Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Annex Three: Bird Summaries by Guild

Regulation 9a Reporting, The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended).

January 2026

We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment. We aim to grow a green economy and sustain thriving rural communities. We also support our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries.

Defra is a ministerial department, supported by 34 agencies and public bodies.

This report was produced by Natural England on behalf of Defra.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/defra

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk.

Contents

Introduction

The Reg 9A Birds spreadsheet at Annex Two consists of worksheets setting out UK population estimates, trends, pressures, measures and notes on Species Action Plans, strategies and Working Groups for 241 native UK bird species. A summary of the overall findings for the 221 of these that are relevant to England can be found in Section 3 of the General Implementation Report.

It would be impractical and repetitive to produce individual reports summarising the information in Annex Two for each species. Therefore, the UK Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCB) 9A Birds Working Group agreed to brigade some of these species into species guilds, and report on the outcomes for these groupings. The guilds are groups of species that have similar ecology or use the same habitat, and broadly mirror the groups used by the UK Biodiversity Indicators. The species making up each guild are set out at Appendix One. Brigading species in this way allows conclusions to be drawn regarding common pressures and conservation measures that apply to the guild.

This report presents summaries of the status, pressures and measures for the following five guilds: non-breeding waterbirds, farmland birds, breeding waders, breeding seabirds, and woodland birds, and draws overall conclusions for each group (see Table 1). Not all bird species are included in a guild in this report. The guilds were chosen by the SNCB 9A Birds Working Group as they are groups of species of high conservation concern that provide the opportunity to illustrate the breadth of pressures facing birds and the conservation efforts to recover them.

Group/guild	Number of species included	Where to find a summary	Number (and percentage) of species not at Favourable Conservation Status (FCS)
All birds relevant to England	221	Section 3 of General Implementation Report	117 (53%)
Non-breeding waterbirds	66	p. 8	31 (47%)
Farmland birds	27	p. 15	15 (56%)
Breeding waders	17	p. 19	11 (65%)
Breeding seabirds	22	p. 25	14 (64%)
Woodland birds	39	p. 32	12 (31%)

Table 1: Number of species in each group/guild and overall conclusions. The spreadsheet at Annex Two contains the detailed assessments for each individual species. Birds not considered at

Favourable Conservation Status are those that are Red-listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern and/or in a ‘threatened’ category (Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable) on the GB IUCN list (Stanbury and others, 2024).

Method for assessing population status

This report uses three metrics to assess population status: population trend, Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) status, and extinction risk measured by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) criteria. These metrics are reported in the Reg 9A Birds spreadsheet at Annex Two.

Species population trends and status have been assessed at the UK level. This is because robust trends could not be produced at the country level for all species. However, this report only summarises information for species present in England.

The UK BoCC assessment uses criteria to allocate species to Red, Amber or Green lists depending on their level of conservation concern. These quantitative criteria assess historical declines, recent trends in population and range, population size, localisation and international importance of each species, as well as global and European threat status. There have been five BoCC assessments since 1996. In this report we compare the outputs of BoCC4, published in 2015, and BoCC5, published in 2021 and updated for seabirds in 2024 (Eaton and others, 2015, Stanbury and others, 2021 and 2024).

The IUCN Red List assessment process uses well-established, internationally recognised, and standardised criteria to assess extinction risk. It is informed by population size, range size, species rarity, and rate of decline (measured by ten years or three generations, whichever is the longer). British bird populations have been assessed using the IUCN Red List criteria. This report compares the two assessments that have been undertaken: GB IUCN 1, published in 2017, and GB IUCN 2, published in 2021 and updated for seabirds in 2024 (Stanbury and others, 2017, 2021, and 2024).

Method for assessment of pressures and measures

Whilst population trends are available for the UK level only, an assessment of pressures and measures has been made at the country level. For each species regularly occurring in England, an assessment of the main pressures acting on the population has been made by the SNCB 9A Working Group. Pressures were assigned using the categories set out in current EU guidance, to ensure that the findings are comparable to the habitats and non-bird species assessments. For each pressure, a timing category was assigned: either in the past but suspended due to measures; ongoing; ongoing and in the future; or only in the future (i.e. threats). Ongoing pressures are those that are currently acting to limit population numbers or range at a country scale.

Similarly, we report on the implementation of conservation measures at the individual country level. This allows devolved policy to be appropriately reflected. For each population, an assessment was made of whether conservation measures were necessary,

and if so, the most important measures necessary were chosen from the list provided by the EU for 2025 reporting.

More detail on the methodology for the assessment can be found in the Approach document.

Non-Breeding Waterbirds

Overview

Waterbirds - such as waders, ducks, geese, and swans - are ecologically dependent upon wetlands, both freshwater and intertidal. See Appendix One for a list of the species included in this guild. Non-breeding waterbirds are monitored annually through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), which is a partnership between JNCC (on behalf of the country statutory conservation agencies), BTO and RSPB. Fieldwork is conducted by volunteers. This long-term, standardised dataset gives robust population trend and range information. WeBS core count sectors are mapped, as shown in Figure 1, and give an indication of the distribution of non-breeding waterbirds across the country.

The UK's wetlands support over 3.5 million waterbirds each winter, as recorded by WeBS. England has a particular responsibility for non-breeding waterbirds. All the sites supporting over 100,000 birds each are in England or are cross-border sites. These are The Wash, Ribble Estuary, Morecambe Bay, Dee Estuary, North Norfolk Coast, Thames Estuary, Solway Estuary and Breydon Water & Berney Marshes (Calbrade and others, 2025).

Figure 1: Map of WeBS sectors. Source: BTO

Population change

The UK Wild Bird Indicator (Defra, 2025d) tracks trends in a subset of 46 non-breeding waterbird species, 41 of which are monitored in England. Between 1975/76 and 2023/24, there has been an overall population increase of 92% in the UK and 88% in England. However, the indicator has been declining since the 2000s. Over the past five years, the index has stabilised, with numbers having fallen by 4% in the UK and increased by 2% in England. Most of the decline since the 2000s is due to reductions in wildfowl (ducks, geese and swans) populations, whereas wader numbers have been stable.

The UK trends for 66 native non-breeding waterbird populations relevant to England are reported in the Reg 9A Birds Report spreadsheet at Annex Two. The species are also listed at Appendix One of this report. The long-term (25-year) trend covers the period of decline since the 2000s noted by the Wild Bird Indicator. As illustrated in Figure 2, 40 species (61%) have declined in the long term. However, the situation has stabilised over the last 10 years, during which time fewer species (25 or 39%) are declining in the UK.

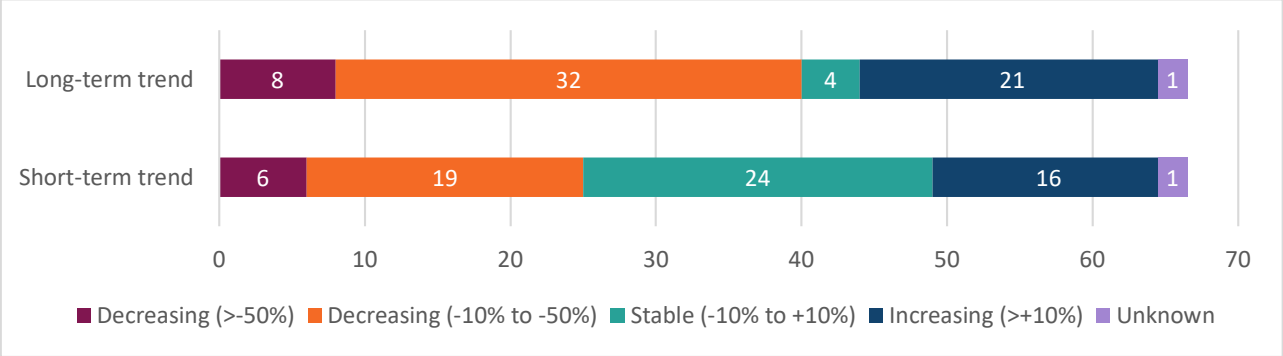

Figure 2: Number of non-breeding waterbird species showing different long-term (25 year) and short-term (10 year) population trends in the UK. Source: Population status worksheet, Annex Two. Over the long-term, 61% of non-breeding waterbird populations have declined, but trends have stabilised over the short-term, with only 39% having declined over that period.

Conservation Status

32 non-breeding waterbird populations were reported in Birds of Conservation Concern 4 (Eaton and others, 2015) and 5 (Stanbury and others, 2021). All but three of these species remained the same level of concern in the UK in the six years between the two assessments. Bewick's swan and smew both moved from Amber to Red in this time. There have been large declines in these species as their distribution has shifted away from the UK in a north westerly direction, in response to milder winters on the continent. Mute swan moved from Amber on to the Green list.

58 non-breeding waterbird populations have been assessed for their risk of extinction in Great Britain using standardised criteria set by the IUCN. The prospects of eight species improved, i.e. their extinction risk reduced, between the first assessment (Stanbury and

others, 2017) and second (Stanbury and others, 2021), and eight increased in risk. The change in status of species is set out at Appendix 1 to this report.

Overall, 31 non-breeding waterbirds are assigned to a threatened category ('Vulnerable', 'Endangered' or 'Critically Endangered') in the latest GB IUCN assessment or are on the BoCC5 Red list. These species (bar-tailed godwit, bean goose, Bewick's swan, black-necked grebe, coot, dunlin, eider, European white-fronted goose, goldeneye, greater scaup, green sandpiper, Greenland white-fronted goose, grey plover, lapwing, long-tailed duck, mallard, pintail, pochard, purple sandpiper, red-breasted merganser, red-necked grebe, ringed plover, ruff, shelduck, Slavonian grebe, smew, snipe, spotted redshank, tundra bean goose, turnstone, velvet scoter) cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Trends within the National Site Network

WeBS data for protected sites are periodically assessed through WeBS Alerts. Trends on Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are calculated over a range of timescales (5-, 10- and 25-years, and since the SPA was designated). A Medium Alert is issued if there has been a decline of 25% to 50% and a High Alert if the decline is greater than 50%, over any of the four timescales assessed.

The latest WeBS Alerts Report (Caulfield and others, 2025) assessed trends up to the winter of 2021/22 on 56 English SPAs for each designated species and the waterbird assemblage. This resulted in 300 site/species combinations. Looking at the maximum decline across all time periods assessed for each site/species combination, a substantial 106 High Alerts and 75 Medium Alerts were recorded (Calbrade and others, 2025).

The WeBS Alerts Report also compared trends on site with regional and national trends to determine whether declines are likely to be due to broadscale or site-based factors. In England, 28 Alerts were linked to broadscale factors such as climate-mediated range shifts, while 79 were likely cause by site-based pressures. A further 70 assessments suggested that site-specific measures were having a positive impact on populations.

Pressures Assessment

Out of the 65 non-breeding waterbirds assessed that are relevant to England, 16 have no pressures acting on them that would limit population growth (see pressures worksheet at Annex Two). These include new colonists such as cattle egret and great white egret, and waders with strongly increasing populations such as avocet and black-tailed godwit.

Climate change is the pressure affecting the greatest number of non-breeding waterbirds (24 species). A further 16 species are threatened by climate impacts in the future. Milder conditions are encouraging species such as Bewick's swan, European white-fronted goose and pintail to spend the winter on the continent, closer to their breeding grounds. There has also been a shift in wintering distribution within the UK in a north-easterly

direction, particularly in the smaller waders such as dunlin. In addition to causing shifts in range, climate change is driving sea-level rise which is affecting non-breeding waterbirds by reducing space for high tide roosts, as upper saltmarsh is squeezed against hard sea defences.

