

# SUFFOLK LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

## **WOODLARK** *(Lullula arborea)*

### **1. Definition**

The woodlark is a species historically associated with heathland. More recently woodlarks have colonised clear-felled forestry plantations and farmland. This species has suffered a historic decline in numbers and range, but increased substantially throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. This plan aims to encourage heathland and forestry management to provide optimum conditions for breeding woodlarks.

### **2. Current status: national, regional and local**

#### **National**

The woodlark was formerly found across Britain, as far north as Yorkshire but then declined substantially to be found in only five core areas; Devon & East Dorset, southern Hampshire including the New Forest, the Surrey/Hampshire border, Breckland and the Suffolk Sandlings. There has been a recent range and population expansion in south Yorkshire with further colonisation in north Yorkshire, the Vale of York and Cannock Chase. In 2006 two pairs were found breeding in Wales. Results from the 2006 national survey showed 131 occupied 10-km squares in the UK, compared to 90 in 1997 – a range expansion of 46%.

Since 1986 ( when the population was estimated at c.250 pairs ) the population has increased with up to 620 breeding pairs in 1993, 1552 pairs in 1997 and 1740 pairs in 2006. The final population estimates for the UK of 3085 territories included a core population, 5km and 10km buffer sample estimates and a correction factor for squares visited less than four times. Nesting habitats include farmland, clear-felled forestry plantations ( mainly in East Anglia ) and heathland in southern England and the Suffolk Sandlings. Results from the 2006 survey suggest that 67% were breeding on heathland, 32% on forestry plantations and just 13% on farmland (*these figures relate to territorial individuals which may associate with more than one habitat type, hence the combined percentages exceed 100%* ). In 1997 up to 50% of the population were breeding on set-aside and fallow fields. The continued increase in the population has resulted largely from new plantation habitats and improved heathland management within the core areas.

In winter some woodlarks can be found on farmland stubbles and some remain on the acid grassland breeding territories all year but there does appear to be a southward movement within England and to the continent.

## **Local**

The 2006 national survey found a maximum of 370 breeding pairs in Suffolk ( 21% of the UK population ). The 1997 national survey found between 403 and 457 breeding pairs in Suffolk ( 30% of the UK population). Nearly 340 pairs were found in Thetford Forest ( Norfolk and Suffolk ) and so represented a substantial proportion of the local and national population. The Suffolk Sandlings held around 16% of the national total and Suffolk Breckland around 14%.

The woodlark has disappeared from three 10km squares between the two Atlas periods in Suffolk although the national survey in 2006 does show an increase in numbers. However it has been found in two previously empty 10km squares. RSPB/FC research ( 1997 ) showed the woodlark to be increasing on all surveyed sites ( except two where there was no change ) within Thetford Forest and on the surrounding heaths. Numbers declined substantially by 48% between 2000 and 2005 especially in Santon and King's Forest but appeared to register a slight increase in 2006 ( full survey results awaited ).

The 1987 storm destroyed a large proportion of forestry plantings in the Suffolk Coastal Forests, subsequently re-stocked, although some areas have been retained as open space specifically to retain woodlark in the long term. However large areas of suitable habitat have become invaded by scrub and bracken making them unsuitable for breeding woodlarks. This situation is being rectified by partnership working between FC, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust and RSPB. The woodlark population has been in steady decline in recent years to just 146 territorial males in 2005 from 225+ in 1999, although there was a significant increase to 176 males in 2006.

The majority of the population are now breeding on open heathland and within forestry plantations with declining numbers using set-aside/fallow land. The woodlark populations in East Anglia tend to utilise those forestry plantations with trees aged 0-4 years, or areas of permanent open space, increasing to 0-9 years in the years with the highest population density. This means that regular clear-felling and re-planting plus regular management of permanent open space is required for a healthy population.

### **3. Current factors affecting woodlarks**

**Heathland Habitat Degradation:** With 90% of the population now breeding on heathlands on the Suffolk Sandlings intensive heathland management, involving scrub & bracken control plus grazing, is essential to maintain a healthy breeding population.

**Forestry Management:** Permanent open space within the forests must be managed and maintained to attract breeding woodlarks. Clear-felling and re-stocking also have a very important role to play in this especially in the Brecks.

**Set Aside/Fallow land:** Increasing numbers of woodlarks are now breeding on this habitat although set-aside is due to be phased out in 2008. Unless other measures are put in place woodlarks numbers on farmland are set to go into steep decline.

**Disturbance:** Woodlarks are prone to human disturbance especially when accompanied by dogs. Recent research suggests that some grassland areas have been abandoned by woodlarks since increased public use following changes in legislation.

**Predation:** As ground nesting birds woodlarks are very susceptible to predation particularly from foxes and from corvids, especially when outdoor pig units are located close to important breeding areas.

