The value of green belt south of Cambridge to populations of farmland birds (2023)

Report of a 12-year study

John Meed, January 2024

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Introduction

For the last twelve years I have conducted ecological surveys – focusing in particular on farmland birds – in a square kilometre of green belt south of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus to assess the levels of the biodiversity of an area close to the city.

The area studied is largely arable land, with mature hedgerows, watercourses, ponds, scrub and woodland, including the Nine Wells local nature reserve (LNR – right). It includes a cycle path and footpath, and land management has created several permissive footpaths, flower-rich field margins and additional woodland (see Appendix 1). It is widely used by walkers, cyclists and families.

Why do farmland birds matter?

Farmland birds have suffered major declines in recent decades.

- Grey partridge declined by 93% between 1970 and 2018 and corn bunting (right) by 89% while yellow wagtail declined by 68%, yellowhammer by 60% and skylark and linnet by 56% (1).
- Farmland birds are indicators for the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy (2) and 11 of the 19 indicator species are 'red list' birds of 'high conservation concern' (3).
- Grey partridge are now classified as 'vulnerable' to extinction in the UK while corn bunting and yellow wagtail are classified as 'near threatened' with extinction (3).

Birds are indicator species because of their place as consumers in the ecosystem, and declines in bird populations indicate wider problems. The *State of Nature* 2023 report (4) states that 'The abundance indicator for common breeding birds declined by 14%; within this group, farmland birds have suffered particularly strong declines of on average 58%.'

Methodology

I monitor the area using a combination of methods. As a British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) surveyor I adopt their Breeding Bird Survey methodology (5), which involves a habitat survey and walking two parallel transects, each of 1 km, on 2–3 occasions early and later in the breeding season; this approach gives a good snapshot of the species present in an area. I did my transect walks on April 12, May 3 and May 30.

In summer I build a more accurate picture of the number of breeding pairs, drawing on my experience as a surveyor for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Volunteer and Farmer Alliance (6). In these visits I observe breeding signs such as singing males, territorial behaviour, courtship displays, nest building and juvenile birds. In summer I also survey butterflies and dragonflies for the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme.

I also visit the site regularly in the autumn and winter, monitoring passage migrants and winter visitors, and in particular grey partridge populations. In 2023 I made over 40 visits.





Findings

Over the twelve years I have recorded 101 bird species including 22 red list species and 32 amber list species. See Appendices 2 and 3.

In 2023 I recorded 82 species on the three transect walks and other visits:

- On the first transect walk: 25 species and 191 individuals
- On the second transect walk: 29 species and 222 individuals
- On the third transect walk: 30 species and 163 individuals



The 82 species recorded included 17 of the 19 farmland bird indicator species for the Sustainable Development Strategy, of which 15 bred (Appendix 4). In total I recorded 16 red list species and 26 amber list species. This table shows the indicator species recorded.

Breeding red list indicator species	Other indicator species		
 50 pairs of skylarks 12 pairs of grey partridge 13 pairs of linnets 8 pairs of corn buntings 11 pairs of yellowhammers (above) 7 pairs of greenfinches 1 pair of yellow wagtails 6+ pairs of starlings 1 pair of lapwing attempted to breed 	 All the other amber and green-listed indicator species were present, and most bred: 24 pairs of whitethroats 2 pairs of reed buntings 3 pairs of stock dove Goldfinch, wood pigeons and jackdaws all bred in good numbers Kestrels and rooks nest nearby and visit regularly 		

In total 48 species bred, including red listed house martins and house sparrows, as well as several other amber-listed species including song thrush and dunnock. The area continues to attract migrating birds, including this year willow warblers and wheatear on migration.

I will discuss in more detail at my findings about the populations of two key red list species that do unusually well in the fields around Nine Wells:

- Grey partridge (right)
- Corn bunting

I will then go on to examine my findings for other species.



I have written up my observations of the fascinating behaviour of these species, and especially grey partridge and corn bunting, in much greater detail in my book *A haven for farmland birds* (7). For more information see johnmeed.net/ecology.

Grey partridge

Grey partridge spring pairs (12) were fewer than in recent years, but followed a low of 50 autumn birds in 2022. In both 2018 and 2022 the lower autumn numbers may have been caused by a shortage of chick food resulting from exceptionally dry summers.



Numbers in the autumn of 2023 represented some improvement; however I recorded no partridge in Fields 1 and 2, probably as a result of development work in Field 1, and this may have had an impact on overall numbers. Fields 4 and 6d were centres of the 2023 population.



