

Whinchat Conservation on the Long Mynd

Pilot project 2019



**Final
Report**

Whinchat Conservation on the Long Mynd, Shropshire Pilot Project 2019

Funded by Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund,
Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons, and National Trust

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Introduction

Nationally, the Whinchat population has declined by 53% in the UK, and 44% in England, in only 21 years between 1995 and 2016. It was moved from the *Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern* to the *Red List* in 2015 because of this severe decline in the breeding population.

Whinchat used to be widespread in Shropshire, but by the time of the first Breeding Bird Atlas (1985-90) they were largely restricted to the uplands, with a county population estimated at 300 pairs. The recent Bird Atlas (2008-13) found a large contraction of range, and the species was, by then, restricted to the Long Mynd, apart from the occasional pair on the Stiperstones, with an estimated population of 75 pairs, a decline of 75% in less than 25 years.

Local monitoring on the Long Mynd has found a decline there from 110-130 breeding pairs in 1996-1998, to around 60 pairs in 2006-09, a decline of around 50% in only 10 years, and a continuing decline since, to around 40 pairs in 2017.

The local monitoring has shown that all Whinchats have bracken in their territories, but densities are higher if the bracken has an understory of heather or grass, rather than bracken litter. More understanding is needed on whether changes to the bracken itself (increased density as a result of climate change and changes in grazing pressures) are a factor in the population decline.

This is a Pilot Project within the Development Phase of the *Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons* project, funded by the Heritage Lottery, to test and evaluate proposals for a Whinchat

conservation project on the Long Mynd, to be included in the Delivery Phase of the *Commons* project 2020-23.

The National Trust has an Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme agreement with Natural England and the Commoners, but is under increasing pressure from the commoners to limit the impact of the spread of bracken on the available sheep grazing.

The spread of bracken is an issue on several of the 12 commons in four parts of the country (Yorkshire Dales, the Lake District, Dartmoor and the Shropshire Hills) involved in the *Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons* project. The AONB Partnership co-ordinates the involvement of the three local commons, including the Long Mynd, in this national project.

Aims

The long term aim is to establish the reasons for the Whinchat decline, and take action to reverse it, by

1. finding a large sample of Whinchat nests, and monitoring the outcomes using trail cameras, to ascertain if breeding productivity is sufficient to maintain the population
2. identifying the common factors between the nest sites and territories, to inform options for conservation management
3. colour-ringing adults and nestlings, so each individual is uniquely identifiable, and monitoring movements and rate of return, to assess the size of each territory and hence its composition (the habitat preferences) and whether factors away from the breeding site contribute to the decline
4. trial different approaches to bracken management, which will take into account the needs of Whinchats identified through 2) above, but also the needs of sheep and graziers on the common

Methods

The project aimed to find a sample of 18 Whinchat nests on the Long Mynd (almost 50% of the estimated population), monitor the outcomes using trail cameras, colour-ring the chicks in the successful nests, and catch as many of the breeding adults as possible.

Monitoring of the population of Whinchat and other upland species is now carried out by 10 or so volunteers, each contributing 3-5 days per year. These volunteers identified the approx. location of Whinchat territories, making the time of the nest finder in this Pilot Project much more productive. Several of the volunteers made additional visits to look specifically for Whinchat.

Based on the volunteers' information, the nest finders spent their allotted 12 days searching. The nest finder also spent a further day taking the ringer to the nests found.

The ringer spent two long days trying to catch adults before they nested, and then two further days looking for nests when they should be easier to find, when adults start taking food back to the nest for nestlings.

A form was prepared by the National Trust Ecologist to record the habitat of every nest site found, and the territory around it (100m radius). The form was completed by the nest finder, when it was found, and again by the ecologist in August (when the extent of the bracken would be more apparent), who visited every site.

Impact of the weather

There was almost continuous heavy rain from early afternoon on Monday 10th June until late afternoon on Thursday 13th June. It was also a lot colder than usual for the time of year. This

was the period when eggs were hatching, and nestlings would be most vulnerable. It was feared that most of the nests would be wiped out, but fortunately that was not the case, at least for the nests that were found. Of the 10, five failed and five were successful. Of the failures, three were found to have failed by revisits about a week after they were found, and the thermacron log showed another failed during the afternoon of 27 May (all before the end of May and before the rainy period), but the fifth, with dead young about two days old, probably failed in the middle of the heavy rain.

This period was also the time when the BBS volunteers and the ringer were due to go back to look for adults feeding young in the nest, but these visits were delayed. Even if nests had been visited during this period, it would not have been safe to handle the chicks, which could have become waterlogged and die from hypothermia.

When it was possible to revisit nests on 17 June, it was feared the chicks would be too big to ring (well-grown chicks usually “explode” from the nest if disturbed, a natural defence against predators), but fortunately this did not happen.

Results

The Grant Application and Approval Letter listed several quantifiable outputs. These are listed in Appendix 1, together with the results achieved.

As a result of the intensive search for Whinchats by the LMBBS volunteers, the population is estimated at 52 breeding pairs, a few more than we previously estimated. Maps showing all observations, and the grouping of these observations into territories, are attached as Appendix 2 and 3, respectively.

Eleven nests were found, 10 by the nest finders, and one relay by a pair that lost their first nest early on (found by the ringer).