Recreational disturbance currently affects 19 species and is a threat to a further five. These are all waders and waterfowl that use coastal and estuarine habitats. This pressure is exacerbated by sea level rise, as high tide roosts are pushed closer to the upper shore areas that people and their dogs are more likely to use for recreation.

There are a range of pressures that can be categorised as ‘Extraction of living resources’. Bycatch in fishing gear currently affects red-throated diver, black-throated diver, great northern diver and long-tailed duck, and is a threat to a further four species. Commercial shellfisheries currently affect oystercatchers by reducing available food, and are a threat to a further five species. Wildfowling, including use of lead ammunition (which can cause poisoning if ingested), is a current pressure on six species and a threat to seven. However, for some species, e.g. whimbrel, the hunting pressure occurs outside the UK.

Waterbirds rely on good quality wetland habitat for foraging and survival. Poor water quality currently affects the populations of 15 species and is a future threat for a further four species. This is principally through hyper-eutrophication due to nutrient inputs from agricultural, residential and industrial sources. This causes excessive algal growth in freshwater and intertidal wetlands. In estuaries, these algae can smother mudflats, leading to anoxic conditions and reducing invertebrate food availability for waders. Drainage of terrestrial wetlands is currently affecting six species.

Conservation Measures

The conservation measure applied to the greatest number of non-breeding waterbirds (55 species/races - see Figure 3) is the management of the impacts of converting land for development. This relates to the Habitats Regulations Assessment process, which has ensured impacts on SPA birds from new developments are avoided, mitigated or compensated. However, it has only been partially implemented for some species: where the Third SPA Review has identified there are insufficiencies in the SPA network (Grady and others, 2025). Where there are gaps in the SPA network for qualifying populations, they are not protected by the Habitats Regulations Assessment process.

Also included in the ‘Residential/industrial development’ category are measures to mitigate recreational disturbance. There are strategic approaches to mitigating recreational disturbance from new housing at many SPAs designated for non-breeding waterbirds. Financial contributions from developers are used to fund access management measures including wardening, infrastructure, educational projects and, in some areas, alternative greenspace. There is some encouraging research showing these are effective (e.g. Saunders & Liley, 2022), but it is uncertain as to whether they are sufficient in scale to address the pressure. This is particularly given the background level of recreational use that derives from existing housing.

The ‘Extraction of living resources’ category (see Figure 3) includes a range of measures to mitigate potential impacts from fisheries, shellfisheries and wildfowling, and is relevant to 26 non-breeding waterbird populations. These measures include mitigating the impacts of fisheries bycatch on divers and management of shellfisheries to ensure sufficient food is available for sea ducks. In 2022 the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative was published, setting out high level objectives and suggested actions outlining how the UK will achieve its ambitions to minimise bycatch of sensitive species (see also Annex Four of this report). Shellfisheries are managed by Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities (IFCA) through mechanisms such as bylaws and Fisheries Management Plans (Defra, 2025h)

Certain waterbirds are on Schedule 2 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which means they can be hunted outside the closed season. During the reporting period, Greenland white-fronted goose was removed from Schedule 2 in England. There are additional measures to manage wildfowling pressure through consenting on designated nature conservation sites, codes of practice and suspension of shooting in periods of prolonged severe weather (JNCC, 2025b).

Measures to address pollution or hydrological impacts are required for 20 non-breeding waterbird species (see Figure 3). Many waders and waterfowl use freshwater wetlands for roosting and foraging. Therefore, landscape scale restoration of wetlands, for example as is happening on the Somerset Levels and in East Anglia, is of great value for species like spoonbill, snipe, wigeon and golden plover. Further action to ensure the hydrological integrity of wetlands and to join them up at the landscape scale will enable species to persist in the face of climate change.

Action has been taken to address point source discharges from sewage treatment works and others through the Habitats Regulations consenting process. Diffuse discharges from agricultural sources have been more difficult to address. However, Diffuse Water Pollution Plans are being produced, which will tackle water quality issues on protected sites (see section 4.5.26 of the General Implementation Report). A further recent measure is the introduction of the concept of nutrient neutrality. This ensures that new housing developments do not add to the nutrient pollution of protected sites.

Whilst climate change affects the greatest number of species, mitigation measures available to tackle short-stopping, where species winter closer to their Arctic breeding grounds, are minimal. However, sea level rise and coastal squeeze can be addressed. Great successes have been achieved through coastal habitat creation including managed realignments. The Environment Agency (in close co-ordination with Natural England) reports on habitat creation to address losses to coastal squeeze. The latest report (Hardiman & House, 2023) shows that habitat creation has kept pace with losses between 2005 and 2023. Key projects delivered since 2019 are managed realignments in the Humber, Lower Otter and Tamar estuaries and freshwater habitat creation in Norfolk.

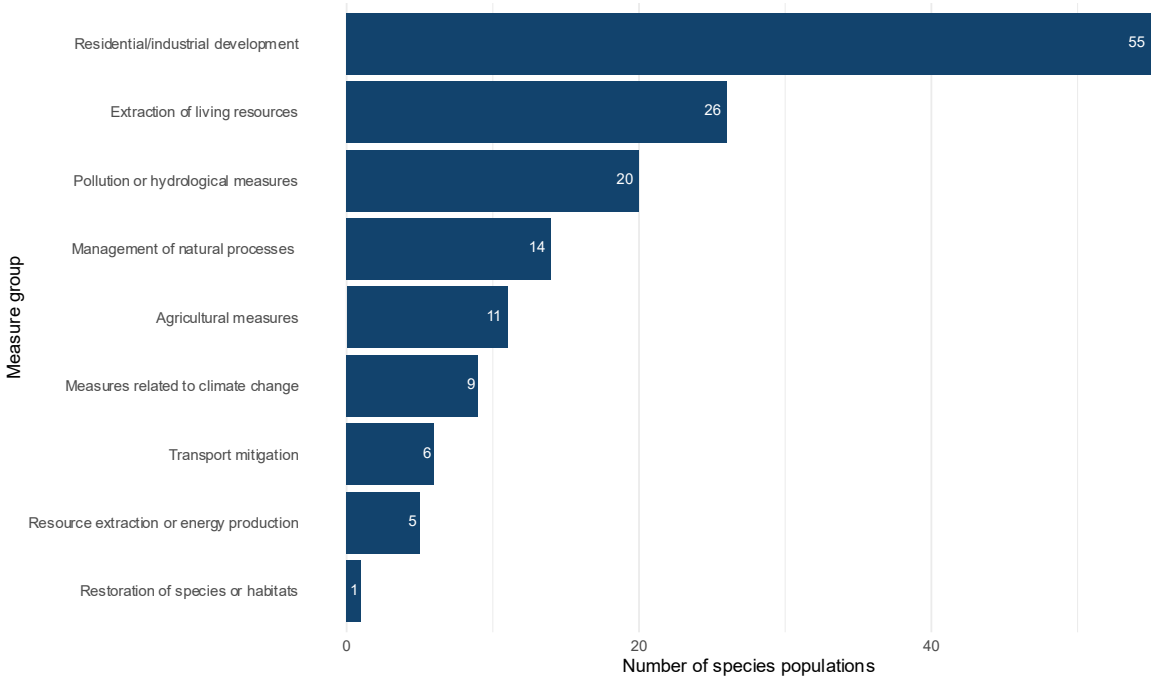

Figure 3. Number of non-breeding waterbird populations associated with each conservation measure group. Source: Measures worksheet, Annex Two. The greatest number of non-breeding waterbirds (85% of those assessed) are benefiting from measures to manage the impacts of developments. This includes ensuring new developments avoid, mitigate, or compensate for any impacts through the planning process, and minimising the impacts of recreational disturbance.

International conservation efforts

The majority of the non-breeding waterbirds present in the UK are migratory and so require co-ordinated conservation action across the flyway. The UK is signed up to the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), which has been developed under the framework of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). There are action plans or working groups for 14 non-breeding waterbirds that are driving co-ordinated action through AEWA (see the Action Plans worksheet at Annex Two for detail).

Overall conclusion

The UK wintering waterbird indicator shows that populations increased overall until the around 2000, but since then have declined. These declines have resulted in 30 non-breeding waterbirds being either on the BoCC5 Red list or threatened with extinction in the second GB IUCN assessment, and as such cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Significant pressures are outside our control in the England and the wider UK. Climate change is leading to shifts in wintering distribution and there are other pressures acting at a flyway scale (e.g. hunting) or on breeding grounds (e.g. predation). In England 16% of WeBS Alerts triggered (i.e. where there were declines on sites of over 25%) were most

likely due to broadscale factors. However, WeBS Alerts also show that where action is taken on sites, populations can go against the regional or national trend, indicating the value of conservation work on SPAs.

Much work is being done at a site level to address the impacts of coastal squeeze, recreational disturbance and poor water quality. This is driven by Habitats Regulations assessments of plans and projects, further highlighting the importance of the SPA network for non-breeding waterbird conservation.

Farmland Birds

Overview

The utilised agricultural area (UAA) is 8.8 million hectares in 2025 and accounts for 68% of the total area of England (Defra, 2025e). These habitats, and the features within them such as hedgerows and field margins, are used by a suite of breeding birds (see Appendix 1 for a list of the species in this guild). Some of these birds are specialists, highly reliant on farmland (e.g. turtle dove, tree sparrow, grey partridge and corn bunting), and others are generalists that are found in other habitats as well (e.g. greenfinch, kestrel and jackdaw).

England supports a high proportion the UK population of some of these species: including turtle dove and cirl bunting.

Population change

Aggregated population trends of a suite of 19 species of farmland birds in the UK are reported annually in the UK Wild Bird Indicator (Defra, 2025d). There has been an overall decline in the indicator of 62% in the UK between 1970 and 2024. Most of this decline occurred in the mid-1970s to early-1990s during a period of agricultural intensification which severely affected farmland specialists. Since the mid-2000s, generalists have also started to decline.

The period of decline since the 2000s is represented by the long-term trend shown in Figure 4. The Reg 9A Birds spreadsheet (Annex Two) identifies 27 species that are associated with farmland in England, these are listed at Appendix 1. Over the last 25 years, 48% of these species have been declining and 52% stable or increasing. More recently, the declines have slowed, with only two species declining by more than 50% (greenfinch and turtle dove), but fewer species are increasing.