The counts remain good: other studies suggest that the arable farms typical of Cambridgeshire support between 0–5 pairs/km² in spring and 0–20 birds/km² in the autumn. Only with high levels of management aimed at the species do numbers approach those at Nine Wells, as in the GWCT's Grey Partridge Demonstration Project near Royston (8).

Corn bunting 2014–23

In 2023 I recorded 8 singing male **corn buntings**, three fewer than last year, and flocks of over 15 birds in the early autumn. The number of birds recorded in this study is important; there are now only 11,000 corn bunting territories in the UK and despite the fact that East Anglia is now one of their main remaining areas, a recent survey of populations found a very patchy distribution of singing males across Cambridgeshire (9). The species' recent extinction in Ireland risks being repeated in large parts of Britain if breeding sites are not protected.



In early May works on the Cambridge South station began to impinge on the railway line and may have contributed to the smaller number of territories.

Other red-list farmland indicator species

Four other red-listed species have also been a key focus of my study, and this graph shows their breeding populations over recent years:



- Skylark populations (right), with around 50 breeding pairs, had another good year. I base estimates of skylark numbers on singing males observed (greatest on May 3rd). This population density is higher than the mean recorded for similar crops in the BTO's skylark survey (10). Winter counts numbered up to 150 birds.
- I estimated the linnet population (right) at 13 pairs; linnets tend to nest more communally than other species (11) so populations are harder to estimate than species with distinct territories. Winter flocks included 40+ birds on November 14th.
- Yellowhammer populations (right), at around 11 breeding pairs, were similar to last year, and compare well with populations found by Bradbury et al (12). Densities were highest in the hedge along Granhams Road and the ditch along the cycle path. Winter flocks were frequent, with over 20 birds regularly during the autumn.
- One pair of **yellow wagtail** (below) also bred, in or near to Field 7. In recent years 2–3 pairs have bred consistently. This species is now classified as 'near threatened' in the UK, with just 20,000 breeding pairs.
- **Greenfinch** were moved to the red list this year, following a decline of 68% in the years 2008-2018, largely as a result of the trichomonas parasite. However, they have recovered well in my study area. In 2012, I recorded a single pair. By 2016 I recorded 4 pairs, and this year at least 7 pairs bred.
- At least 6 pairs of **starlings** bred, continuing the recent increase; flocks of up to 50 were present in the winter.
- A **lapwing** pair attempted to breed in Field 3, and may well have laid eggs. However, I have no evidence that chicks hatched or were reared.

All the other farmland bird indicator species were present:

- Whitethroat (right) with 24 breeding pairs, were well up on the 14 in 2024. Densities were highest along the hedges around Nine Wells and in the hedges along Granham's Road. The most birds on one occasion was 14, on May 10th.
- Two-three pairs of stock dove bred.
- Reed bunting (right) populations (2 pairs) were two down on 2022.
- Kestrel and rooks breed nearby and visit regularly.

Goldfinch, jackdaws and wood pigeon all bred.













Other species

Other notable bird records included:

- House sparrows, red-listed birds that have been scarce visitors to the site, bred for the first time in the bushes along the railway line from August 7th onwards at least 15 were always present, including recently fledged youngsters.
- A pair of coots, which I had never recorded before on the site, raised young in the pond by the road bridge.
- A little ringed plover, another new species, spent some time in the area during the spring

 I recorded one or two birds 15 times between April 15th and June 6th. It is unclear whether a pair was ever present, and there was no clear breeding evidence. The birds used an area of water and shingle near to Papworth Hospital and on April 19th a green sandpiper, also new to the site, stopped there.
- A pair of red kites attempted to nest in the woodland on White Hill and may have been successful, but I was away during the time when young would have fledged. The species became extinct in England in 1871 and did not breed again until reintroduced in 1989!
- Once again a pair of reed warblers bred in the bushes along Hobson's Brook and raised young successfully. A second (and possibly third) pair also attempted to breed.
- At the turn of the year I received reliable reports of barn owls using the barn on White Hill first confirmed records though there is no evidence that they breed. And on November 17 another new species, brambling, was present.
- For ten days in late January temperatures rarely rose above freezing and a teal made the most of the unfrozen water flowing from Nine Wells.
- Work on the Cambridge South station may have contributed to fewer house martin nests under the bridge, and I recorded no signs of swallows breeding there though two pairs bred in the barn at White Hill Farm.
- Sadly, I recorded very few chaffinch and none in the breeding season and no bullfinches. Both species bred in the early years of my study.

