

the plight of our feathery friends!

Kara Lewis spreads her wings and heads countrywide, learning about shifts within the UK's diverse bird population and their causes. Human Beings, as well as Mother Nature, are hugely impacting their existence.



since 1955, the collared dove species now has around one million pairs fluttering around the country – a 333% increase since 1970. Bitterns, corncrakes and night jays – previously on the first list of priority species outlined in the 1995 Biodiversity Action Plan – have dramatically recovered thanks to a number of conservation efforts put in place. Richard feels that highlighting these increases is important, as often the media portrays a bleak picture – one where bird decline is the only story.

the impact of farming

Availability of foods essential for survival is one of the key components that has influenced a reduction in species. Modern developments in farmland management, as well as their practices and policies, have had adverse effects on biodiversity in the countryside. Intensification of agriculture techniques linked to boosting productivity has led to less mixed farming, less crop rotation and greater use of pesticides. Plummeting to half of their 1970 figures, farmland bird populations have suffered particularly large losses. A nationwide spreading of pesticides over huge areas – from farms to golf courses, parks to home gardens – has also had widespread implications on their habitat. The depletion of insects has instigated a decline of many insect-eating species such as the starling, spotted flycatcher and nightingale – the song of the latter would be sorely missed as it is often described as one of the most beautiful sounds in nature!

Weather has had an enormous effect on bird populations too. The past two summers – witnessing record rainfall and chilling temperatures – have placed additional pressure on blue tits. These colourful garden visitors normally have a single brood each year, which produces 10-12 young. In recent years, people with nesting boxes have reported a 50% failure rate in blue tit reproduction. "It only requires a couple of cold, rainy days in mid to late May, when parent birds can't get out for food, that the young die of starvation," says Richard. "It doesn't take much to get them down, but equally their capacity to bounce back is enormous." He feels optimistic that the overall bird population is relatively stable and notes that more positive trends become apparent when individual species are examined. The large number of winter migrants from the high arctic have done well, and are dependent on our estuaries for survival. Also, whilst pintail and redshank have declined in places such as the West Country and, Ribble Estuary, avocets and black-tailed godwits have notably increased in estuaries of the east.

migrants decline

On the whole, generalist species, such as magpies, have had better luck adapting to changing environments than specialist species, such as migrants, who struggle to adapt to changing climates and landscapes. "If you want to survive, be a magpie!" says Richard. "You eat anything, you're highly intelligent, handsome, and everybody hates you for it!" Sadly, not all species have such good fortune. Long-distance migrant birds, which spend on average four months of the year in the UK and the rest migrating or in Africa, have severely declined over the last half a century. In response to this, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) – www.rspb.org.uk – has launched an initiative titled 'Birds Without Borders' to improve our knowledge on the issues affecting migrant birds, in order to aid conservation efforts. "Many of the UK's migrant species have declined at an alarming rate over the past 40 years," explains Richard James from the RSPB. "Cuckoos have declined by 62%, spotted flycatchers by 88% and turtle doves by a staggering 93%." Turtle doves are suffering one of the most significant declines of any species. One contributory factor is thought to be the lack of weed seeds on farmland, which they primarily feed on during breeding season. However, there are also concerns about factors such as hunting and habitat loss affecting them on their migration and overwintering sites too. Accordingly, the RSPB is working with farmers and landowners to identify the best ways to aid



in conservation efforts during breeding season to avert a future extinction. They also work with partners in Europe and Africa, as well as here in the UK, to help track further problems. "Each migrant species has its own place in the UK's ecosystem and therefore the loss of these species could have an impact on the environment they live in" says Richard. "For example, species such as swallows, swifts and martins have an important role in controlling the number of airborne insects such as mosquitoes and midges."

wild gardens

In order to secure our eco-system's survival for the foreseeable future, adjustments to modern day lifestyles need to be made. On a grassroots level, individuals can take action within their own gardens. Regardless of plot size, gardeners can encourage birds into their back yard. "Feeding birds all year round is an important way of making up for the lack of natural food in our countryside," says Jenny Steel, a professional wildlife gardener who encourages us to plant wisely, with birds in mind. "Plants that attract lots of insects will encourage robins, wrens and other species that rely on this type of food both for themselves and their chicks. Dense shrubs with berries will feed some bird species in the winter, and a prickly shrub could also make a protected nest spot for a blackbird or thrush." Her website – www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk – brims with tips for creating a colourful and wildlife-friendly outdoor space.

Beyond providing a natural habitat for our feathered friends, Jenny highlights how attracting birds to our gardens has a positive impact on our own lives. "Having lots of birds to watch in the garden promotes a tremendous feeling of well-being, as well as being a positive interest or hobby that we can participate in at any age," she enthuses. In addition, audio experts argue that birdsong relaxes people physically and provide cognitive stimulation, whilst other studies prove it makes traffic sounds more tolerable, aids concentration and helps people feel less hemmed in. Diversity in our UK bird population is worth fighting for! Where would we be without the melody of a dawn chorus – nature's very own sweet-sounding alarm clock – filling our skies?

Imagine summers without the sounds of cuckoos, spring nights devoid of turtle doves, and the vanishing of farmland birds from our beautiful British countryside. Since 1977, the UK's wild bird population has fallen by 13.7%. Dramatic changes have occurred within our eco-system over the past 40 years, leading to fluctuations in our feathered friends. This ongoing transition has resulted in some bird species declining to the point of near extinction, whilst others have increased dramatically. Everything from modern day agricultural practice to changes in weather has contributed to this shift and one thing is for certain, human activity is also very much to blame.

changing habitats

According to bird expert, Richard Bland, the more humans we have on the planet, the fewer other species can exist. "The habitat is changing because of what humans are doing, because the climate is changing and also due to the way species interact with each other," explains Richard. Supporting this are some shocking statistics revealed in the 2012 report, 'The State of the UK's Birds'. Willow tits have decreased by 60% over the last 15 years, the population of house sparrows has declined by 20 million since 1966 but remain one of Britain's commonest birds, and two of the UK's seaducks – velvet scoter and long-tailed ducks – are threatened with extinction. At a glance, these statistics paint a dismal picture for the future of the UK's birds. However, along with these losses, have also come some gains. Nesting in the UK