Of the 10 nests found early, five were successful, and five failed. Of the failed nests:-

- 2 empty when revisited a week later: predated
- 1 not found a week later: unknown
- 1 with abandoned eggs: natural causes, or adult female predated
- 1 with dead chicks: unknown, possibly abandoned due to torrential rain

Of these 10 nests found early, eight were in bilberry, and two were in bracken.

A total of 23 individuals were colour-ringed, four adults (one male before nesting, and two males and a female when taking food to nests) and 19 nestlings from 4 nests. A brood of five were ringed but not colour-ringed, as handling and time spent at the nest had to be curtailed due to the rain. The ringing results are shown in Appendix 4.

A revised project proposal, incorporating the results and lessons of this Pilot Project, was submitted to *Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons* and it has been incorporated into the bid to HLF for the Delivery phase of the project in 2020-23.

Habitat Selection

For the 10 found nests:-

- Eight were above 400m, min 369m, max 453m, average 419m.
- Seven were on steep slopes of 28° or more, with four at 40°, and one each at 35°, 30° and 28°. The three on shallow slopes were at 10° (2) and 20°.
- All except one had an aspect between south (4) and east (3), with 2 in between, facing south-east and south-south east respectively.

- Considering habitat within 10m of the nest, half were in bracken, and half in heath. Of the former, two had bracken litter understorey, and one of each of the other three had heath, moss and bilberry, and bilberry understoreys.
- Within 100m, all had tall bracken, height in summer min 55cm, max 150cm, average 93cm
- All except two were within 50m of water (stream or flush), max 83m, and half were within 25m of a flush.
- None had a tree closer than 18m, but the furthest distance to the nearest tree was 79m (average 45m.)

A spreadsheet showing the habitat of each nest, and surrounding area, compiled by the National Trust ecologist, is available on request.

The habitats on the Long Mynd were mapped in 1995, and the distribution of Whinchats in 1994-98 was correlated with these habitats. The habitat mapping was repeated in 2017. In the intervening period, the National Trust changed its GIS mapping system, so the 1995 map was re-done to match the 2017 map. The results are shown in Appendix 5.

A line has been drawn on the maps, marking the boundary where the steep-sided valleys begin to level out onto the upland plateau. The boundary was drawn by eye, using the change in the separation of contours on the map. This has proved helpful in analysing the habitat preferences of several species, as some only use flattish heathland, and some rarely do. This boundary is marked on the 2017 habitat map, reproduced at a larger scale in Appendix 6.

In 1994-98, only 19 territories out of the total of 434 territories were on the plateau side of the boundary line (note that all territories found in the six year period are included, so the territories of most pairs are counted several times). 165 territories (38%) of all Whinchat territories were in bracken with bracken litter understorey on the valley sides, but this was the most widespread habitat. When the densities were calculated, by dividing the area of each habitat by the number of territories in it, then calculating a density ratio by setting the lowest habitat density at one, and dividing all the other densities by that lowest one, bracken with bracken litter understorey had the lowest density of Whinchat territories (density ratio = 1), and the more favoured habitats were heath with scattered bracken (64 territories, density ratio = 2), bracken with heath understorey (71 territories, density ratio = 1.6), bracken with heath and grass understorey (30 territories, density ratio = 2.0) and Acid Flush (22 territories, density ratio = 1.8).

The Whinchat territories map for 2019 has been overlain on the 2017 habitat map, and the number of Whinchat territories in each habitat is shown in Table 1

Table 1. Whinchat territories in each habitat

HABITAT	No. of Territories		
	Plateau	Valley sides	Totals
Acid-neutral flush	1	3	4
Bracken over grass	1	4	5
Bracken over heath	7	14	21
Bracken over litter		6	6
Gorse		2	2
Grass with heath and scattered bracken		1	1
Heath	1	2	3
Heath with scattered bracken	3	7	10
Total	13	39	52

It will be seen that the proportion of territories on the plateau has increased to 25%, probably reflecting the movement of bracken to the top of the slopes and beyond, creating more of the favoured habitats on the edge of the plateau.

These results for 2019 have then been compared with the area of each habitat to calculate densities and density ratios in the same way as the

1994-98 calculation outlined above. The results are set out in Table 2.

It will be seen that the highest numbers, and highest densities (discounting the single territory on the valley sides in Grass with heath and scattered bracken) are in bracken over heath, and heath with scattered bracken. This is a similar result to 1994-98.

The reduction in the number of Whinchats in bracken over bracken litter reflects the reduction in this habitat, as a result of management (bracken spraying). It will be seen from the table in Appendix 5 that the total of bracken with bracken litter understorey on the steep sided valleys has reduced from 345ha in 1995 to 227ha in 2017, a reduction of 34%. There are now more Whinchats in bracken over heath in absolute terms, as well as in proportion to the area of available habitat.

Table 2. Area of each habitat, number of Whinchat territories, and density ratios

Habitat	Plateau			Steep sided valleys			Whole Long Mynd area		
	area ha	Whinchat territories	Density Ratio	area ha	Whinchat territories	Density Ratio	area ha	Whinchat territories	Density Ratio
Acid-neutral flush	46.73	1	1.89	43.1	3	2.63	89.83	4	1.84
Bracken over grass	73.83	1	1.20	184.9	4	0.82	258.73	5	0.80
Bracken over heath	241.99	7	2.56	133.6	14	3.97	375.59	21	2.31
Bracken over litter	20.46	0		227.09	6	1.00	247.55	6	1.00
Gorse	4.05	0		77.24	2	0.98	81.29	2	1.02
Grass with heath and scattered bracke	46.42	0		5.57	1	6.80	51.99	1	0.79
Heath	452.27	1	0.20	90.78	2	0.83	543.05	3	0.23
Heath with scattered bracken	265.27	3	1.00	73.56	7	3.60	338.83	10	1.22
Total	1151.02	13		835.84	39		1986.86	52	

What we learnt

The planning assumption that it would be possible to find three nests every two days was achieved before incubation started, but after that nests were extremely difficult to find, because the female rarely left the nest, and the male had no need to sing, display or otherwise defend his territory.

