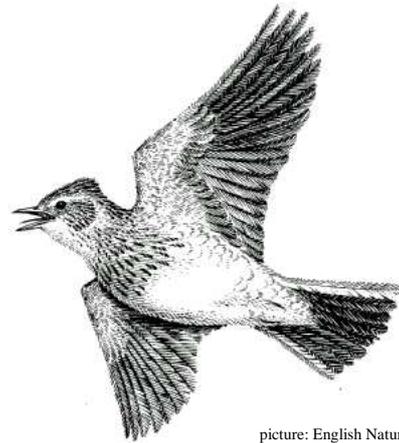


Species Statement for Sussex

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*



picture: English Nature

The National Species Action Plan as well as the Sussex Arable Land, Chalk Grassland and Floodplain Grassland Habitat Action Plans will be used to implement and monitor action for the skylark in Sussex.

1. Introduction

One of the most widespread birds of the UK, with over 1 million breeding pairs (The State of the UK's birds, 2001), the resident population is joined in winter by a significant proportion of the northern European population - possibly up to 25 million individuals. Nonetheless, recent national trends have shown the species to be undergoing a marked decline. The UK breeding population of skylark on lowland farmland declined by 52% between 1970 and 1999 (The State of the UK's birds, 2001). The population has also declined substantially in many other European countries.

The causes of decline are poorly understood because population trends in habitats other than farmland are largely unknown. It is thought that autumn-sown cereals may make an unsuitable nesting habitat compared with spring-sown varieties, and that dense, tall, fertilised grass is also unsuitable.

The skylark is protected under the EC Birds Directive, the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. It is a Red List species (high conservation concern) in Birds of Conservation Concern: 2002-2007.

2. Current Status in Sussex

The skylark is still commonplace in Sussex, particularly on the Downs and the Levels in the far east of the county, although its distribution is somewhat patchy. It is largely absent from urban and heavily wooded areas, as well as much Wealden farmland where fields are small and enclosed by hedges.

Recent information on breeding densities in Sussex is lacking. Shrubbs (1979) quoted densities of up to:

- 17.5 pairs per km² on the coastal plain
- 3.5 - 10 pairs per km² on the Downs
- 6 pairs per km² on the permanent grassland of the river valleys
- 8.5 pairs per km² on Wealden grassland.

The results of a number of censuses of breeding birds, in defined areas, during the 1980s can be combined. Densities varied between 1.4 pairs per km² (Kingley Vale) and 58 pairs per km² (Adur Levels). The census gave an average of 5.8 pairs per km², a figure which, if applied to

the 627 tetrads in which breeding was confirmed during the Atlas Survey, indicated a county population of about 14,000 pairs, rising to about 18,000 pairs if all records were considered. However, this estimate may be too high, given the recent loss of temporary grassland, which is the favoured habitat (SOS 1996).

3. Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline

The skylark is a rapidly declining species whose numbers on farmland have fallen by over 50% in the last 25 years. The fate of the skylark is intimately bound up with the management of lowland agriculture.

- Intensive management of arable fields has reduced ephemeral weeds and insect prey through the use of agrochemicals.
- An increased trend to autumn-sown cereals has reduced the number of essential winter stubble fields and may provide unsuitable habitat in comparison with spring-sown varieties.
- Conversion of lowland grassland to arable.
- Intensive management of grasslands.
- Early silage cutting, which destroys nests and exposes skylarks to predators.

4. National Species Action Plan

National Species Action Plan objectives and targets are as follows:

- The plan aims to stabilise the population and to prevent further declines.
- Maintain present breeding numbers, wintering numbers and distribution throughout the UK.
- Reverse the population decline on lowland farmland and other habitats where found to be declining.
- Protect the skylark's habitat, particularly during the breeding season.
- Advisory, research and monitoring activities. These to be disseminated to all partners.

5. Current Action

Little action has been taken to help the skylark, as British Trust for Ornithology census work has only recently highlighted its decline. Survey and research is now commencing to identify the causes of the decline, particularly the effects of habitat change.

This species statement has been prepared and agreed by RSPB and Sussex Ornithological Society.

References:

Sussex Ornithological Society. (1996) *Birds of Sussex* ed. Paul James
Shrubbs (1979) *The Birds of Sussex - their present status*
The State of the UK's Birds (2000 & 2001)