



**BTO Research Report No. 444**

**Lark Rise Farm, Barton, Cambs (Plot 1571)  
The Countryside Restoration Trust  
Report on Breeding Birds 2004**

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**Fieldwork carried out by:  
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## CONTENTS

	Page No.
1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. METHODS .....	3
3. RESULTS .....	3
3.1 Waterbirds .....	3
3.2 Diurnal Birds of Prey .....	3
3.3 Gamebirds.....	4
3.4 Gulls to Doves .....	4
3.5 Owls to Wagtails.....	4
3.6 Thrushes & Allied Species .....	5
3.7 Warblers & Tits.....	5
3.8 Corvids .....	5
3.9 Starling, Sparrow & Finches.....	6
3.10 Buntings.....	6
4. DISCUSSION .....	7
5. References .....	9

## TABLES

Table 1. Number of breeding territories on Lark Rise Farm in 1999 – 2004 .....	11
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## APPENDICES

I CBC Master Sheet.....	13
II Habitat Master Sheet .....	14
III Habitat Map.....	15



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2004, the sixth successive annual census of the breeding bird community supported by Lark Rise Farm was completed. As in previous years, an ongoing crop rotation programme was maintained, with cereals as the dominant crop type with winter wheat covering almost half the total area and spring wheat a further 11%. There were also spring- and autumn-sown beans and grass cut for hay, as well as 7% natural regeneration, rotational set-aside and some woodland (see Appendix II, Habitat Summary Form). No new habitat features were introduced and the existing features appear to be still too young to be having much effect on bird distributions. An updated, colour Habitat Map, greatly enhanced the interpretative potential of the study.

## **2. METHODS**

A full mapping census was completed using the Common Birds Census (CBC) methodology laid down by the BTO guidelines (Marchant *et al.* 1990). Coverage was excellent with eleven complete visits to map bird activity from late March through to mid June, similar to coverage in 2003. Field effort expended (24.35 h) was slightly lower than in 2003 (26.15 h, Glue and Carter 2004). Particularly useful were two evening visits, in late April and early June, to sample for crepuscular species (visits D and I). The findings are considered to be broadly comparable with previous years.

## **3. RESULTS**

Overall 56 species were observed within or flying over Lark Rise Farm, exceeding the number noted in 1999 and 2002 (50 and 51 species, respectively) but slightly lower than in 2000, 2001 and 2003 (59 species in the first two years and 58 in the last). The increase over 2002 is probably a product of the reduced field effort in that year. Thirty-three species merited acceptance of one or more confirmed territories under CBC criteria (see Appendix I, CBC Master Sheet). This is again more than in 2002 but lower than other years (Table 1). The total number of territories of all species has increased from the low of 162 in 1999 to over 200 in 2004 (Table 1).

Lark Rise Farm continued to hold a rich bird community for a medium-sized, arable farm in eastern England.

### **3.1 Waterbirds**

The damp southern streamside and meadow supported a single territory of Moorhen and four territories of Mallard. This maintains the improved status of these species on the farm since 1999. Mute Swan was not, however, recorded after holding a single territory for three successive years. Grey Heron and Cormorant were casual visitors, as in most previous years. Snipe was absent in 2004 during CBC visits after its first appearance in 2003. Redshank was recorded for the first time during CBC visits but only as a flyover in late March. Greylag Goose (three birds) was also recorded as a flyover on this date.

### **3.2 Diurnal Birds of Prey**

Kestrel was only observed on two occasions so it did not warrant a confirmed territory. Hobby, for the second year running, was not recorded on any of the visits. Sparrowhawk was, again, not noted enough to warrant a confirmed territory, with only a single sighting of a female flying over the central part of the farm.

### **3.3 Gamebirds**

Pheasant maintained its 11 territories from 2003 after showing an increase each year since 1999. Birds ranged widely although they were concentrated along the southern and eastern edges, bordering the winter wheat and set-aside fields. Numbers of both partridge species declined. Red-legs, with four territories, ranged widely but with most of the foraging being in the winter and spring wheat, the hay meadow and the set-aside. Grey Partridge, with only two territories after three years of four, was widely scattered over the farm with observations in the hay meadow, winter wheat and set-aside.

