

## BERKSHIRE LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY

### SUBMISSION BY THE BERKSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

The Berkshire Ornithological Club (BOC) has been keeping records of birds since 1947, and has been the compiler and publisher of the county bird reports since 1974. It has been supported by the Newbury District Ornithological Club (NDOC) in this role. It supported the production of two atlas projects, the first of breeding birds between 1987 and 1989, the second of both breeding and wintering birds between 2007 and 2011. It also hosts the county bird record database.

The results of the two local atlas projects have been published in book form in the two editions of *The Birds of Berkshire* published in 1996 and 2013 (referred to in this paper as “the County Atlas”), and are available on-line on the club’s website, at [County Atlas | Berkshire Ornithological Club \(berksoc.org.uk\)](http://berksoc.org.uk). The club’s conservation sub-committee has run surveys of some species and farmland sites, supports the work of local site-specific groups such as the Theale Area Bird Conservation Group, the Lavell’s Wetland Trust and Moor Green Group and also encourages participation locally in the national monitoring surveys run by the BTO.

In 2022, we published *Berkshire’s Birdscapes*, written by the late Renton Righelato. This draws on the materials referred to above, and summarises the main habitats of the county, the changes that have occurred and the impact that this has had on the county’s birdlife. At the same time, we drew up a list of “Birds of Conservation Concern” that can be viewed on-line at [Berkshire-Species-of-Conservation-Concern.pdf \(berksoc.org.uk\)](http://berksoc.org.uk) .

These representations and suggestions are derived from these resources, and are intended to be relied upon in stages 1,3,4 & 5 of the LNRS formulations process (mapping areas of importance; describing the areas on their importance; agreeing priorities and potential measures and mapping areas that could be of particular importance). Stage 2 only applies to reviews of the LNRS once it has been implemented. We look at current protected sites, potential new sites and landscape-scale initiatives to achieve a strategy that fulfils the requirements of the Lawton Principles of “more, bigger and better joined” spaces for nature in the county.

In making these representations there are some underlying themes and principles we consider should run through the LNRS as it is promulgated.

1 – Any creation or improvement of habitats or sites needs to include funding for long-term maintenance as well as the initial work. There have been examples of

sites that have been designated but not maintained (such as Aldermaston Gravel Pits), and some of our proposals specifically are for support for maintenance of sites.

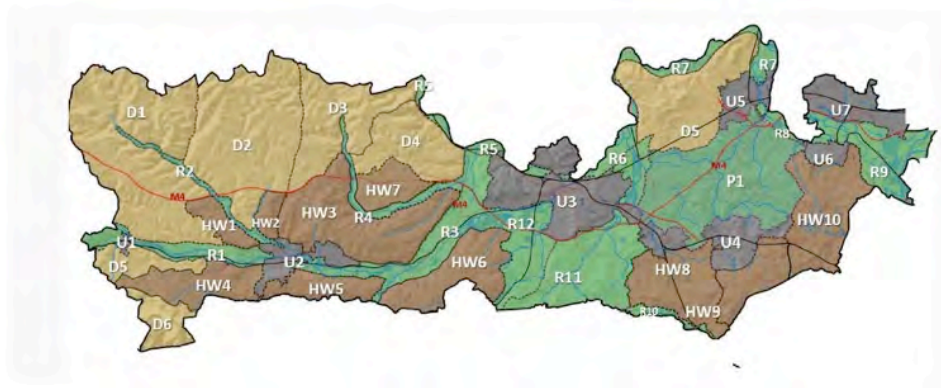
2– We urge recognition of the site-specific groups and their contribution. The work done by the groups we mention above at Theale Gravel Pits, the Loddon and Blackwater valley gravel pits and Fobney Island in Reading. These groups already exist, and have members who are committed to the sites they manage, so are in a position to deliver nature recovery efficiently by bringing their existing resources and knowledge to bear.

3 - There has to be recognition of the conflict between the goals of protecting species and access to the countryside. This has been an issue at heathland sites like Greenham Common and wetland sites such as Hosehill Lake, Theale. While access to nature is welcome as part of any proposed scheme, there should also be provision for controlling access to areas where uncontrolled access is an identified threat for wildlife.

4 – In identifying sites, recognition should be given that it is the mosaic of habitats that is as important as identifying areas of a particular habitat. This is particularly relevant for bird species, where different habitats for breeding, feeding and roosting in proximity contribute towards an area’s importance for birdlife, and potential for enhancement.