Similarly, males don't respond to the tape of a singing Whinchat once laying is largely complete, so the early ringing was less productive than hoped.

Nests were hard to relocate, and one couldn't be relocated at all, because of rapid growth of bracken.

Therefore, in future years we will start the whole project earlier:

- Catch males before the end of the second week in May
- Find nests in the period 17-27 May
- Ring chicks in the found nests from 6 June onwards, and look for more nests with adults feeding nestlings from a week before that.

We will also improve the nest marking.

Survey work in previous years found Whinchats in the upper reaches of the steep sided valleys, and it was only when fledged young have been out of the nest for several days that family parties ventured onto the plateau. The Long Mynd maps have the boundary between the steep-sided valleys and the plateau marked on them (blue line). Surprisingly, three of the found nests were on the plateau side of this line. The mapping observation is confirmed by the nest site analysis, which shows that these three found nests were on a shallow slope (two of 10°, the third of 20°).

The other found nests were all towards the top of the steep slopes, and we will monitor in future years whether nest site selection favours close proximity to the levelling off of the steep sides.

The reduction in the area of bracken with bracken litter understorey since 1994-98, as a result of aerial spraying with herbicide, has been accompanied by an apparent shift in the distribution of Whinchats into bracken over heath and heath with scattered bracken. This needs to be confirmed by work in future years, a recalculation of the habitat areas on the plateau and the valley sides consistent with the methodology of the 2017 habitat survey, and perhaps a slight reworking of the 1994-98 data to remove annual recounting of the same favoured territories.

No attempts have been made to find nests in any previous years, so this year's results (8 in bilberry, 2 in bracken) highlighting the importance of heath in the bracken is also new information.

The findings in the previous two paragraphs suggest that the objectives of the three-year *Our Common Cause* project, to break up the dense bracken (that with the bracken understorey) for the benefit of both Whinchat and commoners (sheep graziers), will benefit Whinchat.

They also suggest that the feared deterioration of the bracken habitat (an increase in the bracken litter understorey) has not occurred. The bracken habits are now more diverse, and further work needs to be undertaken to see if they account for any changes in the Whinchat population.

Acknowledgements

The nest finding and monitoring was carried out by Martyn Owen and Richard Moores of Biome Ecological Consultants.

The colour-ringing was carried out by Andy Spencer, under the auspices of Stephen Westerburg, warden of RSPB Geltsdale, who has been colour-ringing Whinchats for many years. He provided the colour-ring combinations that Andy was allowed to use.

All of the volunteers conducting the Long Mynd Breeding Bird Survey (Joe Bodycote, Isobel Carter, Gill Davies, Ron Parnell, Dave Pearce, Leo Smith, David Stafford and Dick Ward) submitted their observations of Whinchat immediately after their fieldwork visits, so a distribution map could be provided to help the nest finder.

Ron Parnell, Dave Pearce, Leo Smith and David Stafford made additional visits to look specifically for Whinchats. Dick Ward compiled the Whinchat records into a single spreadsheet, which Debby Santry, National Trust GIS Officer, used to compile the distribution maps in Appendix 2.

Andy Perry, National Trust ecologist, produced the habitat recording form, and visited all the found nest sites to complete it. The first part of the section on *Habitat selection* above is extracted from this table, which is available on request.

Advice was provided by

- Jennifer Border (nee Taylor), who carried out a Whinchat nest finding and monitoring project on Salisbury Plain, and who now works for BTO.
- Stephen Westerburg, warden of RSPB Geltsdale, who has been colour-ringing Whinchats since 2011.

The project was managed and co-ordinated for the National Trust by *Leo Smith Ornithological Surveys and Consultancy*. It was overseen by Peter Carty, the National Trust Countryside Parkland & Gardens Manager. Nicola Read, National Trust Property Administrator, managed

the project's payments, accounted for the expenditure, and provided information for the final AONB Conservation Fund Grant claim.

Funding

Grants were provided by the Shropshire Hills AONB Trust, through the AONB Conservation Fund. (£2,500) and Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons, funded by Heritage Lottery, with the Shropshire arm of the project operated by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership. The project could not have been undertaken without these grants, which are gratefully acknowledged.

The National Trust contributed £2,000 from its own resources.

The final grant claim to the AONB Conservation Fund is set out in Appendix 8. It explains the variances between the grant application and final claim.

Special conditions

The AONB Conservation Fund required an acknowledgement that it had contributed funding, published together with the AONB logo. This condition was primarily met through a Special Acknowledgement and Article in the May edition of "Newsbleat", the NT Shropshire Hills newsletter. The relevant sections are reproduced in Appendix 7.

Newsbleat is emailed to around 320 people, about 10 copies are distributed around Church Stretton (doctors/dentists surgeries, library, Mayfair) and copies are left in the CMV Info Hut, for visitors to take away.

In addition, talks are regularly given by NT staff to community groups in the Shropshire Hills about conservation work and wildlife on the Long Mynd (at least five since the project started), and the Whinchat project, and the AONB Conservation Fund support for it, are included.

