

**Scottish / UK Significance**

Breeding attempts in the North-east represent only a tiny fraction of the 500 or so calling males now recorded in Britain each year.

**Population Trend**

The British population has been declining for 150 years and the range has decreased enormously<sup>1</sup>. The species has now virtually disappeared from most of mainland Britain, including central and eastern Scotland. In the west of Scotland and Orkney, conservation initiatives have stemmed and begun to reverse the decline. In NE Scotland, the species remains a rare visitor, though possibly more frequent in the last 3 - 4 years<sup>5</sup>.

**Factors Influencing Population**

The main causes of decline are thought to have been loss of traditional grassland habitat, a lack of early and late cover on many farms and change in management practices, especially earlier cutting of hay and silage<sup>1</sup>. In NE Scotland, birds have used long-term set-aside and rough grassland in tree planting schemes as cover. There is a chance that if breeding attempts are located early enough in the season, and local conditions are right, then successful breeding may occur in the area, though it is very hard to confirm. Payments are available to farmers as an incentive to delay grass cutting if corncrakes are present.

**Information sources**

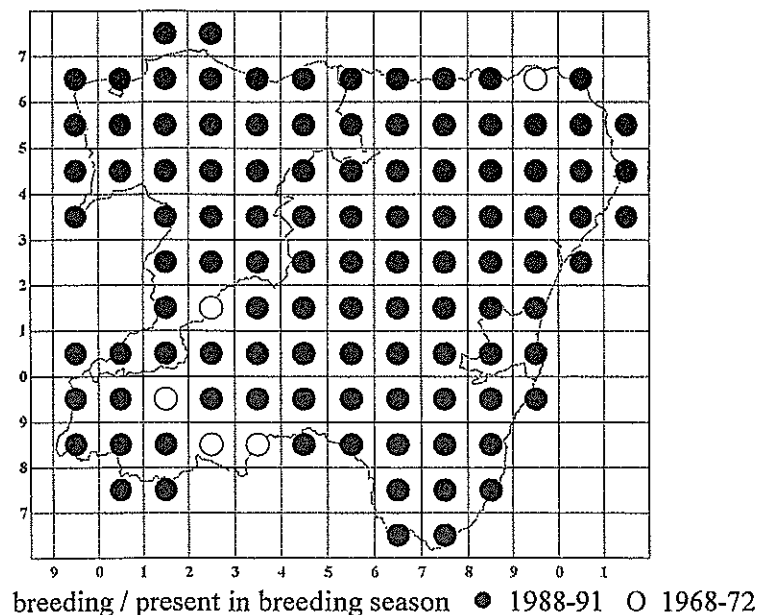
- 1. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993
- 2. Buckland *et al.*, 1990
- 3. Cook, 1992
- 4. NE Scotland Bird Reports, 1991-95
- 5. RSPB East Scotland records

*Alauda arvensis* Skylark

Short List

**Current Status & Distribution**

Skylarks occupy a wide range of habitats in open country with short vegetation, such as arable farmland, grasslands and moorland. Densities are highest on arable and rough grazing land and lower on high mountain tops<sup>1 2</sup>. They are found throughout the North-east, breeding in most 10 km squares in the area and still locally very abundant. In winter skylarks congregate in flocks at lower altitudes, and numbers may be augmented by continental migrants.



Sources: Gibbons *et al.*, 1993

### Scottish / UK Significance

Skylarks are found throughout the British Isles<sup>2</sup>. The species is most abundant in the lowlands of eastern England and least common in the Scottish highlands, with densities in NE Scotland generally similar to those in other parts of eastern Britain. The British breeding population was estimated to be around 2 million pairs in 1988-91<sup>2</sup>.