### **3.4 Gulls to Doves**

Lesser Black-backed Gull was observed as a flyover on two occasions.

Woodpigeon, again, fed widely in strength over much of the farm, but breeding birds were more confined to the edges of the site. Limited song and allied territorial display provided few discrete clusters of breeding activity and made accurate assessment of the nesting population a challenge. The 15 territories calculated should be considered with caution although comparable with previous seasons. Numbers have returned to their high levels in 2001 after two years of decline. Three Feral Pigeons were noted on one occasion in spring beans. Stock Dove, with four territories, compared with two in 2003, now has a strong presence on the farm. Most foraging was associated with wheat, beans and set-aside fields. Collared Dove returned to its former level of two territories, both in the northwest corner, associated with the housing.

### **3.5 Owls to Wagtails**

The absence of owls during CBC visits, despite evening visits, was a disappointment, especially following 'first-time' hunting by Barn Owl in 2002 and their use of a nestbox on the farm. The continued absence of Cuckoo seems to confirm its loss as a breeding species on the farm since it held a confirmed territory in 2000 (Carter and Glue 2001). The presence of two of its important foster parents (Duncock and Meadow Pipit) on the farm suggests that a scarcity of hosts may not be the limiting factor.

Neither Green nor Great Spotted Woodpeckers, held confirmed territories. The former was seen on two occasions, the latter only once. They are still largely reliant upon the marginal hedges and scrub, meadowland and wildlife strips in the southern sector.

The Skylark population reached a new high in 2004 with 29 territories, nine more than in 1999 when the survey started. Birds were spread over the whole farm, although the numbers of records from the winter wheat in Blackthorns and Brookfield were lower.

Swifts were seen on three visits, especially in mid-June, when House Martin was also noted most frequently. Swallow was observed more frequently than the other two species. None, again, showed any evidence of nesting on site.

Meadow Pipit, with four territories, maintains its impressive level for a lowland arable farm in the area. Three of these territories were in the spring wheat and meadow land on the West side of the farm and the fourth was based in the set-aside in the northeast corner.

Yellow Wagtail maintained its slender presence at Lark Rise, with one territory. The two sightings, including one carrying food, were both in Nans Meadow. Pied Wagtail, reverted to its casual visitor status with only one sighting in the set-aside in late March.

### **3.6 Thrushes and Allied Species**

Wren, with 14 territories, reached a record level. The bulk of the activity was in the Nans Meadow and Holly Field (six territories) and three more were in the northwest corner (two associated with the housing). Most records were from the fringes of the site, although there were a few internal ones along field boundaries next to grass margins and wildlife strips.

Robin with nine territories, like Wren, reached a new high. This is in direct contrast to Westfield Farm where the Robin population declined dramatically (Carter 2006). There is still no sign of Robin moving into the farmed area along the new hedges and margins. Most of the records were along the western and eastern edges.

Dunnock with five territories maintained its usual level. All but one record were on the edges of the farm. The one internal record was in the hedge separating Blackthorns from Hare Field.

Blackbird, with 8 territories, had declined from its all-time high of 13 territories in 2003. It showed evidence of pairs using a wildlife strip in the southwest corner, along with the mature fringing cover afforded by the hedge, thicket, osierbed and wood. Song Thrush, with only one territory (down from three in 2003), had all the records coming from the northwest corner. Territories were lost from the East and South of the site. Mistle Thrush was absent; it has only been present in one year of the study period so far. Fieldfare, a winter visitor, was only seen as a flyover in late March.

### **3.7 Warblers and Tits**

Sedge Warbler maintained its tenuous presence on the farm, with one confirmed territory, a singing bird recorded in the hay meadow near the stream and in the wildlife strip bordering the nearby winter wheat field. This is in contrast to the three and four territories recorded in 1999 and 2000. Sedge Warbler populations tend to oscillate, with the dynamics being driven by winter survival, which is dependent on rainfall in the Western Sahel. At the moment rainfall is low, which has reduced survival and populations have declined from 2000 ([www.bto.org/birdtrends](http://www.bto.org/birdtrends)) matching the situation at Lark Rise. Reed Warbler, the other wetland warbler on the farm, just maintained its presence (first recorded in 2003), with one record of a singing bird from the stream area in the south.