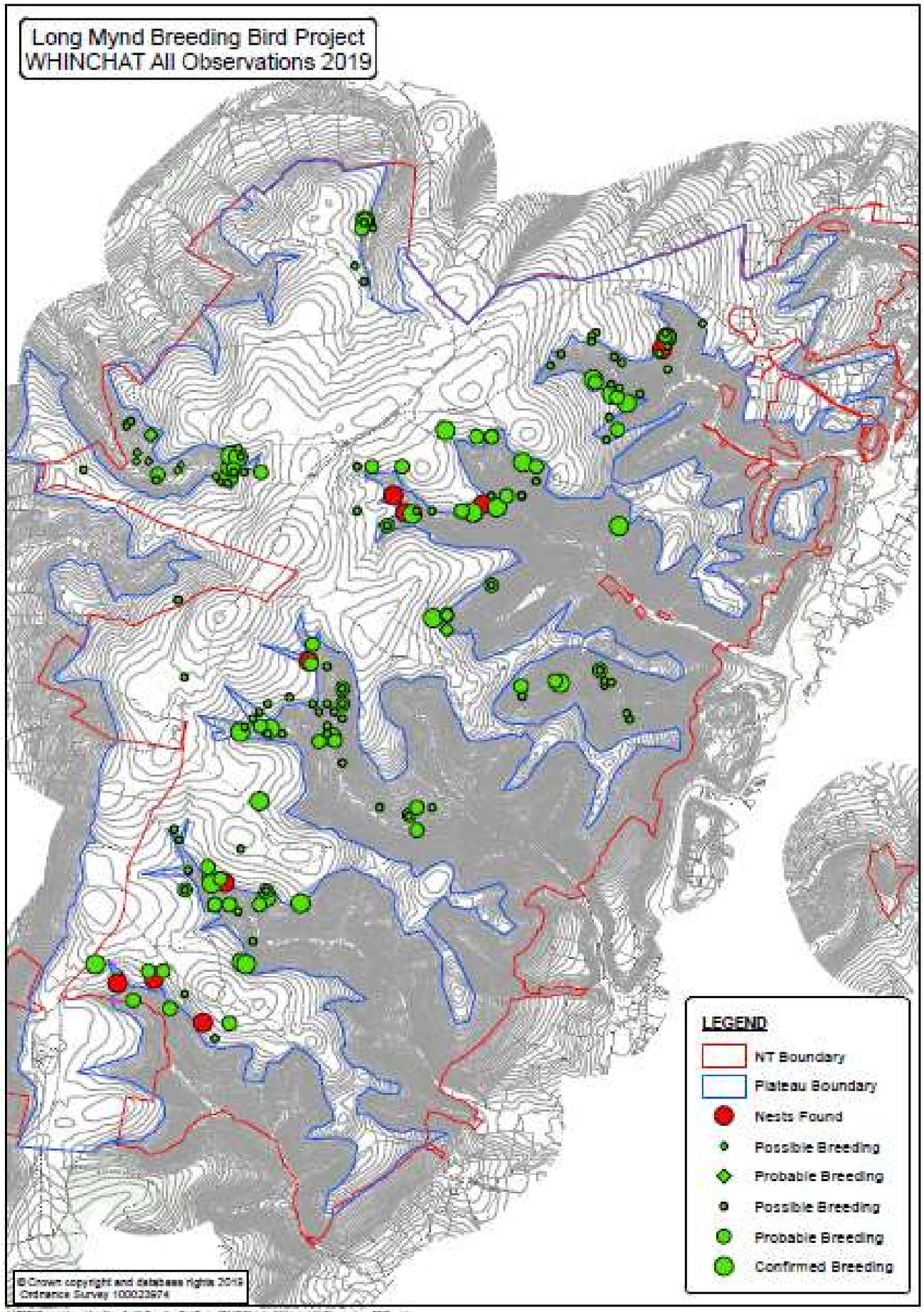
Conclusion

We learnt a great deal from the pilot project, so the implantation of the next phase, hopefully through the Delivery phase of the Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons, should be much more effective and meaningful as a result.

