

Development of Species Recovery Action Plans

Introduction

The approved Red and Amber lists highlight those native species that are under greatest threat in the County. They are intended to steer SOS's conservation efforts and encourage other organisations to adopt the same conservation priorities. The next step is to consider all the species on the Lists, and decide what those conservation efforts should be: in short, what, if anything, we can realistically do to help reverse the decline of each species?

Initially, this will be set out in an Action Plan for those species where action at the County level is likely to be effective.

This is a long term project. The declines have occurred over many years, and it will take a similar timescale for populations to recover. We therefore need to start with what we can do in 2021, and hopefully build the project each year in the light of experience.

A "Species Champion" will be appointed for each priority species, who will draft the species Action Plan, and lead and co-ordinate its implementation. Overall, the work will be the responsibility of the SOS Conservation Sub-committee, and be carried out by a dedicated "Species Recovery Working Party".

Generic Action Plans

There are some things that apply to all species, which should go into an overall Action Plan:

1. Publicise the whole list, to raise consciousness of the threatened species.
2. Highlight the plight of common and / or iconic species (e.g. Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Lapwing, Curlew) to get the message across to the general public, with simple actions that everyone can take (e.g. provide bird-friendly gardens, maintain hygiene at feeding stations)
3. Encourage SOS members and others, to seek out these species, and submit reports which include counts and evidence of breeding behaviour

In general, the farmland birds are only going to be helped effectively through agri-environment schemes, and we should work to influence Defra (and, if appropriate, Natural England) to get them included in the next generation of schemes. The BAP species (on the national Red List, but their decline occurred before our 1990 baseline) should be included in the generic Farmland Birds Action Plan.

Criteria for Selecting Priorities

Abundance was not a criterion for deciding which species appear on the lists, but it should be a criterion for which species we prioritise, and develop Action Plans for. We should concentrate on species with a low abundance (the ones we are at most risk of losing), and the ones which occur regularly at only a few sites.

Monitoring population trends is an essential part of each Action Plan, but the main emphasis should be on actions that will improve the quantity and quality of available habitat, and reduce threats such as loss of nest sites, predation, agricultural operations and flooding. We have the best chance of achieving this on managed sites (Venus Pool, NE / NNRs, National Trust, SWT and Forestry Commission). SOS will set an example, with the soon-to-be revised Management Plan for Venus Pool incorporating appropriate Actions for the appropriate Red and Amber list species.

Nest box schemes may be an easy way of helping some species, if loss of nest sites is a cause of their decline.

The decline of some species on the Shropshire Amber List is rather less here than elsewhere, and they are on the BoCC4 Red List. Therefore we have an obligation to the country as a whole to safeguard our population. The species on the Shropshire Amber list that are on the national BoCC4 Red List are Corn Bunting, Grey Wagtail, Marsh Tit, Mistle Thrush, Yellow Wagtail and Yellowhammer.

Although over 600 people contributed records to the 2008-13 Atlas, most of the fieldwork was done by fewer than 100 observers. Around 300 people are listed in SBR 2018 as sending records to SOS (although the total number who have sent records in the last few years is over 1,800), and a similar number (of largely different people) are involved in Community Wildlife Groups (CWGs). About 60 people (often the same ones) do BTO BBS. There are very few active SWT members interested in birds, or members of RSPB local groups, who aren't also members of SOS or a CWG, but we should work through these organisations too.

Jonathan has a BTO local supporters email list, held by BTO, which I think has more members than SOS. The Shropshire Ornithology Facebook group also has more members than SOS. Hopefully some of these additional contacts might help.

In summary, the surveyor resources we can mobilise are severely limited, so we need to concentrate on species where we can monitor a significant proportion of their population. How easy it is to find and count species is also a factor, as is whether surveyors will go and look for crepuscular or nocturnal species.

Jonathan has agreed to try and compile an email distribution list of active / potential surveyors. This needs to be completed well before the start of the next breeding season, and preferably before the end of December 2020.

We can't have an Action Plan without someone to lead on it and be the Species Champion. This need not be a member of the Conservation Sub-committee. A short brief on the role of a Species Champion and what is expected of them, is appended. This includes preparing the initial Plan, co-ordinating its implementation, and updating it each year to reflect increasing information on distribution, habitat and actions that will help reverse the decline.

Resources

Volunteer resources, for monitoring work and acting as Species Champions, are the major limiting factor on what we can do.

