

Skylark (Eurasian Skylark)

Alauda arvensis

Common resident

Skylark breeds across Europe, but those in central, eastern and northern Europe move south for the winter. Here, it was abundant and widespread throughout the 1800s. In 1838 Eyton described the 'lark as common' and Beckwith noted in 1890 that it was 'common everywhere'. He remarked that in October and November they congregated in large flocks augmented later by migrants, and added that the flocks fed 'on blades of wheat where they caused considerable damage but also fed on the troublesome weed-knotgrass'. Forrest (1899) stated that it was 'very plentiful' and 'is killed for the table, and is very good eating' although he argued it was 'a thousand pities that it should be destroyed for this purpose'. By 1906 he wrote that it was now rarely killed for the table and was 'very numerous especially in the open country to the north'.

Its status appeared to remain unchanged throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but following agricultural intensification after the Second World War, the population began to decline. The *Handlist* (1964) asserted that the Skylark was still 'resident, common ... also a winter visitor and passage migrant. Winter flocks of up to 100 birds frequent the low ground in the north and east'. However, between 1970–2013 there was a decline of 60% in the UK population, with a particularly rapid decline between the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s, after which the rate of decline slowed.

This decline was evident here by the time the Atlas (1992) was published, forced largely by agricultural intensification, particularly a shift to autumn-sown cereal and consequent loss of winter stubbles, and increased application of pesticides and herbicides. The breeding population was estimated at around 14,000 pairs and the *Handlist's* earlier reference to the Skylark as common 'no longer applies'. BBS data indicates that the breeding population declined by a further 4.5% in the period 1997–2014.

Annual breeding populations fluctuate and can be influenced by seasonal mortality rates, which may be highest in severe winters such as November–December 2010. Population declines between 2007–11 may also have been partially driven by the effect of severe rainfall during the breeding season in the summers of 2007 and 2008.

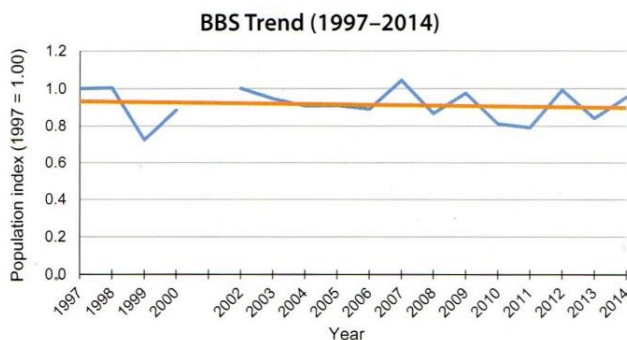
During 2008–13 Atlas fieldwork, evidence of breeding was found in 723 (83%) tetrads, compared to 764 (88%) in 1985–90, a decrease of 5%. Relative abundance is highest in the north-east but substantial



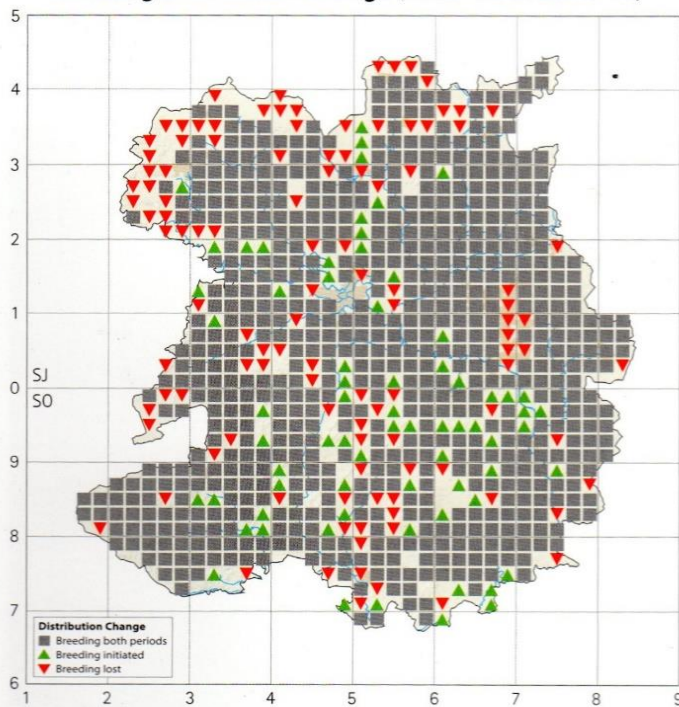
John Hawkins, North Shropshire, 26 January 2009

losses have been incurred in a broad band across the northern border and north-west, and losses far outweigh gains. This is likely to be due to a decrease in cereal crops, with pasture for heavy sheep grazing, or silage, now dominating. There were some gains in the south, but even there, losses have exceeded them. The detrimental impact of urbanisation is clearly exemplified in Telford, where they have been lost from eight tetrads, and the development of brownfield sites and open farmland for business parks and housing has undoubtedly destroyed once-suitable habitat.