Whitethroat remains by far the commonest warbler on the farm, with twelve territories, up two from 2002 and 2003 but similar to the average. They were spread across the whole farm, but were concentrated along the southern fringe and the boundaries with grass margins and the permissive footpath. Its rarer cousin, the Lesser Whitethroat, was only recorded on one occasion, in the southwest corner, in mid-June. Blackcap, the second commonest warbler with three territories, was restricted to the southern and eastern boundaries. Garden Warbler held one territory, the first since 1999, located in the hedge along the western side of Great Catherines. Willow Warbler, although observed on three separate occasions was not thought to be holding territory as the records were well spread out.

Blue and Great Tits, with five and four territories respectively, reached their highest levels (Blue Tit returning to its level in 1999). They still have not shown any signs of penetrating the slowly maturing elements of wildlife-friendly plantings. Presumably, nest site availability is the limiting factor. Long-tailed Tit maintained its tenuous presence on the site with two birds being seen during the first visit in late March in the hedge near the housing.

### **3.8 Corvids**

Carrion Crow and Magpie, with five and four territories respectively, were the most numerous members of the crow family breeding on Lark Rise Farm. Two nests of the former were located near to Holly Field in the South. Three other territories were assigned, one along the northern fringe and two more in the southwest. The latter was confined more to hedges and thickets and wildlife strips. One nest was located in the hedge on the eastern side of Brookfields. Two other territories were assigned along the northern fringe and one more in the southwest corner. Few birds of either species

were seen in the central part of the farm. Rook commonly flew over the farm and there were large flocks feeding in the set-aside in late March/early April. Jay ranged widely over the farm and was seen on four separate occasions and so was considered to hold one territory. Jackdaw was seen on several occasions, including a flock of 20 birds in early April in set-aside, but was not considered to be holding territory.

### **3.9 Starling, Sparrow and Finches**

Starling declined from three territories in 2003, its highest density, to only one territory, situated in the northwest corner. With only two sightings of House Sparrow (after one territory in 2003) this is negative news for these two species of high conservation concern, after the more positive developments in 2003. Both species were largely centred on human activity and housing.

Chaffinch, with 14 territories (down from 16), was the most abundant finch species (Table 1). Territories were concentrated along the peripheral areas of hedge, scrub and thicket with birds rarely venturing into the open fields. The fine-billed finches had mixed fortunes. Linnet, with five territories (down from seven), ranged widely from boundary hedge into wildlife strips, grass margins set-aside, winter wheat and spring beans. Greenfinch, with three territories, matched its level from 2002 and 2003, with singing most strongly associated with the hedgerow cover in the northwest near the housing, as in previous years. Goldfinch, with four territories (up from two), was concentrated along the northern area but with some activity in the south. Bullfinch, has been present every year, except 2002, but has yet to establish a breeding territory on the farm.

### **3.10 Buntings**

The trio of 'red-listed' buntings on Lark Rise Farm enjoyed mixed fortunes. Yellowhammer, with 12 territories, has maintained a relatively constant level throughout the period of the study. Its territories encompassed sections of both boundary and young internal hedgerow, scrub, set-aside and grass margins and crops such as wheat and spring beans. Reed Bunting, with fifteen territories, reached its highest ever level, overlapping spatially with Yellowhammer, and is now the commonest bunting. Much activity was centred on boundaries bordering cereals and beans, and hedges bounding the meadow along the damper ground to the south. Corn Bunting, with song records in the wildlife strip adjacent to the set-aside merited a territory (it had only been present in 2003).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Only 33 species registered one or more territories, down four from 2003 (Table 1). The species lost as territory holders compared with 2003 were: Mute Swan; Kestrel (still present); Green Woodpecker (still present); Pied Wagtail (still present); Lesser Whitethroat (still present); Long-tailed Tit (still present); Jackdaw (still present) and House Sparrow (still present). Species gained as territory holders were: Collared Dove; Garden Warbler; Jay and Corn Bunting, although all four had held territories in earlier years.

The total number of species observed was 56 compared with 57 in 2003. Snipe, Tree Pipit and Redwing (none holding territory in 2003) were not observed in 2004. Greylag Goose and Redshank were both observed for the first time during CBC visits and Willow Warbler returned after an absence of one year. None of these species were considered to be holding territory.