Hopefully if there are costs involved (e.g. for nest boxes) SOS will help meet them, but we will also need to apply to other bodies for funds. This needs to be co-ordinated. Once the Action Plans have been agreed, the Working Party will need to work out the total funding requirements each year, and agree on who applies for what to who.

Existing Action Plans and Projects

Many of the species on the Lists already have established projects which are already comprehensive Action Plans, or which can form the basis of the Action Plan

- Curlew - SOS Save our Curlews campaign (lead Leo Smith)
- Dippers in the Teme Catchment – population monitoring, nest box scheme, colour ringing (lead Tony Cross, helped by Leo Smith)
- Kestrel – population monitoring, nest box scheme, colour ringing, assess reasons for decline (Raptor Group, Ringing Group, CWGs)
- Pied Flycatcher - monitoring distribution, abundance and assessing reasons for poor breeding success (lead Bob Harris)
- Snipe - breeding sites survey (currently every five years – lead Leo Smith)
- Swift – Shropshire Swift Group (lead Peta Sams)

- Wheatears on Commons (Long Mynd, Stiperstones, Clee Liberty - lead Leo Smith)
- Whinchats on the Long Mynd (lead Leo Smith)
- Willow Tit - survey (lead Jonathan Groom)

Action Plans for species not on the list of existing projects are likely to be much more limited, until a similar amount of work has been undertaken.

Format of Action Plans

To ensure consistency of approach, all Action Plans should follow the same template

- Status
- Distribution (geographic and habitat requirements)
- Population trend
- Monitoring (what we need to know, and a brief summary of survey methods and frequency)
- Reasons for decline
- Actions towards recovery
- Constraints to delivery of actions
- Targets
- Relevant non-SOS projects

However, the scope of each Action Plan will be different, depending on how widespread it still is, and how much we already know about distribution, habitat requirements, and how to reverse the decline. In some cases, Species Champions may need to do some fact-finding research work before drafting an Action Plan. For some species we will need to start with very limited plans, which can be built up over time. Species Champions should develop plans that reflect the current level of knowledge, what can usefully be done, the resources available and a level of personal commitment that they are comfortable with. Any action, however limited, is better than none!

Most species will need tailored survey methods to find and count them, so Instructions for fieldworkers will need to be available. The Action Plan does not need to incorporate this guidance in detail, but only include a very brief summary of what's involved, and say if the Instructions exist already, or need to be produced.

Monitoring is vital, but it makes no direct contribution towards recovery, and no survey work should be listed under that heading.

Actions towards recovery are likely to be targeted at improving the breeding success of species where they still occur, to facilitate eventual dispersal into new sites, together with identifying historic sites where habitat improvements or restoration may encourage a return.

Targets should list all work planned for 2021, and then deal with current expectations of how the work will evolve in future years. It's inherent in the approach that the results from each year will be analysed at the end of that year, and new / revised targets added for the following year as necessary.

The Role of the Species Champion is outlined below.

Management Issues

Within SOS, the process will be the responsibility of a Species Recovery Working Party that is accountable to the Conservation Sub-committee and reports through them to the Board. Members of the Working Party will be Leo Smith (Co-ordinator), Graham Walker (Chair of Conservation Sub-committee), those members of Conservation Sub- who wish to be, and up to four Species Champions.

