

English Woodland Grant Scheme

Guidance Note

March 2011

Reversing Woodland Bird Decline

Background This note gives guidance on the support available to woodland owners and managers who wish to manage their woodlands to help reverse the decline in woodland birds.

Wild birds are a good indicator of the general state of health of our wildlife and the countryside. Woodland bird populations have fallen by 20 per cent among 33 species in the last 25 years. Some of these such as the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Tit have declined by more than 50 per cent since the late 1960s.

A major survey by the RSPB and BTO in 2003/04 - the Repeat Woodland Bird Survey - further highlighted the declines over a 20 year period, detected by national monitoring schemes, particularly those of long-distance migrant species and less common residents. There was strong evidence, at least for the declining species, to support the hypothesis that declines could be being driven by changes in woodland structure notably increasing woodland age, reductions in active woodland management, and increased deer browsing.

Together with the RSPB and Natural England, the Forestry Commission is aiming to reverse this decline by providing financial support and advice to landowners and managers to improve woodland habitat for birds.

Rationale for target areas The Bird Conservation Targeting Project has been developed to target management and resources towards important sites for scarce and declining farmland, woodland and wetland birds. Records are brought together from a wide range of sources, including individual birdwatchers, county bird clubs and national surveys, and compiled to show hotspots for individual and for aggregations of species.

See www.rspb.org.uk/targeting

Note: *Discretion can be applied re grant applications for existing woodlands outside the hotspots if all the other eligibility criteria are met and the RSPB supports the application. The final decision whether to accept the application will rest with the Forestry Commission who will consider the merits of the case and inform the applicant of their decision.*

What type of woodlands are eligible? For most woodland, the habitat requirements of a wider range of bird species will be better served by maintaining a mosaic of patches of different growth stages, whether within coppice, plantations or more natural woods. Therefore most woodland types (where the canopy has closed e.g. >15 years old) including plantation woodlands are potentially eligible for support as long as the target bird species are present in the locality and the work proposed will benefit the target bird species.

What support is available? Support for the management of existing woodland for woodland birds is primarily delivered under the English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS). Woods first need

to be assessed and the management requirements for woodland birds planned.

In the first instance the support provided by EWGS will include two types of grants:

- **Woodland Planning Grants** that contribute to the costs of preparing a woodland management plan which considers and directs opportunities for sustainable working across the whole woodland holding which, benefits woodland birds. Further information can be obtained from the EWGS website: www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wpg
- **Woodland Assessment Grants** that contribute to the costs of assessing the intensity, scale and significance of the proposed management and methods to be employed such as harvesting and regeneration methods in relation to the woodland size and sensitivities (e.g. ancient or semi-natural woodland). Further information can be obtained from the EWGS website: www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wag

The FC normally expects a management plan to assess the appropriateness and priority of proposals, as well as setting them in a wider context. If there is no plan, the woodland should have a Condition, Opportunities & Threats (COT) Assessment undertaken. An electronic version of the COT is available for download in the Woodland Management Grant section of the website www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wmg

- **Woodland Management Grant (WMG)** is an area-based standard grant paid in five annual instalments. The eligible work is described in full in the scheme literature on the EWGS website: www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wmg

but for birds will include:

- Management to benefit biodiversity interest and protect the woodland resource
- soil and ground water protection – e.g. reducing the effects of the adjacent use of fertilisers, fuels, oils and farm sprays etc
- woodland light management
- woodland open space management
- management of veteran trees
- maintenance of woodland boundaries
- controlling non-native species
- managing the impacts of deer
- sustainability monitoring

While many of the management needs of existing woods can be addressed through the types of regular management supported by WMG, in some cases more intensive but non-recurring intervention may also be needed.

- **Woodland Birds WIG80**

This grant can be used to support changes that are required to complement work supported by Woodland Management Grant or to implement actions identified through the Woodland Assessment or Woodland Planning grants. Grants are delivered through the use of standard costs paid at 80% of published costs towards work that improves habitat for woodland birds. This may include supervision costs required to oversee contract work. The up-to-date list of operations and costs that can be funded are contained in *Operations Note 9 – Standard Costs* under the WIG Bio column in Annex 1. Further information can be obtained from the EWGS website: www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wig

Appropriate management for reversing the decline of woodland birds

Native woodland wildlife has been declining for decades. The causes are now becoming clearer: woods that were once structurally complex are now generally much simpler, and this is likely to be the cause of declines in woodland dependent wildlife. Reduced levels of management and increases in deer populations are considered likely causes of the change of structure. One of the key challenges for reversing the decline in woodland birds is to create larger areas of both young-growth and old growth habitat.