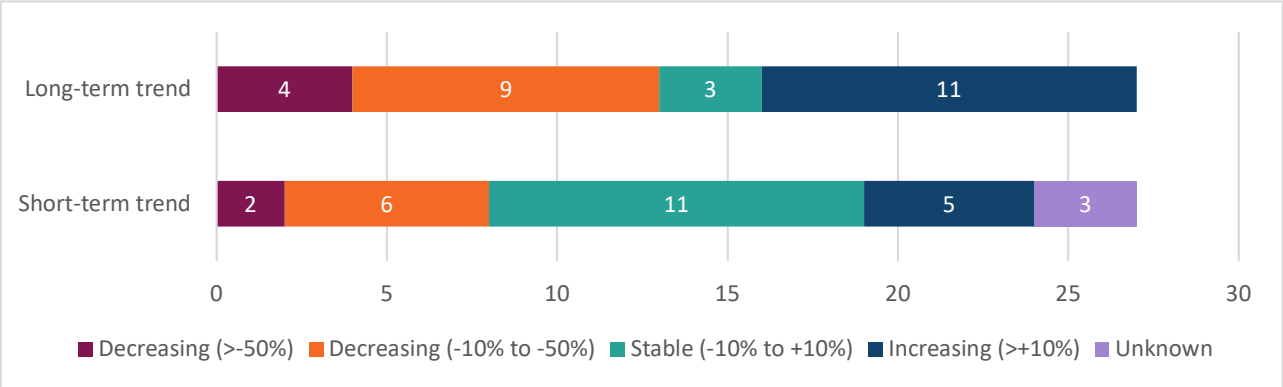

Figure 4: Number of farmland bird species showing different long-term (25 year) and short-term (10 year) population trends in the UK. Source: Population status worksheet, Annex Two. Over the long-term, 48% of species have declined, whereas over the short term only 30% are declining. However, fewer species are increasing over the short-term compared to the long-term.

Conservation Status

Between the fourth Birds of Conservation Concern report (BoCC4) (Eaton and others, 2015) and BoCC5 (Stanbury and others, 2021), three farmland bird species moved off the Green list and onto Amber (common whitethroat, rook and woodpigeon). However, of these three species, the only one that is declining is the common whitethroat. Woodpigeon is Amber-listed due to the size of the UK population being of international importance, and rook because it is threatened at the European-scale. Greenfinch moved from Green to Red between BoCC4 and BoCC5, due to declines caused largely by the disease Trichomonosis. Only one species moved in the other direction: song thrush moved from Red to Amber.

The extinction risk in Great Britain for 26 farmland birds has been assessed using standardised criteria set by the IUCN. Two farmland bird species increased in extinction risk between the first (Stanbury and others, 2017) and second (Stanbury and others, 2021) GB IUCN assessments. Quail moved from Least Concern to Endangered, and hobby moved from Least Concern to Near Threatened.

Change in conservation status of farmland birds is set out at Appendix 1. Overall, 15 out of 27 farmland birds (56%) are assigned to a threatened category ('Vulnerable', 'Endangered' or 'Critically Endangered') in the IUCN assessment or are on the BoCC Red list. These species (cirl bunting, corn bunting, corncrake, greenfinch, grey partridge, house sparrow, kestrel, linnet, quail, skylark, starling, tree sparrow, turtle dove, yellowhammer and yellow wagtail) cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Pressures Assessment

Farmland birds need nesting habitat, food available in the breeding season (particularly invertebrate food for chicks), and winter seed food for resident species. All these requirements can be affected by agricultural practices, as detailed in Figure 5.

Conversion of one type of agriculture to another or from mixed to specialised (e.g. single crop) farming are the agricultural pressures affecting the most species (see Figure 5). For example, the switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown crops impacted species such as skylark, grey partridge and quail. Nesting habitat is lost as the crop grows too tall and dense in the breeding season. This leads birds to nest on the tramlines in fields where they are more vulnerable to predation by foxes or destruction by tractors. Autumn sowing also leads to loss of food resources over winter as stubbles are ploughed in rather than left in the field.

The move from mixed to single crop farming and removal of features such as hedgerows has simplified the landscape. This has led to the loss of nesting habitat for species such as tree sparrows and turtle doves, and loss of food for species such linnets and yellowhammers. Similarly, use of plant protection chemicals has reduced the amount of invertebrate food available.

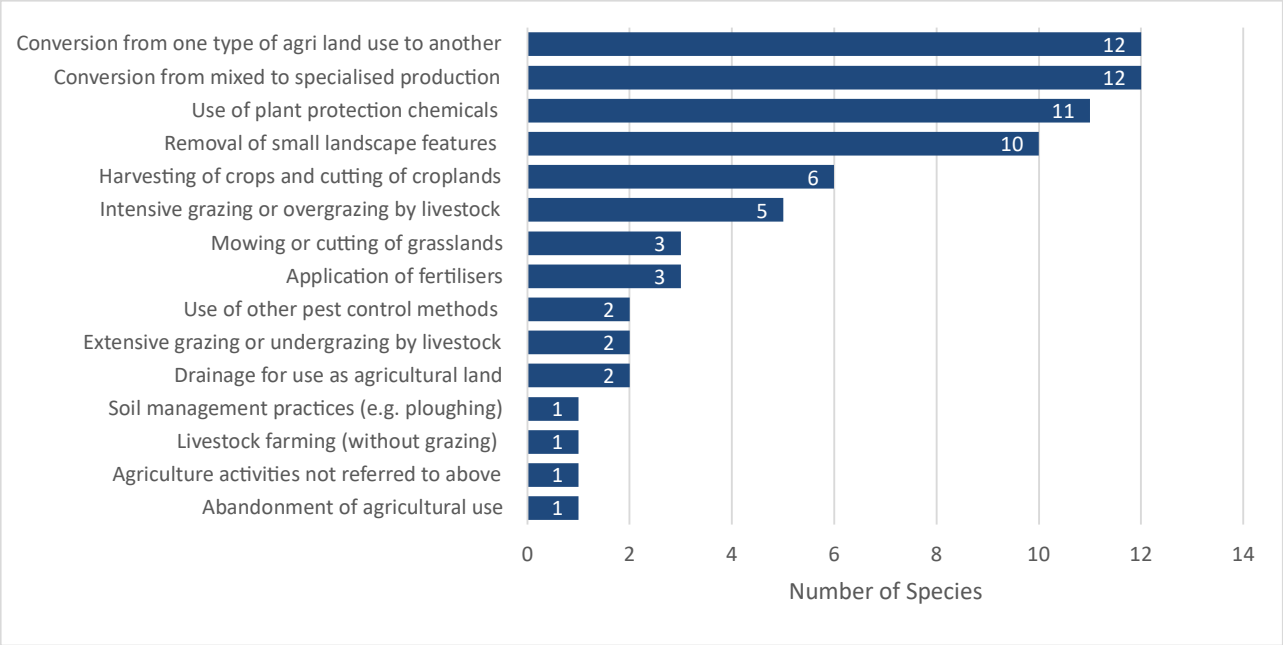

Figure 5: Current agricultural pressures acting on farmland bird species in England. Source: Pressures worksheet, Annex Two. Conversion of one type of agricultural land use to another, e.g. the switch from spring- to autumn-sown cereals, has affected 44% of farmland bird species. The conversion from mixed to specialised farming has also affected 44% of species.

Farmland birds are not only affected by agricultural pressures. Trichomonosis has severely affected greenfinch populations. It is also one of the many pressures on turtle doves, contributing to its status as one of the fastest declining breeding birds.

Predation by native species including foxes, crows and mustelids is a current pressure on five farmland bird species, including grey partridge and skylark. And climate change is currently affecting six species, with potential to affect a further four in the future.

Conservation Measures

Collaborative research by the RSPB and Natural England, through the Action for Birds in England (AfBiE) programme, has demonstrated that targeted agri-environment schemes can improve populations of farmland birds in arable and pastoral landscapes (Sharps and others, 2023). This work was built on with further analysis by the RSPB for the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP), which found that the scale of implementation needs to significantly increase if the farmland bird indicator is to recover (Burns and others, 2024). The RSPB's simulations suggested that to be 50% confident of the indicator improving, around half of landholdings in lowland England would need to be implementing tailored bird-friendly measures (Higher Level Scheme options) and half of the remaining landholdings would need to be implementing bird-friendly Entry-Level Scheme options. Set against this modelled figure, in 2022, higher-level or targeted agri-environment agreements (all measures, not just bird-friendly ones) covered 2.3 million hectares in England (Defra, 2025f). This equates to 26% of the 8.8 million hectares of utilisable agricultural area in England (Defra, 2025e).

This issue of scale of implementation is illustrated by the contrasting fortunes of cirl buntings and skylarks. Cirl buntings were once widespread but by 1989 there were only

118 pairs left, mostly confined to south Devon (Eaton and others, 2024). Research through the AfBiE programme identified that the declines were caused by poor survival over winter due to lack of weedy stubbles for food, poor productivity due to lack of grasshopper food in summer due to intensive grassland management, and lack of nest habitat due to loss of hedgerows. These issues were targeted by special options for cirl buntings within the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which were promoted to landowners by RSPB project officers supported by Natural England. This action has led to recovery of cirl buntings in Devon and enabled translocation to new sites in Cornwall. The population has now recovered to 1079 pairs (see population status worksheet at Annex Two).

In contrast, skylarks are widespread: the latest Bird Atlas (Balmer and others, 2013) found skylarks present in the breeding season in 96% of 10km squares in Great Britain. Whilst there has been little change in range, the population has been declining over the long term (by 11% over the last 25 years) and the species is Red-listed under BoCC. Research showed (Eaton and others, 2024) that the declines were due to low productivity, linked to a switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown cereals. This switch means that crops grow earlier in the nesting season, making them unsuitable for skylarks. As the crops grow too dense and tall they have fewer breeding attempts than in traditional spring-sown crops.

To address this, Natural England and the RSPB collaborated with partners in the agricultural industry to test ‘skylark plots’. These are 4x4m uncultivated plots within cereal fields at a density of 2 plots per hectare. They have been found to be very successful in improving skylark numbers with little impact on yield. Despite the fact that agri-environment scheme payments more than make up for the lost revenue, there has been slow take up of the intervention. As of April 2025, there were 9000 skylark plots in 240 agreements under either Countryside Stewardship (CS) or Environmental Stewardship (ES) schemes (Defra, 2025g). To put this in context, there are a total of 34,000 businesses in CS and 4,800 in ES, and each business can have more than one agreement. Whilst there are signs of skylark recovery (15% increase in the short term - see population status worksheet at Annex Two), to achieve increases in arable habitats there needs to be much greater deployment of skylark plots.

Overall conclusion

Significant research has been undertaken to diagnose the causes of farmland bird declines, design the agri-environment measures, and demonstrate that these can be successful in improving farmland bird populations. The issue now is achieving sufficient scale of implementation of measures to reverse population declines. It will be critical that the right suite of interventions is employed, in the right places, at a sufficient scale, to ensure the recovery of farmland birds.

Breeding Waders

Overview

There are 17 wader species breeding in England that are summarised in this section and listed at Appendix 1. This group comprises birds that use a range of habitats. For example, lowland wet grasslands, upland moorland, pastures, arable fields, bare or sparsely vegetated ground, sandy or shingle beaches and shores by sea or lakes.

As they use such diverse habitats it is difficult to generalise. However, they all nest in a simple scrape on the ground and usually require open habitats. They feed their chicks on soil or surface invertebrates, generally requiring soft ground for probing with their long bills.

Population Change

Breeding waders are high profile species of conservation concern because of their declining populations in the UK and globally. Of the species assessed, 53% are declining in the UK over the long-term (see Figure 6). Lapwing, woodcock, dotterel and ruff have all experienced declines of more than 50%. Dotterel and ruff are in a very precarious position in England, each with fewer than 10 pairs remaining (see population status worksheet at Annex Two). In contrast, avocet and stone curlew have each increased by more than 50% in the long-term, largely due to conservation efforts.

Fewer waders appear to have experienced large population declines in the short-term (see Figure 6). However, it is not possible to say that declines have slowed in the short term because trends are not available for six species. This includes for ruff and dotterel, whose status in England is uncertain due to climate change and pressures acting outside the UK.