The different species enjoyed mixed fortunes. Stock Dove, Skylark, Wren, Robin, Great Tit, Magpie, Carrion Crow and Reed Bunting achieved highest-ever levels. None of these species showed significant increases in England between 2003 and 2004, although Wren showed a significant 10% decline (Raven *et al.* 2005). Generally doves and corvids retained their strong showing. The plot remained important locally for Meadow Pipit and one of a few supporting Yellow Wagtail. Some territory-holding species declined: Red-legged Partridge; Grey Partridge; Blackbird; Song Thrush; Starling; Linnet and Yellowhammer (in addition to those listed above as being lost as territory holders).

Summer visitors generally maintained their 2003 levels. Whitethroat maintained its impressive density while Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler and Willow Warbler maintained their tenuous presence on the farm. Three former breeding summer migrants, Hobby, Cuckoo and Grasshopper Warbler, were not recorded at all. Cuckoo has declined by 49% in eastern England between 1994 and 2004 (the other two species are not recorded frequently enough in eastern England for accurate trends to be calculated, Raven *et al.* 2005).

In 2003, 14 amber-listed and 10 red-listed species (Gregory *et al.* 2002) occurred on the farm, compared with 15 and 10 respectively in 2004. Of these, 12 were holding territory (four amber-listed and eight red-listed, compared with seven and eight respectively in 2003, Table 1). Since the study started in 1999 one red-listed breeding species, Grasshopper Warbler has been lost as a breeding species. Grasshopper Warbler only occurred in 2001 (one territory). Corn Bunting which had declined from three territories in three earlier years to just being present in 2003 held one territory in 2004. Four amber-listed (Mute Swan, Snipe, Tree Pipit and Redwing) were lost between 2003 and 2004.

The red-listed Skylark, the most numerous breeding bird on the farm, had another good year in 2004, reaching an all time high of 29 pairs. This is in contrast to the 22% decline in the region between 1994 and 2004 (Raven *et al.* 2005). It will be interesting to see if numbers are maintained in 2005 with so much of the farm under winter wheat, a poor breeding habitat, in 2004.

Grey Partridge, which declined significantly in eastern England by 38% between 1994 and 2004, has increased from one pair in 1999 and 2000 to four pairs in the last three years on the farm, before declining to two pairs in 2004. Interestingly Red-legged Partridge also declined between 2003 and 2004, while Pheasant maintained its gamebird dominance.

Song Thrush is another red-listed species that has generally increased on the farm during the study, from one pair in 1999 and 2001 to three pairs in 2003, but then down to one pair again in 2004. The regional trend for this species between 1994 and 2004, was a significant decline of 25%.

The two newcomers to the red-list, Starling and House Sparrow, both declined between 2003 and 2004. Starling, which is declining in the region (36%), has increased from one pair, in 1999, to three pairs in 2003, then back down to one pair in 2004. Activity was mostly associated with housing. House Sparrow is hanging on with either one territory or just recorded during the study period.

In contrast to Corn Bunting, the other red-listed finches and buntings are either increasing (Reed Bunting) or relatively stable (Linnet, Bullfinch and Yellowhammer), although Bullfinch has not yet registered a territory during the study. Probably the improved margin management on the farm has improved winter survival through providing more seeds. It is interesting that the breeding Yellowhammer population has not increased despite the provision of internal hedges, as this species favours low, scrubby hedges for nesting. These increasing or stable populations are in contrast to the continuing declines that are occurring in England and the region. Goldfinch has shown a significant 23% decline in eastern England between 1994 and 2004 but returned to four territories in 2004 compared with just two in 2003 on the farm.

Most of the amber-listed species recorded in 2004 have stable populations on the farm. One species, Stock Dove, increased, from two to four territories. Mute Swan was lost after holding a territory in the last three years, and Snipe, Tree Pipit and Reed Warbler were not observed during a CBC visit in 2004. Green Woodpecker which had established a territory for the first time in 2003, was only recorded in 2004. One interesting result was Yellow Wagtail, which has maintained at least one territory every year in contrast to the 24% regional decline since 1994.