The Working Party will need to take forward the following management issues:-

- i. Approaches to landowners or managers of sites which hold important numbers of several Red and Amber List Species need to be co-ordinated, so all requests and proposals relating to the Action Plans are made once a year, and a framework is provided for the work of individual Species Champions. This is likely to involve producing an Action Plan, or at least a guidance note, for each site. Species involved are shown in the relevant Site owner columns of the spreadsheet. It should be recognised that the habitat requirements of the different target species are different, and may be incompatible, so an action to help one species may hinder or indeed cause further declines in other species. It may be possible to meet the needs of all of them on different parts of the site through a carefully targeted site management plan but this may not be possible, given the overall management objectives of the site. For owners of multiple sites, specifically the Forestry Commission and SWT, it may be best to produce different advice for each site. Relevant FC woodlands include e.g. Haughmond Hill, Bury Ditches and Wyre Forest, and the Forestry Commission's felling programme also needs to be addressed, to ensure heathland for Nightjars, and retention of song posts for Tree Pipits. There are about 40 SWT reserves, and by 2015 scarce species on the national Red list of *Birds of Conservation Concern* had been recorded at 12 of these reserves. We need to ask SWT for the list. A co-ordinator for each site is listed on the spreadsheet, where it has been established, and names will be added as and when decided.
- ii. The National Nature Reserves are owned by Natural England (NE), and several of the other individual key sites are SSSIs, privately owned but overseen by NE. We therefore need to brief NE on the whole project, seek NE approval, and ask what support they can offer. This needs to be done before the Action Plans are finalised (i.e. before Christmas 2020).
- iii. The initial approaches to FC and SWT, again briefing them on the whole project, seeking their approval, and asking what support they can offer, also need to be made this year.
- iv. There are about 650 Local (County) Wildlife Sites (LWS), comprising about 12,000ha. (adopted by an inter-agency Committee, co-ordinated by SWT). Less than 10% of them (by number and by area) are SWT reserves, so the vast majority are in private ownership. Some of them have been adopted for their avian interest, but the criteria for adoption are out-of-date. We've agreed in SOS Conservation Sub- to address the criteria for adoption of sites because of their importance for birds, following publication of the Avifauna. We need to take this forward, initially by getting agreement that the species on the Red and Amber lists are taken into account, then producing a list of which species are on which sites, and then producing / adding to the site plan. Working on LWS has the advantage that the owner has agreed to the site being adopted, and so is known to SWT.
- v. Approaches to the Environment Agency also need co-ordinating. Continued monitoring of Dipper and Kingfisher will highlight diffuse pollution in streams and rivers, the cause of their decline, while action to reverse the decline of Moorhen should include the elimination of alien feral Mink. The approach to EA should be made only after the initial Action Plans for these three species have been drafted (not currently imminent).
- vi. Further research is needed on the diverse nature of woodland ownership, and the woodland grant schemes that would facilitate management work. Is there a representative body / local network of woodland owners?
- vii. It will be necessary to identify individual owners of the Ellesmere Meres, and other waters, to implement an Action Plan for safeguarding Great Crested Grebe.
- viii. The paper lists above some other actions not associated with any specific species, including Generic Action Plans, representations to Defra about including the farmland

birds in future agri-environment schemes, and applications for funding for nest box schemes.

Many of these management issues won't be resolved quickly, so it is likely that they will feed into Action Plans in revisions at the end of 2021.

Summary Spreadsheet

The spreadsheet attached summarises the approach taken. It is currently sorted by abundance (targeting the scarce species as the highest priority), then whether (in my judgement) a local Action Plan is worthwhile (can we do it, and will it get results?), with species that have a Champion listed first. Most columns identify specific actions, with an X against each species where the action should be part of the species Action Plan.

Leo Smith
October 2020

The Role of the Species Champion

Each Species Champion will have responsibility for creation and delivery of an Action Plan with the ultimate goal of reversing the decline of that species. It should be noted that this is a long-term collaborative project and there will be no pressure to deliver everything at once. Every Champion will have the support of others, along with knowledge and resources available to all. Each Champion will have the support of the SOS Species Recovery Working Party, and may be a member of it.

The broad role of the Champion can be defined as follows:

1. **DRAFTING AN ACTION PLAN.** The first role of the Champion will be to draft the species Action Plan, based on the standard template, with an overview of available knowledge and proposed actions for survey, monitoring and recovery of the population. This will involve some research, and a list of available resources is listed below. The extent of each Plan, and the work needed to create it, will vary considerably, depending on the existing level of knowledge. *Don't take on more than you are willing and able to deliver, but any Action, however limited, is better than none!!!* This is a long-term project, so you can start small and increase the Actions, year on year, as you wish.
2. **COORDINATION OF SURVEY/MONITORING ACTIONS.** It is crucial that we obtain as much up-to-date and specific information as possible about the species' breeding range. This will involve researching suitable survey techniques, coordinating surveyors (including preparing survey instructions), processing survey data and, presumably, actively participating in the survey work.
3. **ANNUAL REVIEW.** The first Action Plan will include targets for 2021, and subsequent years. The nature and extent of them will vary from species to species, depending on current knowledge and activity. At the end of each year the Plan will be reviewed in the light of results for the year, and new knowledge, and revisions made as necessary and new targets set.
4. **MAINTENANCE OF RECORDS/ACTION PLAN.** The Action Plan and associated data, with a list of references, must be maintained to keep things up-to-date and also to facilitate the transfer when you come to hand over the role to a new person.
5. **DEVELOPMENT OF PROPOSED RECOVERY ACTIONS.** When knowledge of the local distribution is sufficient to undertake some useful action to tackle the decline, research into possible actions will be needed. This will involve literature searches and correspondence with national species experts (if available), as well as write-ups of findings from any previous local work.
6. **DELIVERY OF RECOVERY ACTIONS.** This part of the role will involve responding to opportunities for taking recovery action. This may vary from providing recommendations (based on findings of step 4 above) to landowners, working with local projects/groups, looking for funding to support actions, responding to planning developments which may threaten/provide opportunities for species etc. Note that you will not be expected to work alone at this, and approaches to landowners and other agencies will be co-ordinated through the SOS Species Recovery Working Party.