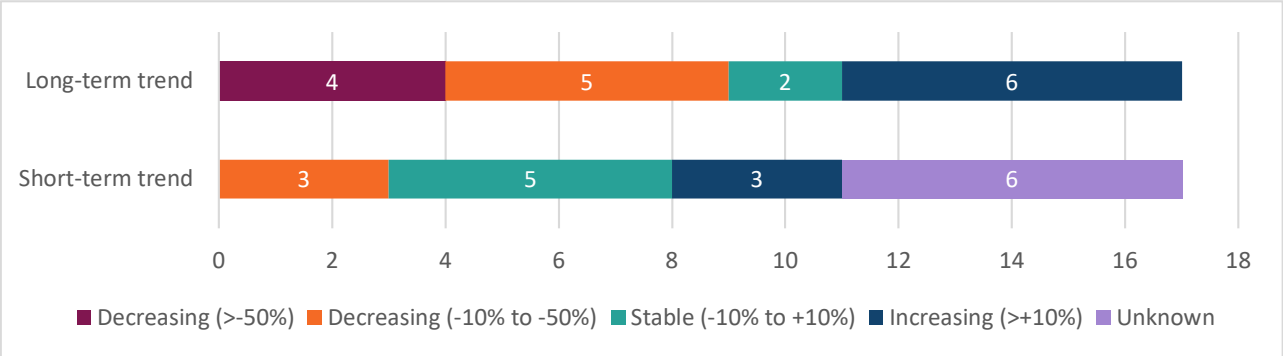

Figure 6: Number of breeding wader species showing different long-term (25 year) and short-term (10 year) population trends in the UK. Source: Population status worksheet, Annex Two. 53% of breeding waders are declining over the long-term. As there are six waders with an unknown short-term population trend, it is not possible to say whether populations are faring better more recently.

Conservation Status

There are currently eight Red-listed and seven Amber-listed breeding waders on BoCC5 (Stanbury and others, 2021). Only two species are Green-listed: golden plover and little ringed plover. There was no change in the status of breeding waders in the six years between the fourth and fifth BoCC assessments.

There has been some change in extinction risk in the four years between the first and second GB IUCN assessments. Oystercatcher moved from ‘Least Concern’ to ‘Vulnerable’. Three species reduced in extinction risk. For two species this was due to revised understanding of trends and for lapwing this was due to a genuine improvement in fortunes.

Change in conservation status of breeding waders is set out at Appendix 1. Overall, 11 of 17 breeding waders (65%) are assigned to a threatened category (‘Vulnerable’, ‘Endangered’ or ‘Critically Endangered’) in the latest GB IUCN assessment or are on the BoCC Red list. These species (black-tailed godwit, curlew, dotterel, dunlin, lapwing, oystercatcher, redshank, ringed plover, ruff, stone curlew, woodcock) cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Pressures Assessment

An assessment has been made of the current pressures or future threats on 17 breeding wader species in England (for detail see the Pressures worksheet at Annex Two). Three species (avocet, black-winged stilt and little ringed plover) have no current pressures acting to limit their populations, though they do still require conservation management to ensure habitats remain suitable.

Agricultural and other land-use changes (current and historic) have driven breeding wader declines, compounded by predation by a wide suite of predators including foxes, crows and mustelids. Climate change is making an increasing contribution to these declines.

Lowland wet grassland waders (e.g. lapwing, snipe, curlew and redshank) have undergone significant declines and range contractions. Historic and ongoing agricultural pressures include drainage, under- or over-grazing, use of fertilizers or pesticides, and conversion from one agricultural use to another. The most significant change for lowland grassland waders was the shift from hay production to silage and haylage, which altered the timing of cutting to earlier in the year. In the uplands, grazing level is the key agricultural pressure impacting habitat quality for breeding waders. In some areas, land abandonment leads to under-grazing and in others over-grazing is the issue.

Lapwing and stone curlew have been affected by the switch from spring- to autumn-sown crops. This switch enables cereals to grow taller earlier in the season, so they become unsuitable for species that require open habitats.

These agricultural pressures reduce habitat suitability, which concentrates birds in smaller areas, where they are more vulnerable to predators. However, even where lowland wet

grassland habitat is suitable, Malpas and others (2013) found that low productivity, largely caused by predation, can limit wader recovery.

Historic afforestation has had a significant impact on the distribution of breeding waders, where conifer plantations effectively sterilised large areas of land. Forestry pressures are also a future threat to breeding waders. Tree planting can bring many conservation benefits, including climate change mitigation. However, tree planting in inappropriate places can result in the loss of open habitats which species like breeding waders rely on, and displacement as waders generally avoid nesting near woodland. Forestry also creates a ‘predator shadow’ across adjacent open habitats, which can be extensive, providing habitat for both mammalian and avian predators and offering them vantage points and cover when hunting.

Climate change mediated variations in temperature or moisture availability have been linked to changes in the abundance of upland breeding waders, including golden plover, dunlin and curlew (Pearce-Higgins, 2021). Hot, dry summers reduce the availability or abundance of soil-dwelling invertebrates, meaning less food is available for adults and chicks. Similarly, lowland wet grassland waders such as snipe can be affected by the drying out of habitats. Conversely, summer rainfall and flooding can have negative impacts on species such as black-tailed godwits. For coastal-nesting waders, like ringed plovers, increased storminess and sea level rise can wash out nests.

Conservation Measures

Intense conservation effort has gone into breeding wader recovery. As shown in Figure 7 the three main measure groups are mitigation of development pressures, predator management and agricultural measures. Further detail can be found in the measures worksheet at Annex Two.

The conservation measure applied to the greatest number of breeding waders (13 species - see Figure 7) is the management of the impacts of development. The Habitats Regulations Assessment process ensures that developments are not approved unless any impacts on SPA birds are avoided, mitigated or compensated. However, this measure has only been partially implemented. The Third SPA Review has identified there are insufficiencies in the SPA Network (Grady and others, 2025) for avocet, dotterel, golden plover, dunlin, curlew and redshank. Also included in the ‘Residential/industrial development’ category are measures to mitigate recreational disturbance and measures to reduce the impact of abstraction for public water supply on wetlands.

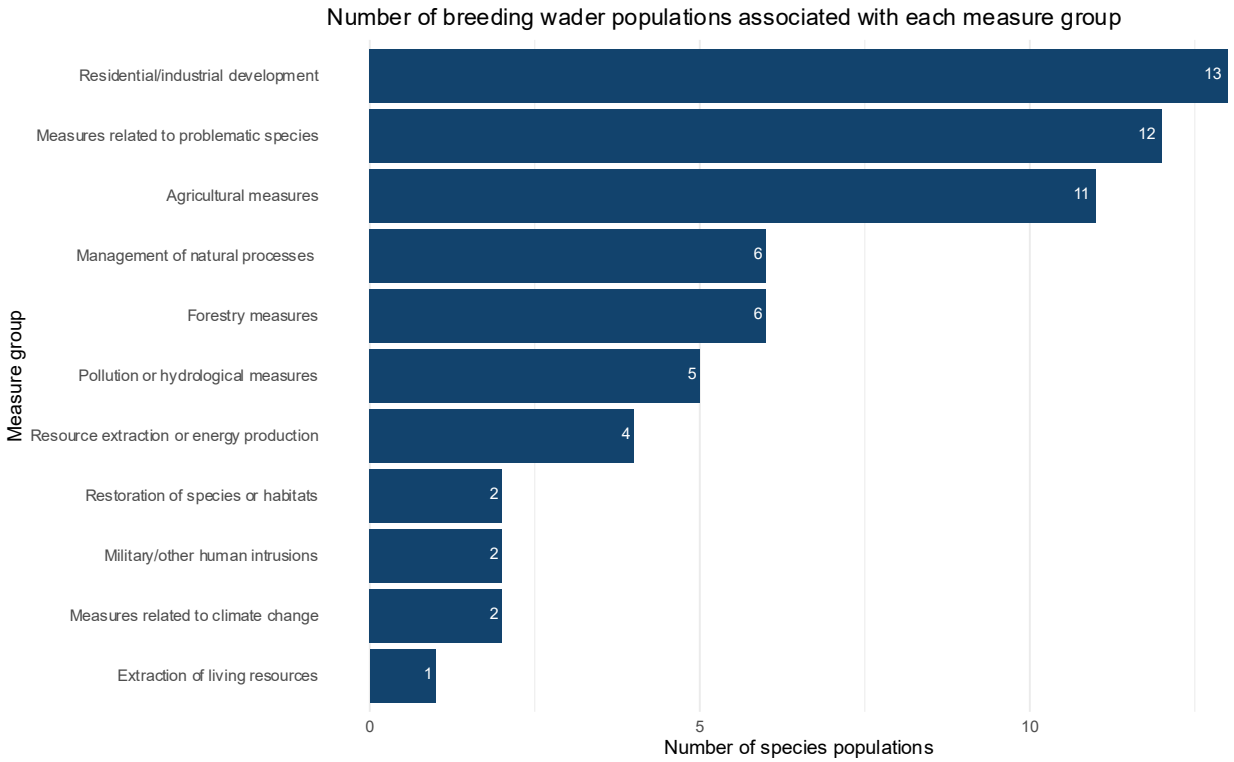

Figure 7: Number of breeding wader species associated with each measure group. Source: Measures worksheet, Annex Two. 75% of breeding waders benefit from measures to mitigate the impacts of developments. Measures to minimise predation and agricultural pressures are also crucial for breeding waders.

Agri-Environment Scheme (AES) measures are available to aid breeding wader recovery in grassland, moorland and arable habitats. Successful management of wet grassland for breeding waders is one of the most complex land management challenges in AES, requiring delivery of suitable sward structure, high groundwater levels and some surface water. Strong adviser support and targeting is necessary to achieve the best outcomes.

Hawkes and others (2025) found that protected areas (nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)) and AESs benefit breeding waders but their efficacy depends on the landscape context. The suggestion from this work is that conservation investment might focus on expanding existing nature reserves or creating large blocks with reserve-level management, and that deployment of wader AES needs to deliver high quality habitat at sufficient scale.

Arable nesting lapwings and stone curlews have been impacted by the switch from spring- to autumn-sown cereals. To address this, AES payments are available to create uncultivated plots, which maintain the open conditions that these species require. The plots are 1 hectare (ha) for lapwing and 2ha for stone curlew. These plots have been very successful for stone curlews because it has been possible to target the measure at the remaining geographic locations for the species. For example, breeding stone curlews in Wessex have increased from around 30 in 1985 to 120 in 2024, with 70% of the 2024 birds on nesting plots (RSPB, 2025).

Joint guidance has been developed by the Forestry Commission, Natural England and Defra to inform England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) applicants where woodland creation is likely to have no or limited impact on waders and is therefore appropriate (Defra, 2024g). Whilst the focus of this guidance is northern England (as this is where the majority of waders breed), the general principles are applied to lowland tree planting applications and to other schemes promoting increased tree cover.

Even in areas of high habitat quality, breeding wader populations can fail to recover due to high predation rates causing low productivity. There are various methods available to exclude predators that have been shown to be effective. Fences have successfully been used in lowland wet grassland habitats to exclude predators and improve lapwing (and other species) productivity (Malpas and others, 2013). Cages around individual ringed plover nests are also effective against both mammalian and avian predators (Liley, 2021). However, predator exclusion is more difficult for species like curlew that nest at a low density over wide areas of habitat and lethal predator control may be required in certain areas where predation remains the limiting factor on productivity despite optimum habitat management.

