

# Cirl bunting

## 1. A Definition

The cirl bunting (*Emberiza cirlus*) in Britain is a bird of lowland mixed farmland, especially warm, south-facing slopes with tall bushy hedges and scattered trees from which it delivers its distinctive rattling song.

The male is distinctively marked, with black, olive and yellow head markings, yellow under-parts and a grey-green chest-band, and a chestnut back. The female and juveniles are rather uniform brown and buff, and easily overlooked while they are feeding quietly on the ground.

The cirl bunting population has declined in range drastically since the 1970s and today is a rare breeding bird in Britain; the entire population of almost 700 pairs (updated 2004 figure) is now almost totally confined to Devon.

Within the County the species is generally not encountered outside a broad coastal band from Plymouth to Exeter, apart from the edge of Dartmoor along the Teign Valley.

## 2. Why an Action Plan?

The cirl bunting is very much a Devon speciality and we in the County have a particular responsibility to ensure its conservation.

The reasons for the cirl bunting's scarcity today are associated with agricultural change; the decline of mixed farming systems and especially cereal stubble, threshing yards and stock yards has deprived cirl buntings of winter food.

Yet, within the last decade, cirl buntings have benefited greatly from conservation efforts to manage agricultural land more sympathetically; for the benefit of farmland birds generally.

Achieving this turn-around in the cirl bunting's fortunes is testament to the success of local partnerships of landowners, conservation organisations, farmers and local authorities. Perhaps, with continued effort, as set out in this action plan, the cirl bunting, along with other species of declining farmland wildlife, could regain its former status as a widespread feature of the Devon countryside.

### 3. Relevant ecology

Cirl buntings nest in dense and often thorny hedges or bushes. At coastal sites gorse is often used, whilst inland bramble growing amongst a hedge is favoured.

First eggs are laid at the end of April and up to three broods are produced. Young are fed on a mixture of invertebrates, "milky" cereal grain and weed seeds. Grasshoppers and bush-crickets become an increasingly prominent feature of chick diet after the start of July.

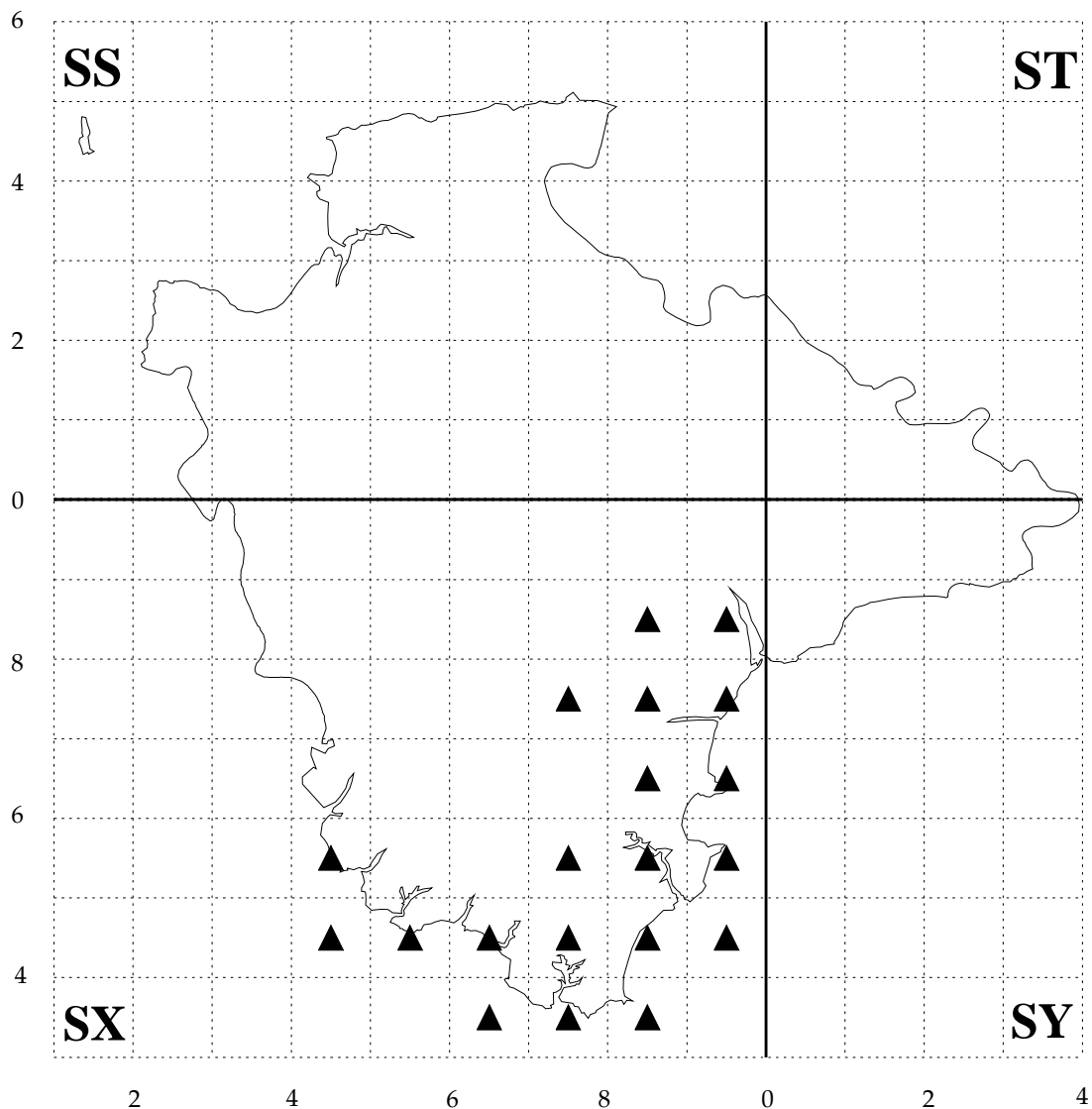
In the breeding season, adults forage for food mainly on lightly-grazed unimproved and semi-improved grassland.

