

T. Hamblin / RSPB-images.com

Reed bunting - *Emberiza schoeniclus*

The reed bunting is 15-16.5cm long with a wingspan of 21-28cm, similar in size to a sparrow. They have a large head with a short stout bill and a thick neck. The body is slimmer than that of a sparrow and the reed bunting has a long tail with a large notch that appears black with wide white edges in flight. The male reed bunting's plumage is very distinctive, with a black head and bib and contrasting white collar and white moustache. The upper body is a boldly streaked brown and the underside is largely pale. The females have similar body plumage but their head is streaked. The reed bunting's song is a non-musical 'tweek tweek tweek tsissick' which is sung quickly by unpaired males and more slowly by paired males.

Reed buntings are opportunistic feeders. They are omnivorous, feeding on seeds and insects, the latter of which are especially important for developing chicks. Outside of the breeding season reed buntings are often found in flocks, frequently with other species such as chaffinches.

Reed buntings occur throughout Britain and Ireland but are less common in the uplands and far north and west regions. They favour areas with dense vegetation often in association with water. However more recently they have begun to frequent farmland especially ditches, they also occur on the edges of young forestry plantations. Reed buntings numbers declined in the period 1974-1999. Much of this decline appears to have taken place during the 1970s. The species has also seen a decline of 12% in its range over a similar time scale. The reed bunting population in Kent is concentrated where suitable lowland arable farmland and marshland occurs. They can also be found in several river valleys including the Medway and Stour.

Reed bunting decline has coincided with the decline of a range of other farmland birds. Many of these species share similar dietary preferences and it is suspected that changes in agricultural practices are a significant factor in the decline of many of these species. Modern farms have far fewer insects and weeds than those of several decades ago as a result of increased use in the number of herbicides and pesticides, which has

reed



reduced the food sources available for reed buntings and their chicks. In addition, detrimental changes have occurred to a number of wetland habitats. Between 1968 and 1985, a substantial number of wetland environments were drained and modified on a large scale and, with the combination of poor watercourse management in more recent years, the remaining wetland habitat available for reed buntings has been significantly reduced.

The reed bunting is on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK and is listed in the Kent Red Data Book as vulnerable.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan aims to induce a sustained recovery in reed bunting numbers both in wetlands and farmland environments. This will in part be assisted by existing conservation schemes for the creation of new wetlands and the various agri-environment initiatives that encourage sympathetic farming practice in the form of spring-sown cereals, winter stubbles, and areas devoid of herbicides and pesticides.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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

Environment Agency: www.environment-agency.gov.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

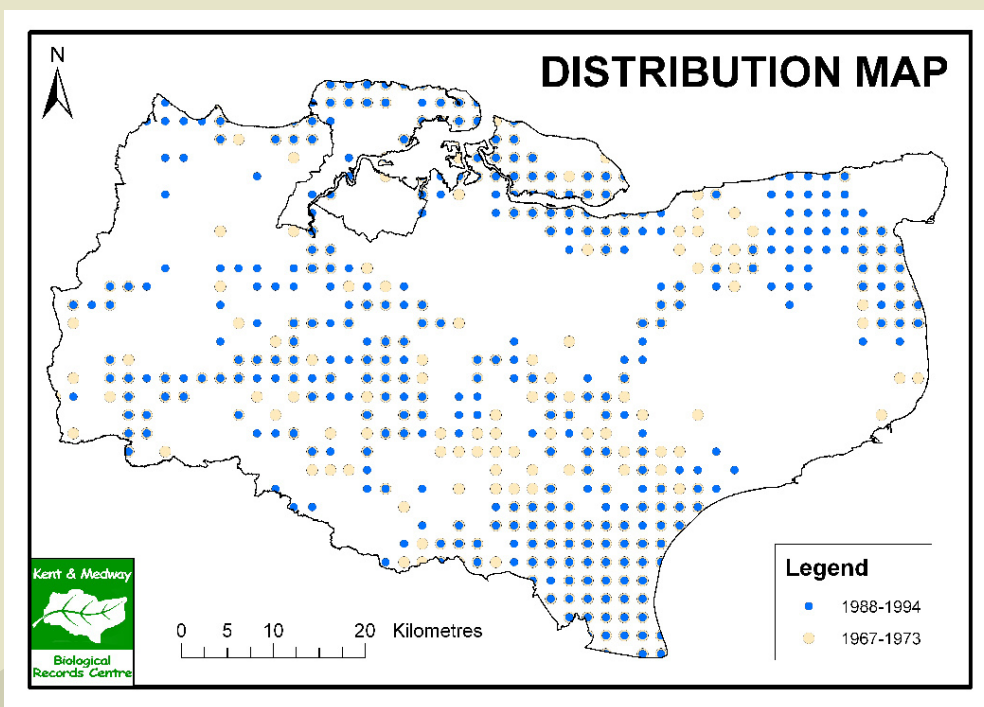
Kent Ornithological Society: www.kentos.org.uk

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