Habitat restoration work includes re-wetting of peatlands, which can mitigate the impacts of climate change. For example, the South West Peatland Partnership (SWPP, 2024) is working to restore peatland on Dartmoor, benefitting species including dunlin and snipe.

Emergency action has also been taken to improve the productivity of some breeding waders. ‘Headstarting’, where eggs are taken and reared before releasing juvenile birds, has been used to benefit curlews and black-tailed godwits. These projects are described in more detail in section 5.5.3 and 5.5.5 of the General Implementation Report.

Species Action Plans, Strategies and Working Groups

Collaborative wader working groups aiming to recover breeding wader populations have been established in recent years. The England Curlew Recovery Partnership, involves a wide range of organisations and landowners, working together and supporting local action. It is a vital partnership, sharing best practice on issues such as monitoring, predator management and head starting. It also delivered research into land management for curlews to inform the design of agri-environment scheme options.

An International Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP) has been developed for Curlew by the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) (Brown, 2015), and a UK Action Plan including a ten-year strategy for Black-tailed Godwit was published in 2023.

A number of important projects were undertaken during the reporting period including LIFE on the Edge: improving the condition and long-term resilience of key coastal SPAs in England, Project Godwit, which aimed to improve the conservation status of Black-tailed Godwit as a breeding species in the UK, and the Curlew LIFE project, which involved emergency action to halt Curlew declines in five UK priority landscapes. These Species

Action Plans, Strategies and Working Groups all involve organisations working in partnership with others to halt and reverse wader population declines.

Overall Conclusion

Whilst 11 of 17 English breeding wader species (65%) cannot be said to be in Favourable Conservation Status, there is hope for positive future change. Increasing long-term population trends are reported for six breeding waders, and the initiatives undertaken by collaborative wader working groups and other organisations aim to improve the fortunes of others.

In a study on the effect of conservation interventions on the abundance of breeding waders within 79 UK wet grassland nature reserves from 1993-2018, Jellesmark and others (2023) found that long-term targeted conservation interventions led to increased numbers of breeding waders within these sites. The challenge is to build upon the successful outcomes for breeding waders on nature reserves and move towards a goal of reversing wader population declines in the wider countryside.

Breeding Seabirds

Overview

Breeding seabirds are widely distributed around England's coastline. They can form impressive colonies on cliff faces, nest in burrows, or on beaches. Increasingly, some seabirds are nesting inland: on moorland, lakes, reservoirs and in urban areas.

There are 25 species of seabird that regularly nest in the UK, 22 of which occur in England and are discussed in this section (see list at Appendix 1). England is particularly important for some of these seabirds, holding 99% of the UK's Mediterranean gulls, 98% of roseate terns, 75% of black-headed gulls, around 75% of lesser black-backed gulls, 73% of Sandwich terns, and 72% of little terns (Burnell and others, 2023).

Population Change

Seabirds in the UK are monitored by a combination of periodic censuses and annual monitoring of a subset of colonies by the Seabird Monitoring Programme (SMP). These datasets were used to calculate the trends for the UK presented in the Population Status worksheet at Annex Two and summarised in Figure 8.

There have been four censuses of seabirds in the UK. The latest, Seabirds Count, was carried out in 2015 to 2021 (Burnell and others, 2023). For most species, the long-term trend equates to the period between the second census (Seabird Colony Register (SCR), undertaken in 1985-88) and Seabirds Count. If comprehensive data was not available from the SCR, a comparison between the third census (Seabird 2000, undertaken in 1998-2002) was made. The short-term trend covers a 10-year period if sufficient data was available from the SMP, if not the period between Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count was used.

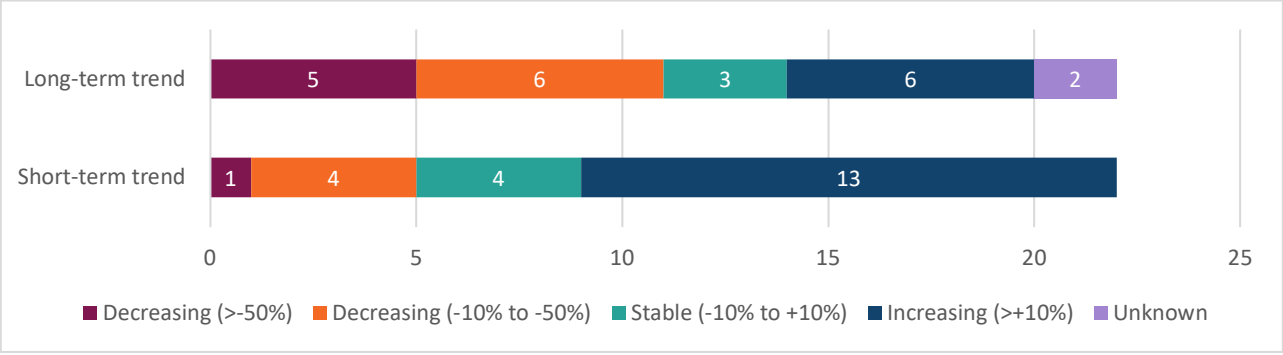

Figure 8: Number of breeding seabirds showing different long- and short-term population trends in the UK. Source: Population status worksheet, Annex Two. Over the long-term, half of seabird populations have declined, whereas over the short-term 23% have declined.

Based on the time periods assessed in this report, as shown in Figure 8, seabirds seem to be faring better over the short-term rather than the long-term. However, where the latest data available is Seabirds Count, the trends do not include the effects of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Of the five species that have declined by more than 50% over the long-term shown in Figure 8, only common gull continues to decline at the same rate. This species is rare in England with only 27 Apparently Occupied Nests (AON) recorded in Seabirds Count (Burnell and others, 2023). Roseate terns are the seabird with the largest declines over the long-term (63%), mainly due to the loss of colonies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The remaining English colony on Coquet Island showed an impressive recovery between Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count, though has subsequently been affected by HPAI.

The UK Wild Bird Indicator (Defra, 2025) combines the individual indices of 11 breeding seabirds in England into a single indicator to provide an overall trend. The England seabird index increased by 11% between 1986 and 2024 but declined by 21% in the last five years. This latter change is due to the impacts of HPAI.

The seabird censuses also enable an assessment to be made of change in range of breeding seabirds. Maps showing the change between Seabird 2000 and Seabirds Count are presented at on the JNCC website and summarised in the General Implementation Report section 3.5.18.3. The most significant changes in range over the last 25 years have been shown by species that are able to make use of inland sites. Mediterranean gulls, black-headed gulls, cormorants and common terns have all expanded into inland sites. Herring and lesser black-backed gulls have both shifted inland and into urban environments.

Conservation Status

The fifth Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC5a) report was recently updated for seabirds (Stanbury and others., 2024). This used data from the latest seabird census (Burnell and others, 2023) and also took account of apparent impacts from the HPAI outbreak that began in 2021. There has been a deterioration in status of species in the six years between the fourth and fifth BoCC assessments. Of the species relevant to England, the BoCC5a assessment added Arctic tern, common gull and great black-backed gull to the Red-list due to pre-HPAI population declines. Though more positively, black guillemot moved from Amber to Green and shag moved from Red to Amber.

Extinction risk of seabirds has substantially increased between the first GB IUCN assessment in 2017 (Stanbury and others, 2017) and the second in 2024 (Stanbury and others, 2024). In the first GB IUCN assessment, only 23% of species were threatened with extinction, whereas the latest assessment assigned 64% of species to a threatened category. Three species moved straight from Least Concern to Critically Endangered (fulmar, great black-backed gull and puffin). Whilst eight additional species increased in extinction risk by at least one step. Three species improved by one step: cormorant moved from Near Threatened to Least Concern, kittiwake moved from Critically Endangered to Endangered, and shag moved from Endangered to Vulnerable.

There are some differences between the outcomes of the assessments under BoCC and IUCN. For example, fulmar is Critically Endangered but BoCC Amber-listed, and black guillemot improved in BoCC status but increased in extinction risk. This is a product of the different criteria for assessments, and particularly that the IUCN projects trends into the future to assess extinction risk, and BoCC just looks at past trends.

Change in conservation status of breeding seabirds is set out at Appendix 1. Overall, 14 out of 22 breeding seabirds (64%) are assigned to a threatened category ('Vulnerable', 'Endangered' or 'Critically Endangered') in the IUCN assessment or are on the BoCC Red list. These species (Arctic tern, black-headed gull, common gull, common tern, fulmar, great black-backed gull, guillemot, herring gull, kittiwake, little tern, puffin, razorbill, roseate tern, shag) cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Pressures Assessment

An assessment has been made of the pressures on 22 breeding seabirds present in England, which can be found in the Pressures worksheet at Annex Two. Mediterranean gull is the only species that does not have any pressures currently acting to limit its population abundance or range.

Alien and problematic native species (including disease) is the pressure currently affecting most species: 19, or 86%, and is a future threat to one additional species. HPAI is the disease that has emerged in this reporting period and the long-term impacts are still unknown. In England, terns and gulls suffered significant population declines due to HPAI: Sandwich terns declined by around 28% between the Seabirds Count census and 2023, common terns by 37%, Arctic terns by 45%, and kittiwakes by 34% (Tremlett and others, 2024). HPAI halted the recovery of roseate terns and caused a 21% reduction in the population on Coquet Island over the period 2022 to 2023 (RSPB, 2024). However, there is hope for the population as 2024 saw very high productivity with 1.39 chicks fledged per pair from 126 pairs (RSPB 2024).

Predation is an important driver of seabird behaviour and distribution because the aggregation of many species into colonies represents an abundant potential food source for predators. Presence of non-native brown rats on islands limits the populations of Manx shearwaters and storm petrels. Native predators, notably foxes, but also badgers, otters and other species, impact tern and gull colonies, which can lead to colony abandonment (Burnell and others, 2023). Large gulls (great black-backed, lesser black-backed and herring) can exert heavy predation pressure locally on the eggs and chicks of smaller gulls and terns. Other avian predators include raptors, which can also put pressure locally on colonies.

The 'Extraction of living resources' group of pressures, which includes fisheries impacts, is the next most important, currently affecting 17 species and a future threat to a further three. However, some of the impacts of these pressures are judged to be low. Seabird abundance and distribution are strongly influenced by local and regional food availability, which can affect both breeding productivity and survival of adults. Commercial fisheries

can affect seabird food availability by removing forage fish such as sandeel and sprat. Surface-feeding species, as well as those with specialist diets and short foraging ranges, and those breeding in locations with high competition for shared food resources, are likely to be most severely affected by food scarcity.

Commercial fisheries can also affect seabirds through incidental bycatch. Whilst this is not well monitored, ten species of seabird have been reported as being caught in fishing gear since 1997 and modelling has suggested a population-level impact of this for fulmar and cormorant (Miles and others, 2020).

Climate change impacts are currently affecting 16 species and is a future threat to a further four species. These include a range of direct and indirect pressures and threats:

- Extreme weather events increase the likelihood of breeding failure through chilling of eggs or chicks, or the flooding of nests or burrows. Strong winds can reduce foraging ability and affect both chick and adult survival. The most extreme events can result in 'wrecks' of a large number of birds.
- Sea level rise is reducing the availability of soft coast habitat for terns and gulls, particularly where the coast is constrained by hard sea defences.
- Rising sea temperatures can affect food availability through impacts on the marine food web. Increased sea surface temperatures affect the stratification of the water column, which affects plankton communities, which in turn affects forage fish such as sandeels, and the seabirds that rely on them.
- Modelling suggests that the breeding ranges of several species, such as razorbill, are likely to shift northwards as a result of a warming climate.