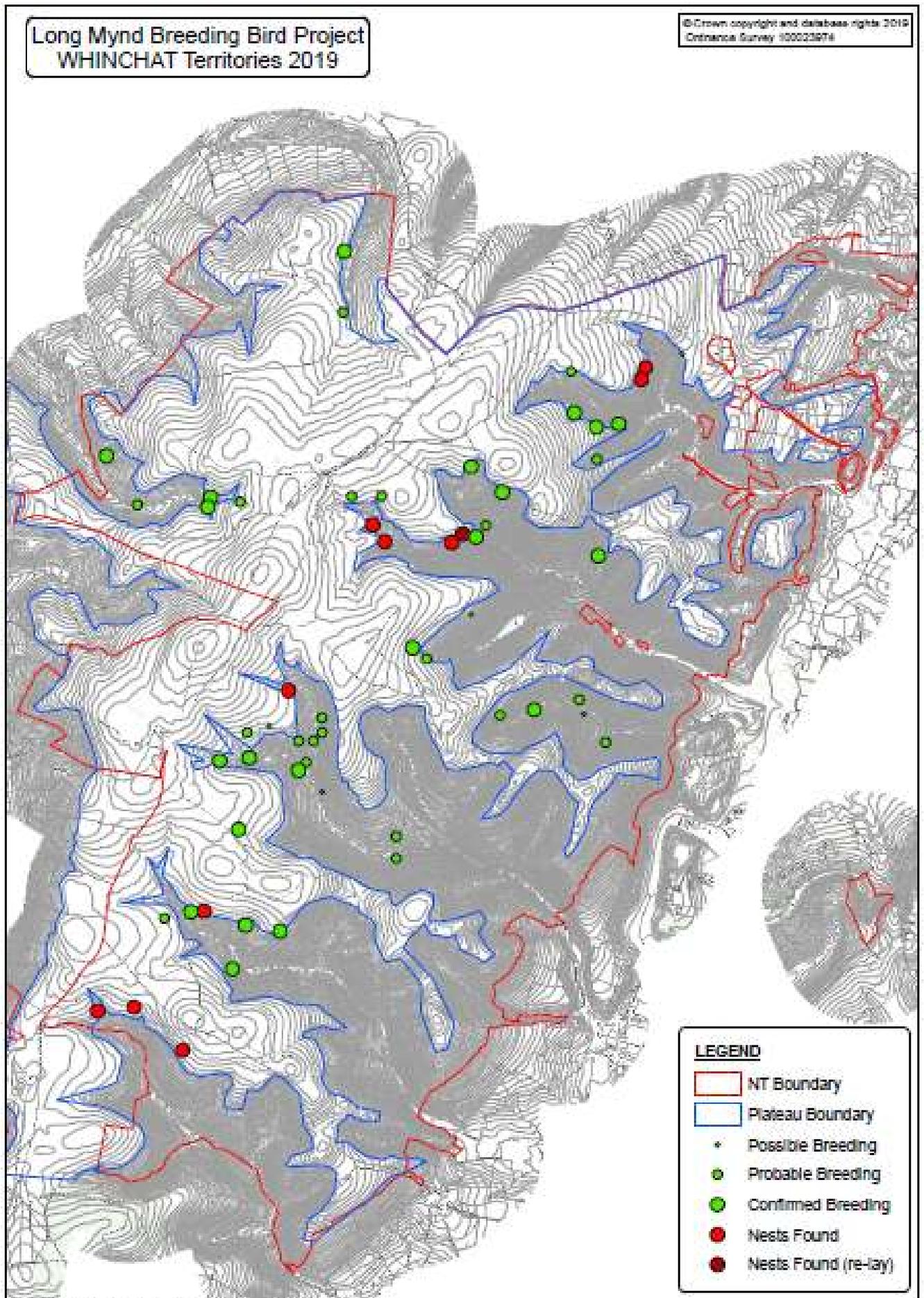
Leo Smith
Leo Smith Ornithological Surveys and Consultancy
Project Manager and Co-ordinator
March 2020

Appendix 1. Quantified Outputs

Outputs for this Pilot Project listed in the Grant Application are:-	Result
1. Nests found	10 + one re-lay
2. Habitat identified for each nest and surrounding territory	Habitat recorded for all 11 four and also by NT Ecologist in August (spreadsheet available on request).
3. Successful nests	5 + one re-lay
4. Cause of failure of unsuccessful nests	2 empty when revisited a week later - predated; 1 not found a week later - unknown; 1 with abandoned eggs - natural causes or predation of adult; 1 with dead chicks - unknown.
5. Chicks fledged	Unknown. The young had already fledged from one nest when it was visited for ringing. It is assumed, but not known for certain, that all the ringed chicks fledged. BBS surveys suggest at least 20 pairs produced fledged young
6. Chicks Colour-ringed	19 (+ 5 ringed but not colour ringed, due to rain)
7. Adults caught and colour ringed	4
8. Project report	Completed March 2020
9. Proposal to <i>Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons</i> project for a three year comprehensive project, to be finalised in consultation with the AONB Partnership by the end of September.	Revised costs and project proposal submitted to OCC in August 2019. Lessons presented to AONB and OCC on 10 October