More details on how to proceed with all of this, as well as available resources and contacts, will be made available to all Species Champions as the project develops (see section on Overall Co-ordination below).

Species Champions should be able to bring the following things to the role:

- **COMMUNICATION.** Champions will need to be communicative and responsive, especially in support of volunteers helping with surveys/actions. Networking may be important as there are often national experts or groups for some species which can

provide a wealth of information and experience. Champions are highly recommended to try and join relevant groups where possible.

- **ENTHUSIASM.** This is really important! Species Champions do need to be actively looking to support and enthuse people to get involved (within the overall framework) and to provide support to landowners/other organisations who are looking to make positive actions.
- **WILLINGNESS TO LEARN.** Champions don't have to be experts in their chosen species, and it is possible that there will be lots to learn about the ecology of scarcer birds. Champions need to be open to new ideas and discussion and always be looking out for new sources of evidence in the form of studies and papers.

Again, the emphasis is that you are not expected to deliver all this straight away but any action is better than none, and any progress that can be made will be greatly appreciated.

Overall Co-ordination

This is potentially a very big project, with 49 species on the Red and Amber lists altogether, and hopefully 25 Action Plans in operation in 2021. An overall framework will be provided by the SOS Species Recovery Working Party.

This will include efforts to recruit fieldworkers / surveyors, which will be organised across the County through all available outlets and organisations, on behalf of the whole project, because there will be chaos if approaches are made to each individual by each Champion separately. Volunteers will be asked to select the species they want to work on, once the Action Plans are sufficiently developed to know what survey work is planned for each year, and some survey work might involve recording several species if distribution and / or habit overlap. However, Champions are encouraged to follow up personal contacts to recruit surveyors.

Similarly, co-ordination of approaches to other agencies and multi-site landowners is essential, particularly in cases where several Action Plans involve survey or habitat work on a single site. All approaches to landowners by Species Champions require the prior approval of the Working Party Chair, or the Working Party as a whole.

Model Action Plans

Model Action Plans for Snipe and Willow Tit are available initially, and more will be available as the work develops. All Action Plans will be shared with all Champions.

Approval of each Action Plan

Send a draft for comment to the Working Party Chair, Leo Smith, in the first instance. Following any necessary amendments, it will be circulated to the Working Party, and all other Species Champions, for comment. In most cases it will be finalised by the Champion, in consultation with the WP Chair, but disagreements will be referred to the Working Party by the Chair.

Resources available to Species Champions

To assess knowledge of the current and previous distribution of the species in the County, the main source is the species account in *The Birds of Shropshire*. The author of the account should have reviewed the original sources (SBRs and SOS records: computerised since 1992, on paper slips before then), but it might be worthwhile to look at that again, particularly if part of the Action Plan is to make habitat improvements to encourage recolonisation of parts of the previous range. Not all records in the SOS database made it into SBRs, and certainly not all records in SBRs made it into the species account in *The Birds of Shropshire*. The Atlas maps can be found in the Avifauna supplement part of the SOS website.

To assess how much is known about the causes of the decline, sources include:-

- i. The species account in *The Birds of Shropshire*
- ii. The species account in the *BTO Bird Atlas 2007-2011*

- iii. An RSPB Species Action Plan (whether or not such a plan is available is shown on the spreadsheet. Those available will be supplied to the Champion).
- iv. BTO Birdtrends (<https://app.bto.org/birdtrends/species.jsp?year=2018&s=wilti>) is an excellent source of info into reasons for UK declines which are likely as not applicable here
- v. A Google Search, and a search of the British Birds website, to find species-specific research papers.