

British Farmland Birds

Ptáci farem Velké Británie

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British Farmland birds can be defined quite simply as birds that live, feed and breed around the farm and in the surrounding countryside. They include passerines, game birds, raptors and some waders. Sadly their numbers have reduced substantially in the last 50 years and most of this can be related to changes in farming methodology. As British farmers have become more efficient at their work so the bird numbers have decreased. Most of our farmers have been seduced into producing higher and higher yields at the expense of the natural environment. Their income is usually dependant upon government subsidies which up until now have been linked to production. As you can imagine, this has led to conflict between the farming community and the environmental/ornithological lobby. It should be pointed out that whilst this problem applies to the majority of farms in the UK there is a minority who do very good environmental work maintaining a high level of stewardship of the land at the expense of their own profit levels. Another factor has been the rising interest of big business in the farming industry. Many farms have been purchased by large corporations which again have often led to the pursuit of profit with degradation in the quality of stewardship of the environment.

The increased use of chemicals and loss of habitat accounts for the fluctuations in bird numbers in the 1960's and 70's but the major decrease since the late 70s relates to the change from spring sown cereals to autumn sowings (these are known as spring cereals and winter cereals. Winter cereals have a higher yield). This change has had a devastating effect on our farmland birds as it has made their survival during the winter extremely difficult. In the past the fields were not ploughed until March and many birds have relied on the stubble left in the field after harvest. This has not only given them some ground cover but also enabled the birds to glean the seeds that have been spilt during harvest. In addition it allows arable weeds to grow in the fields from late summer which also provides a valuable food supply – arable weeds seem to grow very well after a crop of barley which has an early harvest. Both the spilt corn and the weeds are essential to the winter survival of a healthy bird population.

This major change in farm practice was a savage blow to the farmland birds as it came at a time when they were already suffering from increased chemical use and destruction of habitat. From the middle of the last century a number of dangerous chemicals were made available to farmers to kill pests. These „pests“ were often a good food source for the birds and the deadly chemicals soon started to reduce the numbers of farmland birds. The effect on raptors was particularly severe. Also at this time the British

Government was encouraging farmers to become even more efficient by digging up many miles of hedges to make their fields larger. They were paid subsidies for doing this work and the field size sometimes increased from say 5 hectares to over 50 hectares. This meant that the area of field margin and headland reduced substantially as did the length of hedgerows available to birds for their protection, food and breeding. With the increased use of heavy machinery it became very easy to cut the remaining hedgerows by using flail implements on powerful tractors. Not only did this severely reduce the size of the hedges but was also done at a time which suited farm production and not bird survival. Often the hedgerows would be cut during the breeding season and this resulted in abandoned nests – or again during early winter, which destroyed much of the wild fruit that is a good source of food for many birds during severe weather. So it can be seen that the major change in farming methodology from spring to winter cereals came at a time when the birds had been weakened by increased chemical use and loss of habitat. The effect on the bird population was therefore devastating and accounts for the very rapid reduction in bird population in the 1980s and 90s.

The first statistics come from the BTOs Common Bird Census from 1974 to 1999. Such species as the Tree Sparrow, Corn Bunting and Grey Partridge have been particularly badly hit and are nearly extinct in many parts of the UK. The second row of figures relates to the BTOs Breeding Bird Survey and happily shows that 2 species (Tree Sparrow and Song Thrush) have started to improve. The Tree Sparrow is starting from a very low base and will take a long time to recover.

In addition to the above we have also seen a loss of habitat due to demise of the classic mixed farm which used to be predominant in much of the UK. The mixed farm would grow cereals as well as keeping a dairy herd and some beef cattle. They would also probably have a few sheep and pigs and this diversity would help to attract a whole range of insect and animal life which in turn would benefit the bird population. With all the changes in the farming industry the majority of land in Eastern England is now only used for arable production whereas in the West the farms are concentrating almost entirely on milk and beef production. This further loss of diversity has also had a long term impact on our avifauna. Although the western regions do not have problems with the cereal sowing phenology, the cattle farmers have also been under pressure to increase their efficiency which has meant more fertiliser and chemical application to the land. The result is a monoculture of „improved“ meadows without the wonderful range of native flora that used to be such an enjoyable part of the English countryside. To the environmentalist the word „improved“ used in the farming context, means just the opposite – ruined!