## 2 BERKSHIRE’S PRINCIPAL HABITATS AND THEIR BIRDLIFE

Although one of the smallest inland counties in England, it has considerable habitat diversity. The BOC has divided the county into habitat areas to use for analysis of its bird records, and almost all the county can be broadly divided between four main habitat categories. Fig 1 is the map of the county showing these areas



**Fig 1 – Principal habitat areas of Berkshire**

Chalk downs & hills – beige; Acid heaths and woods – brown; River valleys and plains – green; Urban areas - grey

### 3 THE PRIORITY SPECIES

We attach at Appendix 1 a copy of our “Birds of Conservation Concern” published in 2022. Note that the conservation actions in the right-hand comment referred to actions within the resources of the BOC, and not intended as local policy prescriptions or suggestions.

In addition to these species, there are some species that would benefit from conservation measures, or which are currently the subject of conservation measures that merit support.

These are-

**Peregrine** – there is a small population of this species that has spread across southern England in recent years, using largely urban sites, which usually require support by way of the provision or improvement of nest-box sites and liaison with the owners or managers of the buildings on which they are nesting.

**Swift** – a declining long-distance migrant, largely dependent upon artificial nest sites in roofs or similar, many of which have been lost as older buildings have been repaired or updated. The BOC has provided artificial nest boxes to provide new or replacement sites.

**Black Redstart** – a species with a very small local breeding population, that usually uses town centre or other urban sites.

**Linnet** – a farmland species that has largely retreated to the higher areas of the Downs, where it still breeds and forms winter feeding flocks that benefit from over-winter stubbles and areas of uncut weeds.

**Winter visitors** – there are a considerable number of winter visitors that occur in the county, some in substantial numbers, and a few in nationally important (or near nationally important) numbers, particularly in wetland areas, on waterbodies or in open country. These include – Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Smew and other wildfowl, Water Rail, Hen Harrier, Lapwing, Golden Plover, Snipe, Woodcock, Lesser Black-backed and Herring Gulls, Short-eared Owl, Skylark, Starling and Redpoll.

### 4 SUGGESTED NATURE RECOVERY TARGETS – SITES AND PROJECTS.

#### 4.1 - Habitat Area – Chalk Downs and hills

This comprises much of the north and west of the county, with a small part of the Hampshire Downs in the south-west corner of the county. The area is currently dominated by arable cultivation, but there are a number of other land uses and landscape features that add to its value for wildlife. There are substantial areas of permanent grassland associated with the horseracing industry, notably areas of

“dead land” around and between horse gallops, still some chalk grassland on slopes too steep for cultivation, and the corridors created by the Ridgeway and other old drove roads, with wide uncultivated margins including thorn scrub providing additional feeding and nesting habitats.

The County Atlas surveys have shown that the high tops of the Berkshire Downs have become a refuge for many of the red-listed birds of farmland that have disappeared or largely disappeared from the rest of the county, and indeed the chalklands of (for example) Hampshire. These include Lapwing, Stone Curlew, Quail, Grey Partridge, Yellow Wagtail, Linnet, Yellowhammer and Corn Bunting. In addition, there is a very small population (2-3 pairs) of Curlew, a nationally threatened species. There is also a winter roost of Short-eared Owls at one site.

In addition to the impact of modern agricultural practice, there is a problem with recreational pressure at the most popular spots, particularly from dogs that are not kept under control, disturbing both breeding and wintering birds.

### **Opportunities**

As highlighted above, the higher areas, particularly around the scarp on the northern side of the Berkshire Downs, an area that crosses over the Oxfordshire and (in the west) Wiltshire, county borders, is a refuge for many scarce and declining birds of farmland and open country. These areas are predominantly either farmed for arable crops, or used as gallops by the horse-racing industry. Our records and surveys indicate that the value of these areas for birds is enhanced by the mosaic of habitats described above, and any element of the LNRS relating to these areas should concentrate on encouraging the creation and maintenance of the mix of these elements. This should include-

- 1 - the encouragement of managing the margins of drove roads for wildlife,
- 2 – retaining but managing any scrub areas
- 3 - retaining informal hedges and field margins, allowing them to grow and avoiding tidying up field and track margins, to provide nesting habitat and feeding resources for birds.
- 4 - provision of set-aside areas and winter stubbles and supplemental winter feeding to increase over-winter survival of seed-eating birds,
- 5 – within field measures to safeguard or encourage ground-nesting birds. There has been success in recent decades in maintaining the local population of Stone-Curlew, and there are three species that might be a focus of action, namely Grey Partridge, Lapwing (both of whose numbers continue to decline at an alarming rate) and Curlew (a nationally threatened species with a very small local breeding population).