Breeding success varies from year to year, and prolonged wet weather may have a detrimental effect on breeding success. The main causes of nest failure are predation (1/3 of all losses) along with other natural causes. Predation occurs at both the egg and nestling stage, with corvids and small mammals thought to be the main culprits. Starvation of nestlings is the other important loss, and their loud and persistent food-begging calls may make them all the more prone to predation.

Cereal stubble is the preferred winter habitat for cirl buntings, where they feed on invertebrates, cereal grain and weed seeds. Stubbles which are rich in broad-leaved weeds and which have a low level of volunteer cereals attract larger flocks than less weedy fields. Whilst foraging, birds tend to venture no more than 30m from the nearest hedgerow. Other habitats used in winter include brassicas, unimproved and lightly grazed pastures, and grass leys that have been allowed to go to seed. Artificial sources of food - including bird tables - are also used in winter, especially in the absence of a suitable weedy field.

Birds tend not to move very far between breeding and wintering sites (usually less than 2km). The coastal distribution of cirl buntings now seen in south Devon is very largely a reflection of the availability of suitable habitat in the county, rather than factors such as climate.

### 4. Distribution of cirl bunting in Devon (1998)



▲ Cirl Bunting presence in 10 Km squares

(Data supplied by Royal Society for the Protection of Birds)

## 5. Current population

Updated 2004:

In Britain the cirl bunting is almost wholly restricted to south Devon.

In 2003 the Devon population was estimated to be almost 700 pairs. The next full survey is planned for 2009.

## 6. Current problems for cirl bunting in Devon (1998)

- Cirl buntings are closely associated with lowland farmland, and several factors related to agricultural change have been identified as affecting the numbers and distribution of the species. The factors affecting the cirl bunting population in Devon include.
- Area of winter feeding habitat in the form of cereal stubble and other weed-rich fields.
- Area of lightly-grazed unimproved or semi-improved permanent pasture as a feeding and breeding habitat. Much of this habitat has been lost through agricultural intensification and cessation of grazing (which allows scrub to encroach).
- The switch from spring- to autumn-sown cereals.
- Number of supplementary winter feeding sites, such as stock yards.
- Availability of nesting habitat, such as tall hedges and scrub.
- Building development on nesting and wintering sites.
- Disturbance from humans at nest sites.
- Nest predation.
- Weather: few young tend to be fledged during prolonged periods of wet weather; snow cover makes food unavailable to buntings.
- The cirl bunting's reluctance to make seasonal local migrations means that the species is vulnerable to poor weather/feeding conditions. Poor powers of dispersal mean that the species does not colonise sites easily, which contributes to its restricted distribution.

## 7. Recent changes in population (updated 2004)

Prior to 1938 cirl buntings occurred as far north as North Wales and the Malvern Hills, and were common south of a line from Gloucestershire to the River Thames. During the 1970s the population contracted, leaving isolated pairs throughout its former range.

