

SHROPSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY 2005

www.shropshirebirds.com



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The Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London, SW1P 3JR

cc: Lucy Allan MP
Philip Dunne MP
Daniel Kawczynski MP
Helen Morgan MP
Mark Pritchard MP

Dear Dr Coffey,

The Conservation of Shropshire's Birds

As you will be all too aware, the last three years have been a period of considerable upheaval and, as a consequence, there are a number of decisions that your department will be making over the coming months that will have fundamental implications for the future of Shropshire's birds. We thought it timely, therefore, to write to you and highlight the ways in which the County's birds may be affected.

The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS), formed in 1955, is an entirely voluntary Society with over 800 members. Its aims are to encourage the study and protection of birds in Shropshire and elsewhere, to organise a wide range of activities and produce publications with this objective, and to co-operate with other bodies with similar aims. We manage three nature reserves, including Venus Pool, a site managed under the terms of an Environmental Stewardship Agreement, where we have re-created about 10 ha of species-rich grassland and grow 5 ha of winter bird crops. We estimate that the reserve has over 20,000 visits by bird enthusiasts each year.

The 67 years since the Society was formed have seen considerable losses in the County's avifauna with very few gains. Once-common farmland birds like Lapwing, Curlew, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow are increasingly difficult to find and Turtle Dove is almost certainly extinct as a breeding species. In 2020, the Society published a list of Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire (<https://www.shropshirebirds.com/index/species-recovery/>). There are 32 species on the Red List (50% decline in only 23 years 1990 – 2013), and 17 species on the Amber List (25% decline over the same period). Although we have identified the 49 species of greatest concern, it is the case that most of the species accounts in *The Birds of Shropshire** shows a pattern of decline and, although some factors (including climate change, habitat loss and hunting elsewhere) are not entirely within the Government's control, there are a number of areas where the Government can make a difference with measures that seek to prevent further declines and reverse past losses.

Access to Natural Greenspace

If Covid-19 did anything, it reinforced the fact that the natural environment is vitally important in maintaining the health and well-being of the population. A number of our members tell us that they rely on their visits to Venus Pool to maintain their mental health and we believe that it is essential that everyone should have easy access to high quality natural greenspace; it must be cheaper than regular prescriptions of anti-depressants! We are concerned that this is not always considered as part of new housing developments, even when it would be easily achievable with some thought and forward planning, and we would ask you to make these points in any discussions that you may have with the Secretaries of State for Health & Social Care and Levelling Up, Housing & Communities.

Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS)

These schemes are critical if we are to have any chance of maintaining, never mind restoring, the County's biodiversity. As mentioned above, the Society's Venus Pool Nature Reserve is managed under the terms of one of these schemes and we would find it difficult to maintain the reserve without the financial support we receive under its terms. Its loss could compromise the biodiversity gains that we have made and the benefits that these bring to our many visitors.

As mentioned earlier, the Society has recently published Red and Amber Lists for Shropshire's Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern. From the action plans that we have prepared for a number of these species, it is clear that improved habitat management is essential for their survival and, in many cases, that this will not be achievable unless this is supported by appropriately targeted ELMS.

We understand that the design of ELMS is currently under review and we would urge you to ensure that future schemes include the necessary options and underpinning funding to support the habitat management required to maintain and enhance Shropshire's bird populations.

While off-the-peg options will cover most scenarios, we do think that it is important to include provision for one-off projects that are novel and innovative and will support, for example, complex habitat restoration and re-creation projects. This will be essential if Nature Recovery Networks are to be delivered as part of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

Water Quality

Dipper and Grey Wagtail, two iconic birds of the rivers and streams of south Shropshire, have both shown declines of around 30% in recent years. This is a result of reduced water quality, including both sedimentation and elevated nutrient levels, that have had a damaging impact on the aquatic invertebrate populations upon which these two species depend. The causes of this are well-documented (agricultural run-off and sewage treatment plant discharges) and we believe it is important that the Environment Agency is fully supported and funded to use all its available powers, including enforcement action where necessary, to improve the quality of all watercourses and water bodies across Shropshire.

Environmental Protection Legislation

Laws protecting the natural environment, including those safeguarding vulnerable wildlife and associated habitats, clean water and clean air, are fundamental to maintaining a high quality of life that we can all enjoy and benefit from; it is clear from history that biodiversity

cannot survive on goodwill alone because this will inevitably result in a gradual erosion of the diversity of wildlife that we enjoy. Any proposals to scrap or modify this legislation should only take place if bespoke, robust replacements are in place. Without such legislation it will be impossible to meet the Government's commitment to restore nature by 2030.

Game Bird Releases

The Society's Save Our Curlews project (<https://www.shropshirebirds.com/index/bird-conservation/save-our-curlews/>) was established because, at the current rate of decline, this species is likely to become extinct as a breeding species in the County within the next few years. The work involves nest protection and chick tagging and monitoring. While a number of factors impact on this species, it is clear from our work that, even when nests are protected, the chicks are predated within a few days of hatching when they have left the shelter of the electric fencing around the nest. It is clear to the Society that the amount of carrion arising from the large number of game birds released each year, particularly pheasants, is supporting elevated populations of predators which are a threat to all ground nesting birds, particularly those that are already vulnerable. Unless the number of released game birds is reduced to a level commensurate with the number shot and collected, we see little hope that populations of many of our characteristic species can be saved even if other beneficial measures are in place. The protection of individual nests of any species is not sustainable in the medium to long term, and neither is pest control. If predator numbers are to be restored to a level that allows species like the Curlew to survive, then the amount of carrion in the countryside must be reduced by stopping the release of an excessive number of game birds and we would ask that you consider how best this can be achieved.

Environment Act Targets

Much of the above would be supported if challenging targets are set for the restoration of wildlife and improvements in water quality, as required by the Environment Act and set out in your own 2019 manifesto. It is unfortunate that the Government missed the original deadline for the publication of these targets, but we welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to delivery of the manifesto with respect to the natural environment and look forward to publication of the targets, providing they are at level that will make a positive difference to the bird populations of Shropshire.

I have copied this letter to the County's MPs and would be happy to discuss any of the points we have raised with you or the MPs.

Yours sincerely,



Dr John Arnfield
Chair, Shropshire Ornithological Society

*Smith, L. (2019) *The Birds of Shropshire*. Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.