### Population Trend

The British breeding population in lowland farmland decreased by 54% from 1969 to 1991<sup>4</sup>. Most of the decline has occurred since 1980, after a long period of stability in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>2</sup>. Population trends in habitats other than farmland are largely unknown<sup>4</sup>. In Moray and Nairn, skylarks are thought to have been abundant in the mid 19th century, had become scarce by 1900, and are now common again<sup>3</sup>. Elsewhere in Northeast Scotland, there was no evidence of a change in status from 1968-72 to 1981-84<sup>1</sup> although anecdotal information from some ornithologists and farmers suggests a decrease in breeding density. In general, little information is available on population trends in the Skylark in NE Scotland. The results of the newly instituted National Breeding Bird Survey should help to rectify this.

### Factors Influencing Population

The causes of the national decline are thought to be related to changes in agriculture, such as a decline in ley grassland and conversion of lowland grasslands to arable. Other factors which may affect food supplies are increased use of herbicides and pesticides, and change from spring to autumn sowing of cereals, leading to loss of winter stubbles. Little is known of habitat preferences in NE Scotland, where the proportion of spring cereals is higher than further south in Britain.

### Information sources

1. Buckland *et al.*, 1990 2. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993 3. Cook, 1992 4. BSG, 1995b

## *Turdus philomelos* Song thrush

Short List

### Current Status & Distribution

The song thrush is a common and widespread breeding species in NE Scotland, present in almost every 10 km square<sup>2</sup>. It is found from gardens in the centre of Aberdeen to the birchwoods and juniper scrub of the upper glens, being absent only from the high mountains above about 600m<sup>1 2 3</sup>. The species is most abundant in lower Speyside and mid-Deeside<sup>2</sup>. A 1980/83 survey on Deeside found highest densities (1-6 territories/10ha) in the oakwoods at Dinnit and Craigendarroch, and the birchwood at Crathie. In NE Scotland the breeding population is mainly migratory with birds returning to the breeding territories from late February and leaving in early autumn, possibly to winter in Ireland<sup>2</sup>. Scandinavian migrants pass through in autumn and some of these may winter in the area. During the winter song thrushes are present in small numbers in coastal and lowland areas<sup>4</sup>.

**Scottish / UK Significance**

Spotted flycatchers are found throughout Britain, but are uncommon in the far north and west of Scotland and rare in the Outer Hebrides and Northern Isles. There were an estimated 120,000 territories in Britain in 1988-91<sup>3</sup>. The numbers in NE Scotland are not known. The area probably holds only a small proportion of the British population, but may be more important in Scottish terms.

**Population Trend**

The population size fluctuates but, in Britain as a whole, there has been a long-term downward trend since the 1960s<sup>4</sup>. The biggest declines have occurred in farmland in the southern half of England, while in northern England and Scotland populations have remained more stable. In NE Scotland, numbers may have increased slightly from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s<sup>1</sup>. There were more records of this species in 1984 than any of the 3 previous summers, in contrast to a decrease of 34%, estimated from the Common Bird Counts for Britain as a whole. However, since the 1981-84 survey, numbers in NE Scotland may also be declining as the species has not been recorded recently in several 10km squares where it was formerly present<sup>3</sup>.

**Factors Influencing Population**

It is possible that the gradual decline in Britain is related to weather conditions, both during the breeding season in Britain, and on migration<sup>4</sup>. Habitat degradation and increased use of insecticides could also be important factors.

**Information sources**

1. Buckland *et al.*, 1990 2. Cook, 1992 3. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993 4. Marchant *et al.*, 1990

***Lanius collurio* Red-backed shrike**

Middle List

**Current Status & Distribution**

The red-backed shrike is a scarce passage migrant in Scotland and a few pairs bred in the late 1970s, with a maximum of 6-8 pairs<sup>1</sup>. Breeding was first recorded in 1977, including a pair in NE Scotland which deserted due to disturbance and a successful pair at Abernethy, just outside the area<sup>2 3</sup>. A nest was also found in NE Scotland in 1979 and another male held a territory<sup>2</sup>. A small number of birds, mainly males, have been recorded during the summer in Deeside and Strathspey in the 1980s and 1990s, but there is no evidence of breeding<sup>2 3</sup>.