Some farm clusters have already been established, and the North Wessex Downs AONB office has taken a role in promoting these in the AONB. Other landowners

(notably the Sheepdrove Estate near Lambourn) have implemented wildlife friendly management regimes. The continued promotion of such measures, and their extension to the horseracing industry should be a key part of the LNRS.

In areas at risk of disturbance from recreation (such as the busier stretches of the Ridgeway) measures to reduce or control this, including signage, education of the public and dog-proof fencing of sensitive sites should form part of the LNRS.

#### **4.2 - Habitat Area – Acid heath and woodlands**

The heaths and forest of the acidic soils in the south and east of the county are a part of one of Britain's important maritime heaths. In common with most of these in southern England, they have been considerably reduced by development, conversion to plantation forestry and scrub invasion. These threats are compounded by their proximity to urban and suburban areas, leading to recreational pressure and problems from disturbance and predation from domestic pets. Notwithstanding, they remain important for a number of scarce or threatened birds, notably Nightjar, Woodcock, Tree Pipit, Woodlark and Dartford Warbler.

Well-managed rotational forestry can create transient suitable habitat for some of these heathland specialists, and for scarcer woodland species like Redstart, Firecrest, Siskin, Redpoll, Crossbill and (in the past) Wood Warbler and Hawfinch. Many traditional woodlands in county appear to have deteriorated from a wildlife perspective, possibly as a result of abandonment of traditional management as it ceased to be a resource for firewood and materials for building, tool- and furniture-making and more recently as the local deer population has expanded, which has been blamed for the removal of the ground cover layer in woodlands and prevention of natural woodland regeneration. A number of woodland birds, including Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, Willow and Marsh Tit have declined, the first two being on the verge of extinction locally.

There is a call for the planting of more trees to aid carbon sequestration. However, this could pose a threat to other habitats, including heathland, a substantial proportion of which has previously been appropriated towards forestry. Much of east Berkshire already has greater woodland cover than most of England.

### **Sites and Opportunites**

#### **A - Current Heathland sites designated or managed for wildlife**

There are currently a number of heathland sites managed as nature reserves. These represent a small proportion of the original extent of heaths in the county. They depend on continued management to avoid scrub and birch encroachment, and those at Greenham/Crookham, Padworth and Wildmoor Heath experience

disturbance from recreational pressure. The continued support of their management plans and for restoration and improvement works should form an important element of the LNRS. As with sensitive downland sites, measures to control recreational disturbance, especially from dogs off leads should be implemented. In the east of the county this should include co-operation with adjoining areas to promote the use of SANGS created to ease pressure on the heaths pursuant to policies to protect the Thames Basin Heaths.

- 1.1 Greenham and Crookham Commons (BBOWT for West Berkshire Council) -**
- 1.2 Snelsmore Common (BBOWT)**
- 1.3 Bucklebury Common (BBOWT)**
- 1.4 Inkpen Common (BBOWT)**
- 1.5 Padworth Common and Decoy Heath (BBOWT)**
- 1.6 Caesar's Camp, Bracknell (Bracknell Forest Council).**
- 1.7 Wildmoor Heath (BBOWT)**

In addition there is the heath along the Surrey borders at Wishmoor Bottom that is a significant site for heathland birds.

### **B – Opportunities – Heaths**

The restoration of Greenham Common after closure of the airbase in 1997 has shown what can be done, recreating 414 ha of heathland, but what remains elsewhere is a fragment of the former extent. The extension of other sites, and creation of heaths by heathland reversion of surrounding farmland on poor soils where production is maintained by artificial fertilisation, using nutrient stripping should be encouraged as a preferred Biodiversity Net gain measure. In addition, although rotational coniferous woodland creates ephemeral areas suitable for heathland birds, the reversion of some of these areas to heath, particularly by some of the landowners who own considerable tracts, like the Crown Estate, should be encouraged.

### **C – Projects and Opportunities – Woodland**

A considerable part of the woodland in the east of Berkshire forms part of the Crown Estate's Windsor Great Park and Windsor Forest. In addition, BBOWT has reserves at Bowdown Woods, Thatcham and Moor Copse, Tidmarsh; the National Trust at Maidenhead Thicket, Finchampstead Ridges and Basildon Park/the Holies at Lower Basildon and Streatley. There is a notable site for birds in the south-west corner of the county, Combe Wood, which is the last stronghold of one of the county's rarest birds, the Willow Tit.

