

Curlew in Northern Ireland



Curlew by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

Curlew nest on damp, rushy grassland with strongholds on the shores of Lough Neagh and Lough Erne, islands in Lower Lough Erne, the South Sperrins, Antrim Hills and the Fairywater Bogs in Co Tyrone. The name comes from the sound of its bubbling call. In Co Antrim, it was also known locally as a whapp, as seen in place names such as Whappstown Road and Whaup Hill.

Drainage, improvement and forest planting have all reduced the areas where curlew can breed. Once they are concentrated into smaller areas they are also more vulnerable to predators.

If you are in CMS and you have breeding curlew (or snipe/redshank) you can enter this land into the upland breeding wader option, or for those entering from 2005, the breeding wader option. The land is managed to provide ideal nesting conditions for breeding curlew and safeguard our existing breeding pairs, by carrying out the following:

- **No machinery operations, and reduced or no stocking during the nesting season (April to June)** to prevent damage to nests and young chicks;
- **Heavier grazing in the autumn** to remove rank growth. Cattle grazing is preferred as it creates a mosaic of tussocks for nesting and short grazed areas for feeding in the following spring;
- **No new drainage (permission must be sought before clearing existing drains).** Curlew use their long curved bill to probe for earthworms and leatherjackets. Damp soil gives better feeding as it is easier to probe and earthworms are closer to the surface;
- **Rush cutting.** Curlew (snipe and redshank) conceal their nests in tussocks of rush or grass. However, tall rush tussocks and too much rush in a field means it is more difficult for a curlew to look out for predators, and they may desert the site. When rush covers over one third of the area, control rush by cutting every year between 15 July and 15 March. Grazing after rush cutting or doing a second cut a month later will also help to reduce the vigour of the rush.

In 1999, the number of breeding curlew in Northern Ireland was estimated at only 2,000 pairs, almost a two-thirds decline from a previous survey carried out in 1988.

Around 6,500 curlew winter with us but this number includes birds from Northern Europe.

To maintain curlew numbers at current levels, a breeding pair needs to produce 3 chicks every other year.

Farm Nutrient Management Calculators

To help you to plan your farm business in response to the proposed Nitrates Directive Action Programme measures DARD has developed two calculators that are available free on the Internet.



The Organic Manure Nitrogen Loading Calculator estimates organic manure nitrogen loading based on the total land area farmed and nitrogen produced from livestock and/or imports/exports of slurry/manure.

The Slurry and Manure Storage Calculator estimates weekly slurry, dirty water and manure production, current storage capacity and additional storage capacity required.

Calculators are available at www.ruralni.gov.uk. (If you are a first time user follow the instructions for registration).

The Farm Nutrient Management calculators are easy to use, secure and confidential and available 24 hours a day.

Reminders

Hedgerow management

Do not cut hedges between 1 March and 31 August to protect nesting birds and other wildlife. Avoid spreading slurry or fertilisers close to hedges to encourage a diversity of plants at the bottom.

Wetlands and Species Rich Wet Grassland

Participants will be aware that grazing is not permitted between 1 January and 31 May. This helps protect ground nesting birds such as curlew, snipe and lapwing. After 1 June graze according to the stocking density marked on your scheme.

Pollution Control

Ensure any remedial works identified as part of your scheme entry are completed by the end of year one. Please ensure you follow the guidelines and advice listed in the Codes of Good Agricultural Practice.

Annual Payments

Please ensure when completing your annual payment claim form that all work not completed (for example, hedge or tree planting) is declared. For advice on any aspect of your scheme agreement contact Countryside Management Staff

This newsletter is produced by Countryside Management Branch for participants in agri-environment schemes. For further information contact local Countryside Management staff or

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Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Countryside Management

Newsletter - Summer 2005

Agri-environment Scheme Update

The Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme (ESAS) and the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) are the two main agri-environment schemes in Northern Ireland. The ESAS operates in the five areas designated as Environmentally Sensitive Areas, while CMS is available throughout the remainder of the country.

Key Facts

ESA Scheme has 4,500 participants and over two thirds of eligible land is under agreement. CMS is expected to have around 8,500 farmers signed up to the scheme by the end of 2005.

