



Our work for ground-nesting birds

December 2018.

The Malvern Hills Trust is the charity that protects and manages the iconic Malvern Hills and Commons landscape as an open space for public recreation and has done so for over 130 years. The Malvern Hills and Commons are a large, complex landscape that attracts over a million visits every year. There are many features of interest, such as archaeology and public access, and also many differing points of view. MHT works to find the right balance.

MHT is well aware of the national decline in ground-nesting birds including Skylark¹ and the corresponding decline in Skylark on the Hills as recorded by volunteers and staff.

What are MHT doing for ground-nesting birds?

A key part of our role is to manage our land for wildlife, such as ground-nesting birds including the charismatic Skylark. This is recognised in our Land Management Plan under Objective 17: Ground nesting birds (page 79)².

On the ground, we actively maintain over 200 hectares of grassland habitat through hay-cutting and extensive grazing which provides home to populations of Meadow Pipit, Tree Pipit, Grasshopper Warbler and Skylark. Every year we undertake works to restore areas that were previously open but had become scrubby and thus the amount of suitable habitat is rising.

Through 2016-2018 we successfully worked with Natural England to get Malvern Common (home to breeding Skylark) further protected as a new Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)³.

However, it is important to keep in mind that no part of our land can be managed solely for one single feature.

Why do we undertake livestock grazing?

Many species need open grasslands to flourish. Without a means of preventing vegetation succession these open areas will change to bramble and ultimately trees which are not suitable habitat for birds of open ground. Livestock grazing provides the best way to maintain open habitats, it is also the prescribed form of management for the Malvern Hills SSSI, ensuring the protection of the most important features, including the acid grasslands and heath. The wider benefits of such conservation grazing are well-established and widely recognised by ecologists.⁴

In the past, grazing was undertaken by local people with Commoners' rights. However this practice ceased on the Hills in 1990 as it was hard work and economically unviable. A subsequent twelve year period with no grazing and encroaching scrub meant open habitats were much reduced, until MHT re-introduced grazing in 2002 thanks to a conservation grant.

Our conservation grazing is extensive, meaning relatively low numbers of animals are used and the animals are regularly moved around the Hills to ensure many areas are livestock-free for months at a time creating diversity in swards (see photo 1).

The combination of livestock grazing and practical work have improved the condition of the habitats over the last 12 years as recognised by the Hills SSSI's 'unfavourable - recovering' status.

What's the situation for ground nesting birds nationally?

It has been widely recorded by bodies such as RSPB and the BTO that the national populations of several of our species of ground nesting birds have sadly declined in the past 25-40 years. A figure of 59 % decline in Skylarks numbers across England (1979-2004) is often mentioned, while more recently the BTO reported a 20 % decline in Skylarks and 7 % decline in both Meadow Pipit and Grasshopper warbler numbers for the 21 year period from 1995 to 2016.

These declines are nationwide and their cause is attributed by those monitoring bodies to a number of widescale factors - most notably changes in arable farming practices, intensive grassland management, predation and disturbance.

Why have ground-nesting birds declined around the Malverns?

In 2014 MHT established a group of local people all keen to look into why numbers of these birds have declined locally. The group found many relevant factors, including visitor disturbance, predation, grass length and competition. The group's recommendation was, amongst other things, for a ground-nesting bird campaign involving temporary signage to help make the public aware of the issue of disturbance that they and their dogs can cause in nesting season. Other recommendations, such as opening up quiet, less disturbed level areas for ground nesting birds, were included in the Land Management Plan of 2016 coupled with open habitat restoration works.

The RSPB and Natural England ornithologists have told us that the birds on the Hills, particularly the Skylark population, most likely represent a 'sink' population – i.e. one that was previously maintained by recruitment from the surrounding arable and pasture farmland. This farmland has all but lost Skylarks and it is here that effort is needed to regain Skylark-friendly farming to create a robust, shared population again which may then recolonise and support the Hills.

Despite the birds being dependent upon this much wider landscape, MHT is enacting its planned works to create the right conditions should the birds be able to re-colonise. In line with advice from NE ornithologists, open habitat restoration continues with a focus on the quieter, more-level areas (see photos 2&3) which will be more attractive to ground-nesting birds than the very busy ridgeline and not compromise the important acid grassland management.

MHT will continue to work with its statutory partners and local people in improving the Hills for wildlife. If you would like to help out and can spare some time, perhaps you would like to join our team of wonderful volunteers.

Contact MHT on 01684 892002.

References:

1. British Trust for Ornithology Skylark trends
<https://www.bto.org/birdtrends2010/wcrskyla.shtml>
2. MHT Land Management Plan
www.malvern hills.org.uk/looking-after/land-management-plan/
3. Malvern Common SSSI
<https://www.malvern gazette.co.uk/news/17241038.much-loved-malvern-common-gains-extra-protection-from-natural-england/>
4. Conservation grazing
<https://insideecology.com/2017/11/09/conservation-grazing/>

Photo 1: Tussocky sward of over 20cm on Table Hill, 2018.



Photos 2&3: Table Hill in 2017 and 2018 (right) after open habitat restoration work chiefly replacing swathes of gorse with tussocky grassland.