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**Table 1. Number of breeding territories on Lark Rise Farm in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, & 2004**

<b>Species</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
Cormorant	-	Present	-	Present	Present	Present
Grey Heron	-	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Mute Swan	-	-	1	1	1	-
Greylag Goose	-	-	-	-	-	Present
Canada Goose	-	Present	-	Present	-	-
Mandarin	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Mallard	Present	1	4	3	4	4
Marsh Harrier	-	Present	-	-	-	-
Sparrowhawk	-	Present	1	Present	Present	Present
Kestrel	1	1	1	Present	1	Present
Hobby	1	Present	Present	Present	-	-
Peregrine	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Red-legged Partridge	4	5	8	6	6	4
Grey Partridge	1	1	4	4	4	2
Quail	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Pheasant	2	3	7	9	11	11
Moorhen	Present	Present	1	1	1	1
Lapwing	-	Present	-	-	-	-
Snipe	-	-	-	-	Present	-
Woodcock	-	Present	-	-	-	-
Bar-tailed Godwit	-	Present	-	-	-	-
Redshank	-	-	-	-	-	Present
Lesser Black-backed Gull	-	Present	-	Present	Present	Present
Feral Pigeon	-	-	Present	Present	Present	Present
Stock Dove	1	2	3	3	2	4
Woodpigeon	15	13	c.15	12	10	15
Collared Dove	1	2	2	Present	Present	2
Cuckoo	-	1	Present	-	-	-
Barn Owl	-	-	-	Present	-	-
Swift	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Kingfisher	Present	-	-	-	-	-
Green Woodpecker	-	Present	Present	Present	1	Present
Great Spotted Woodpecker	-	Present	-	Present	Present	Present
Skylark	20	25	26	26	24	29
Sand Martin	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Swallow	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
House Martin	Present	-	-	-	Present	Present
Tree Pipit	-	-	-	-	Present	-
Meadow Pipit	3	4	4	4	4	4
Yellow Wagtail	1	3	1	1	1	1
Blue-headed Wagtail	Present	-	-	-	-	-
Pied Wagtail	Present	Present	-	-	1	Present
Wren	10	8	9	11	11	14
Dunnock	5	5	3	6	5	5
Robin	5	7	8	7	7	9
Whinchat	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Wheatear	-	-	Present	-	Present	-
Blackbird	8	7	10	10	13	8
Fieldfare	-	-	Present	-	Present	Present
Song Thrush	1	1	2	1	3	1
Redwing	-	-	-	-	Present	-

<b>Species</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
Mistle Thrush	-	-	Present	-	-	-
Grasshopper Warbler	-	-	1	-	-	-
Sedge Warbler	3	4	1	Present	1	1
Reed Warbler	-	-	-	-	Present	Present
Lesser Whitethroat	Present	2	2	1	2	Present
Whitethroat	12	12	14	10	10	12
Garden Warbler	1	-	Present	-	Present	1
Blackcap	3	4	5	2	2	3
Chiffchaff	Present	Present	-	-	-	-
Willow Warbler	1	1	1	Present	-	Present
Goldcrest	-	-	-	-	-	-
Long-tailed Tit	1	1	1	Present	1	Present
Coal Tit	-	Present	-	Present	-	-
Blue Tit	5	4	4	4	4	5
Great Tit	3	3	2	2	2	4
Nuthatch	Present	-	-	-	-	-
Treecreeper	-	Present	-	-	-	-
Jay	1	Present	1	-	Present	1
Magpie	2	1	1	2	2	4
Jackdaw	1	1	1	1	1	Present
Rook	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present
Carrion Crow	4	4	3	3	2	5
Starling	1	1	1	2	3	1
House Sparrow	Present	1	1	-	1	Present
Chaffinch	12	13	14	16	16	14
Greenfinch	2	2	2	3	3	3
Goldfinch	4	4	3	3	2	4
Linnet	3	4	3	8	7	5
Bullfinch	Present	Present	Present	-	Present	Present
Yellowhammer	13	11	12	14	13	12
Reed Bunting	8	7	6	7	10	15
Corn Bunting	3	3	1	3	Present	1
<b>Total No Territories</b>	162	172	190	186	192	205
<b>Total No Species</b>	50	59	59	51	58	56
<b>Number Territory Holding Species</b>	36	37	41	32	37	33