Revised habitat survey

I revised the habitat survey in the light of loss of Field 1, new hedgerows and field uses. In summary:

- The total cropped area is 88 hectares. The total uncropped area is 12.5 hectares including woodland (4ha), set-aside (4ha), margins (c3ha) and hedges (c1.5ha).
- There are now 5.5km of hedgerows (of which almost half a km has been planted recently); 5km of margins; and 1.5km of streams and ditches.
- There are also 4 new ponds adjoining the new development.

Field 6d, owned and farmed by Timothy Sills, provides the 4 hectares of set-aside. It is planted with a winter bird seed mix and during 2023 was home to half the autumn grey partridges as well as good flocks of linnet, yellowhammer and skylark. The two recently-planted hedges are now mature enough to provide nest sites for grey partridge.

It is important that over 10% of the site is uncropped, as this allows a good range of arable weeds to grow, which provide food for the birds in the form of leaves, shoots and seeds. They are host plants for the invertebrates that grey partridge chicks and other young birds depend on in their early days. In addition, weeds are sometimes present in cropped areas; in 2023 this was notably the case with Fields 2, 7 and 8 (County Council land farmed by Peter Wombwell) which were planted with beans. Weeds present included field pansies, scarlet pimpernel, poppies, thistles, yarrow, and mayweed and they attracted butterflies, pollinators and farmland birds.

Furthermore, cultivation techniques have changed over the course of my study. Whereas ten years ago fields were frequently ploughed, this is now rarely the case. Field 4 (owned by St John's College and farmed by the Webster family) has in recent years been left as stubble into the autumn, with the next crop drilled directly into the soil without ploughing. Several coveys of grey partridge spend the winter in the field, along with skylarks, finches and hares.

I continue to record other, non-bird, species:

- **Mammals**: I continue to record water vole in Hobson's Brook important as water vole numbers in Britain have fallen disastrously. Up to 20 brown hare, principally in Fields 4 and 6, represent a good population of another declining species (13). I have recorded a total of 20 mammal species over the course of the study to 20.
- **Amphibians and reptiles**: Frogs spawned in at least one of the new ponds, my first record of any amphibian across the site. Common lizard and grass snake are the only reptiles.
- **Invertebrates**: Brown argus butterflies, one of the star species on the site, had a remarkable year. I regularly recorded 5 from the first brood in May and June, and 15 from the second brood from July through to early September. Butterfly numbers were generally good with 160 individuals and 18 species on August 9th. Other species that did particularly well were holly blues (up to 38 individuals), small heath (up to 27 individuals) and orange tips (up to 18 individuals). The small heath is now a priority species because of the decline in its population. I also recorded 14 species of dragonfly and damselfly. The site supports good populations of other invertebrates including moths, grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, flies, ants, bees and wasps.
- **Flora**: I have recorded over 40 trees and shrubs including the rare black poplar (right), and well over 100 species of flowering plants. The area has mature hedgerows with thick growth and good variety and extensive grassy and flower-rich margins.





Discussion

In *A haven for farmland birds* I argue that 'three key factors that contribute to the success of the farmland birds and other wildlife in the fields around Nine Wells:

- 'Firstly, the geology of the site the combination of the low chalk hill of White Hill with the flatter surrounding fields provides an important foundation. Above all, this produces the springs that are a vital source of water and essential for the populations of water voles, dragonflies and other aquatic plants and animals.
- 'Secondly, the variety of habitats copses, hedgerows, ditches, ponds and grassy and flower-rich margins provide an important complement to the arable fields. They offer food, shelter and nesting habitat for the endangered farmland birds and brown hares, and they also help to explain the richness of the overall flora and fauna across the site.
- 'Thirdly, the management of the land the restrained use of pesticides, the approaches to cultivation, the attention to spring chick food and winter bird food all help to create space for nature.'

For grey partridge, the mosaic of habitats helps provide their three key requirements. Grassy, raised hedge bottoms, notably between Fields 4 and 5 and on the slope of Field 6, provide good nesting sites. Food for chicks in the form of invertebrates live in the field margins and on arable weeds. Autumn stubbles provide winter food for the coveys, while since 2019 the winter bird food crop in Field 6d have helped contribute to high survival rates (as well as meadow pipits, larks and finches).

