



Professor Gideon Henderson  
Chief Scientific Adviser  
Defra  
2 Marsham Street  
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By email

6 December 2024

Dear Professor Henderson

[Science for Sustainable Agriculture](#) (SSA) is an independent, not-for-profit think-tank, overseen by an [advisory board](#) of prominent academics, politicians, farmers and industrialists. Our mission is to promote a more evidence-based public debate about science and technology in agriculture.

We are contacting you in your role as Defra chief scientific advisor - and specifically in relation to your responsibility for overseeing and ensuring the quality and integrity of scientific advice provided to Ministers - to highlight our concerns over the department's apparent dependence on highly selective and potentially distorted scientific evidence provided to the department by environmental NGOs.

The undue influence of these groups, in view of their active campaigns against many aspects of modern, productive agriculture (including the UK Government's policies on farming innovations such as genome editing) is a generally held concern in relation to the development of farm policies which encourage producers in England to cease food production, or to adopt lower yielding farming practices.

However, we refer specifically in this instance to the recent Defra report, entitled [Wild bird populations in the UK and England, 1970 to 2023](#), and its headline conclusions that farmland bird populations have declined by 61% since 1970. While the report acknowledges that the most severe population declines occurred between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, largely due to rapid changes in farmland management from spring to autumn cropping, it states that *"populations have continued to decline at a fast rate, declining by 9% in the 5 years since 2018."*



These are deeply worrying statistics, but at the same time, for a number of us, reports of recent rapid population declines didn't feel quite right. It didn't chime with our own experiences, as bird enthusiasts in regular contact with farmland. We were equally concerned that the Defra report attributed the negative impacts observed primarily to 'farming practices' without referencing or providing any evidence of farming practice as the cause of declines.

This also led us to question the presentation of some aspects of the report, which appear to downplay positive changes in populations of some species while accentuating the declines. Rather than reflecting the science, we are concerned that this reflects the vested interests of NGOs whose existence depends on gloomy and pessimistic forecasts about the declining state of biodiversity on Britain's farms, and on positing 'modern intensive farming practices' as the primary cause of those observed declines.

We therefore 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.

This 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 only marginally by 0.4% since 1997.

Our discussion of these issues is included in [this commentary](#) on the Science for Sustainable Agriculture platform.

A key objective for SSA is to ensure policy development, as well as decisions and statements in relation to sustainable agriculture, are grounded in scientific rigour and evidence.

When the current Defra indicator list of 19 farmland bird species excludes a number of very common and important farmland species, such as the carrion crow and chaffinch, as well as increasingly prominent species such as the herring and lesser black-backed gulls, and burgeoning birds of prey such as the buzzard and red kite, we seriously question its relevance as an up-to-date indicator of bird life in today's farmed environment.

Of course, the natural ecosystem, and the biodiversity which inhabits it, is constantly evolving. Climate change is another factor which does not seem to have been accounted for in comparing the make-up of today's farmland bird populations with 1970.

There is no perfect blueprint for biodiversity. 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.



This has important implications not only for the development of farming policy but also for the United Kingdom's international biodiversity commitments.

We would therefore urge Defra to review that quality of its evidence base for measuring biodiversity status, and to seriously question whether the limited and highly selective indicator list used to assess the health of bird life on Britain's farms today is relevant and fit-for-purpose.

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 very existence depends on negative assessments of the status of bird populations on Britain's farms.

We would be grateful for your considered response on these issues, and in particular whether the limited selected of species currently used to determine biodiversity status are a good representation of British farmland birds today.

With kind regards

Daniel Pearsall  
Co-ordinator  
Science for Sustainable Agriculture

(For and on behalf of the Science for Sustainable Agriculture Advisory Board)