Countryside Management Scheme

- From 2001 to 2003 almost 3,000 applicants joined the scheme.
- In 2004 there were a further 3,000 applications to the scheme.
- Agreements signed after June 2005 will be at new, generally higher, rates of payment with modified management requirements. Those already in one or other of the schemes will be given the opportunity later in the year to apply to transfer to the new payment rates and conditions.



Hawthorn makes a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland landscape and biodiversity

Biodiversity, landscape and water quality

Farmland is home to a very wide range of plant and animal wildlife, from the tiniest insects to massive oaks – the biodiversity of the countryside. Farming also influences the appearance of the landscape and has a major impact on the quality of the water in our lakes and rivers. So agri-environment schemes focus on maintaining biodiversity, enhancing landscape and heritage features and protecting water quality on farms.

Target

The target is to have 20,000 participants in agri-environment schemes by the end of 2006. In addition to the CMS and ESA Scheme, it is proposed to open a new Entry Level CMS in the autumn to give a 'taster' for those not participating in agri-environment schemes.

If this target is achieved, two out of every three farmers will be in one of the schemes and will have agreed to focus their farming on enhancing the biodiversity and landscape character of the countryside and protecting water quality.



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Enhancement Plan

Participants in the CMS and ESAS have the opportunity to obtain grant aid towards the capital costs of environmental enhancement works by way of an enhancement plan (E-plan). This includes restoring old stone buildings and features of historic interest, installing traditional metal gates and restoring traditional pillars and gateposts.

Applications for an enhancement plan can be made on an annual basis at any time after you have signed a CMS or ESAS agreement. Approval lasts 12 months and grant can be claimed as soon as the work is completed.

Since the funding for E-plan became available in April 2003, only £1.25 million out of a possible £5.5 million has been spent or committed to spend.

This means that over £4 million is still available for environmental enhancement works.



A farm building recently restored in Fermanagh using enhancement plan funding.

Farming in a Single Farm Payment Era

The countryside as we know it, is the product of hard work by many generations of farmers, whose contribution to biodiversity and landscape character is well recognised. The introduction of the Single Farm Payment has brought about a major change to farming. For most, this means meeting the requirements of Cross Compliance so that farming is carried out with protection of the environment in mind.

Cross Compliance means that to receive the new Single Farm Payment farmers must manage their land to maintain Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition. Participants in the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme or the Countryside Management Scheme receive annual payments for managing and enhancing the environment on their farms over and above the requirements of Cross Compliance.

Take, for example, the management of hedgerows. Cross Compliance requires that hedges cannot be cut between 1 March and 31 August, and they cannot be removed without prior approval from DARD.

However, participants in agri-environment schemes undertake additional management prescriptions which include cutting hedges on a two or three year rotation, allowing them to reach at least two metres in height and leaving saplings to grow into hedgerow trees.

Some may find that only minor alterations to their management practices are necessary. Others may be required to make considerable changes, particularly if they are not already farming in an environmentally responsible manner. But remember that most of the changes are needed simply to meet Cross Compliance requirements for the Single Farm Payment.

Agri-environment schemes set higher standards than Cross Compliance, and pay for the results. Over 10,000 participants are expected in agri-environment schemes by the end of 2005 which equates to one third of Northern Ireland farmland under agreement.

With the introduction of the Single Farm Payment many more environmental opportunities are now available within agri-environment schemes. Are you making the most of your agreement? For further advice or information contact your local Countryside Management Office.

Hedge restoration on a CMS farm

Father and son, Dennis and Paul Hawthorne farm 40 hectares at Redrock on the outskirts of Armagh City. Their main enterprises are suckler cows, beef cattle and a flock of crossbred ewes.

Dennis and Paul applied to join the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) in 2003. The scheme provides an additional source of income and offers the opportunity to improve the wildlife value of the farm hedges damaged by sheep. Over the years the hedges have also become less stockproof.

With careful planning, the Hawthornes are committed to restoring a minimum of 175 metres of hedges each year as part of their CMS agreement. Coppicing and interplanting of the first section of hedgerow was completed in early 2004. The hedge was cut back close to ground level, allowing hedgerow trees to remain, and the gaps planted with a double staggered row of hawthorn quicks.

Dennis and Paul fenced off the coppiced hedge to protect it from grazing livestock. Hand weeding of the coppiced hedge on a regular basis has ensured a good rate of establishment of thorn quicks.

In early March, 50 metres of new hedgerow were planted with a variety of species including hawthorn, blackthorn, holly, beech and oak.

A polythene cover weighted down with fine stones was used as a weed control measure. Dennis has found grass grows through the holes cut for the thorn quicks and so has to hand weed around the quicks twice during the growing season. Establishment rates appear excellent with only a small number of quicks requiring replacing during the winter months.

Thorn quicks in the coppiced hedge have not grown as well as thorn quicks in the newly planted hedge. This may be due to the fact that the coppiced hedge is on a relatively dry bank and quicks could be suffering from water shortage. In periods of prolonged dry weather the Hawthornes may have to consider watering the thorn quicks to prevent this problem.

After one year in the scheme Dennis and Paul have completed almost 300 metres of field boundary restoration, well above their 175 metres minimum requirement.

The undertaking to restore field boundaries to reach annual targets is supported by on-going maintenance of existing and previously restored hedgerows. The Hawthornes are dedicated to managing hedgerows as habitats and stockproof barriers. It is this commitment that will bring about real environmental benefits on their farm.



Dennis and Paul discuss a newly planted hedge on their Co Armagh farm

Have you signed up for another 10 years in the ESA Scheme?

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) would like to congratulate those farmers who have completed, or who will soon complete their first ten years in the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme.

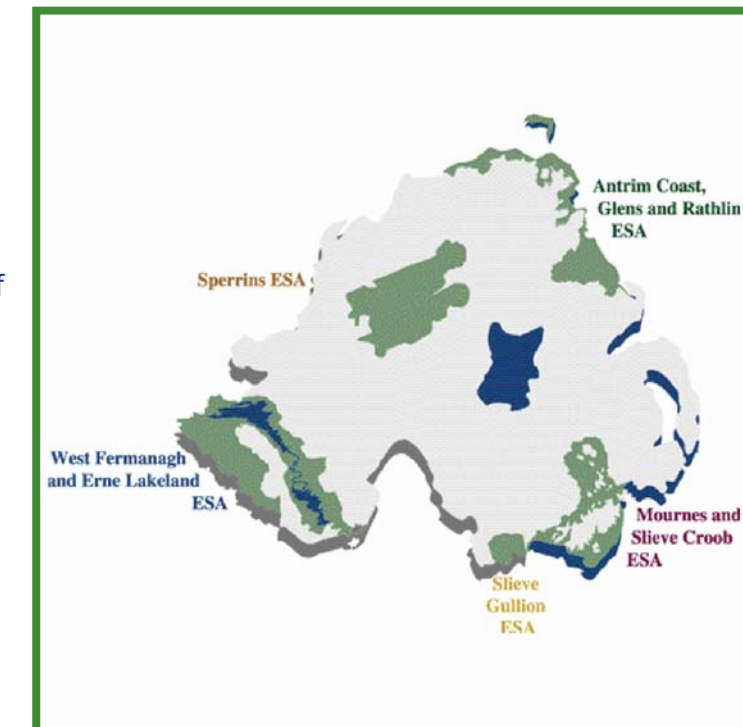
This scheme applies to land only **inside** one of the five Environmentally Sensitive Areas (see map), whereas the Countryside Management Scheme applies to land **outside** an ESA.

If you are nearing the end of your ten-year agreement, you should reapply to join the scheme. Application forms are available from your local DARD office.

Countryside Management Branch recently held a series of meetings throughout Northern Ireland, which highlighted these key issues:

- To continue receiving annual payments under the ESA Scheme, you should reapply at the end of the ten-year agreement.
- There have been changes to the Scheme since it began in 1994.
- The scheme has delivered benefits to the environment in terms of biodiversity, enhancement of the landscape and heritage features.
- There are over 4,500 participants in the scheme, and to maintain this level of commitment, farmers need to reapply.

If accepted into the scheme, participants must sign a new ten-year undertaking, but have the option to withdraw after five years without penalty. Provided the scheme requirements are met, an



annual payment is received on completion of each year in the Scheme. Applications are also welcome from new entrants in the designated Environmentally Sensitive Areas. Land outside the ESA may be entered into the Countryside Management Scheme, when it reopens for applications in the future.

For further advice and an application form, please contact Countryside Management at your local DARD office.

DARD Countryside Management Adviser, Aidan Kerr explains the ESA scheme to Slieve Gullion Farmer Mrs Eileen Murphy at a recent meeting in the Mullaghbawn Community Centre.