Although important in mitigating climate change, offshore wind developments may affect seabirds through collision mortality, displacement from foraging areas or barrier effects. This pressure currently affects 13 species (although the impact is judged as low for seven of these) and is a future threat to a further two species.

Residential, commercial and industrial developments can have direct impacts through nesting habitat loss, or indirect impacts through recreational disturbance or pollution. These pressures currently affect nine species and are a threat to a further four. Recreational disturbance is a key factor in determining nesting site availability for gulls and terns that nest on soft coasts. It was a pressure for roseate tern in the past, but this has been resolved for the remaining colony on Coquet Island as this is not open to the public.

Conservation Measures

The Measures worksheet at Annex Two contains an assessment of the actions underway or necessary for seabird recovery. These are summarised at Figure 9. Measures to mitigate the direct or indirect impacts from developments are necessary for all 22 species assessed. The Habitats Regulations Assessment process ensures development impacts on SPA species are avoided, mitigated or compensated. However, this measure is only partially implemented because there are gaps in the terrestrial SPA network identified for

cormorant, Mediterranean gull, common gull, great black-backed gull and Arctic tern (Grady and others, 2025). Where important populations are not protected by SPA designations, there are risks that development impacts will occur without mitigation. A marine SPA sufficiency review process may identify further insufficiencies in the marine environment.

Additional measures are being taken to address indirect impacts from developments, particularly recreational disturbance. Fencing, wardening, signage and other visitor management measures are being used to limit impacts on breeding seabirds. But recreational use of beaches continues to limit available habitat for terns and gulls.

Measures are necessary to reduce predation by native and non-native species on 18 seabird species. Successful eradication of non-native species from islands can be difficult but can have spectacular results. For example, removal of brown and black rats from Lundy (Devon) in 2004 enabled the recolonisation of storm petrels and recovery of Manx shearwaters, which increased from 166 Apparently Occupied Sites (AOS) in Seabird 2000 to 5,505 AOS in Seabirds Count (Burnell and others, 2023). Removal of brown rats from St Agnes and Gugh (Isles of Scilly) in 2013 is having similarly encouraging results. Anti-predator fencing can be effective against native mammalian predators, including fox and badger (Babcock & Booth, 2020), though needs regular maintenance. Large gulls can predate the eggs and chicks of smaller gulls and terns, and licences may be issued to control the large gulls where it is necessary to conserve a rare and localised species such as roseate tern. Diversionary feeding has been used to reduce kestrel predation on little terns in Dorset, but this is labour intensive and unlikely to be practical at a large scale (Burnell and others, 2023).

Whilst HPAI has exerted a large pressure on seabirds in recent years, the available measures are limited to monitoring and reducing other pressures on colonies in an effort to enable them to recover as quickly as possible.

Fisheries measures (Extraction of living resources measure group) are the third most important group in terms of number of species (see Figure 9). The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (IFCAs) assess and manage the impact of fisheries on Marine Protected Areas in offshore (beyond 6 nautical miles) and inshore waters respectively. There are 12 breeding seabirds that require action to manage fisheries with the aim of ensuring there are sustainable forage fish stocks. Important action has been taken to improve the marine ecosystem by permanently closing English waters of the North Sea to the fishing of sandeels. This will benefit species such as puffins and kittiwakes that rely on sandeels for food. Nevertheless, further work is recommended in the English Seabird Conservation and Recovery Pathway (ESCaRP) Natural England, 2024c): to develop a forage fish policy (or similar mechanism) to implement an ecosystem approach to fisheries management decisions that consider the importance of prey for seabirds.

Fisheries can also directly affect seabirds through incidental bycatch. In 2022 the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative was published, setting out high level objectives and suggested actions

outlining how the UK will achieve its ambitions to minimise and, where possible, eliminate the bycatch of sensitive marine species (see also Annex Four of this report).

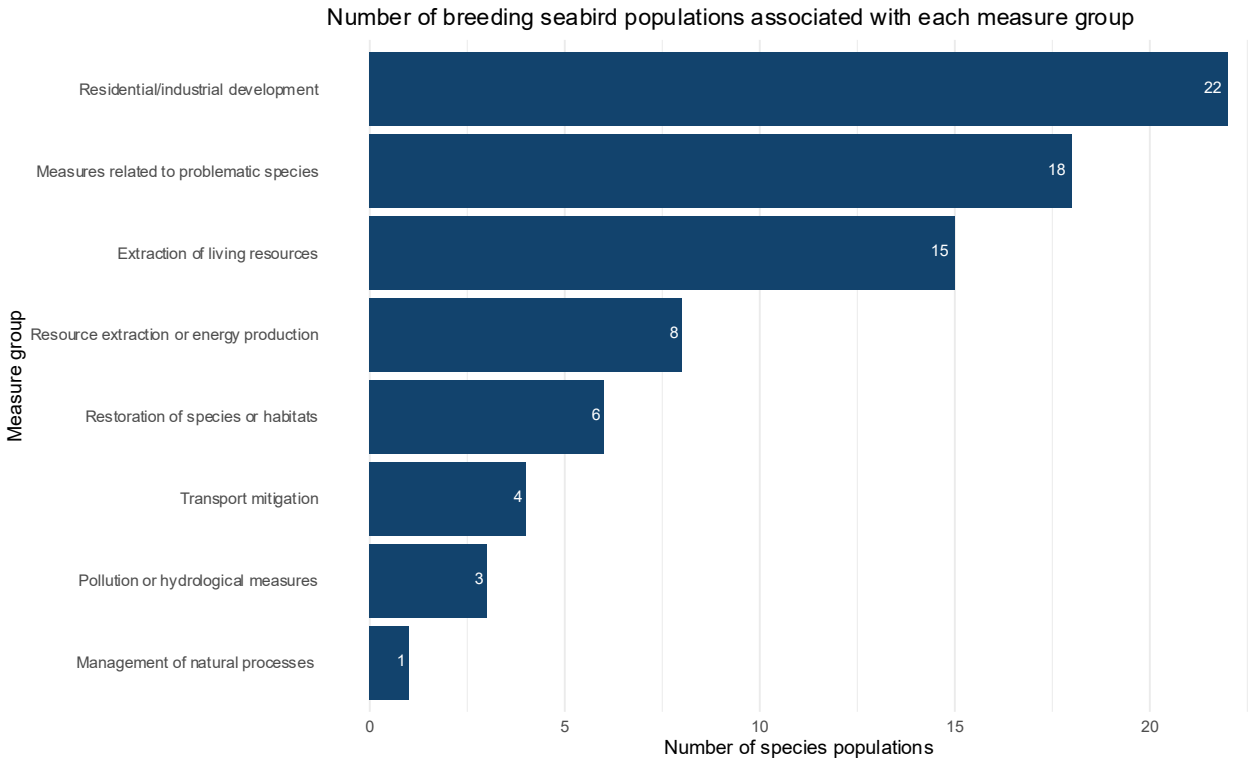

Figure 9: Number of breeding seabird species associated with each measure group. Source: Measures worksheet, Annex Two. Measures to mitigate the impacts of residential or industrial developments are necessary for all 22 seabird species assessed. Measures to reduce predation from native and non-native species are necessary for 82% of seabirds.

Species Action Plans, Strategies and Working Groups

The 2024 English Seabird Conservation and Recovery Pathway (ESCaRP) is a technical report commissioned by Defra to investigate the causes of decline for 36 species of seabird and marine waterbird populations within England and identify potential actions to support their recovery (Natural England, 2024c).

Overall Conclusion

Work to recover little terns demonstrates that co-ordinated action addressing the key drivers of decline brings positive results. Since 2014 a large-scale recovery programme has been in place at key sites for little terns in England and Wales. The work was started by the EU LIFE+ Little Tern Recovery Project and continued by the LIFE on the Edge and AfBiE-funded Beach Nesting Birds projects, plus work by site managers. Enhanced wardening, predator management, habitat management and habitat creation measures have tackled disturbance and predation issues and ensured habitats are more resilient to

climate change. Productivity monitoring has found that these measures have coincided with an improvement in breeding success (Wilson and others, 2025) and signs that the population trend is stabilising (Population worksheet at Annex Two). Seabirds are generally long-lived, slow-reproducing, species and so conservation efforts are needed over the long-term to ensure recovery.

Whilst the long-term impacts of HPAI are still unknown, the outbreak that started in 2021 has demonstrated the need to increase the resilience of breeding seabirds so they can better recover from disease. This requires reducing other pressures and taking positive action such as habitat creation, where possible.

Woodland Birds

Overview

Woodland covers 10% of England's land area (Forest Research, 2025b), providing birds with trees and other vegetation suitable to nest in, foraging resources and cover from predators. Some birds are specialists, highly reliant on woodland (e.g. wood warbler, redpoll and spotted flycatcher), and others are generalists that may also make use of gardens or wooded areas in farmland (e.g. bullfinch, blackbird and chaffinch).

The Reg 9A Birds spreadsheet (Annex Two) identifies 39 species that are associated with woodland in England, and which are listed at Appendix 1. Some of these species have a southerly or south-easterly distribution and so England supports a high proportion of the UK population, for example lesser spotted woodpecker and nightingale.

Population Change

The UK Wild Bird Indicator (Defra, 2025d) tracks aggregated trends in a subset of 37 breeding woodland birds in the UK, 34 of which have sufficient data available in England to be included in the indicator. Between 1970 and 2024 there has been an overall population decline of 32% in the UK and 36% in England. This decline is mainly accounted for by declines in specialists, with the populations of most generalists being stable since 1970 (Defra, 2025d).

The population trends of a longer list of 39 woodland breeding birds are summarised in Figure 10. Over the long term (mostly 27 years, but dependent on data availability) 46% of species are declining and 49% are stable or increasing. Over the short term (mostly 10 years) 41% are declining and 43% are stable or increasing.

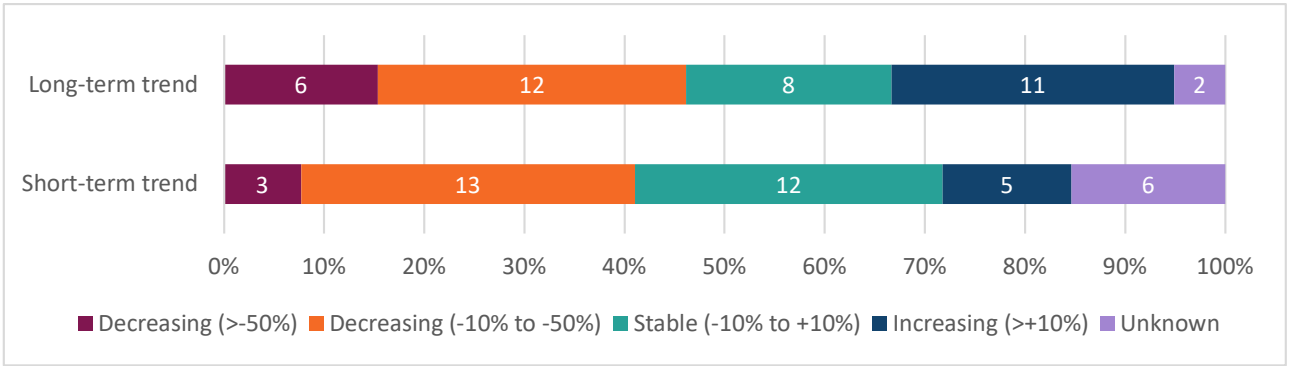

Figure 10: Number of woodland species showing different long- and short-term population trends in the UK. Source: Population status worksheet, Annex Two. Over the long-term, 46% of woodland bird species declined and over the short-term, 41% have declined.