For further information please refer to: Symes and Currie (2005) *Woodland management for birds: a guide to managing for declining woodland birds in England* available from the RSPB website:

www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Handbookform_tcm9-234215.pdf

- **Deer Management**

At even moderate densities deer browsing affects woodland structure and the ability of many species to regenerate. A landscape approach using local deer management initiatives should help to ensure long term benefits. Effective deer management (usually through the production and implementation of a deer management plan) will need to be demonstrated before consideration is given to any applications for grant assistance. Grant assistance (WAG) is available to support the production of deer management plans. Once plans are approved, further support is available through WMG or WIG for deer management.

- **Closed Canopy Woodland**

Poorly structured woods with crowded stems, small crowns and a reduced under storey provide limited benefits for wildlife. A multi aged and structured woodland with open areas is desirable as this will provide many of the features needed by flora and fauna, particularly woodland birds and will ensure continued woodland regeneration. Grant assistance through Woodland Management Grant or Woodland Improvement Grant is available to kick-start the sustainable management of woodland to provide ongoing benefits for wildlife and where appropriate encourage the production of wood fuel or wood products to support long term woodland management. Priority will be given to supporting the creation or improvement of harvesting access infrastructure e.g. roads, tracks and loading areas that will lead to the ongoing sustainable management of woodland.

- **Coppice**

Coppicing used to be practiced extensively but has largely ceased. Reinstatement is recommended only in those areas where markets exist for coppice products and coppice dependent wildlife still endures. The design and rotation used will depend on the crop species and markets, but should aim to deliver a mosaic of different ages that also allows species to move readily between similar aged stands; several bird and invertebrate species need a continuity of specific structures.

- **Woodland edge, Rides and glades**

A high proportion of woodland and farmland wildlife is associated with the woodland edge. Where practicable, more complex diffuse edges will significantly benefit wildlife, as woodland and herbaceous features are combined in a sheltered microclimate. A progression from mature woodland, through thicket to open habitat provides a focus for wildlife. Abrupt woodland edges are usually caused by fencing or walling to field and hill edges. Placing conservation field margins along woodland boundaries will help buffer woodlands from wind chill etc and provide foraging areas for wildlife. Internal open space in woodlands is important but generally scarce. The lack of open space is often a product of reduced management that leads to closed canopy woodland with heavy shade, a sparse under storey and ground layer. A network of management access tracks throughout the wood have the potential to provide linear open space and

edge habitat. Further and more detailed guidance can be found in *FC Bulletin 123*, which can be obtained from www.forestry.gov.uk/publications or there is a simpler pdf guide, *Operations Note 011 – Managing woodland open space for wildlife*, available at www.forestry.gov.uk/england-ewgsdocuments

- **Hydrological management**

A significant proportion of woodland in England occurs on damp soils. The ecology of these woods is closely linked to soil moisture and the influence this has on tree species' composition and the nutrient cycle (rate and type of rotting). Damp soils also contribute to humidity within the woodland, providing conditions for bryophytes and ferns, and limiting drought damage to foliage, and consequently increasing associated invertebrate biomass. A well-structured broad-leaved woodland managed as high forest on both wet and drier soils is likely to provide the optimum combination of humidity and dappled shade.

- **Dead and decaying wood**

Standing and fallen dead and decaying wood is important for invertebrates and fungi, and for birds as nest sites and for foraging. It is an important feature across all woodland types and deadwood features should be retained during management including large old trees and fallen trees wherever it doesn't conflict with other objectives such as Health & Safety issues. Further guidance is contained in the EWGS WMG guidance document:

www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wmg
[www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/lifeinthedeadwood.pdf/\\$FILE/lifeinthedeadwood.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/lifeinthedeadwood.pdf/$FILE/lifeinthedeadwood.pdf)

- **Nest boxes:**

The evidence is mixed for the use of nest boxes; boxes may cause issues with competitor species, so it is important to assess the individual needs of the bird species present. There is an ongoing maintenance requirement and in most situations it is more important to get the habitat right for the species suite before the use of nest boxes is considered. Likely beneficial use in appropriately managed woodland: willow tit (adapted box), spotted flycatcher (thinned immature woodland), pied flycatcher/redstart (in semi mature upland broadleaf – lacking natural holes)

- **Creation of native woodland on planted woodland sites**

The creation of early successional scrub and/or native species woodland can deliver important habitat for many declining woodland birds where appropriately designed. Restocking can be by planting or natural regeneration and must comprise native broadleaves. For further guidance see:

www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wrg

- **Creating new native woodlands on bare land**

Further information can be obtained from the EWGS website:

www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs-wcg

Further Advice The EWGS website www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs contains all the information needed to apply for grant support. If you do not have access to the internet, you can request any of the information from your local Forestry Commission office. We recommend getting professional advice on woodland management and grants. A list of national and regional professional organisations is available at www.forestry.gov.uk/england-advice or from your local FC office.

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