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Skylark - *Alauda arvensis*

The skylark is a small bird 18-19cm in size with a wingspan of 30-36cm. It has a thickset, long body with quite long legs. The plumage is dominated by streaked brown markings, with distinguishing white bars on the edge of the wings and outer sides of the tail. The stout bill is typical of the lark family and a small head crest is sometimes visible when the bird becomes alarmed or excited. The skylark's song is very distinctive due to its continuous loud melodious song, which is most often heard as the birds ascend into the wind with a sheer spiralling flight.

Skylarks are generally omnivorous and change their diet to suit the food in season: cereal grains in spring, insects in summer which are especially important for developing chicks, cereal grains and weed seeds in the autumn and weed seeds and leaves in the winter. Outside of the breeding season skylarks often occur in flocks.

Skylarks can be found all over the United Kingdom. They are ground nesting birds that can be found in numerous types of open countryside, from large farm fields in the south-east of England

to heather moorland in the Scottish highlands. In the period 1972-1996, a decline of 75% has occurred in the UK skylark population on lowland farmland and the population halved during the 1990s. A large scale decline has also been observed in other European countries. In Kent, skylarks are still numerous in some local areas; however many inland areas of the county have suffered a large decline in numbers to the point that for some parts of the county the skylark is considered a scarce bird.

The greatest factor in skylark decline is thought to be the increased production of winter cereal. Winter cereals are sown in autumn as opposed to the traditional spring-sown cereal. This results in a very dense tall crop unsuitable for nesting skylarks in the spring breeding season and as such they are unable to raise as many broods as they could in a spring-sown crop. In addition, increased use of insecticides means there are far fewer insects to feed to the young chicks. Insects are a very important food source for many infant birds, as they provide the nutrition required for rapid healthy development. Grassland habitats have also changed in recent times.

skylark



Modern pasture systems are heavily grazed by livestock, which results in skylark 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 skylark breeding season and consecutive cuts give insufficient opportunity for skylarks to produce second broods.

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

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan is closely monitoring skylark populations and is aiming to maintain skylark numbers at a sustainable level as further research into skylark decline takes place. Sympathetic farming practices are likely to be a major contributing factor to the reversal of skylark decline. Agri-environment schemes that offer undisturbed nest sites and foraging areas will aid successful breeding and a more conservative use of insecticides and pesticides will increase food availability. An increase in the amount of permanent pasture and lower stocking densities is also likely to be a beneficial influence in breeding success.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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

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

Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kent.bap.org.uk

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

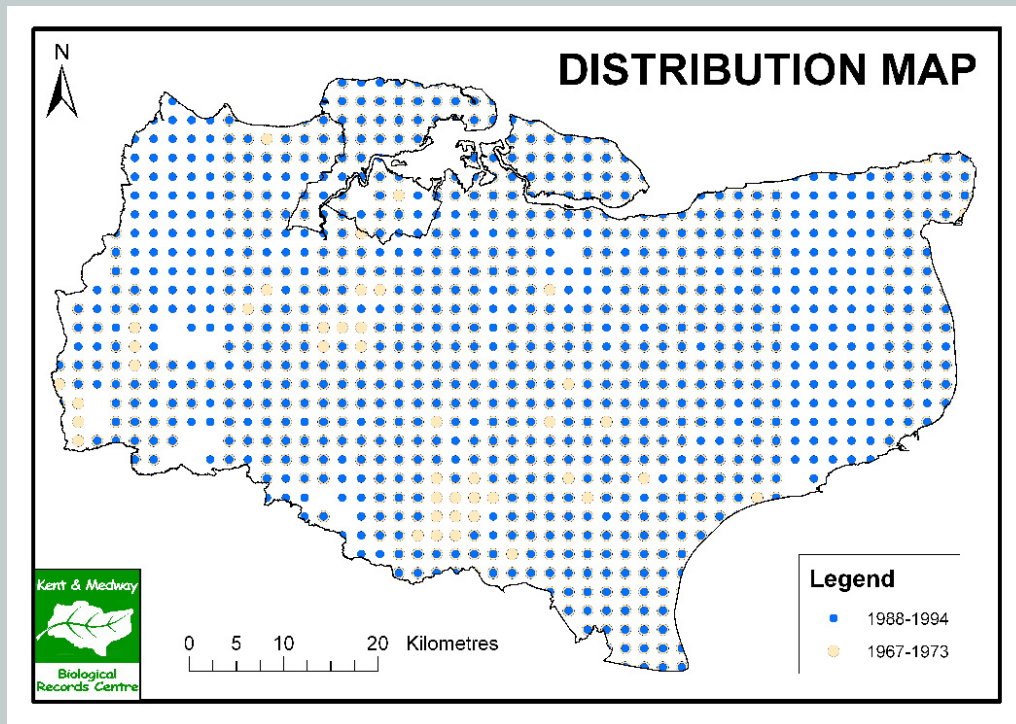
Kent Ornithological Society: www.kentos.org.uk

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