In 1982, 167 pairs were recorded; 136 of these in Devon (Sitters 1985). In 1989 a repeat survey found 114 pairs, with all but four in South Devon. Since targeted conservation efforts in Devon began in earnest, the breeding population of the cirl bunting has increased dramatically, from around 114 pairs in 1989 to almost 700 pairs in 2003. Despite these increases in density, the broad distribution has spread very little.

## 8. Current protection

Listed in the EC Birds Directive.

Listed under Appendix II of the Bern Convention.

Listed on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, making it illegal to kill, injure the species or cause disturbance to it or destroy its nest.

The Hedgerow Regulations 1997 can normally afford protection to older hedgerows, which contain specially protected bird species such as the ciril bunting.

## 9. Current positive initiatives for ciril bunting in Devon

- Enough is now known about the most important requirements of ciril buntings to enable direct conservation action to be taken. A Project Officer (joint funded by RSPB and EN) is employed to advise land managers on management practices for ciril buntings, and to promote awareness of ciril bunting conservation through publicity material and events.
- Countryside Stewardship has been one of the main tools for achieving changes in management, as the scheme provides payments to farmers for winter stubble, low-input pasture, scrub removal, arable margins and hedgerow restoration. To date there is over 220 CSS agreements in South Devon providing positive management for ciril buntings, including 1000 ha of stubble and over 2300ha of unimproved/semi-improved/low intensity grassland. This land currently holds 50% of Devon's ciril bunting population.
- Set-aside rules now provide opportunities to create habitats suitable for ciril buntings (wild bird cover or natural regeneration after cereals), although there are no extra payments for conservation management of set-aside land. The area currently under set-aside changes and is currently 5% (in 2003).
- EN's Wildlife Enhancement Scheme is available to establish management agreements with landowners of SSSIs or landowners adjacent to the SSSI where management impacts on the SSSI. The focus is on achieving favourable condition of the SSSI and, in particular, to ensure areas in favourable condition do not become unfavourable. The grant can cover capital costs as well as annual management payments and can be used together with CSS as long as they are not funding the same management. There is currently one WES agreement specifically for ciril buntings by providing arable habitat, and several agreements that are contributing to ciril buntings by enhancing the scrub/grassland habitat; this includes a global WES covering the NTs coastal SSSIs in south Devon. WES is an invaluable management tool as it enables

management to be undertaken on sites where the costs of establishing management are particularly expensive or where a landowner is currently unwilling to commit to a long-term agreement on the whole farm.

- Teignbridge District Council's Environmental Grants Scheme can provide funding for land management and capital works to benefit ciril buntings, especially where CSS is not appropriate. In addition, ciril bunting management has been incorporated into some Local Authority tenancy agreements.
- Dartmoor ESA, through DEFRA, offers agreements to protect and properly manage unimproved/semi-improved grassland and arable field margins and traditional hedgerows, and promotes the sustainable management of scrub. Although there is no payment for retaining winter stubble through the ESA, CSS can be used. Ciril buntings are recorded regularly from certain localities within the ESA.
- Land within Dartmoor National Park which supports ciril buntings may be eligible for management grants under the following schemes: top-up grants for land receiving ESA payment for management over and above the ESA prescription and grants to maintain and improve habitat for ciril buntings on land not eligible for other payments. Management agreements are also available.
- The National Trust owns large stretches of coastal land in south Devon, most of which is under beneficial management for ciril buntings (*i.e.*, CSS), either directly through NT or through agreements with tenants.
- Planning and Policy Guidance 9 (Nature Conservation), issued by DoE, explains that the presence of a protected species is a material consideration when a local planning authority is considering a development proposal which, if carried out, would be likely to result in harm to the species or its habitat. This point is reflected in policies in statutory development plan which have been prepared by a number of Devon Local Authorities.
- Ciril buntings are subject to a UK BAP and Species action plans have been produced for ciril bunting by both English Nature and RSPB (see below).
- Since 1988 the RSPB has undertaken a programme of research, including an investigation of their breeding and non-breeding habitat requirements and breeding success. A sample of the population was surveyed annually between 1993 and 1999. The last full survey was undertaken in 2003, and will be every six years thereafter.
- Members of the Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society have undertaken research into the habitat preferences of breeding and wintering ciril buntings.

- The ciril bunting is listed in the Birds of Conservation Concern red list.

## 10. Biodiversity planning context

### National BAP Context

Species of principal importance in England (NERC Act, S.41):

- Ciril bunting

Current national BAP targets can be viewed on the [Biodiversity Action Reporting System](#) (BARS).