**Scottish / UK Significance**

The red-backed shrike is no longer a regular breeding species in Britain. Although common and widespread in England and Wales in the 19th century, by the late 1970s when the species started breeding in Scotland, the English population numbered less than 100 pairs. There have been few recorded breeding attempts in Scotland since 1980; one in 1987, one in Shetland in 1990, and one in Caithness in 1997<sup>1 3 4</sup>.

**Population Trend**

The British population has been declining since the 19th century. By 1970 the species was confined to the heathlands of southern and eastern England<sup>4</sup>. In 1989, for the first time, the red-backed shrike did not breed in Britain, although there have been one or two nesting attempts since<sup>4</sup>.

**Factors Influencing Population**

The causes of the decline are not known. Climatic change is one suggestion<sup>1</sup>.

**Information sources**

1. Batten *et al.*, 1990 2. Buckland *et al.*, 1990 3. Dennis, 1995 and Roy Dennis, pers. comm.  
4. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993

***Passer montanus* Tree sparrow**

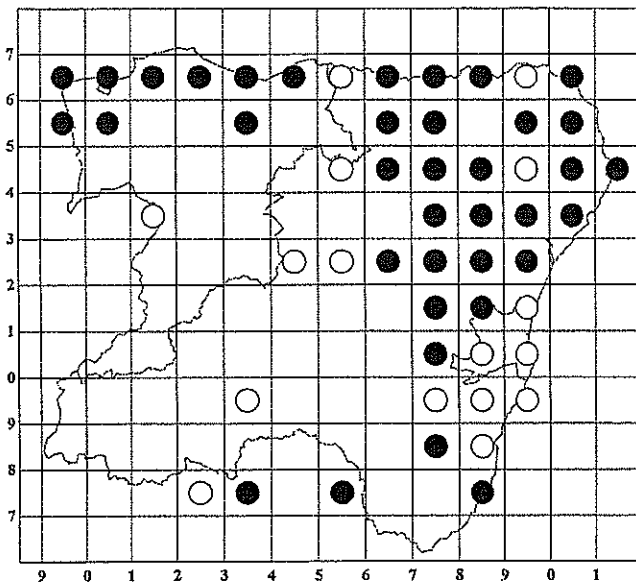
Middle List

### Current Status & Distribution

The tree sparrow is a common breeding species in the lowland areas of NE Scotland, particularly in arable farmland close to mature deciduous trees<sup>1 2 3</sup>. Tree sparrows are most abundant in coastal areas north of Aberdeen, especially around Peterhead, and inland as far as Inverurie<sup>1</sup>. Winter and summer distributions are similar, the species being mainly sedentary<sup>4</sup>. Mixed flocks with other finches, buntings and house sparrows often occur in winter<sup>1</sup>.

### Scottish / UK Significance

The tree sparrow has a rather restricted distribution in Scotland, being found mainly along the east coast as far north as the Black Isle, though also in parts of the southwest. The species is more widely distributed in England and Wales, and is most abundant in central and eastern England. NE Scotland probably holds quite a large proportion of the Scottish population. The British breeding population was estimated as 110,000 territories in 1988/91<sup>3</sup>.



Tree Sparrow: breeding / present in breeding season ● 1988-91 ○ 1968-72  
Sources: Gibbons *et al.*, 1993

### Population Trend

Numbers in Britain fluctuate in an irregular manner, with variations in both breeding density and range<sup>3</sup>. Numbers were high in the 1960s and early 1970s, but have declined steadily since about 1977<sup>3 5</sup>. Numbers in NE Scotland may not have followed the national trend. Between 1968-72 and 1981-84, tree sparrows apparently spread inland from the coast to breed around Inverurie and Turriff, and there were many more confirmed breeding records in the latter survey, suggesting an overall increase in numbers<sup>1</sup>. At the same time there appears to have been a decrease around Aberdeen and Stonehaven which has continued. The species is now scarce in the area from Aberdeen southwards, although perhaps not as scarce as the map suggests<sup>6</sup> and found in neighbouring Angus<sup>3</sup>.

