



Improving biodiversity & socioeconomic returns in the Cotswolds

## Sapperton Wilder Bird Report 2023 - 2024

### Background

Over the first two years of the Sapperton Wilder Project, structured winter and breeding bird surveys have been carried out across the site by a local ecologist and ornithologist, Anna Field. Anna has a particular expertise in surveys and conservation of farmland birds and has been carrying out bird surveys for nearly 20 years. Outside the formal surveys, staff members and local birders have also recorded birds they have seen. To date, nearly 70 species have been recorded including excellent numbers of commoner (but still red-listed under the [Birds of Conservation Concern 5](#)) farmland birds such as Skylark and Yellowhammer. Numbers of farmland birds compare favourably to other farms in the area. Some locally notable species, including two species monitored by the Rare Breeding Bird Panel were also recorded during the breeding season.

The first year or two of the surveys will serve as a baseline to assess the abundance and distribution of bird species across the site, prior to the changes in management towards a more regenerative farming system and will enable analysis of population trends over the following years as more data is gathered. In addition to the main Sapperton Wilder site, three different control sites were surveyed in both years; two sites which are under conventional arable and one site which is seven years into regenerative farming practices. Although the control sites are small for the scale of land use by birds, the surveys should give a feel for how particular species fare across these different sites.



## Methods

The surveys involved both a winter bird survey to monitor resident and winter visitors, and a multi-visit breeding bird survey to monitor resident and summer visitors. The breeding bird surveys also looked for evidence of breeding and mapped the locations of farmland and other red-listed birds to provide information on the habitats preferred by these species. Additional nocturnal surveys were carried out using a thermal imager to record species such as Woodcock, which roost during the day but feed on the farm at night. Regular annual surveys following the same methodology will allow any changes in bird populations to be monitored as the project progresses.

## Results

Results from the first two years are summarised in the tables below.

### (a) Main Sapperton Wilder site

Year	2023	2024
<b>Total number of species recorded ALL YEARS</b>	67	
<b>Total number of species recorded</b>	58	58
<b>Total number of species confirmed or probable breeding</b>	35	30
<b>Core Farmland Species (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies through territory mapping)</b>	Corn bunting (3) Linnet (7) Skylark (33) Woodlark (5) Yellowhammer (32)	Corn bunting (6) Linnet (5) Skylark (25) Woodlark (2) Yellowhammer (17)
<b>Red-listed species recorded</b>	12	13
<b>Red-listed species confirmed or probable breeding</b>	9	8
<b>Non-core red-listed species territory mapped (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies)</b>	Greenfinch (1) House sparrow (1) Marsh tit (1) Mistle thrush (2) Starling (1)	Greenfinch (1) House sparrow (1) Marsh tit (1) Mistle thrush (1) Spotted flycatcher (3) Starling (2)
<b>Amber-listed species recorded</b>	17	15
<b>Amber-listed species confirmed or probable breeding</b>	8	8
<b>Raptors</b>	Buzzard Goshawk Kestrel Sparrowhawk	Buzzard Kestrel Red Kite
<b>Owls</b>	Tawny Owl	-

### (b) Conventional arable control site 1

Year	2023	2024
<b>Total number of species recorded ALL YEARS</b>	32	
<b>Total number of species recorded</b>	16	27
<b>Core Farmland Species (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies through territory mapping)</b>	Corn Bunting (1) Grey Partridge (1) Linnet (1) Skylark (3) Yellowhammer (3)	Corn Bunting (3) Linnet (1) Skylark (4) Yellow wagtail (1) Yellowhammer (1)
<b>Red-listed species recorded</b>	5	7
<b>Non-core red-listed species territory mapped (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies)</b>	-	-
<b>Amber-listed species recorded</b>	4	8
<b>Raptors</b>	Buzzard	Buzzard
<b>Owls</b>	-	-



(c) Conventional arable control site 2

Year	2023	2024
Total number of species recorded ALL YEARS	28	
Total number of species recorded	22	25
Core Farmland Species (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies through territory mapping)	Skylark (1)	
Red-listed species recorded	3	3
Non-core red-listed species territory mapped (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies)	Marsh tit (1) Mistle thrush (1)	Mistle thrush (1) Starling (1)
Amber-listed species recorded	4	5
Raptors	Buzzard	Buzzard
Owls	-	-