The impact of development

However, other factors are less favourable to the threatened farmland species. Since I began my study, there has been considerable development of the Biomedical Campus, including now most of Field 1. This has had a significant impact on grey partridge: in 2017 I recorded 11 pairs in and around Field 1, but I have recorded no partridge there or in Field 2 this year – loss of habitat and high noise levels may both explain this. The partridges have become concentrated in the other fields, and while changes in land management have been positive, it is likely that the loss of habitat has contributed to a reduced population. The work on Cambridge South station almost certainly reduced corn bunting territories.

What little remains of Field 1, and all of Field 2 are scheduled for development, while Fields 7 and 8 have been recommended for development by the local councils in the next local plan. Such development would remove the last breeding sites of yellow wagtail, halve the number of corn bunting and reduce breeding sites for grey partridge and other red list birds.

The problem is where wildlife can go if good existing habitat is lost. The square kilometre of land on the other side of Granham's Road comprises just four fields, far less margin habitat and three hedges, one of which is a poor remnant with large gaps. The land does support skylark, but is less welcoming to the other red list species, and while partridge occasionally feed there they are unlikely to breed. As further fields are lost, it will be essential to improve habitat here to provide a refuge for displaced wildlife.

Conclusions

The data I have gathered over the last eleven years provide a picture of an area of green belt arable land on the outskirts of the city of Cambridge that supports important breeding populations of threatened farmland birds and other wildlife.

- 1 Over the period of my study the site has supported exceptional populations of grey partridge and corn bunting (species that have declined by around 90% since 1970) and the site may well be among the best in Cambridgeshire for both species.
- 2 Other red list farmland species also thrive in the area, notably yellow wagtail, linnet, skylark and yellowhammer. The area also supports good populations of water vole and brown hare, as well as plants and invertebrates.
- 3 Habitat variety and land management contribute to the richness of the area. The combination of arable crops with grassy hedgerow bottoms and margins benefit grey partridge, skylark, corn bunting and yellow wagtail; the ditches benefit yellowhammer and reed bunting, as well as water vole.
- 4 Development and infrastructure work has resulted in disruption and lost farmland habitat. This has led to a concentration of birds in the relatively undisturbed areas, and is a likely cause of 2023's lower grey partridge and corn bunting populations.
- 5 Proposed further construction and infrastructure development would place real pressure on populations. If this were to go ahead, considerable, and urgent, new habitat creation would be needed in adjoining fields to provide a refuge for displaced wildlife.

John Meed, January 2024

John Meed is a researcher, writer and musician who lives in south Cambridge. His book *A haven for farmland birds* provides much more detail about the ecology, behaviour and social lives of the birds he has studied in this area. See: johnmeed.net/ecology

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11 Moorcroft, D and Wilson, J (2000) The ecology of linnets *Carduelis cannabina* on lowland farmland, in Aebischer, N J et al, *Ecology and conservation of lowland farmland birds*, British Ornithologists' Union, pp 173–181. The RSPB's Hope Farm density rose from 3 pairs to 19 pairs after management.

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13 Hutchings, M.R. and Harris, S., (1996), *The current status of the brown hare (Lepus europaeus) in Britain* recorded a mean density of 7.12 hares/km² on arable land

Appendix 1: The area covered



Looking towards White Hill



The Nine Wells LNR from White Hill



Mature hedge and copse



Grey partridge on Field 4, winter 2022



Cycle path and flower-rich margin



Yellowhammer on Field 4/5 hedge, 2020

Appendix 2: Species recorded (2012–23)

This list shows the 101 bird species recorded over the last 12 years: 22 red list birds, 32 amber list birds, and 47 green list species. The numbers show the number of breeding pairs/territories (except n/c where not counted); (S) denotes summer visitor, (W) winter visitor, (P) passage migrant and *italic* = not recorded in 2023.