As with heathland, management of woodland should be an element of the LNRS, to control and remove rhododendron, restore understory (including deer exclusion measures) and encourage retaining felled timber and standing dead timber, the latter to provide nesting opportunities for the species of conservation

concern noted above. Where new woodland is proposed, native species should be encouraged, and care taken not to lose other valuable habitat in the process.

### **4.3 - Habitat Area – River valleys and plains**

Berkshire is crossed by rivers and streams of the Thames and its tributaries, and their valleys and floodplains. While these might once have been a substantial area of seasonal wetland, centuries of works to control flooding, improve navigation and drain land has seen much of this land converted to arable land that is only wet in exceptional flood conditions. This has resulted in the loss or severe reduction in a number of wetland birds, including Snipe, Redshank, Lapwing, Corncrake and Yellow Wagtail.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, extraction of construction minerals (particularly gravel) and the flooding of the pits after extraction created new wetlands. These have provided a refuge for some of the birds of wetlands that otherwise were disappearing (such as Redshank and Lapwing) and a new habitat for a number of species that previously seldom or never bred in the county, such as Little Ringed and Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Common Tern and Shelduck. The waterbodies also provided wintering sites for a substantial number of waterbirds. These included a number of wintering duck species and waterbirds, with some sites holding nationally significant numbers of Tufted Duck, Gadwall and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The waterside vegetation has provided breeding habitat for scarce or threatened songbirds, particularly Cetti's Warbler and Nightingale.

The problems with these new wetlands are that the habitat used by many of these birds is transient, and as nesting islands become overgrown and waterside vegetation grows the niches that benefit many of these species disappear, so management is required to keep them in optimum condition for birdlife, and they attract both formal and informal recreation leading to problems with disturbance.

#### **Sites**

##### **A Current formally managed nature reserves**

Set out below is a list of nature reserves in the county in the river valleys, mostly wetland sites. These all depend on continued management to maintain their optimum condition, and the organisations managing them will have projects for their restoration and improvement (including the provision or replacement of facilities for visitors. The support of these efforts should form a key part of the LNRS.

##### **Kennet Valley and tributaries**

**1.1 – Freeman's Marsh, Hungerford – (Town & Manor of Hungerford)**

**1.2 - Kintbury Newt Ponds – (BBOWT)**

**1.3 - Rack Marsh, Bagnor – (BBOWT)**

**1.4 - Thatcham Marsh & Wetland Centre – (BBOWT & RSPB)**

**1.5 - Hosehill Lake, Theale (BBOWT & Theale Area Bird Conservation Group)**

**1.6 - Fobney Island (Reading Borough Council & Friends of Fobney Island)**

**Pang Valley – Moor Copse (BBOWT)**

**Loddon, Blackwater and tributaries**

**2.1– BBOWT Loddon Nature Reserve, Twyford (BBOWT)**

**2.2 - Dinton Pastures, Lavell’s Lake and Lea Farm (Wokingham Borough Council (Dinton Pastures): Lavell’s Wetland Trust)**

**2.3 - Moor Green Lakes, Finchampstead (Moor Green Lakes Group).**

**Thames – main river and lower tributaries**

**3.1 – Cock Marsh, Cookham (National Trust).**

**3.2 - Haymill Valley, Slough (BBOWT)**

**3.3 - Dorney Wetlands (Environment Agency).**

**3.4 – Colne Valley Park – including Wraysbury and Horton gravel pits (Colne Valley Trust).**

## **B Opportunities**

There are a number of sites known for their populations of birds, either as breeding sites, wintering sites or both, that have no formal protection (beyond designation as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)), and/or no current management. Our river valleys have the potential to create linear connected wetland habitat for threatened wetland birds, and other fauna and flora. They are by river system-

### **Kennet valley and tributaries**

The Kennet valley already has a number of protected sites as listed above. The area has a variety of habitats with potential for improvement or extension to benefit wildlife, including wet meadows and marsh, old gravel workings, wet woodland and waterside scrub vegetation. These provide breeding sites for a number of scarce or threatened local species, including (in damp woodland and waterside scrub) Marsh Tit, Nightingale and Cetti’s Warbler, (on islands and margins of waterbodies) Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Little Ringed and Ringed Plovers, Redshank and Shelduck and (in marsh and bog) Water Rail. In winter the water bodies hold significant numbers of wintering duck, including 100s of Gadwall, and in the 2006 national wintering Gull survey the lower Kennet held the second largest roosting concentration of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The wet areas around hold wintering Snipe, Water Rail and Lapwing.