### Associated Action Plans within the Devon BAP:

- Flower-rich meadows and pasture
- Species-rich hedgerows
- Sea cliff and slope
- Brown hare
- Barn owl
- Great green bush-cricket
- Greater horseshoe bat

## 11. Biodiversity objectives and targets for ciril bunting in Devon

### Objective 1

Increase the population of ciril bunting in Devon.

#### Targets:

- Attain a population of 1000 pairs by 2009.
- Establish 40 ha of new winter stubbles each year over the next three years.

### Objective 2

Increase the range of the ciril bunting in Devon.

## Target:

- Establish a population of 10-15 pairs in east Devon by 2009 and a population of 20-30 pairs in Teign and Exe Valleys by 2009.

Note: There is still no established population in East Devon though there are occasional records and wintering birds. The population in the Teign Valley has moved north though there has been no increase in numbers and they have apparently been lost from some areas.

## Objective 3

Foster understanding and awareness, on the part of land managers and the general public, of the conservation of the curlew and its value as an indicator of biologically diverse farmland environments.

## Target:

- Ongoing.

## 12. Wider benefits from pursuing these objectives

The pursuit of the objectives and targets set out above will not only benefit the curlew. Conservation has wider benefits and advantages for society, by providing a resource which is the basis of many aspects of the local economy, and by adding to the quality of life of the people of Devon in ways which are beyond financial measure. Thus enhancing the interests of biodiversity will also enhance the interests of society as a whole. Some of these wider benefits are as follows:

- Benefits to declining species of arable plants, and to declining seed-eating birds and other farmland wildlife.
- Benefits to green tourism as birdwatchers and other naturalists travel from far and wide to see Devon's curlews and associated wildlife.
- Promotion of a mixed farming pattern in Devon.

## 13. Priority or indicative actions for curlew in Devon

Action	Key Partners
Devon BAP Version: May 2009	8

1. Ensure that the new agri-environment schemes adequately replace the options currently available within CSS. Seek to retain management of sites already undertaking sympathetic management and review agreements that are nearing the end of their 10-year period.	DEFRA; RSPB; DWT ; FWAG; TeDC; EDDC
2. Continue to target agri-environment scheme within current cirl bunting area and the potential expansion areas e.g. E. Devon. Promote appropriate management prescriptions, e.g. winter stubbles, wildlife seed mixtures, 6m grass and cultivated margins and hedgerow management in target areas to provide a network of adjacent sites.	DEFRA; RSPB; DWT ; FWAG; TeDC; EDDC
3. Ensure planning authorities consult RSPB, EN and DWT over planning applications on or near cirl bunting sites. This includes applications for hedgerow removal under the Hedgerow Regulations. Develop Supplementary Planning Guidance to guide developers.	LAs; RSPB; EN; DWT
4. Monitor populations and distribution of cirl buntings to help inform land management and planning decisions and to help assess the success (or otherwise) of agri-environment scheme agreements.	RSPB; EN; DBWPS
5. Ensure that relevant land owners and land managers (including nature reserves) are aware of, and take account of, the needs of cirl buntings in the management of their land. Continue the programme of advisory work on habitat management through training, personal contact and advisory material.	DEFRA; DWT; RSPB; FWAG; CLA
6. Ensure that hedge-cutting operations in cirl bunting areas are carried out to minimise disturbance and to encourage suitable nesting sites.	DCC; RSPB; DWT; FWAG; DEFRA
7. Ensure that forestry and tree planting schemes are not carried out in cirl bunting areas.	FA; DEFRA
8. Maintain a high profile for cirl buntings as a flagship species for farming and wildlife and the success of working in partnership by holding cirl bunting events, education visits and 'Save our Cirl Buntings' schools project.	RSPB; EN; FWAG; DWT
9. Pursue other forms of funding where agri-environment is not appropriate.	RSPB; EN; LAs; NT
10. Ensure management for achieving favourable condition of SSSIs is compatible with cirl bunting conservation.	EN; RSPB; NT

Cirl Bunting Action Plan Champion - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Abbreviations used in text and table

BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
CLA	Country Land & Business Association
CS	Countryside Stewardship
DBWPS	Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society
DCC	Devon County Council
DEFRA	Department of Environment, food and Rural Affairs
DWT	Devon Wildlife Trust
EDDC	East Devon District Council
EN	English Nature
FA	Forestry Authority
FWAG	Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
LAs	Local Authorities
NFU	National Farmers Union
NT	National Trust

RSPB      Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
TeDC      Teignbridge District Council