

## IRELAND'S FARMLAND BIRDS

Farmland birds across Europe have declined by over 40% in the past 30 years. In Ireland, many previously common farmland birds have suffered major population and range declines since the 1970's<sup>1</sup>. While Ireland has been farmed for millennia, farming practices existed alongside healthy ecosystems. In recent decades we have drastically changed the way we farm. Across Europe, declines in farmland birds have been driven by agricultural intensification, partly driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The Countryside Bird Survey (CBS) is the national scheme for monitoring and reporting on common and widespread breeding bird populations in Ireland, including farmland birds. Having been established only in 1998, the CBS would not have detected many of the more dramatic or long term declines that have taken place in farmland species, many of which occurred prior to this period, and especially from the 1970s onwards. These earlier declines have been illustrated by bird atlases and specialist studies.

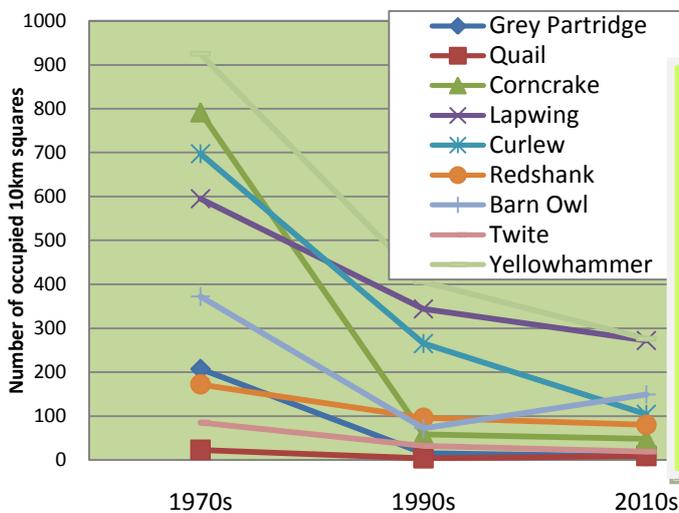


Figure 1: Range (number of occupied 10km squares) in 1970, 1990 and 2010 breeding bird atlases of Red-listed lowland farmland bird species in Ireland

The figure shows trends from the breeding Bird Atlases for the nine lowland farmland bird species that are Red-listed in the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland. **For all nine species, the number of occupied 10km squares has at least halved since 1970.**

Declining bird populations often indicate declining health of the natural environment. They reflect losses in habitat extent and quality and often equate to losses in ecosystems services which are a valuable asset to Ireland.

Agricultural intensification across Western Europe has caused large reductions in farmland biodiversity including losses of many farmland birds. Specifically:

- increased use of pesticides and fertilisers
- increasing mechanisation and re-seeding
- clearance of non cropped farmland habitats
- loss of hedgerow extent and quality

have all driven complex ecological changes which result in declines in range and population of many farmland birds. At the other end of the spectrum, land abandonment is the main threat facing Ireland's semi natural grasslands.

The rate of decline in farmland bird populations between 1990 and 2010 has reduced compared to the rate of decline between 1970 and 1990. In some cases, these slower rates of decline may be linked to a reduction in the level of agricultural intensification in the last twenty years compared to the twenty-year period before that, when larger areas of farmland would have been agriculturally improved (cleared, drained, re-seeded, etc.). In other cases, the reduced rate of decline may be linked to direct conservation action, such as the Corncrake Grant Scheme which was introduced in Ireland in the early 1990s.

### To reverse these declines we need to

- *Improve the CAP & rural development programme (RDP);*
- *Properly fund management of the Natura 2000 network of protected sites, 60% of which is farmed;*
- *Ensure targeted support for High Nature Value Farming (HNVF);*
- *Design and deliver Agri-environment schemes with sufficient advisory & monitoring to deliver objectives;*
- *Put effective policies in place to mitigate against & adapt to climate change.*

## BREEDING WADER DECLINES

Recent data from the 2007-2011 Bird Atlas confirms that breeding waders in Ireland are experiencing significant declines in populations size and range.

Many breeding waders, including Curlew (now on the IUCN Red List as a species threatened with global extinction), Lapwing, Redshank and Snipe are largely **dependent upon farmed grassland** habitats. Their decline has been linked to various effects of grassland intensification, including drainage, increased use of fertilisers, re-seeding and increased stocking rates<sup>2</sup>.

Greater support for appropriate farming practices on extensively grazed grassland is needed, including on upland commonages and machair grassland. Specifically, efforts are needed maintain habitats that offer all their ecological requirements, such as appropriate vegetation for nesting and chick-feeding areas during the breeding season.

Dunlin and Golden Plover are listed on Annex 1 of the Birds Directive; Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank, and Golden Plover are now on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland, due to significant population and/or range contractions over the last 50 years, with Snipe and Dunlin on the Amber List because of similar, though less severe, declines.

**Breeding Curlew have recently declined in Ireland by as much as 90%.** Ireland still had good population of Curlew in 1990, estimated at 5,000 breeding pairs. We may now have less than 200 pairs left. Whilst similar trends have been observed elsewhere, the scale and depth of these declines is such that we face possible extinction of breeding Curlew in Ireland within the next 30 years.

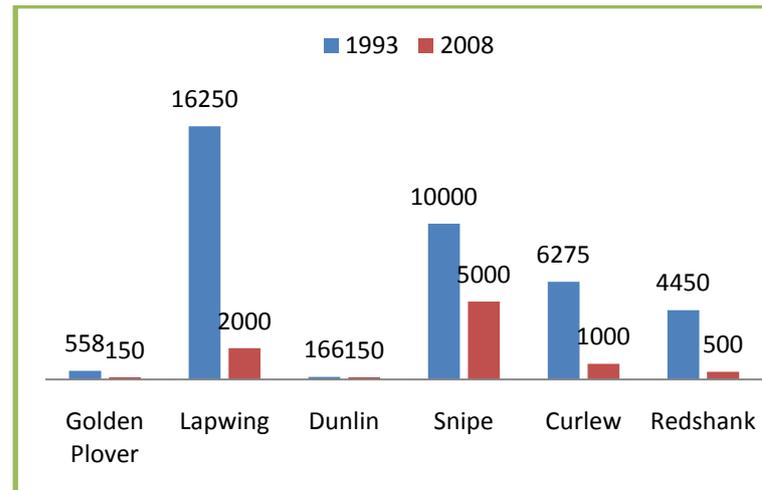


Figure 2: Number of breeding pairs of six key wader species in Ireland between 1993 and 2008 (data from Lauder & Donaghy, 2009)

The breeding wader declines are largely attributed to land use changes, in particular those associated with agricultural improvement, including:

- widespread loss of wetlands; <600,000 acres of agricultural land drained between 1947 and 1997
- more intensive grassland management; for example, fertiliser use increased by 400% in the second half of the last century
- loss of marginal upland habitat through afforestation. For example, > 60% increase in the area of forestry between 1980 and 2000

### **There is a lot that Ireland can do to stem decline of breeding waders in our farmed landscapes.**

Support for farmers to manage breeding wader habitat is one example of positive action necessary. **Targeted Agri-environment measures** that are being trialled in Ireland (and elsewhere) have shown that population declines can be halted, provided that sympathetic grassland management techniques are used.

***A significant amount of Ireland's export lead future prosperity as currently proposed will be based on agriculture. Without improving the delivery of targeted measures that support farming to support biodiversity, we can expect to see continuing declines in farmland bird populations in the immediate future. This will be accompanied by losses in ecosystem services and will damaging the 'green' image that Ireland values so greatly.***