The current protected sites have potential to form the basis of a chain of wetland sites to create a landscape-scale wetland in the valley along much of its length.



The proximity of the urban areas of Newbury and Thatcham and Reading means that there is an opportunity to create accessible places for the public to experience nature at many of these sites.

**Upper Kennet above Newbury** – there is a considerable area between Hungerford and Newbury, from Denford through Kintbury, Hampstead Marshall, Benham and Speen, which provide an opportunity for connecting the sites owned and managed by the Town and Manor of Hungerford (whose conservation efforts deserve support) with the sites immediately to the east of Newbury.

**Lambourn valley** – similarly there is an opportunity to provide or enhance a network of sites in the middle and lower Lambourn valley, from Welford southwards through the water meadows at Boxford, Bangor and Donnington to provide a further network of connected wetland.

#### **Kennet valley between Newbury and Reading-**

There are already a number of sites with potential or partial management that together with the sites above could help create a chain of wetland sites-

**Lower Farm Gravel Pit** – currently in private ownership but there is an informal agreement with NDOC under which a hide is maintained and some management work undertaken. Breeding target species include Little Ringed and Ringed Plover and Common Tern. The site lies close to Thatcham Marsh and Wetland Centre, and with further investment in visitor facilities and protective fencing provides further opportunity for public access to nature close to Newbury and Thatcham.

**Woolhampton Gravel Pits** – in private ownership, managed as a fishery with some limited access and viewing facilities. Oystercatcher have bred here, and it is a wintering site for Snipe.

**Padworth Lane Gravel Pit** – disused gravel pit, owned by the Canal & River Trust (CRT), subject to outstanding planning requirement for restoration for nature conservation and angling and subsequent management. The site has been a breeding site for Little Ringed Plover, a wintering site for many wildfowl and Snipe, but is deteriorating for lack of progress with the restoration. BOC has been in discussions for many years with CRT and has produced a draft management plan. The scope of this could be extended. There is also a wet woodland area within the site that should be safeguarded and has potential.

**Aldermaston Gravel Pits** – another disused gravel pit site, designated as a SSSI, but not actively managed so in poor condition. There are issues – notably health and safety concerns arising from old sludge pits on the site.

**Theale and Burghfield Gravel Pits** – this extensive area covers an area approximately 6km west to east and 2km north to south in the lower Kennet valley, with only 23.6 hectares at Hosehill Lake at Theale being a managed nature reserve. There are a number of different land ownerships, with Prudential

Properties owning a substantial part of the western (Theale) portion, and angling clubs controlling other parts. Most of the wetland species noted elsewhere in the Kennet valley occur as breeding birds (including Oystercatcher, Little Ringed and Ringed Plover, Redshank and Gadwall) and wintering birds include peak counts of 100s of Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Wigeon and Coot. The scrub and woodland areas around the flooded pits are important for breeding Nightingale. In the national survey in 2012 it held the UK's second largest concentration of breeding birds (about 100 territories in total). However, the suitability of this habitat depends upon management to maintain optimum condition, as set out in the BTO's Conservation Advice Note "Managing Scrub for Nightingales" ([conservation-advice-notes-001-nightingalesb.pdf \(bto.org\)](https://www.bto.org/conservation-advice-notes-001-nightingalesb.pdf)), and no agreements or arrangements are currently in place to carry this out.

The potential exists to create a linear country park and nature reserve, incorporating the current recreational activities in this area, but with active management for wildlife to provide an accessible resource for the residents of Reading, and connecting with the nearby Fobney Island reserve to the east.

**Fobney Meadows** – this area of low-lying flood plain land lies adjacent to the Fobney Island reserve. It holds good numbers of wintering waders and wildfowl when water levels are high, and it makes a sensible extension to the current reserve, with potential if it could be secured for management as a nature reserve to create further wetland habitat.

### **Pang valley**

This area receives little attention. Although there are no large-scale sites like those in the Kennet and Loddon valley, there are a number of lakes and marsh areas, particularly between Stanfield Dingley and Tidmarsh, (such as the lakes near Bradfield Hall/Rotten Row, the valley south-west of Bradfield village and lakes between Barn Elms and Maidenhatch Farms) and again south of Pangbourne. These provide an opportunity for another potential network of wetland sites.

