

# Skylark

*Alauda arvensis*



## Description

With its famous ascending and prolonged song flight, the Skylark was once the most distinctive bird of open agricultural terrain and other grassy areas.

The bird has a complex pattern of buff and brown plumage, a fairly stout beak, and short crest. In flight, the wings and short tail have trailing edges of white. The Skylark avoids trees, and nests on the ground in vegetation 20–50cm high. This vegetation must be open enough to give the bird easy access.

They have two to three broods between April and August. Both autumn- and winter-sown cereals grow too tall and dense by spring and grass silage is cut too frequently to allow successful breeding. Adults feed on the seeds of crops and weeds in winter, and along with the chicks, they feed on insects in summer. This food is found in crops, set-aside and pasture land.

In winter, birds usually flock together on suitable feeding habitat and may move around the country during harsh weather.

## National Status

The Skylark is amongst the most widespread of open country breeding birds. Nonetheless, the UK breeding population is in sharp decline. Numbers on lowland farms fell by 61% between 1971–1995. Recent studies indicate similarly steep declines in upland habitats. The Skylark is a priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan on account of its declining population.

## Local Status

Skylarks continue to breed throughout Barnsley wherever suitable habitat remains and are absent only from the most heavily built-up areas. The breeding population in 1997–99 was thought to be around 500–750 pairs and in 2004 a survey estimated 660 pairs.

## Legal Status

The Skylark is protected under the EC Birds Directive and the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.

## Links with other Action Plans

- HAP7 Floodplain Grazing Marsh
- HAP8 Lowland Meadows
- HAP9 Lowland Dry Acidic Grassland
- HAPI3 Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture
- HAPI7 Open Mosaic Habitats on Previously Developed Land

### **Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline**

- Intensive management of arable fields has reduced weeds and insect prey through the use of agrochemicals.
- The change from spring- to autumn-sowing of cereals has reduced the availability of weedy stubble fields, which provide an essential food resource and suitable nesting habitat.
- Conversion of lowland grassland to arable, intensive management of grasslands and loss of mixed farms.
- The reasons for decline in the uplands are the loss of natural meadow areas and appropriate management.
- Early silage cutting which destroys nests and exposes them to predators.
- Conversion of farmland to silage production and intensification of arable land has reduced both feeding and nesting habitat.
- Scrub encroachment in some areas not under agriculture.
- Loss of grassland habitat to development and tree-planting.

### **Current Local Action**

- Local distribution and population size were estimated by Barnsley Bird Study Group surveys in 1999.
- An additional estimated survey was undertaken by volunteers and coordinated and published by Barnsley Biodiversity Trust in 2004, entitled, *Birds of Conservation Concern*.
- Current survey by members of Barnsley Bird Study Group towards the forthcoming *Breeding Bird Atlas*.

### **Proposed Local Action**

- Assess current coverage of DEFRA Stewardship Schemes that support Skylark options (Natural England lead).
- Encourage landowners to take up a Stewardship Scheme to support Skylark (Natural England lead).
- Extract information from the *Barnsley Bird Study Group Breeding Bird Survey* to provide populations and mapping of breeding Skylark.

### **BMBC Land Ownership and Management Actions**

- Review management of public green space, industrial sites and derelict land to provide suitable undisturbed grassland habitat for Skylark.