uk**

Orlock Farm – Stephen Alexander

2023 SPECIES LIST

This list includes all birds seen or heard during surveys carried out by RSPB in **the 2023 breeding season**. *Note, some birds may have been missed, and winter visitors are unlikely to be represented.*

Species	Irish Status ¹	UK Status ²
Blackbird	Green	Green
Chaffinch	Green	Green
Collared dove	Green	Green
Feral pigeon	No status	No status
Goldfinch*	Green	Green
Great tit	Green	Green
Greenfinch*	Amber	Red
Greylag goose	Amber	Amber
Herring gull	Amber	Red
House martin	Amber	Red
Jackdaw*	Green	Green
Linnet*	Amber	Red
Magpie	Green	Green
Mallard	Amber	Amber
Pheasant	No status	No status
Robin	Amber	Green
Rook*	Green	Amber
Song thrush	Green	Amber
Starling*	Amber	Red
Swallow	Amber	Green
Whitethroat*	Green	Amber
Wood pigeon*	Green	Amber
Wren	Green	Amber
Yellowhammer*	Red	Red
Total No. of Species	24	

* Farmland Bird Indicator Species

1 according to Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026

2 according to Birds of Conservation Concern 5: 2021

Red Status: Birds of high conservation concern. These Species have either undergone $\geq 50\%$ decline in UK breeding population or range over the last 25 years, a historical decline from 1800 – 1995, or are species of global conservation concern.

Amber status: Birds of medium conservation concern. These species have undergone a 25 – 49% decline in breeding population or range in the UK during the last 25 years or have unfavourable conservation status in Europe.

All other species hold **green status** and are of lower conservation concern.

For more information, please speak to your RSPB Conservation Officer, who can provide copies of both the Birds of Conservation Concern and Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland reports.

COUNTY DOWN PRIORITY SPECIES ON YOUR FARM

Farm reference: *ECD/OrlockFarmNT*

Farmer name: *Stephen Alexander*

Surveyor: *Aidan Keane*

PRIORITY SPECIES:

- ✓ **Linnet**
2 pairs



- ✓ **Yellowhammer**
Present on farm but no breeding pairs identified



COMPARISON WITH PAIRS RECORDED IN PREVIOUS SURVEY:

Species	Survey 2021	Survey 2023	Increase / decrease
Linnet	4	2	-2
Yellowhammer	0	0	0

More detailed information and analysis is available on request from your RSPB Conservation Officer, Michelle Duggan. Contact 07703 607626 or email michelle.duggan@rspb.org.uk

Overleaf you will find more information on the priority species and additional species of interest found during the surveys.

PRIORITY SPECIES INFORMATION

The following paragraphs contain information about some of the farmland birds that are present on your farm. ***Please note images of birds are not to scale.***

1. Linnet



Male



Female

The linnet is one of the few birds we have that are entirely dependent on small seeds throughout the year even feeding seeds to chicks. Oil-seed rape provides a major food source for linnets in the breeding season. Retention of winter stubbles provide an important food source for linnets in the winter. Within the stubbles broad leaved arable weeds will thrive and the linnet will feed on the small weedy seeds they produce. Retention of winter stubbles is available as an EFS option. Rotational set aside can also provide a valuable seed source, especially if the spraying of broad-spectrum herbicides is delayed as long as possible. The EFS option winter feed crop for wild birds is a great way to support linnet especially mixes containing linseed, oilseed rape and quinoa. Linnets prefer to nest in areas of scrub or thorny hedges and maintenance of bramble or gorse areas will provide ideal nesting habitat.

2. Yellowhammer



Male



Female

One of the last strongholds of the yellowhammer in N Ireland is East County Down. You may know this bird by its local name the 'yellow yarnie'. Yellowhammers nest at the bottom of thick hedges, areas of gorse (whin) and in rough grass field margins, preferring hedges and margins next to ditches. To benefit nesting yellowhammer, cut hedges on a three-year rotation and cut in an A-shape to help thicken up the base. Yellowhammer nest close to the ground, so having a thick base to the hedgerow is important to protect the nest. Rough grass margins along hedgerows also help to thicken up the base of the hedge. Arable margins (rough grass margins, pollinator margins etc) and hay meadows can provide insect food in the spring and summer for feeding chicks. Yellowhammers are dependent on cereals to survive the winter months. Retention of winter stubbles (spilt grains) and winter feed crop for wild birds (wild bird cover) can provide this essential food source in the winter.

FURTHER CONSERVATION ADVICE ON PRIORITY FARMLAND BIRD SPECIES CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/farming/advice/helping-species/>

ADDITIONAL SPECIES OF INTEREST

Greenfinch



The decrease in seed availability in the wider countryside has seen the decline in Greenfinch populations on farmland, with the species becoming more dependent on gardens and bird feeders. A recent decline in numbers has been linked to an outbreak of trichomonosis, a parasite-induced disease which can be spread by contaminated food and drinking water. To help stop the spread, make sure to keep any bird feeders clean. Greenfinches were one of the most common garden birds in Ireland but since trichomoniasis took hold, their numbers have been in freefall. Amber listed in Ireland and now on the red list in Britain for the same reason.

House Martin



Summer visitor throughout Ireland from mid-March to late-September. In the countryside they are most frequently seen in areas of mixed agriculture, near water and in the vicinity of woodland. Like Swallows and Sand Martins, House Martins feed on insects such as aphids and mayflies caught in flight. House martins build mud nests on outer walls of buildings under the eaves. They are colonial nesters, with an average group size of four to five nests. Various artificial house martin nests are available. These can be bought, or you can build them yourself – get in touch with the RSPB conservation officer for further advice.

Song Thrush



Song thrushes like damp areas of ground which provide a source of earthworms and snails that make up much of their diet. Thick hedges provide ideal nesting habitat. As this species nests early, completion of any management practices such as hedge cutting before March will help to avoid the disturbance of nests. Hedges can also provide a good source of berries during the autumn and winter. As many fruiting hedgerow species only produce a crop on two-year-old wood, managing hedges on a two- or three-year rotation will help maintain this food supply into the winter.

Starling



Starlings are hole nesters, and on farms nests are often situated in farm buildings or in dead trees. They will take readily to nest boxes where these are provided. During the breeding season, starlings are heavily reliant on grassland, in particular grazed pasture where they can find good numbers of leatherjackets, which are their favoured food. Starlings in Northern Ireland are largely resident, but the winter population is often swelled by large numbers of migrants from N and NE Europe.

Swallow



Swallows build their nests almost exclusively in areas of human habitation, using a variety of built structures, especially barns. Birds return, often as early as March, to the same farms year after year, after spending the winter in South Africa. During the breeding season swallows will forage over areas of grassland, preferring grazed pasture, where insects tend to be more numerous. If possible, allow swallows access to old farm buildings with roofs by leaving doors or windows open.



Whitethroat

The white-throat is a medium-sized warbler with a long tail. It is a summer visitor which visitors in Africa, south of the Sahara. They can be found from mid-April to early October in areas of scrub, arable farmland and reedbed, typically feeding on insects, berries, and fruit.