So what can be done to reverse this awful trend? Fortunately the environmental/ornithological lobby in the UK is very strong and in recent years the government has seen the sense of introducing measures to restore an ecological balance to the countryside. Various schemes have been tested and even the ornithological societies – such as the RSPB – have been purchasing farms and restoring the methodology to something which is more sustainable. In this way they have been able to prove that it is possible to make a profit in farming without damaging the environment. These

experiments have led to agri-environmental schemes whereby the farming community is encouraged to pay more attention to the stewardship of the countryside in return for payments from the government. Indeed the Common Agricultural Policy reforms from Brussels are now following these good practices and in future farmers will no longer be paid on production but will receive subsidies for good environmental restoration and stewardship. This includes returning wide margins to the fields and not applying chemicals to destroy the important arable weeds. In addition hedgerows will be protected from the flail mower during the breeding season. There will also be payments for reversing wetland drainage and other similar ecological measures.

The future of British ornithology and in particular farmland birds is now beginning to look a little brighter. Although the devastating trends of the last 50 years have had a huge impact on our bird population which will take a long time to reverse, we believe we may now be seeing the beginning of improving statistics.

My thanks to Dr. Juliet Vickery of the British Trust for Ornithology for letting me use their statistics.

Souhrn

Ptáky farem můžeme snadno definovat jako ptáky, kteří v okolí farem žijí, shánějí potravu a hnízdí. Patří mezi ně pěvci, lovní ptáci, dravci a někteří bahňáci. Bohužel jejich počty za posledních padesát let dramaticky poklesly. Tento pokles byl způsoben hlavně změnami ve způsobu farmaření – honbou za většími zisky na úkor životního prostředí.

Fluktuace v početnosti ptáků byly v 60. a 70. letech způsobeny hlavně užíváním chemických látek v zemědělství a úbytkem vhodných biotopů. Od 70. let jsou však největší ztráty spojovány se změnou osívání polí. Výsev ozimů namísto jařin měl na ptáky okolí farem zdrcující účinek, protože to velmi ztížilo ptákům přežívání zimy.

Tato změna byla těžkou ranou pro ptačí populace již oslabené užíváním nebezpečných chemických látek k hubení škůdců. Dalším faktorem bylo zvětšování polí a likvidace živých plotů, což mělo za následek úbytek hnízdních příležitostí, úkrytů a potravy.

První statistické údaje pocházejí ze sčítání ptačiva organizovaného British Trust for Ornithology v letech 1974 – 1999. Druhy jako například vrabec polní, strnad luční či koroptev polní byly těžce postiženy a v některých částech Velké Británie jsou prakticky vyhubeny. Dva druhy – vrabec polní a drozd zpěvný jsou naštěstí již na vzestupu.

Dalším z faktorů, které měly dlouhodobě negativní vliv na ptáky farem bylo vymizení klasických smíšených farem na úkor farem úzce zaměřených na pěstování obilí nebo chov zvířat.

Co dělat pro to, abychom zvrátili tento negativní trend? Naštěstí je ve Velké Británii silná ornitologická a environmentální lobby a vláda vidí smysl opatření na obnovu ekologické rovnováhy venkova. Také ornitologické spolky, jako např. RSPB, kupují farmy, kde dokazují, že vysokého výtěžku je možno dosáhnout i bez poškozování životního prostředí.

Budoucnost britské ornitologie a zejména ptáků farem a venkova tedy začíná vypadat mnohem světleji.