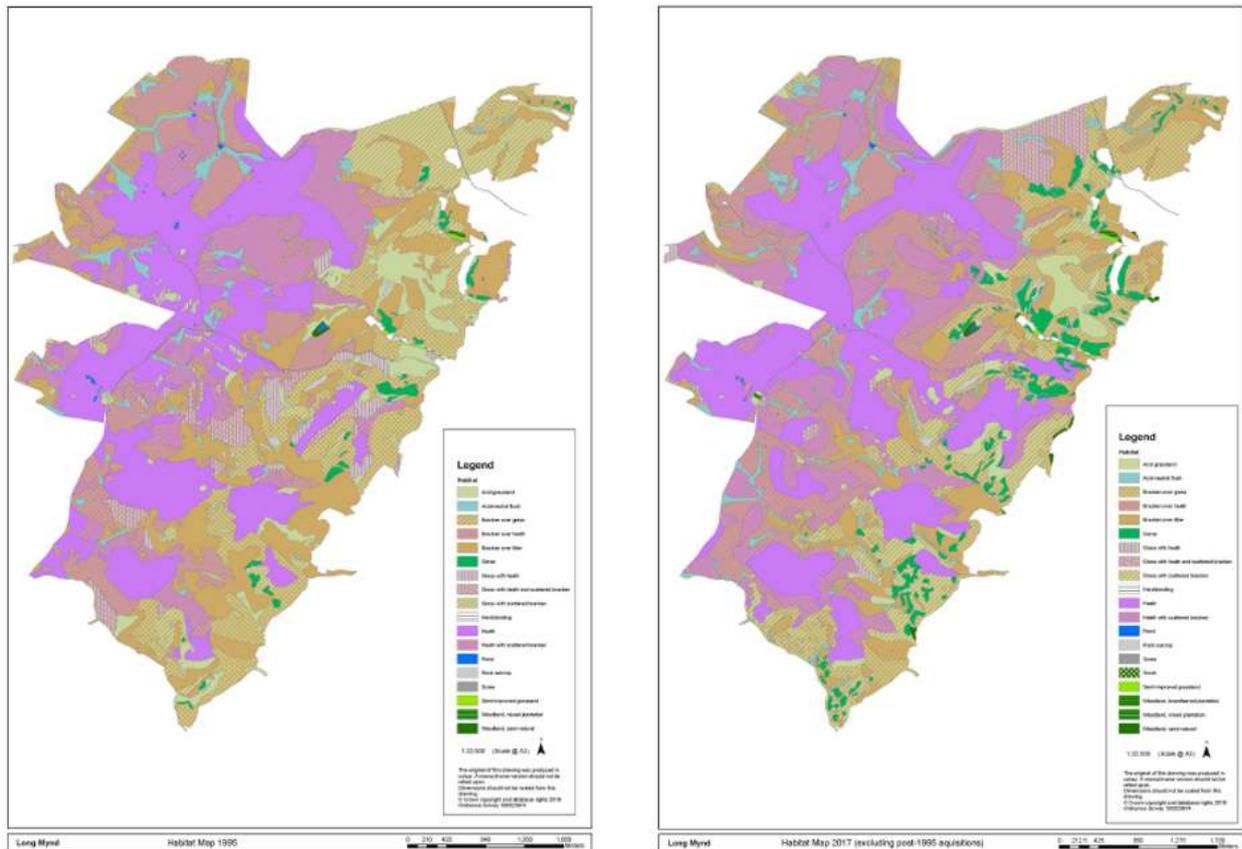
Appendix 3. Whinchat territories



Appendix 4. Ringing and Colour-ringing Results

Date	BTO Ring No	Left leg		Right leg		Days old	OS map	Brood no.	Age	Location (Long Mynd)
		above	below	above	below					
16/05/2019	ANF-0557	B	B	P	BTO		SO4566692650	-	4M	Callow Hollow
18/06/2019	APF-6778	B	C	P	BTO		SO4323195144	-	4M	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
18/06/2019	APF-6779	B	G	P	BTO	6	SO4323195144	5/5	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
18/06/2019	APF-6780	B	N	P	BTO	6	SO4323195144	5/5	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
18/06/2019	APF-6781	B	O	P	BTO	6	SO4323195144	5/5	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
18/06/2019	APF-6782	B	R	P	BTO	6	SO4323195144	5/5	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
18/06/2019	APF-6783	B	V	P	BTO	6	SO4323195144	5/5	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH 1)
21/06/2019	APF-6784	B	W	P	BTO		SO4122595656	-	4M	Bilbatch
Not used		B	Y	P	BTO					
17/06/2019	APF-6761	C	B	P	BTO		SO4142191707	-	4F	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6762	(no colour-rings applied)				8	SO4142191707	5/5	1P	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6763	(no colour-rings applied)				8	SO4142191707	5/5	1P	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6764	(no colour-rings applied)				8	SO4142191707	5/5	1P	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6765	(no colour-rings applied)				8	SO4142191707	5/5	1P	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6766	(no colour-rings applied)				8	SO4142191707	5/5	1P	Minton Batch (MH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6757	C	C	P	BTO	10	SO4085191972	4/4	1P	Minton Batch (MH1)
17/06/2019	APF-6758	C	G	P	BTO	10	SO4085191972	4/4	1P	Minton Batch (MH1)
17/06/2019	APF-6759	C	N	P	BTO	10	SO4085191972	4/4	1P	Minton Batch (MH1)
17/06/2019	APF-6776	C	O	P	BTO	8	SO4452796325	4/4	1P	Jonathan's Hollow (JH 1)
17/06/2019	APF-6760	C	R	P	BTO	10	SO4085191972	4/4	1P	Minton Batch (MH1)
Not used		C	V	P	BTO					
17/06/2019	APF-6772	C	W	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6769	C	Y	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6771	G	B	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6767	G	C	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6768	G	G	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6770	G	N	P	BTO	7	SO4277895145	6/6	1P	Light Spout Hollow (LSH3)
17/06/2019	APF-6775	G	O	P	BTO	8	SO4452796325	4/4	1P	Jonathan's Hollow (JH 1)
Not used		G	R	P	BTO					
Not used		G	V	P	BTO					
17/06/2019	APF-6773	G	W	P	BTO	8	SO4452796325	4/4	1P	Jonathan's Hollow (JH 1)
17/06/2019	APF-6774	G	Y	P	BTO	8	SO4452796325	4/4	1P	Jonathan's Hollow (JH 1)

Appendix 5. Long Mynd habitat maps: 1995 (left) and 2017 (right)

