

# How to BRING BACK BIRDS

Why the UN and global conversations could help save Lapwings and other species

WORDS AND PICTURES PHILIP LYMBERY

I've lost count of the times we've talked in our bird group about how Lapwings and other species have declined locally. Lapwings now have the dubious reputation of being the most rapidly declining bird species in Europe. Like so many birds, they have become harder to see, even on local nature reserves, let alone in their farmland habitat.

Despite living on a farm in West Sussex for four years now, I've never seen a Lapwing. Nor a Hedgehog for that matter. From time to time, though, we have Wood Larks – welcome spill-overs from remnant heathland protected by conservation organisations. I'm always struck by the irony that any sightings around our rural hamlet of Sky Lark, the Wood Lark's 'common' cousin, has me scribbling in my notebook as if a red-letter day.

Over Britain's biggest habitat – farmland – wildlife losses have, unfortunately, continued apace. Populations of farmland birds have, on average, more than halved

since 1970, with Sky Larks, Starlings and Lapwings among the species that have suffered serious declines.

The fact that species that have suffered serious long-term declines are still declining is particularly worrying. In particular, four farmland bird species – Corn Bunting, Grey Partridge, Turtle Dove and Tree Sparrow – have declined by more than 90% since 1970, and their numbers continue to dwindle. According to government data, Grey Partridges have declined by 19% in the last five years, while Turtle Doves have slumped by a further 51%.

## Bigger isn't always better

A big reason for these declines is the way we produce food. Much of our food comes from industrial agriculture – factory farming – which has two sides. The first side is the most well-known: taking farmed animals out of fields and mixed agricultural rotations, instead confining them inside, which looks like a space-

saving idea, but actually isn't. Keeping them confined requires scarce arable land elsewhere to be dedicated to growing their feed. This is usually done intensively: factory farming's second side.

As fields get bigger for intensive arable production, so surrounding trees, bushes and hedgerows disappear, along with wildflowers. And when they disappear, so too do the insects, and the seeds, along with the bats, bees and bird species that depend on them. Even the worms disappear, affecting the soil fertility and leaving little else but the crop. Then that crop is fed to factory farmed animals, where much of the food value is lost in conversion to meat, milk and eggs.

More is known about the state of nature in Britain than anywhere else on Earth, but that hasn't stopped the decline of nature. The UK Government's own annual assessment of wild bird populations has cited the loss of mixed farming as one cause for decline. An increase in the use of chemical pesticides and other facets of intensive farming are also blamed.

The reality is we know more than enough about the countryside to stop doing one of the things that is ruining it: namely intensive farming. Despite the most valiant efforts by conservationists to stem the flow, our 'natural capital', the overall state of the ecosystem, continues to ebb away.



Barn Owl

## Cause for optimism

After decades of intensive agriculture and the consequent decline in farmland birds, there now seems cause for optimism that things might change.

Recognition is growing of the need to overhaul our food system. The Government has enshrined a redirection of subsidies in the new Agriculture Act on the basis of 'public money for public goods', supporting more sustainable agriculture, including nature-friendly farming. In Brussels, there is talk of radical reductions in pesticide use along with other agricultural reforms, including a major increase in land under organic farming.

## Action from the UN

At a global level, the UN is set to convene a ground-breaking Food Systems Summit later this year, using the new buzzword of 'transformation' in food and farming. Announcing the summit, UN General Secretary, António Guterres said: "It is time to change how we produce and consume... Transforming food systems is crucial for delivering all the Sustainable Development Goals."

This global conversation about food system transformation provides a golden opportunity to switch from the current industrial agricultural model that is a major driver of wildlife declines in Britain and

across the world. Many game-changing ideas are being discussed, including reconnecting food production and nature through regenerative, agroecological farming combined with more balanced diets that are less reliant on meat and other animal products.

With farmland being the world's biggest land user by far, the future of birds and other wildlife depends greatly on the success of this global conversation. We can all do our bit by continuing to support conservation and animal welfare groups that lobby governments on our behalf for more nature-friendly farming. We can seek to get involved in the various dialogue and public forum events leading up to the UN Food Systems Summit ([un.org/en/food-systems-summit](http://un.org/en/food-systems-summit)), including the opportunity to be a 'food systems hero'.

We can also take action on our plate by eating less and better quality meat, ensuring that animal-sourced foods support bird-friendly farming techniques such as pasture-fed and organic.

In this way, we can ensure that farmland birds like Lapwings, Sky Larks and Barn Owls can revitalise the countryside and bring back the thrill of nature for generations of birders to come. Now that really would be a red-letter day.

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Lapwing



Wood Lark