Breeding activity begins with sporadic bursts of song, mainly from aerial song flights, but also from the ground or a post, as early as January. Increasingly from March they are recorded as singles, or in twos and threes, as they begin to settle on their breeding grounds and winter migrants depart. The main breeding habitat is lowland farmland and within this landscape Skylarks predominantly occupy fields of autumn and spring-sown cereal, oilseed rape, beans and similar crops, but also rough grazing. Elsewhere, unmanaged rough grassland, and grassland on moorland, commons and heathland, is occupied, often on high ground. A study on farmland at Dudmaston suggested that breeding densities were higher on ungrazed short rank permanent grass than among cereal crops (Tucker 2011). The Long Mynd Breeding Bird Project estimated a fluctuating breeding population between 1994 and 1998 of 140–230 pairs on the moorland plateau (Smith 2004). In 1997 an average density of 6.6 to 6.8 pairs per sq.km was found, substantially higher than the national average of 2.69 per sq.km in upland landscapes. An estimated 54 breeding



Breeding Distribution Change (1985–90 to 2008–13)



Occupied Tetrads

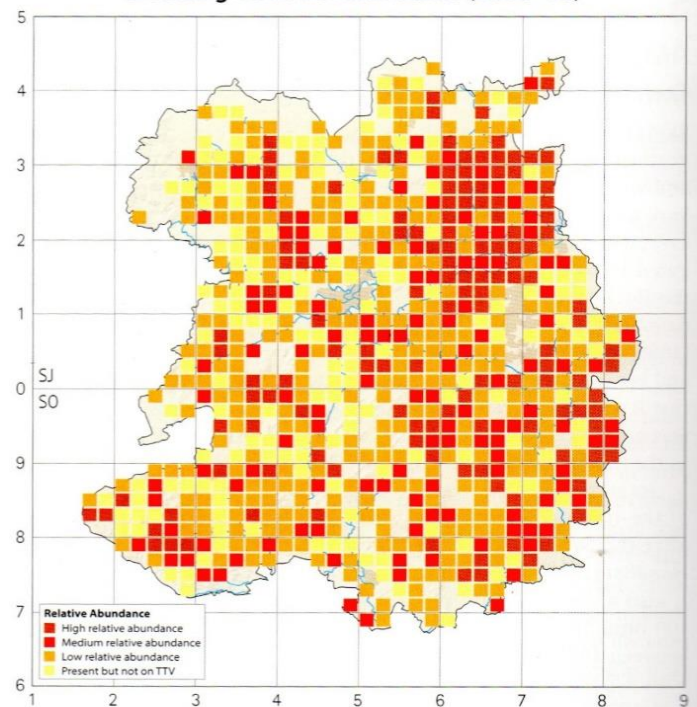
Atlas period (breeding)	1985–90		2008–13		Change	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Confirmed	224	26	153	18	-71	-32
Probable	377	43	406	47	29	8
Possible	163	19	164	19	1	1
TOTAL	764	88	723	83	-41	-5
Tetrads with Winter Records (2007–13): 533 (61%)						

pairs on the Stiperstones in 2002 (11 pairs per sq.km) was similarly high by national standards (Smith 2004).

Based on TTV counts the breeding population is estimated at 13,700–14,000 pairs. Given the population estimate of around 14,000 pairs in the Atlas (1992), loss from 5% of tetrads since then in the recent Atlas, and the BBS evidence also pointing to an underlying decline with annual fluctuations, the population is likely to be around the lower end of the TTV estimate, or perhaps a bit lower, in most years. It is certainly less than it was 20–25 years ago.

In winter, Skylarks exhibit a southerly migration from Scotland and an influx from northern and western Europe from mid-September to early November, and increasingly congregate in flocks from September. An adult ringed on 23 October 1981 at Westduinen, the Netherlands, was recovered dead less than three months later at Meole Brace on 10 January 1982, a distance of 479km, after being killed by a cat. This is one of only three ringing recoveries, the other two being recovered at the place where they were ringed, one and three years later.