Woodland birds have suffered some of the largest long-term declines in population of all UK birds. For example, lesser spotted woodpecker declined by 92% between 1980 and 2015, willow tit declined by 90% between 1995 and 2022, and wood warbler declined by 81% between 1995 and 2022 (see population trend worksheet at Annex Two).

Conservation Status

There are currently 10 woodland birds Red-listed in Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (BoCC5) (Stanbury and others, 2021). This represents 26% of the 39 woodland species listed at Appendix 1. There has been little change in conservation concern of woodland birds in the six years between the fourth and fifth BoCC assessments. The only species increasing in conservation concern were wren and sparrowhawk, which moved from Green to Amber. However, for wren, this was because the UK now holds a significant proportion of the European population, rather than due to population declines. Pied flycatcher improved in status, moving from the Red to Amber list.

There has been some change in extinction risk in the four years between the first and second GB IUCN assessments. Mistle thrush, marsh tit and pied flycatcher all moved from Vulnerable to Near Threatened. However, four species increased in extinction risk, including chaffinch, which moved from Least Concern to Endangered due to the disease, Trichomonosis.

The conservation status of woodland birds is set out at Appendix 1. Overall, 12 out of 39 breeding woodland birds (31%) are assigned to a threatened category ('Vulnerable', 'Endangered' or 'Critically Endangered') in the IUCN assessment or are on the BoCC Red list. These species (chaffinch, hawfinch, lesser spotted woodpecker, marsh tit, mistle thrush, nightingale, redpoll, sparrowhawk, spotted flycatcher, tree pipit, willow tit and wood warbler) cannot be said to be at Favourable Conservation Status.

Pressures Assessment

An assessment has been made of the current pressures or future threats on 39 breeding woodland bird species in England (for detail see the Pressures worksheet at Annex Two). Of these, 16 (41%) have no current pressures on them acting to limit their populations.

Forestry pressures are currently affecting 15 woodland species (38% of those assessed). Abandonment of traditional forest management is affecting species such as the marsh tit, as understorey vegetation is lost due to the closure of the tree canopy. Conversely, intensive woodland management including the removal of old, dead or dying trees is affecting species such as the redstart, by reducing nest sites.

Climate change impacts are currently affecting eight species and are a future threat to a further ten. A suite of these species are long distance migrants, spending their winter in the humid tropics of Africa. Work by Ockendon and others (2012) has suggested that regional changes in climate or land use on the wintering grounds are driving declines in these species. In addition, there may be climate impacts in the breeding season, including phenological mismatch between nesting and the peak of insect prey abundance in the face of warming springs and the drying out of woodlands due to changes in rainfall regimes.

Alien or problematic species (including disease) are currently affecting seven species and are a future threat to a further four species. Both native and non-native deer populations are reducing the habitat quality of woodlands by removing the scrub layer. This negatively affects species, such as garden warbler and nightingale, that nest and forage in the scrub understorey. The recent decline in chaffinches has been linked to the disease Trichomonosis and avian pox is a threat to blue and great tits.

There is a relatively high proportion of woodland birds (26% of the 39 assessed) where the pressures driving population declines are still unknown. For example, research into wood warbler populations has not found evidence that breeding habitat change, food resources, phenology or predation rates explain the declines (Eaton and others, 2024). As a long-distance migrant, there is correlational evidence that conditions in the Humid zone of west Africa affects birds that winter there (Ockendon and others, 2012). But Mallord and others (2018) found that wood warblers are apparently resilient to forest loss on their wintering grounds, as they can use degraded habitats. Therefore, despite this extensive research into various potential causes of change, the drivers behind the 81% long-term decline in wood warbler population are unknown.

Conservation Measures

The Measures worksheet at Annex Two contains an assessment of the actions underway or necessary for woodland bird recovery. There are nine species for which no conservation measures are required. These are species with no pressures acting on them and increasing populations, such as robin and firecrest.

As shown in Figure 11, forestry measures are needed or being implemented for 26 species (67% of the woodland birds assessed). This includes species that have no pressures acting on them, but where well managed woodlands are required to maintain populations. It also includes species where the pressures causing population declines are unknown. In these cases, management to create well-connected woodlands with a diverse structure is likely to be a ‘no regrets’ action benefiting a range of woodland birds, including those where the precise drivers of declines are still unknown.

Within woodland habitats, the highest proportion of wildlife tends to occur within the edges and margins, as these provide the greatest number of habitat niches. Therefore, forestry management measures for birds are often designed to reintroduce a varied structure, ensuring the presence of the field layer, understorey and tree canopy. This structure can be added, for example, through reinstating coppice management or the creation of rides and glades within woodland. Some woodland species cannot disperse through open habitats or have large home ranges, so it is important to consider connecting existing woodlands when creating new woodland habitat. Grants are available for managing existing woodlands and creating new habitat via the Forestry Commission and agri-environment schemes (Forestry Commission, 2025).

The willow tit exemplifies the need for scrub and edge habitat, and well-connected woodlands. The species is not particularly mobile and so depends on expansive patches of dense woody vegetation connected through hedgerows, young woodland and mature scrub. The Back from the Brink project improved over 100ha of habitat in the Dearne Valley, in partnership with Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Barnsley Council and Yorkshire Water. Birds were also radio-tracked to understand more about their movements and habitat use. This led to the production of the Willow Tit Management Handbook for use by land managers to promote best practice (Pinder & Carr, 2021).

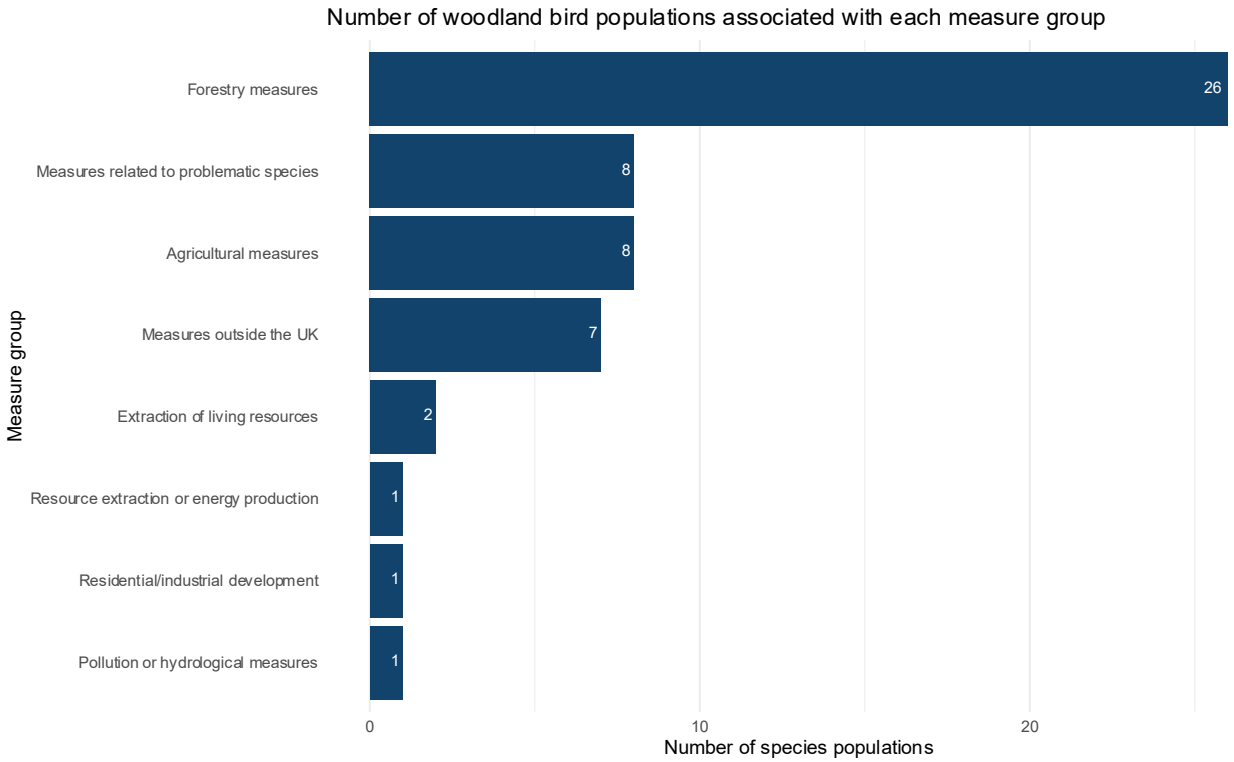

Figure 11: Number of breeding woodland bird species associated with each measure group. Source: Measures worksheet, Annex Two. Forestry measures are the main group of actions required for woodland bird recovery. This includes creation of new woodlands and restoration/management of existing woodlands.

Browsing by native or non-native deer species can reduce the shrub layer in woodlands and has been implicated in the declines of species that nest and forage in this zone. Measures are required to address this issue for 8 species (see Figure 11 - Measures related to problematic species). Management of deer requires co-ordinated action across landscapes for it to be effective. As described in Annex Four, the Sussex Woods Sustainable Deer Management Project is working in partnership to restore woodlands and their biodiversity.

Species Action Plans, Strategies and Working Groups

The UK Woodland Bird Steering Group brings together statutory agencies, conservation organisations, academics and independent woodland bird experts. The aim is to increase understanding of the reasons behind woodland bird declines and collaborate on designing solutions to encourage their recovery.

The Woodpecker Network is run by volunteers and offers support to birdwatchers nationally to record lesser spotted woodpeckers and, where possible, find and monitor nests and to pool the results. This nest recording is vital to understanding the reasons for the declines in lesser spotted woodpeckers.

Overall Conclusion

12 out of 39 woodland birds cannot be said to be in FCS and this guild includes some of the fastest declining bird species. However, the biggest concern is that the reasons behind some individual species declines are still unknown. Lack of food resources, deer browsing, lack of woodland management, climate change and issues for migratory species outside of the UK have all been proposed. However, which of these (or any other factors) are the driving forces behind each species' declines, and their respective importance, is unclear. In order to begin coordinating and mobilising the action needed to address this, a UK Woodland Bird Steering Group has been set up. This brings together experts from many organisations with the aim of understanding declines, testing solutions and promoting recovery.

Acknowledgements

This report was drafted with inputs from a SNCB 9A Birds Reporting Advisory Group comprising Alison Giacomelli (NE); Simon Foster, Andrew Stevenson and Lucy Quinn (NatureScot); Ronan Owens (DAERA); Patrick Lindley (Natural Resources Wales).

The work to compile the population estimates and trends presented in the worksheet at Annex Two and summarised in this report was undertaken by David Noble (BTO) and Iain Woodward (BTO) for commoner terrestrial breeding birds; Ilka Win, Daisy Burnell, Matt Parsons and Tim Dunn (JNCC) for breeding seabirds; Teresa Frost, Graham Austin, Stephen McAvoy & Ian Woodward (BTO) and Simon Wotton (RSPB) for non-breeding waterbirds in Great Britain; Teresa Frost & Graham Austin (BTO) and David Tierney (National Parks & Wildlife Service) for non-breeding waterbirds in the island of Ireland. We thank Mark Eaton Secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, for collating the national archive of data and information on the UK's rarest birds.