**Bad Weather:** Severe winter weather, in particular snow cover, can have an adverse impact on woodlark populations.

#### 4. Current action

- a). All major heathland sites currently managed to include woodlark requirements.
- b). Major areas of forestry at Dunwich to be returned to heathland through the Blyth/Alde partnership, particularly FC & RSPB.
- c). Permanent open areas in Thetford Forest and within Tunstall and Rendlesham Forests managed for woodlarks.
- d). Continuation of clearfell and re-stocking in Thetford, Tunstall & Rendlesham Forests taking account of woodlark requirements.
- e). Breeding populations monitored annually in the Brecks and the Sandlings.
- f). Woodlark population dynamics report (unpublished) by Lucy Wright and Paul Dolman through UEA completed in Jan.2006.

#### 5. Targets

- a). Maintain breeding population at 2006 level of 300 singing males – 176 on Suffolk Coast and 129 in the Brecks by 2010.
- b). Maintain breeding range of 11 10Km squares by 2010.
- c). Maintain current range of heathland and permanent open space within the forests.
- d). Seek opportunities to increase the area of heathland both in the Brecks and on the Sandlings, principally through targeted HLS agreements and further acquisition.

#### 6. Actions

Action	Date	Partners
<b>Policy &amp; Legislation</b>		
Ensure the requirements of breeding woodlarks are included in forest design and management plans for Thetford and the	2007 - 2010	FC NE

Sandlings Forests. ✿		
Encourage other landowners to include woodlark requirements in their land management policies, principally through targeted advice and ELS/HLS agreements	2007 - 2010	NE RSPB SWT FWAG
Ensure CROW access does not cause a reduction in woodlark numbers. Ensure all relevant BAP species including woodlark are considered in the AONB management review discussions during 2007 and further open access developments.	2007 – 2010 2007	NE FC, NE, RSPB, SWT, SCHU, SCC, SCDC
Ensure woodlark as a LBAP species is recognised and protected in LDFs in accordance with PPS9.	2007-2008	SCC, NE, RSPB, SWT, RC, SCDC, FHDC.
Ensure agri-environment scheme target reviews incorporate woodlarks.	2007	NE
Maintain favourable condition of SPAs and SSSIs in Breckland and the Suffolk Sandlings.	2007 - 2010	All landowners under NE supervision.
<b>Species management and protection</b>		
Ensure that suitable management (grazing, mowing & provision of bare ground) for this species is carried out on all SPAs, SSSIs and other nature reserves where woodlarks occur.	2007 - 2010	NE, RSPB, FC, SWT, NT, MOD, Sandlings Group.
<b>Research and monitoring</b>		
Monitor the core populations of breeding woodlarks in the Brecks and Sandlings from February to June. Investigate breeding reports outside of core areas as they arise.	2007 - 2010	RSPB, NE, FC, SWT, NT
Monitor the effects of Open Access on woodlarks through annual monitoring.	2007-2010	RSPB, NE, FC, SWT, NT
Continue woodlark population dynamics research on specific sites in the Brecks.	2007 - 2010	UEA, FC, RSPB, NE
Continue research on predator species of woodlarks in the Brecks.	2007 - 2010	UEA, FC
<b>Advisory</b>		
Provide advice to landowners and their staff on site management for the benefit of breeding woodlarks.	2007 - 2010	RSPB, SWT, NE

Encourage the uptake of agri-environment schemes , esp.HLS, to benefit breeding and wintering woodlarks. Ensure suitable options are included in HLS agreements where woodlarks are present.	2007 - 2010	NE, FWAG
<b>Communications and publicity</b>		
Use woodlark as a key species to promote responsible usage of heathland areas by the general public through press releases and articles in Coast & Heaths newspapers.	2007 – 2010 2007-2010	NE, RSPB, SWT, NT SCHU, NE, RSPB, SWT, NT
Maintain and monitor information points at open access areas to include information on BAP species and associated threats.	2007-2010	RSPB, SWT, FC, NT, SCC

**Monitoring of progress:**

Reported annually on the UK BAP reporting system BARS Biodiversity Action Reporting system.

**Constraints to plan implementation:**

None

**List of organisations that have been consulted regarding this plan and have agreed to aim to deliver their organisations commitments:**

RSPB	Rob Macklin
SWT	Dave Mason
Suffolk Sandlings Group	Rob Macklin
NT	Stuart Warrington & Grant Lohoar
NE	Bill Nickson, Monica O'Donnell, Nick Sibbet & Darren Kidney
FWAG	Tim Schofield
FC	Neal Armour-chelu
Biodiversity Coordinator	Mary Norden
Suffolk County Council	Sue Hooton
Brecks Project	Abigail Stancliffe-Vaughan
Suffolk Coastal DC	John Davies
Forest Heath DC	Guy Belcher
MOD	???