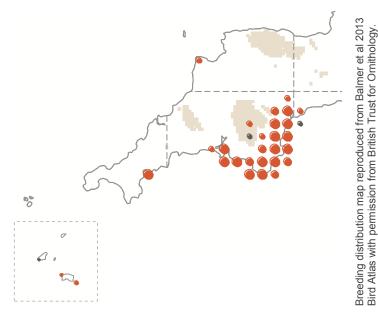


LAND MANAGEMENT FOR WILDLIFE

Cirl bunting (Emberiza cirlus)





ABOUT CIRL BUNTING

Cirl buntings are small farmland birds, related to yellowhammer, but much rarer. They were nearly lost from the UK in the latter part of the 20th century and are now almost entirely restricted to parts of south Devon. Their decline was associated with changes in farming practices, particularly the decline in the growing of spring-sown cereal crops and the consequent loss of weedy winter stubbles.

Positive land management by farmers, the RSPB and other conservation organisations, using government-funded agri-environment schemes has, however, increased the population from 118 pairs in 1989 to more than 860 pairs in 2009. This is a fantastic success story but the birds are still vulnerable as there has been only limited range expansion. Cirl buntings continue to depend on sympathetic land management. A reintroduction project has established a self-sustaining population in south east Cornwall.

WHAT DO CIRL BUNTING NEED?

Nesting habitat

Cirl buntings nest in dense cover provided by thick hedgerows or scrub: blackthorn, hawthorn, bramble and gorse provide ideal sites. They can breed late, so cutting hedges before mid September can destroy nests.

Summer food (mainly invertebrates)

Cirl buntings need invertebrates, especially grasshoppers and crickets to feed to their growing chicks. These are found in unimproved or low intensity grassland and field margins, particularly where taller grasses provide over-wintering habitat for insects.

Cattle grazing can provide ideal sward structure for invertebrates. Cirl buntings will forage in arable areas for invertebrates and for 'milky' grain to feed their chicks in bad weather.

Winter food (small seeds)

Overwintered stubbles, particularly those following spring barley, with plenty of broadleaved weeds such as fat hen, chickweed and annual meadow-grass are ideal. Fallow land, wild bird seed mixtures and field margins also provide foraging opportunities, as can over-winter feeding of stock with grain or hay.

ANNUAL LIFECYCLE

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Birds pair up and select nest sites												
Nesting season: 3 broods during the summer					1st broo	d 2nd	brood	3rd broo	od			
Winter flocks formed												

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE CIRL BUNTING?

Mixed farming

A mosaic of small, grass and arable fields, divided by thick hedgerows with pockets of dense scrub, provides • the ideal conditions for cirl buntings. Nesting habitat, summer invertebrate food and winter seed food should all be provided within a small area because of their sedentary nature. They usually forage within 250m of their nests and in winter rarely travel more than 2km to find weedy stubbles.

Much of the management cirl buntings need can be funded through agri-environment schemes.

Nesting habitat

- Trim hedges as late as possible in the winter and ideally in January or February, preferably on a 3yr or more rotation. Rotate management around the landholding.
- Restore hedgerows through planting, coppicing or laying.
- Maintain or create areas of scrub and open up very dense scrub.

Summer food

- Create wide, tussocky buffer strips, field margins and field corners in arable fields.
- Create/maintain rough or unimproved pasture with low inputs and ideally graze with cattle.
 Summer cattle grazing will create a varied sward rich in invertebrates.
- Leave six metre buffer strips uncut or areas in silage or hay fields.
- Avoid using insecticides in cereals after 15

- March. If this is not possible consider creating conservation headlands in spring barley fields.
- The extended winter stubble option will provide useful summer foraging habitat.

Winter food

- Spring barley followed by open, weedy, overwintered stubble. Leave fields of overwintered stubbles until the end of March to maximise seed availability for birds.
- Create areas of barley-based wild bird seed mixtures in the spring. The crop needs to have an open structure to allow the birds to forage and be maintained until April.
- Maintain or increase areas of low-input arable cropping.



Cirl bunting eye view of barley stubble © Cath Jeffs

KEY POINTS

- Ensure spring barley stubbles are left over winter, until the end of March, to provide a seed food source.
- Maintain extensively managed grassland with a varied sward structure and field margins for summer invertebrate food. Low-intensity cattle grazing can create ideal conditions.
- Maintain tall, thick hedgerows and patches of scrub for nesting. Manage on a rotation in winter so there is always some mature habitat available and not all hedges or scrub areas on the farm are trimmed or cut in the same year. Cutting hedges only every two or three years is best for wildlife.
- Summer fallows and extended stubbles are an excellent source of insects.
- Provide all habitat components together.

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Working together to give nature a home