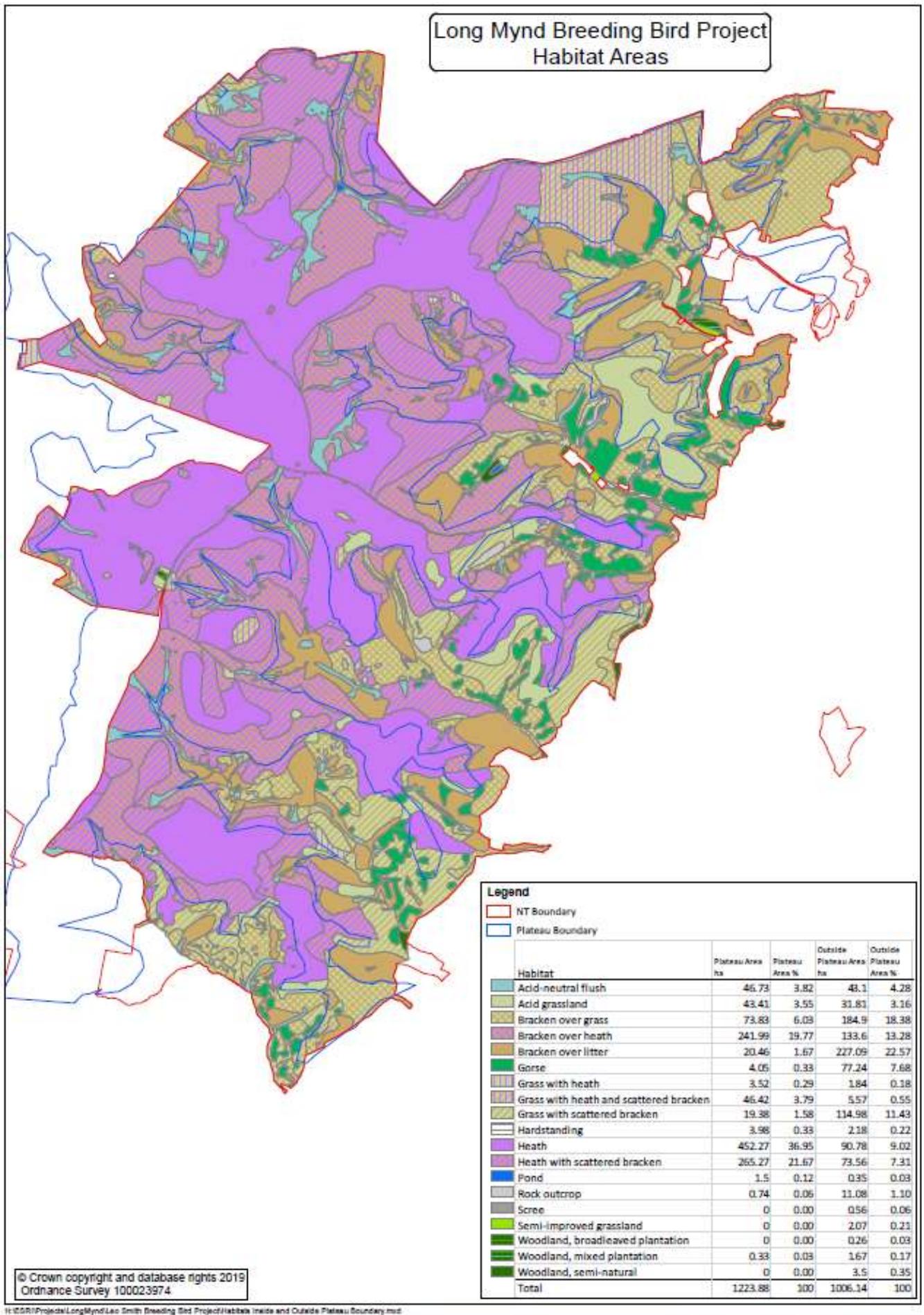


Bracken has moved up the hill, but proportion of dense bracken reduced by spraying

The area and percentage of the different habitats from the 1995 and 2017 surveys is shown in the table below. Note that the earlier figures were calculated at the time, and have not been re-calculated following the revision of the 1995 map to be consistent with the 2017 map.

Habitat	1995				2017			
	Plateau Area ha	Plateau Area %	Valleys Area ha	Valleys Area %	Plateau Area ha	Plateau Area %	Valleys Area ha	Valleys Area %
Acid grassland					43.41	3.5	31.81	3.2
Acid-neutral flush	35.3	2.9	25.9	2.7	46.73	3.8	43.1	4.3
Bracken over bracken litter	87.1	7.3	344.9	36.4	20.46	1.7	227.09	22.6
Bracken over grass	46.1	3.8	193.6	20.4	73.83	6.0	184.9	18.4
Bracken over heath and grass	15.0	1.2	31.4	3.3				0.0
Bracken over grass understorey	187.8	15.7	93.3	9.8	241.99	19.8	133.6	13.3
Gorse	0.6	0.0	20.0	2.1	4.05	0.3	77.24	7.7
Grass	39.1	3.3	43.9	4.6				0.0
Grass with heath	4.4	0.4	13.8	1.5	3.52	0.3	1.84	0.2
Grass with heath and scattered bracken	1.9	0.2	0.8	0.1	46.42	3.8	5.57	0.6
Grass with scattered bracken	69.1	5.8	33.1	3.5	19.38	1.6	114.98	11.4
Hardstanding					3.98	0.3	2.18	0.2
Heath	462.3	38.5	64.4	6.8	452.27	37.0	90.78	9.0
Heath and grass	11.4	1.0	9.0	0.9				0.0
Heath with grass + scattered bracken	12.2	1.0	7.3	0.8				0.0
Heath with scattered bracken	214.5	17.9	66.2	7.0	265.27	21.7	73.56	7.3
Pond	2.0	0.2	0.7	0.1	1.5	0.1	0.35	0.0
Recent Burn	11.3	0.9	0.1	0.0				0.0
Rock outcrop					0.74	0.1	11.08	1.1
Scree					0	0.0	0.56	0.1
Semi-improved grassland					0	0.0	2.07	0.2
Woodland, broadleaved plantation					0	0.0	0.26	0.0
Woodland, mixed plantation					0.33	0.0	1.67	0.2
Woodland, semi-natural					0	0.0	3.5	0.3
	1199.9	100.0	948.5	100.0	1223.88	100	1006.14	100

