



Corn bunting - *Miliaria calandra*

The corn bunting is a small bird 18cm in size with a wingspan of 26-32cm, similar in size to a skylark, and is the largest bunting found in the United Kingdom. It has a thick stout bill and legs. The plumage lacks distinguishing markings and is dominated by streaked brown markings. During the breeding season, the male corn bunting often flies with its legs hanging below its body and with its feet bunched. Its voice is distinctive, with a brief rapid jangling song usually repeated for a long period and conducted from a song perch such as a bush, fence or wall.

The corn bunting is omnivorous and feeds almost exclusively in arable farmland, wet meadows and rough grassland. In poor weather conditions, they will forage in farmyards and grain stores. Insects form an important dietary requirement for young chicks. Outside of the breeding season, corn buntings are gregarious and often occur in flocks. Corn buntings are ground nesting birds and have a complex breeding behaviour, with male birds often breeding with several females.

The UK stronghold for corn buntings is located across southern and eastern England. Small populations occur in south Cornwall and as far north as the Outer Hebrides and north-east Scotland. They are largely absent from much of Wales and north-west England. The breeding population of corn buntings is believed to have declined by 86% in the period 1967-2000 and has disappeared from much of Devon and the West Midlands during this period. This decline has also been observed in northern Europe. In Kent, corn buntings are most common in areas of marsh and downland in the north, east, and south of the county but are rare in central and south-western areas. Corn buntings are listed in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable.

A contributing factor in the decline of the corn bunting is thought to be a lack of winter food availability as a result of the increased production of winter cereal. Winter cereals are sown in autumn as opposed to the traditional spring-sown cereal. This results in far fewer areas of winter stubbles being available for the birds to feed in. In addition an increased use of insecticides means there are far fewer insects to feed to the young

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chicks. Insects are a very important food source for many infant birds as they provide the nutrition required for rapid healthy development. Greater use of herbicides has also reduced the amount of weed seeds available for food. Grassland habitats have also changed in recent times. Modern pasture systems are heavily grazed by livestock, which results in corn bunting nests being at risk from trampling. Modern silage production has eclipsed hay production and is equally detrimental, as the first cuts are often during the corn bunting breeding season.

The decline in corn buntings has only been observed relatively recently and as such the UK BAP is currently investigating the most appropriate ways to encourage the conservation of the species. Sympathetic farming practices are likely to be a major contributing factor to the reversal of corn bunting decline. Existing agri-environment schemes that offer undersown spring cereal options and winter stubbles will provide much needed feeding opportunities. In addition a more conservative use of insecticides and pesticides will also increase food availability.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

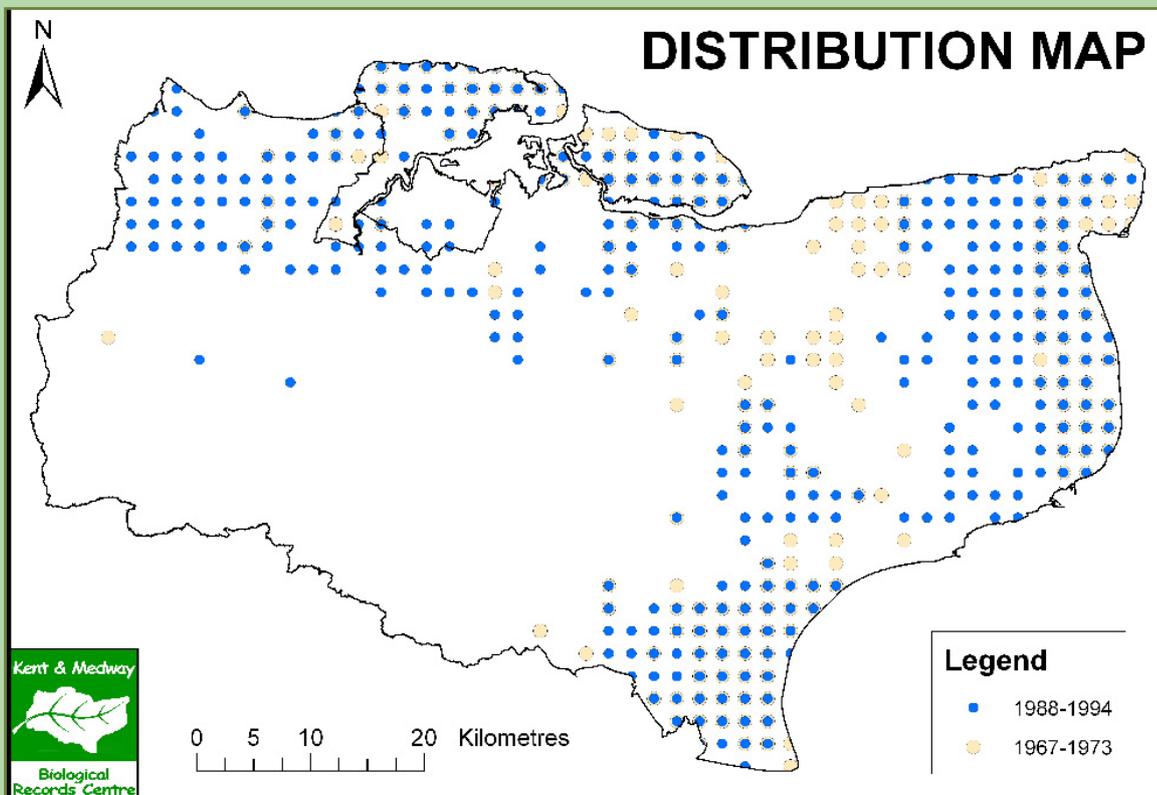
Kent Ornithological Society: www.kentos.org.uk

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: www.rspb.org.uk

British Trust for Ornithology: www.bto.org.uk

Kent Landscape Information System: www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre: www.kmbrc.org.uk



Data courtesy of Kent Ornithological Society