### **Loddon/Blackwater and tributaries**

Although the lower Loddon seems well covered by reserves and protected sites, above the Dinton Pastures Country Park, there is little by way of protected areas between Loddon Bridge through the Arborfield and Swallowfield areas until the Moor Green Lakes area. There are areas that flood periodically that might form the basis of another network of connected wetland areas, and there is also potentially an opportunity to extend the Moor Green reserve area westwards in further gravel working sites towards Fleethill.

### **Thames – main river and lower tributaries**

There is the potential to create a chain of wetland sites along the Thames. The Earth Trust's River of Life projects in south Oxfordshire have shown what is

achievable, but currently there are few actively managed sites for nature below these current schemes, other than Cholsey Marsh BBOWT reserve in Oxfordshire. As the Thames marks the boundary between Berkshire and adjoining counties along much of its length (mostly Oxfordshire or Buckinghamshire), co-ordination with the LNRS proposals in these counties is desirable.

Going downstream from west to east, the following sites, some already designated LWSs would appear to have potential to create such a network. Sites outside the county in such possible network are shown in brackets-

[South Stoke Marsh – identified as a Conservation Target Area by Oxfordshire County Council, including Withy Mead reserve]

**Streatley Meadows LWS and adjoining land** – has held wintering Snipe and Teal, also breeding site for Water Rail. Has recently suffered drying out.

**Riverside meadows around Beale Park wildlife park, Lower Basildon**

**Pangbourne Meadow, Saltney Mead and lakes at Westbury and Scrases/Springs Farm, Purley**

[Riverside meadows at Hardwick Estate, Whitchurch]

**Back land at Little John's Farm/Thameside Promenade, Reading**

[Henley Road and Sonning Eye gravel pits]

**Lakes at Thames Valley Park, Earley**

**Borough Marsh, Charvil/Wargrave** – would also provide connectivity with sites in lower Loddon valley

**Wargrave Marsh**

**Temple Island to Hambleden Lock**

[Marlow gravel pits]

**Cock Marsh, Cookham**

**Battlemead, Cookham** - An area of wetland between Cookham and Maidenhead, acquired by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, that has been acquired with the aim of increasing the extent of wetland in the vicinity.

#### **4.4 - Habitat Area – Urban**

About 20% of the county's area comprises built-up urban and suburban areas. Not only are domestic gardens a habitat used by wild birds, but the built environment has provided niches for many commensal species. However, modern building practices, the re-development of former commercial premises and the improvement of older buildings and their curtilages in the name of

regeneration has removed many of these, so that some species that were formerly widespread in urban areas (notably House Sparrow and Starling) are amongst those that have suffered the largest numerical declines.

Some species that are scarce nationally have adopted urban sites as their preferred nesting habitat, notably Peregrines and Black Redstarts. These provide an opportunity for urban dwellers to see and appreciate unusual and interesting wildlife close to home.

We suggest that local authorities adopt planning policies to provide nesting niches for these species. Swift bricks are already provided on a voluntary basis by some developers, and provision for Black Redstarts in city centres have been incorporated in some “green roof” schemes that should also be encouraged as an element of any major new town centre developments.

## **5 GENERAL SUBMISSIONS AND SUMMARY**

We have noted from the Government guidance on LNRSs that once adopted, the LNRS should be updated every three to ten years. We do not consider that it is realistic to do so every three years, as many of the schemes and projects will have scarcely been implemented or even moved beyond the planning stage, and it would be far too early to be able to discern if any element of the strategy has been successful in achieving its objectives. While it might be sensible to have an annual report on its implementation, we would strongly advocate a longer timescale, and that this be linked to the results of local and national monitoring schemes for wildlife as well as a site-by-site evaluation of any projects implemented locally.

It will be noted that the bulk of these proposals are linked to wetland areas in the county, but we consider that these offer the greatest potential for wildlife enhancement locally. We are concerned that the basis of the Government’s Biodiversity Net Gain calculation mechanism is a simplistic measurement of habitat created or work carried out. For many habitats, it is the sustained management and improvement of existing habitat that will turn around the fortunes of many of our declining species. While clearly there is nothing we can do at a county level to address this issue, we hope our LNRS can be formulated recognising that it is continuing habitat management as much as creation that is important in enhancing our local biodiversity.

## APPENDIX 1

### Birds of Conservation Concern in Berkshire

**Berkshire Ornithological Club**

#### Berkshire Bird Species of Conservation Concern

Prepared by Neil Bucknell & Renton Righelato, August 2022

This analysis has been put together as an aid to the Berkshire Ornithological Club's conservation work. Species of conservation concern have been selected based on one or more of the following criteria: (a) declining Berkshire abundance, (b) very small Berkshire population size, (c) serious national decline in abundance. Where we have been able to identify potential mitigation measures, these are indicated. This is a work in progress that we hope will be helpful to others with responsibilities for nature conservation and we would welcome discussion and collaboration. For background, a table of population estimates for all bird species known to be breeding in Berkshire is attached.