Species		Species		Species		Species	
Barn owl		Garden warbler	1 (S)	Linnet	13	Sedge warbler	Р
Barnacle goose	W	Goldcrest	1	Little egret	W	Siskin	W
Blackbird	c7	Golden plover	W	Little ringed plover	Р	Skylark	50
Blackcap	9 (S)	Goldfinch	c6	Long-tailed tit	c5	Snipe	W
Black-headed gull		Great black-back gull	W	Magpie	c8	Song thrush	5
Blue tit	c12	Gt spot woodpecker	2	Mallard	3	Sparrowhawk	
Brambling	W	Great tit	c12	Marsh harrier		Starling	c6
Bullfinch		Green woodpecker	2	Meadow pipit	W	Stock dove	3
Buzzard	1	Greenfinch	7	Merlin	W	Stonechat	W
Canada goose	W	Green sandpiper	Р	Mistle thrush	1	Swallow	2
Carrion crow	n/c	Grey heron		Moorhen	4	Swift	S
Chaffinch	W	Greylag goose		Mute swan		Tawny owl	?
Chiffchaff	6 (S)	Grey partridge	12	Peregrine		Teal	W
Coal tit	1	Herring gull	W	Pheasant	3	Tree pipit	Р
Collared dove		Hobby	Р	Pied wagtail	3	Turtle dove	Р
Common gull	W	House martin	5 (S)	Raven		Wheatear	Р
Common tern	S	House sparrow	2	Red kite	1	Whinchat	Р
Coot	1	Jack snipe		Red-legged partridge	n/c	Whitethroat	24
Cormorant		Jackdaw	n/c	Redstart	Р	Willow warbler	Р
Corn bunting	8	Jay	2	Redwing	W	Wood pigeon	n/c
Crane		Kestrel		Reed bunting	2	Wren	c15
Cuckoo	S	Kingfisher	W	Reed warbler	1	Yellow wagtail	1
Dunnock	c16	Lapwing	1	Ring ouzel	Р	Yellowhammer	11
Egyptian goose		Lesser black-back gull	W	Robin	c18		
Feral pigeon	n/c	Lesser redpoll	W	Rook			
Fieldfare	W	Lesser whitethroat	4	Sand martin	Р		

This table shows the 25 butterfly species and 16 dragonfly/damselfly species recorded:

Butterflies			
Brimstone	Green-veined white	Orange tip	Small skipper
Brown argus	Grizzled skipper	Painted lady	Small tortoiseshell
Clouded yellow	Holly blue	Peacock	Small white
Comma	Large skipper	Red admiral	Speckled wood
Common blue	Large white	Ringlet	
Essex skipper	Marbled white	Small copper	
Gatekeeper	Meadow brown	Small heath	
Dragonflies			
Azure damselfly	Broad-bodied chaser	Emperor	Ruddy darter
Banded demoiselle	Brown hawker	Four-spotted chaser	Small red-eyed damselfly
Black-tailed skimmer	Common blue damselfly	Large red damselfly	Southern hawker
Blue-tailed damselfly	Common darter	Migrant hawker	Willow emerald

Appendix 3: Maps showing breeding pairs

These maps show estimated breeding pairs/territories in 2023 of six red-listed farmland bird indicator species breeding in the study area:

Grey partridge (P)



Corn bunting (CB)



Yellowhammer (Y), yellow wagtail (YW)

Linnet (LI) and skylark (S)





Appendix 4: Farmland bird indicator species

This table shows the 19 species on the UK Farmland Bird Indicator; the second column shows species which I recorded on the site in 2023; the third column shows species which bred on the site; and the final column shows the percentage change in their national populations for the period 1970-2018:

Species	Present?	Breeding?	Per cent change**
Turtle dove	(2019*)	_	-98%
Grey partridge	X	X	-93%
Tree sparrow	_	_	-90%
Corn bunting	X	X	-89%
Starling	X	X	-82%
Yellow wagtail	X	X	-68%
Lapwing	X	?	-64%
Greenfinch	X	X	-64%
Yellowhammer	X	X	-60%
Skylark	X	X	-56%
Linnet	X	X	-56%
Kestrel	X	_	-48%
Reed bunting	X	X	-28%
Whitethroat	X	X	-13%
Rook	X	_	+5%
Woodpigeon	X	X	+121%
Stock dove	X	X	+127%
Jackdaw	\boxtimes	X	+157%
Goldfinch	\boxtimes	\boxtimes	+197%

* A juvenile turtle dove passed through on migration in 2019.

** Source: Burns F, Eaton MA, Balmer DE, Banks A, Caldow R, Donelan JL, Douse A, Duigan C, Foster S, Frost T, Grice PV, Hall C, Hanmer HJ, Harris SJ, Johnstone I, Lindley P, McCulloch N, Noble DG, Risely K, Robinson RA, Wotton S (2020) *The state of the UK's birds 2020*. The RSPB, BTO, WWT, DAERA, JNCC, NatureScot, NE and NRW, Sandy, Bedfordshire