Appendix 6. 2017 Habitat Map, showing boundary between the plateau and the steep-sided valleys





Long Mynd & Carding Mill Valley Newsletter



NewsBleat

May 2019

Welcome to the 65th edition of the NewsBleat. We hope you enjoy it...

Grateful Acknowledgement!

Last month our Spotlight focused on efforts being made to reverse the decline of whinchats in our area. Reference was made to a new Whinchat Conservation Project, and in this context it's essential to acknowledge the contribution of the AONB to the funding of this important project. Please see Leo Smith's article on page 4 for further details.



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Whinchat Project by Leo Smith, Ornithologist



The March issue of Newsbleat highlighted the massive decline of Whinchats in the UK and in Shropshire. The Long Mynd now holds almost all of the County population, but there are now probably around 40 breeding pairs, only a third of the population 20 years ago.

A project has been set up to find out why, and do something about it. A large sample of nests will be found, and outcomes monitored, to find out which habitats are being used, and if enough chicks are fledging to sustain the population. Adults and nestlings will be colour-ringed, so each bird can be

identified individually, to find out which habitats are used for feeding, and whether enough return each year from Africa. The results will inform bracken management plans.

The total cost of the project (excluding volunteer time) in 2019 will be £5,000, and a grant for half this cost has been awarded by the Shropshire Hills AONB Conservation Fund. This is a small grant pot which supports projects helping to conserve and raise awareness about the Shropshire Hills landscape, its diverse wildlife and rich heritage, such as research to evaluate the effectiveness of agri-environment schemes in the AONB, improving biodiversity along local roadside verges, and numerous projects involving young people in practical conservation tasks.

This year, the Conservation Fund panel distributed almost £15,000 between 12 projects and our Whinchat project was awarded the largest grant of £2,500. The Panel were pleased to be able to support it, as Whinchats are specifically mentioned in the "Special Qualities" section of the AONB Management Plan, which refers to upland species which are very significant in a regional context.

Results will be used to develop a full-scale 3-year project to improve Whinchat habitat as part of a national upland commons project ('Our Common Cause'). The support of the AONB Conservation Fund is gratefully acknowledged. The project would not be able to proceed without this grant.

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Appendix 8. Final Grant claim and variance from Grant Approval.

The nest finders, Biome Consulting, worked for the planned number of days, plus an additional day taking the Ringer to all the nests they found that potentially had chicks to ring. However, because nests were almost impossible to find once incubation started, ten were found rather than the budgeting assumption of 18. This did not affect the time spent, or the number of Thermacrons ordered (they had to be bought in advance, and will be used by the project in future years), but it did reduce the number of Camera Traps rented.

Advice was taken via email correspondence with Stephen Westerberg and Jenni Border (see Acknowledgements), but it was subsequently agreed that a visit by Jenni to train the nest finder and ringer was unnecessary. The provision of £200 in the original budget was therefore reallocated.

To increase the chance of nests being found, the Breeding Bird Survey volunteers were encouraged to make additional early visits to locate Whinchats, and then again to look for adults feeding young in the nest in June. Between them, they contributed 161 hours that were not included in the original application. Organising this, and ensuring that the records were passed on to the nest finders in the form of a distribution map (Appendix 2), substantially increased the number of hours necessary for project co-ordination.

Because Whinchats actually nest earlier than was thought, there was less opportunity for catching adults before nesting started. There was an extended period of torrential rain around the time that eggs hatch, reducing the time available to the ringer to find nests while adults were feeding chicks in the nest. The weather may have also increased the nest failure rate i.e. there were fewer active nests for the ringer to find. It also reduced the window for the Breeding Bird Survey volunteers to help find pairs feeding young, and the number to find. All these factors reduced the number of visits made by the ringer, and consequently his expenses claim and his number of volunteer hours.

In total, the volunteer hours contributed to the project considerably exceeded the value in the original grant approval, and there was a consequent large increase in the time necessary for co-ordination. It was therefore agreed that the cash budget for Project Co-ordination should be increased from £400 to £1,150, utilising the savings on renting Camera Traps, ringer's expenses, and training. After deducting the hours consequently being paid for, the Project Co-ordinator still contributed 107 voluntary hours to the project.

Activity	Initial budget	Outturn
	£	£
Nest finder (12 days)	2,400.00	2,600.00
Trail cameras (rent 18 @ £40)	720.00	233.31
Thermacrons (18 @ £25)	450.00	450.78
Ringer's expenses	600.00	334.67
Ringer's equipment	230.00	231.33
Training	200.00	0.00
Co-ordination	400.00	1,150.00
Total	5,000.00	5,000.09

The table shows that the total cash expenditure is identical to the total in the approved budget in the Grant Approval letter from the AONB Conservation Fund.

The value of the actual volunteer hours were £5,610 compared to £3,000 included in the grant application, an increase of £2,610 (87%).