As well as the species-specific issues and actions considered in the following table of birds of conservation concern, there are some general threads to consider:

#### 1. Farmland

A number of land use changes that are occurring may affect bird populations, eg: changing soil management techniques, growth in game shooting estates, extension of gallops etc.

With greater focus on environmental land management and the development by the North Wessex Downs AONB, among others, of farmer clusters, there is a growing demand from farmers for bird surveys, hence on the BOC for surveyors.

#### 2. Woodland

Woodland appears to be less well covered by birdwatchers than other habitats, hence our knowledge of our woodland birds is probably poorer. As disease and climate are affecting woodland composition and as there is likely to be a growth in tree planting, there is likely to be a demand for information on bird assemblages and for woodland bird surveys.

The basic tenets of managing woodland for wildlife (heterogenous tree layout, leaving decaying wood, ensuring a mixed understorey and herb layer, deer control) are often not followed by woodland managers. We should seek to engage with woodland owners to encourage management for wildlife (other than deer!).

#### 3. Predation pressures

Some species of conservation concern, especially ground nesting species, are vulnerable to predation from generalist mammalian and bird predators, several of whose populations have increased substantially in recent decades. Measures to protect vulnerable species from such predation may be important in safeguarding their presence in the county.

#### 4. People pressures

We can anticipate continuing development demands for land, including so-called "brownfield" sites that are often valuable biodiversity assets. Disturbance of feeding and nesting areas by people and pets is likely to increase. Landowners/managers should be encouraged to set aside areas for no general access, particularly for ground-nesting birds on heaths and wetlands.

Species	Main breeding habitat area	Cause for concern			Potential BOC conservation action
		UK BCC level.	Berkshire Status.	Comments	
Goosander	River valleys	Green.	Berkshire rare, sporadic breeder.	National range and abundance increasing.	None needed.
Grey Partridge	Downs	Red.	Serious national and local decline.	Managed recovery on a few estates.	Farm surveys. Disseminate best practice, eg via farm clusters.
Goshawk	Heath and Woodland	Green.	Rare (Sch.1) but increasing nationally and locally.	Disturbance and persecution risk.	Encourage landowners and gamekeepers to leave birds of prey.
Stone Curlew	Downs	Amber.	Scarce, stable as managed locally.		None. RSPB managing conservation.
Little Ringed Plover	River valleys, Heaths	Green.	Scarce (Sch 1), vulnerable to disturbance and damage at nest site.		BOC members can help by reporting sites or liaising with land manager to protect nests.
Ringed Plover	River valleys, Heaths	Red.	Scarce, vulnerable to disturbance and damage at nest site.		As Little Ringed Plover.
Curlew	Downs	Rare (Red, Sch 1).	National rapid decline. A few pairs make breeding attempts annually at downland sites. Sites vary from year to year.		Monitor breeding sites and liaise with land managers to protect nests.
Lapwing	Downs, River valleys	Red.	Declining, rapidly since 1980s nationally, with losses greatest in lowland UK. Almost exclusively arable sites vulnerable to farm working and crop growth.		Farm surveys. Encourage farmers to look for and protect Lapwing nest sites. Encourage creation of lapwing plots.
Redshank	River valleys	Red.	Scarce, steady slow decline nationally since 1970s. A bird primarily of saltmarshes, in Berkshire a few pairs breed at gravel pit and managed river sites.		None identified. Most existing sites are managed nature reserves.
Woodcock	Heaths and Woodland	Red.	75% decline nationally since 1970s. In Berkshire a 50% decline in occupied tetrads between 1987/9 and 2008/11 atlas surveys (confirmed + probable). Cause of decline unknown.		None identified.
Turtle Dove	All areas	Red.	Major national decline, probably mostly due to habitat loss in wintering grounds, but habitat management in UK has led to successful nesting (eg Knepp). A few birds have occurred in Berkshire in recent years, but most fail to establish pairs and nests.		Monitor observations and follow up with landowner and Project Turtle Dove recommendations. Maintain small stock of supplemental feed for immediate use.
Cuckoo	River valleys	Red.	Declining rapidly nationally, especially in south, possibly related to migration/wintering ground losses. In Berkshire the main host, Reed Warbler, is doing well.		None identified.
Long-eared Owl	Downs	Green.	Rare. UK population stable. Berkshire numbers unknown, possibly fewer than ten pairs, but probably much overlooked.		None identified.
Short-eared Owl	Downs	Amber.	Rare, sporadic breeding occurs.		None identified.