### Factors Influencing Population

Although the causes of long term fluctuations in population size are not clear, the widespread use of herbicides on farmland is thought to have contributed to the recent decline<sup>5</sup>.

### Information sources

1. Buckland *et al.*, 1990 2. Cook, 1992 3. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993 4. Lack, 1986  
5. Marchant *et al.*, 1990 6. Adam Watson, pers. comm.

*Carduelis cannabina* Linnæus

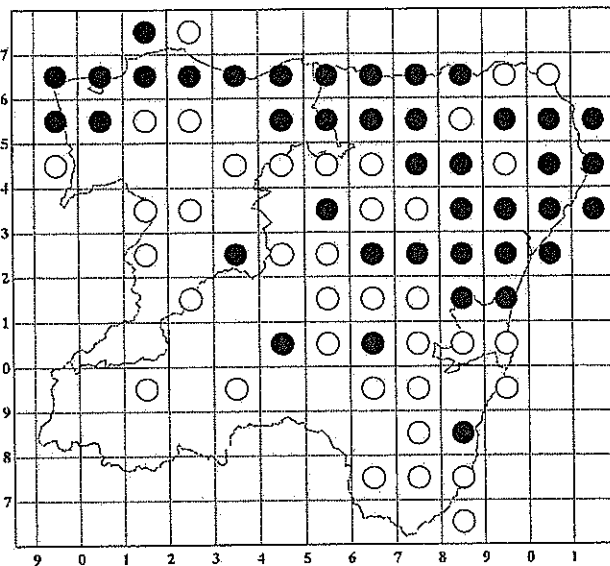
Middle List

*Miliaria calandra* Corn bunting

Middle List

**Current Status & Distribution**

Corn buntings are largely confined to lowland farming areas, especially arable land. They frequently nest in cereal crops, oilseed rape and grass, and are concentrated in the low-lying agricultural lands of the Buchan plain<sup>1 2</sup>. However, national surveys have under-estimated numbers and range in the North-east and the species is not as scarce in the area south of Aberdeen as suggested by the map below<sup>2</sup>.



breeding / present in breeding season ● 1988-91 ○ 1968-72

Sources: Gibbons *et al.*, 1993, Roy Leverton, pers. comm.

**Scottish / UK Significance**

Although their range is much reduced, corn buntings are still widespread in eastern Britain<sup>1</sup>. There were an estimated 20,000 territories in 1993, three quarters of these in eastern England. In Scotland the main strongholds are the North-east and the Outer Hebrides<sup>3</sup>.

**Population Trend**

The corn bunting was widespread and numerous in Britain around the turn of the century but suffered a massive decline in the 1920s and 1930s. A period of slow recovery from the 1950s to mid-1970s was followed by a second rapid decline, at a rate of about 3.8% p.a. There was a 35% reduction in range from 1968-72 to 1988-91<sup>3</sup> with the greatest losses were in the north and west. Local trends may have differed, as populations in eastern Scotland are thought to have been relatively stable until the 1950s<sup>4</sup>. More recently, there have been losses, particularly from inland areas<sup>1</sup>. For example, in Moray, breeding was recorded in Strath Avon in 1968-72, but the species is now confined to coastal areas. A 1997 survey found substantial numbers only in the area around Garmouth and Buckie<sup>5</sup>.

**Factors Influencing Population**

The decline is generally agreed to be a result of changing agricultural practices. A variety of factors may have been involved<sup>3</sup>, most importantly, perhaps, the replacement of traditional mixed rotation farming with intensive arable<sup>2 4 6</sup>. Increased use of pesticides may have reduced food in the form of weed seeds and insects, while earlier harvesting of crops and cutting of grass for silage destroys nests. The change from spring to autumn planting has also led to a loss of winter stubbles, an important food resource for the corn bunting and other seed-eating species<sup>2</sup>.

**Information sources**

1. Gibbons *et al.*, 1993 2. Watson & Rae, 1997 and Adam Watson, pers. comm. 3. Donald, 1997

