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Think-tank questions Government method for counting farmland bird numbers, says bird populations have remained stable, not gone down

“Attacks on ‘modern intensive farming practices’ as the main reason for declining bird populations are now well past their sell-by date.”

Pro-innovation think-tank Science for Sustainable Agriculture (SSA) [has written](#) to Defra chief scientific adviser Professor Gideon Henderson, calling for an urgent review of the ‘limited and highly selective’ list of indicator species used by Government to determine and report the status of bird life on British farmland.

The letter also questions the basis on which the Government attributes declining bird populations primarily to ‘farming practice’. SSA expresses concern over the “undue influence” of environmental NGOs in the analysis and presentation of the Government’s biodiversity data, in view of their active campaigns against many aspects of modern, productive agriculture, and their fundraising model, which depends on pessimistic forecasts about the declining state of biodiversity on Britain’s farms.

SSA notes that the Defra indicator list of just 19 species, which has remained unchanged for more than 50 years, no longer reflects the increased species diversity found on farmland, and excludes important species such as the carrion crow and chaffinch, newcomers such as the herring and lesser black-backed gulls, as well as thriving birds of prey like the red kite and buzzard.

As a result, the Defra indicator list misrepresents the status of farmland bird populations, SSA believes.

For example, a recent Defra report, entitled [Wild bird populations in the UK and England, 1970 to 2023](#), concluded that since the early 1990s, farmland bird populations “*have continued to decline at a fast rate, declining by 9% in the 5 years since 2018*”.

However, when SSA compared the 19-bird farmland indicator list used by Defra with the much more comprehensive [Songbird Survival](#) list of 64 species, which includes a number of important species typically found on farmland but not included on the Defra indicator list, it painted a very different picture.

This analysis revealed that far from declining at a rapid rate, **the total number of birds has remained largely unchanged**. In fact, the total UK songbird population has grown marginally since 1997 from 70,339,741 to 71,347,200 today, an increase of just under 1.5%. Bird 'biomass', as an indicator of the food sources available to sustain our wild bird populations, has also remained remarkably stable in recent decades, declining very slightly by 0.4% since 1997.

In a recent [commentary on the SSA website](#), Peter Button, Daniel Pearsall and Matt Ridley discussed a range of factors which have influenced changes in the diversity of farmland bird species over time, from disease and predation to climate change, garden bird feeders, migratory impacts and the interactions between competing species.

They also questioned the basis on which Defra concluded that farming practice was leading to declines in some populations, while not also explaining the increased numbers of other species, suggesting that *“attacks on ‘modern intensive farming practices’ as the main reason for declining bird populations are now well past their sell-by date.”*

“Headlining bad news and keeping good news to the small print should not be the approach in an objective, scientific study that will guide government policy,” said Peter Button, a member of the SSA advisory board.

“The distribution of species is not set in stone, nor preserved in aspic at some nostalgic point in time 50 years ago, however much some people might wish it to be. There is no perfect blueprint for biodiversity. It is constantly evolving. But while some species are faring better than others, there is good evidence to indicate that individual bird numbers and the physical ‘biomass’ of bird life in the farmed countryside have remained broadly stable for the past three decades. That’s good news.”

The letter to Professor Henderson, supported by all members of the SSA advisory board, therefore urges Defra to review the quality of its evidence base for measuring biodiversity status, and to seriously question whether the indicator list used to assess the population status of bird life on Britain’s farms is still relevant and fit-for-purpose. It notes that this has important implications not only for the development of farming policies but also for the United Kingdom’s international biodiversity commitments.

“We believe the discrepancies between our findings and the Defra report raise questions about the evidence base Ministers are relying on for conservation advice when other, more comprehensive data sources paint such a different picture. It also prompts concern over the Government’s reliance on data and analysis from environmental NGOs actively campaigning against modern farming practices, and whose existence thrives on negative assessments of the status of bird populations on Britain’s farms,” the letter concludes.

ENDS

Notes

A copy of the SSA letter addressed to Defra chief scientific adviser Professor Gideon Henderson [is available here](#).