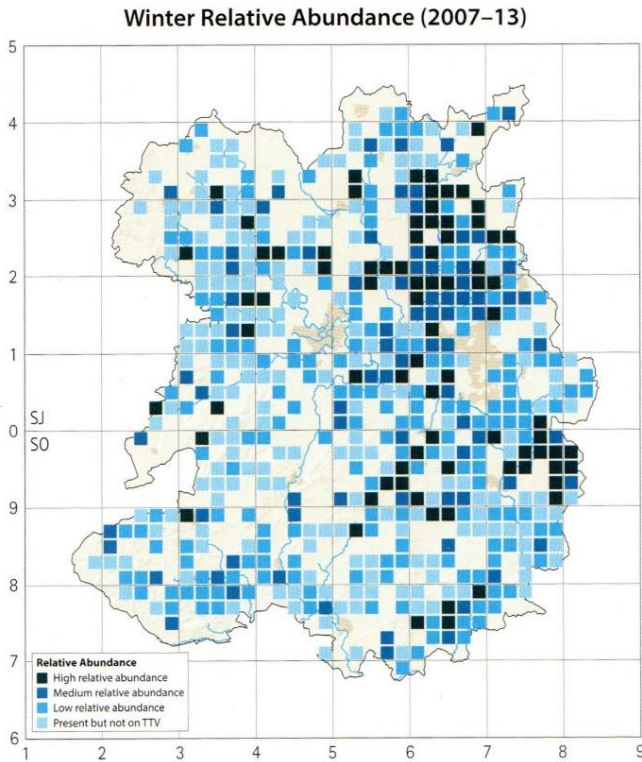
Breeding Relative Abundance (2008–13)



Passage movement is noticeable from October, continuing throughout November into December. In a diurnal migration watch over the Brown Clee in autumn 1994, numbers were highest in the first half of October and 63.3% were flying in a southerly direction (Blunt 1995). 57% of SOS records in October 2009 specifically related to Skylarks passing over sites and, where recorded, in a westerly direction. There were 'few seen' after the cold weather of December 1981, probably indicative of cold weather movements and also increased mortality.

Skylarks were widely distributed during the winters of the 2007–13 Atlas, but found in far fewer tetrads (60%) than in the breeding season. The highest abundance levels were again in the north-east and east, but upland areas were largely vacated, with notable absence from the high ground of the Long Mynd, Clee hills and Oswestry uplands. The northern fringes and large urban areas, where they were absent in the breeding season, were again vacant.

Over 200 fed in stubble at Redhill, St Georges on 20 February 1961, and where it still exists, cereal stubble is an important feeding habitat during the winter, but autumn-sown crops, winter fodder, and weedy fields also provide food-grain, seeds and fresh green plant material. Counts of wintering flocks mainly below 50 in 1999 illustrated the continued problems. Flocks in excess of 100 are now unusual, and 400 at Wall Farm in November 2002, 300 at Upton Magna, and 280 feeding in stubble and an autumn-sown field at Arlescott on 14 Nov 2010 and then 560 in the same field on 28 Nov 2010, were exceptional. Most flocks recorded in recent years are now relatively small with an average flock size of 24 in 2010. TTV counts



suggest Shropshire supports an estimated 2.0 % of the British winter population, but this is unlikely.

The population decline is largely attributable to agricultural intensification, particularly an increase in autumn-sown cereals reducing the availability of winter food in stubbles and then nest sites, use of pesticides, and an increase in unfavourable habitats such as oilseed rape and intensively managed or grazed grass. Set-aside provided a welcome refuge, but this has been lost. The optimum sward height for breeding is 60cm (Donald 2004), and autumn sowing results in crops that are too tall and dense to allow late-season nesting attempts, so the number of broods per year has fallen. Crop development also forces Skylark to nest closer to tramlines, with a consequent increase in nest predation.

Agri-environment schemes can be effective. The mean monthly maxima wintering at Harper Adams University College Farm, Edgmond, increased from 0.6 in 2004–05 to 34.1 in 2011–12 following the implementation of an HLS scheme which included stubble retention, beetle banks, grassy and unsprayed headlands, and the planting of wild bird-seed mixes (Bishton 2012).

Pairs nesting in fields containing Skylark plots – small unsown patches within crop fields – raised more chicks per breeding attempt than those in conventional fields (RSPB 2012). Available as an ELS agri-environment option, in 2014 there were 21 local agreements delivering 393 Skylark plots (Denise Howe, NE *pers. comm.*). The rate of take-up must be improved and Skylark plots adopted on a landscape scale if the decline is to be reversed.

Glenn Bishton