Species	Main breeding habitat area	Cause for concern		Potential BOC conservation action
		UK BCC level.	Berkshire Status. Comments	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	River valleys, Woodland	Red.	Rapid decline nationally. Perhaps fewer than ten pairs remain in Berkshire.	General woodland management advice re decaying wood, especially along rivers.
Willow Tit	Woodland, Downs	Red.	Continuous decline since 1970s in UK (95% since 1970). Declining also in W Europe. Declining most rapidly in SE England. Perhaps fewer than ten pairs remain in Berkshire, SW of Kintbury. Cause thought to be habitat degradation.	Liaise with landowners re BTO guidance on habitat management.
Marsh Tit	Woodland, River valleys	Red.	Similar pattern of decline to Willow Tit, but slower (75% since 1970).	Liaise with landowners re BTO guidance on woodland management.
Woodlark	Heaths & woodland	Green.	Increasing in abundance and range in UK, though still scarce. Vulnerable to wood and heath management and human disturbance.	Watching brief.
House Martin	All areas	Amber.	Population nationally halved in 1990s with further halving in since. Losses have been in south and east, with increases in NW and Scotland. Causes unknown, but smaller clutches and fewer second broods may suggest insect shortage.	Offer House Martin boxes for use in or near previously used sites.
Willow Warbler	Heaths & woodland	Amber.	Rapid decline in south and east England since 1980s, continuing. Causes unknown, but thought likely to be related to climate and habitat change in UK. In Berkshire, young forestry plantations have been a significant nesting habitat in recent years.	None identified.
Grasshopper Warbler	River valleys, Woodland	Red.	Moderate decline mostly in south. In Berkshire loss of scrub and tussocky grassland may be a factor, though they also use young forestry plantations.	None identified.
Spotted Flycatcher	Woodland	Red.	Rapid national decline 1960s-1990s, slower decline since, in common with some other species migrating to the W African humid zone. In UK decline mostly in pasture and rural settlements, little decline in deciduous woodland. In Berkshire, breeding (confirmed + probable) halved between the 1987/9 and 2008/11 atlas surveys, and birds were lost completely from most of mid and east Berkshire.	None identified.
Nightingale	River valleys	Red.	Steady, continuing national decline (95% since 1970). In Berkshire it has largely disappeared, an important population remaining along the Kennet in the Theale-Burghfield area, probably at risk due to habitat change and disturbance.	Habitat management following BTO guidance to be encouraged with landowners (RDAA, Pru, RBC etc).
Meadow Pipit	Downs	Amber.	Slow national decline in all areas, causes unknown but losses of suitable marginal land and climate change are likely factors. The population estimate below is almost certainly now too high.	None identified.
Yellow Wagtail	Downs, River valleys	Red.	70% national decline between 1980 and 2010, stable since. In Berkshire it has disappeared from the river valleys and is predominantly a scarce arable farmland, mostly downland bird. Spring sown crops favoured; soil penetrability appears to be an important factor in suitability of land.	Farm surveys.
Tree Pipit	Heaths & Woodland	Red.	Sudden 80% collapse in national abundance in 1985-95, slower decline since. Tree Pipits winter in the W African humid zone, where habitat change may contribute to losses. Woodland management and disturbance also a factor.	None identified.
Tree Sparrow	River valleys, Downs	Red.	Lost to Berkshire. Successful colony boosting projects in Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.	Encourage wintering birds to stay by supplemental feeding. Consider a reintroduction programme.
Yellowhammer	Downs	Red.	Abundance halved nationally in the period of arable intensification (1970s-90s), followed by continuing slower decline. In Berkshire, it has largely disappeared from the east of the county, otherwise widespread though increasingly scarce. Winter survival appears a major factor, hence winter provision of food (stubbles, seed plots, feeding stations etc).	Farm surveys. Farmer advice/engagement.
Corn Bunting	Downs	Red.	Nationally abundance fell 90% between 1975 and 2000, since when stable. Locally, now retreated to the Berkshire Downs, where a good population exists. Favours spring sown cereals in breeding season. Winter feeding as for Yellowhammer.	Farm surveys. Farmer advice/engagement. Consider supplemental feeding at key sites.