(d) Regenerative agriculture control site

Year	2023	2024
Total number of species recorded ALL YEARS	40	
Total number of species recorded	26	33
Core Farmland Species (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies through territory mapping)	Linnet (2) Skylark (2) Yellowhammer (1)	Linnet (2) Skylark (3) Yellowhammer (1)
Red-listed species recorded	5	6
Non-core red-listed species territory mapped (parentheses = estimated number of territories/colonies)	Marsh tit (1)	-
Amber-listed species recorded	7	10
Raptors	-	Buzzard Kestrel
Owls	-	-

(e) List of all species recorded at Sapperton Wilder (red = red-listed, amber = amber listed, black = green listed)

English name	Latin name
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
Garden warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>



Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Jack snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus Iliacus</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>
Willow warbler	<i>Curruca communis</i>
Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>



There have also been some notable species observations outside of the bird surveys. Of particular interest was a 2-year-old female Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*), seen by the project ecologist and volunteers in May 2024. ID was confirmed by county bird recorder. This is a very rare visitor from Eastern Europe.

A Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) also made an appearance in the same month. These owls are passage migrants from the continent and winter visitors in Gloucestershire, although they can sometimes linger well into Spring. Their diet consists of small mammals, voles in particular. The hope is that with land management changes, small mammal populations increase, hopefully attracting these and other owls.

## Discussion

Overall, the survey found excellent numbers of the more common farmland birds, particularly in the fallow Northern Block, making use of the great variety of seed and invertebrates available. Species of note for the site included Brambling, Corn bunting, Firecrest, Garden Warbler, Goshawk, Jack Snipe, Marsh Tit, Redstart, Sedge Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Stonechat, Wheatear, Woodcock and Woodlark.

The Conventional Arable Control Site 1 and the Regenerative Agriculture Control Site are typical arable farmland sites, and both recorded a variety of Core Farmland Species and red-listed species. The Conventional Arable Control Site 2 site is less typical farmland, being surrounded by woodland, and the predominantly woodland species recorded reflects this.

A suite of conservation measures has already been implemented on site at Sapperton Wilder which are likely to have positive impacts on most bird species.

1. Wildflower margins, herbal leys, and rough grassland areas will provide a source of invertebrate (and mammal) prey for chicks to boost breeding productivity.
2. Overwinter stubbles, winter bird seed crops, and supplementary feeding provide winter food sources which can minimise the impact of the 'hungry gap' in late winter. These also provide safe roosting areas for many species, boosting over-winter survival and consequently breeding numbers.
3. Rotational hedgerow management, gapping up, widening, and/or laying existing hedgerows will provide ideal habitat for many birds to nest and roost in as well as host invertebrate prey.
4. Uncut grass margins left along the base of hedgerows will allow tussocky grass to develop, protect nests in hedgerows and allow Blackthorn suckers to grow, providing ideal nesting habitat for species such as Yellowhammer.



5. Skylark 'plots' will provide bare, weedy areas amongst a crop or herbal ley for larks to feed on and use to access nest sites in the nearby crop.
6. Nest boxes will provide nesting opportunities for species such as Barn Owl for whom there are limited natural sites available.
7. Signs encouraging dog walkers to remain on paths and keep dogs on leads to protect the many ground or near-ground nesting species breeding on the site will hopefully reduce disturbance and nest predation.

## Conclusion

The overarching aim of the Sapperton Wilder Project is to restore natural processes and habitat diversity within the farm. We should see breeding numbers of bird species increase as a result. By changing land management from conventional arable production to a mixed system of rotational herbal leys and arable, wildflower margins and fields, agroforestry, expanding hedgerows, grassland restoration and other interventions (beetle banks, livestock integration, etc.), there should be an increase in invertebrate abundance and seed availability, both of which should support higher breeding productivity. It is also possible that some changes might have a negative effect on some species (e.g. agroforestry on Skylark) and regular bird surveys will allow us to monitor this and make further adjustments to management as may be required.

If you are looking to get a bird survey done on your land, please consider Anna at Cotswold Bird Surveys <https://cotswoldbirdsveys.org.uk/>