The BTO generously made available maps and derived statistics from the Atlas of breeding and wintering birds in Britain and Ireland (Balmer and others, 2013). JNCC produced the seabird range change maps using data collected through Seabirds Count (Burnell and others, 2023).

Pressure and Conservation Measure assessments were made by the SNCB 9A Birds Reporting Advisory Group.

Surveys from which the data in this report were derived were funded and/or organised, by the following organisations (and their predecessor bodies): BirdWatch Ireland, BTO; DAERA; Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT); JNCC; Natural Resources Wales; Natural England; Raptor Study Groups in Scotland, England and Wales; RSPB; Welsh Ornithological Society (WOS), Scottish Ornithologists Club (SOC); NatureScot and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this assessment would not have been possible without the massive voluntary efforts of many tens of thousands of volunteers who have given their time (and resources) to participate in the monitoring of UK birds since the 1960s. We acknowledge their huge input and interest, without which knowledge of the UK's changing birds would be immeasurably poorer.

References

Full list of references can be found at Annex Six to this report.

Appendix 1 – List of species in each guild and their status

Non-breeding waterbirds

Common name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 status	Change since IUCN GB1[1]
Great Crested Grebe	Green	0	LC	0
Jack Snipe	Green	0	LC	0
Mute Swan	Green	1	LC	na
Black-tailed Godwit	na	na	LC	0
Common Merganser	na	na	LC	0
Common Scoter	na	na	LC	0
Eurasian Golden Plover	na	na	LC	0
Gadwall	na	na	LC	0
Little Grebe	na	na	LC	0
Northern Shoveler	na	na	LC	0
Pied Avocet	na	na	LC	0
Red-throated Diver	na	na	LC	0
Tufted Duck	na	na	LC	0
Barnacle Goose (Svalbard)	Amber	0	LC	0
Bar-tailed Godwit*	Amber	0	VU	-2
Bean Goose*	Amber	0	EN	1
Black-necked Grebe*	Amber	0	EN	-1
Common Sandpiper	Amber	0	na	na
Common Shelduck*	Amber	0	VU	1
Common Teal	Amber	0	LC	0
Dark-Bellied Brent Goose	Amber	0	LC	0
Great Northern Diver	Amber	0	LC	0
Grey Plover*	Amber	0	VU	0
Greylag Goose (Icelandic)	Amber	0	LC	0
Light-Bellied Brent Goose (Greenland)	Amber	0	LC	0
Light-Bellied Brent Goose (Svalbard)	Amber	0	LC	0
Pink-footed Goose	Amber	0	LC	0
Red Knot	Amber	0	LC	0
Ruddy Turnstone*	Amber	0	VU	0
Sanderling	Amber	0	LC	0
Spotted Redshank*	Amber	0	EN	0
Tundra Bean Goose*	Amber	0	EN	1
Whooper Swan	Amber	0	LC	0
Common Redshank	na	na	NT	0
Eurasian Wigeon	na	na	NT	-1
Bewick's Swan*	Red	-1	CR	0

Common name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 status	Change since IUCN GB1[1]
European White-fronted Goose*	Red	0	EN	na
Greenland White-fronted Goose*	Red	0	EN	2
Long-tailed Duck*	Red	0	NT	0
Red-necked Grebe*	Red	0	CR	0
Ruff*	Red	0	EN	0
Smew*	Red	-1	CR	0
Velvet Scoter*	Red	0	VU	0
Common Coot*	na	na	VU	-1
Common Goldeneye*	na	na	VU	0
Common Ringed Plover*	na	na	VU	0
Common Snipe*	na	na	VU	-1
Dunlin*	na	na	VU	1
Green Sandpiper*	na	na	VU	1
Mallard*	na	na	VU	-1
Northern Lapwing*	na	na	VU	0
Northern Pintail*	na	na	VU	1
Purple Sandpiper*	na	na	VU	1
Red-breasted Merganser*	na	na	VU	0
Slavonian Grebe*	na	na	VU	-1
Common Eider*	na	na	EN	-1
Common Pochard*	na	na	EN	0
Greater Scaup*	na	na	EN	0
Black-throated Diver	na	na	na	na
Common Greenshank	na	na	na	na
Eurasian Curlew	na	na	na	na
Eurasian Oystercatcher	na	na	na	na
Greylag Goose (British/Irish)	na	na	na	na
Whimbrel (passage)	na	na	na	na
Whimbrel (winter)	na	na	na	na
White-billed Diver	na	na	na	na

na = not assessed (Species populations were generally ‘not assessed’ because the assessment was undertaken for the breeding population, not the non-breeding population)

[1] Change in status – number of step changes, e.g. Red to Amber = -1, or NT to LC = 1

* Species not at Favourable Conservation Status (either BoCC Red-listed or IUCN threatened)

IUCN categories listed in increasing extinction risk: LC = Least Concern; NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered

Farmland birds

Common Name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 Status	Change in extinction risk since IUCN GB1[1]
Barn Owl	Green	0	LC	0
Blackbird	Green	0	LC	0
Collared dove	Green	0	NT	0
Goldfinch	Green	0	LC	0
Hobby	Green	0	NT	-1
Jackdaw	Green	0	LC	0
Magpie	Green	0	LC	0
Song Thrush	Amber	1	LC	0
Common Kestrel*	Amber	0	VU	0
Common Quail*	Amber	0	EN	-3
Common Whitethroat	Amber	-1	LC	0
Rook	Amber	-1	NT	0
Stock Dove	Amber	0	LC	0
Woodpigeon	Amber	-1	LC	0
Cirl Bunting*	Red	0	LC	0
Linnet*	Red	0	LC	1
Common Starling*	Red	0	VU	0
Corn Bunting*	Red	0	NT	0
Corncrake*	Red	0	LC	0
Greenfinch*	Red	-2	EN	0
Grey Partridge*	Red	0	VU	0
House Sparrow*	Red	0	LC	0
Skylark*	Red	0	LC	0
Tree Sparrow*	Red	0	VU	0
Turtle dove*	Red	0	CR	0
Yellow Wagtail*	Red	0	NT	0
Yellowhammer*	Red	0	LC	0

[1] Change in status – number of step changes, e.g. Red to Amber = -1, or NT to LC = 1

* Species not at Favourable Conservation Status (either BoCC Red-listed or IUCN threatened)

IUCN categories listed in increasing extinction risk: LC = Least Concern; NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered

Breeding Waders

Common Name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 Status	Change in extinction risk since IUCN GB1[1]
Golden Plover	Green	0	LC	0
Little Ringed Plover	Green	0	LC	0
Avocet	Amber	0	LC	0
Black-winged Stilt	Amber	Not applicable	na	Not applicable
Common Snipe	Amber	0	LC	0
Common Sandpiper	Amber	0	NT	1
Oystercatcher*	Amber	0	VU	-2
Redshank*	Amber	0	VU	0
Stone Curlew*	Amber	0	VU	0
Ringed Plover*	Red	0	NT	0
Dotterel*	Red	0	VU	1
Dunlin*	Red	-1	VU	1
Northern Lapwing*	Red	0	VU	1
Woodcock*	Red	0	VU	0
Black-tailed Godwit*	Red	0	EN	0
Curlew*	Red	0	EN	0
Ruff*	na	Not applicable	CR	0

na = not assessed

[1] Change in status – number of step changes, e.g. Red to Amber = -1, or NT to LC = 1

* Species not at Favourable Conservation Status (either BoCC Red-listed or IUCN threatened)

IUCN categories listed in increasing extinction risk: LC = Least Concern; NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered

Breeding Seabirds

Common Name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 Status	Change in extinction risk since IUCN GB1[1]
Cormorant	Green	0	LC	1
Black Guillemot	Green	1	NT	-1
European Storm-petrel	Amber	0	LC	0
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Amber	0	LC	Not applicable
Manx Shearwater	Amber	0	LC	0
Mediterranean Gull	Amber	0	LC	0
Gannet	Amber	0	LC	0
Sandwich Tern	Amber	0	LC	0
Black-headed Gull*	Amber	0	VU	-2
Common Guillemot*	Amber	0	VU	-2
Common Tern*	Amber	0	VU	-1
Shag*	Amber	1	VU	1
Little Tern*	Amber	0	VU	0
Razorbill*	Amber	0	VU	-2
Fulmar*	Amber	0	CR	-4
Kittiwake*	Red	0	EN	1
Common Gull*	Red	-1	EN	-3
Arctic Tern*	Red	-1	EN	-1
Herring Gull*	Red	0	EN	Not applicable
Puffin*	Red	0	CR	-4
Great Black-backed Gull*	Red	-1	CR	-4
Roseate Tern*	Red	0	CR	-1

Not applicable = There were no assessments of extinction risk for herring and lesser black-backed gull in the first GB IUCN report.

[1] Change in status – number of step changes, e.g. Red to Amber = -1, or NT to LC = 1

* Species not at Favourable Conservation Status (either BoCC Red-listed or IUCN threatened)

IUCN categories listed in increasing extinction risk: LC = Least Concern; NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered

Woodland Birds

Common Name	BoCC5 UK status	Change in conservation concern since BoCC4 UK[1]	IUCN GB2 Status	Change in extinction risk since IUCN GB1[1]
Long-eared Owl	Green	0	LC	0
Robin	Green	0	LC	0
Garden Warbler	Green	0	LC	0
Blackcap	Green	0	LC	0
Goldcrest	Green	0	LC	0
Firecrest	Green	0	LC	0
Long-tailed Tit	Green	0	LC	0
Great Tit	Green	0	LC	0
Wood Nuthatch	Green	0	LC	0
Treecreeper	Green	0	LC	0
Jay	Green	0	LC	0
Crossbill	Green	0	LC	0
Coal Tit	Green	0	LC	0
Siskin	Green	0	LC	0
Blue Tit	Green	0	LC	0
Chiffchaff	Green	0	LC	0
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Green	0	LC	0
Lesser Whitethroat	Green	0	LC	0
Green Woodpecker	Green	0	NT	-1
Goshawk	Green	0	NT	0
Chaffinch*	Green	0	EN	-3
Dunnock	Amber	0	LC	0
Common Redstart	Amber	0	LC	0
Willow Warbler	Amber	0	LC	0
Bullfinch	Amber	0	LC	0
Wren	Amber	-1	LC	0
Pied Flycatcher	Amber	1	NT	1
Tawny Owl	Amber	0	NT	0
Sparrowhawk*	Amber	-1	VU	-1
Tree Pipit*	Red	0	LC	0
Redpoll*	Red	0	LC	0
Mistle Thrush*	Red	0	NT	1
Spotted Flycatcher*	Red	0	NT	-1
Marsh Tit*	Red	0	NT	1
Nightingale*	Red	0	VU	0
Wood Warbler*	Red	0	VU	0
Hawfinch*	Red	0	EN	0
Willow Tit*	Red	0	EN	0
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker*	Red	0	EN	0

[1] Change in status – number of step changes, e.g. Red to Amber = -1, or NT to LC = 1

* Species not at Favourable Conservation Status (either BoCC Red-listed or IUCN threatened)

IUCN categories listed in increasing extinction risk: LC = Least Concern; NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered