



Cirl Bunting

Key Facts

- most of the UK population is found in Devon
- was down to 120 pairs now increased to 700
- a victim of modern farming practices

The Cirl Bunting *Emberiza Cirius* is a UK and Devon BAP priority species. It is the UK's rarest resident farmland bird - the most recent survey found 700 pairs which were almost totally confined to Devon. Within the county it is rarely found outside a coastal band running from Exeter to Plymouth apart from the edge of Dartmoor along the Teign Valley.

The male has a black mask over a yellow head and an olive green rump (Yellowhammers have a brown rump). He has a short, strong beak and huge great feet! While the male is rather cool and colourful, the female is a little on the brown and plain side. As the female does all the egg incubating in the hedge being well camouflaged saves a lot of unpleasantness by avoiding attracting the attentions of sparrow hawks!

Bunting is a medieval word meaning 'plump', Cirl Buntings definitely have a plumpish appearance especially in winter when their feathers are permanently fluffed up for better insulation. 'Cirl' comes from the Italian word 'cirlar' meaning 'chirping'. The Cirl Bunting has a distinctive chirping call of 'Tsip' which it trills for 2 or more seconds, usually while perching on top of a hedge.

Cirl Buntings eat seeds for most of the year and grasshoppers over the summer, hence their stout, strong beaks the backs of which are specially shaped for crunching seeds and their huge great feet to scratch around and find seeds on the ground.

Cirl's nest in dense hedges and bushes. The first eggs are laid at the end of April and up to three broods are produced. The adults feed their young on a mixture of invertebrates, cereal grain, weed seeds and increasingly grasshoppers and bush-crickets after July.

Cirl Buntings used to be very common in the South of England and farmers called it 'the farmyard bunting'. However over the last 30 years numbers drastically reduced and in the late 80's it was estimated that only 120 pairs were left.

What went wrong?

Well, Cirl Buntings are quite fussy and need 3 major things in their lives. Firstly they need thick hedgerows in which to nest. Secondly they need a good area of stubble left on fields over the winter to provide a source of seeds. Thirdly they need a good supply of grasshoppers to feed their young on over Spring and Summer, grasshoppers only do well in permanent grassland that is lightly grazed. Since the Second World War the intensification of farming has meant that miles and miles of hedges have been destroyed; permanent pastures have been ploughed up and stubble fields are no longer left over the winter, instead the new crop is sown soon after harvest in the autumn for increased efficiency.

Back from the brink.....

In the early 90's a new farm conservation scheme called Countryside Stewardship was launched which gave farmers cash payments in return for managing their farms to help wildlife, with the help of the RSPB. The Trust's site at Maidencombe farm was one of the first to sign up to the 10 year agreement. At least 2 fields of winter stubble are left, grasshopper friendly grazing occurs on the pasture and the hedges have been restored and are properly maintained. Maidencombe now supports up to 7 breeding pairs of Cirl Buntings and winter flocks of up to 30.

Many other farms in Devon signed up and as a result there are now around 700 breeding pairs with a 42% increase on Trust land between 1998 and 2003. That is brilliant news, however 700 pairs is still a very small and vulnerable population and their range has not expanded at all - there is still a long way to go.