Questionnaire 'Farmland and Birds' workshop: Belgium

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“FARMING AND BIRDS WORKSHOP”
QUESTIONNAIRE

BELGIUM

1. Have there been scientific studies to determine the status and trends of farmland birds and their habitats in your country and what have been their main conclusions?
   - Long term or detailed ecological studies on status and ecology of specific farmland birds are rare. Only status, ecology and habitat preference of the Little Owl (Athene noctua)(VL), Red-backed Shrike (Lanius collurio), Great Grey Shrike (Lanius excubitor) and Whinchat (Saxicola rubetra) (WAL) are well known.
   - Short inventories of the status of Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica) and long-term but locally of the Ortolan Bunting (Emberiza hortulana) (VL) and House Martin (Delichon urbica) exist.
   - Since 1994 a breeding bird monitoring project in Flanders including several farmland birds shows that compared to the situation in the 1970ties, species as Garganey (Anas querquedula), Whinchat (Saxicola rubetra), Red Backed Shrike (Lanius collurio), Ortolan Bunting (Emberiza hortulana), Great Grey Shrike (Lanius excubitor), Corn Bunting (Miliaria calandra) have strongly declined but remain stable at low population level (Ortolan Bunting has now disappeared).
   - Since 1990 a long-term monitoring project of all breeding birds (Point count routes) is running in Walonia. Results show a very unfavorable situation for many farmland birds, with a faster decline than in adjacent regions of The Netherlands and North of France. Striking examples are Corn Bunting (Miliaria calandra) and Meadow Pipit (Anthus pratensis).
   - Breeding bird atlas projects (Flanders:2000-2002, Walonia: 2001-2005) will provide detailed information on status (numbers, densities) of all farmland birds and allow to compare with former data. A preliminary analysis (VL) of the status of typical farmland birds such as Yellowhammer (Emberiza citrinella), Meadow Pipit (Anthus pratensis) and Skylark (Alauda arvensis) reveals a clear reduction of the breeding area as well as much lower densities within this area, compared to the situation in the first half of the 70ties. First results of the Walloon project reveal similar tendencies.
   - Local long-term inventories of mostly meadow birds in different parts of the region show a general pattern for the breeding waders as Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus) and Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) of rather stable breeding population numbers, although very little is known on nest succees and survival of young birds. Locally, numbers may increase or decrease (in particular the case in Walonia).

2. What factors relating to changes in farming practices do you consider to be most damaging to birds in your country?
   Intensification: Loss (totally or by drying up) of grasslands/meadows, enlargement of plots with loss of small landscape elements (hays, buffer zones and treelines),
intensive use of pesticides, urbanisation of farmland (WAL), decrease of stubblefields during winter (less food).

3. **Has there been/ Is there research on the habitat management requirements of farmland bird species, especially those under greatest conservation threat?**

Apart from some local studies, no intensive research has been done.

4. **What are the key practical measures being taken in your country to address the threat to farmland birds, especially in the context of agri-environment schemes?**

Management agreements of the “Vlaamse Landmaatschappij” (Flemish Land Agency, a Flemish public institution) with farmers, in particular in grasslands and meadows (postponing of mowing date) and placing of nest-protection devices. These agreements include a financial compensation. They comprise a total of 450 ha during the last three years, with 260 agreement contracts which is still very low. Species involved are Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*), Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), and Curlew (*Numenius arquata*). Other management actions as maintaining buffer zones between farmland parcels, conserving small landscape elements (tree rows, hedges), planting new hedges etc. are promoted and financed. In Walonia similar agreements exist between the Ministry of Agriculture and farmers focusing on all farmland birds and on management practices concerning decrease of fertilizer use, postponing of mowing date and maintenance of small landscape elements. Several Life projects for the protection farmland birds (Corncrake, meadowbirds in the Polders) have been running or are starting.

5. **Have best practice guidelines on managing farmland for birds been developed that are available to farmers and other stakeholders?**

In the framework of a special ‘meadow-bird’ project of the NGO Natuurpunt (BirdLife partner) a leaflet with information on management of meadow birds, in particular on the use of nest-protection devices has been diffused. Several leaflets on landscape restoration in general are published by the “Flemish Land Agency”.

6. **Are you aware of any particularly noteworthy examples of models of good practice in the development and implementation of targeted management schemes for bird conservation that may be of value to other countries?**

No.

7. **Are specific measures being taken to benefit the conservation of farmland habitats for huntable bird species, with benefits for other wildlife?**

Financial support is provided to certified local “Game Management Units” for projects resulting in a surplus value for hunting as well as nature conservation. Two examples are financial support for planting of autochtonous trees, shrubs and hays and the development of non sprayed field edges rich in herbal flora in the framework of management of Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*). Only in a few cases such measures really contribute to the benefits of other farmland species and no objective evaluation system exists (VL). In Walonia no specific measures are taken.

8. **Do monitoring schemes exist for farmland birds and if so, do these provide a basis to evaluate the effectiveness of agri-environment measures for birds?**
No specific schemes exist (see question 1). Effectiveness of the use of nest-protecting devices is now evaluated on a local scale. This is only recently done and no trends can be derived yet.

9. What are the **main sources of information on management and monitoring schemes for farmland birds in your country** (including web sites etc.)
   - Walonia Breeding Bird Monitoring Scheme, Breeding Bird Atlas: Aves & Région wallonne [www.aves.be](http://www.aves.be) and [www.mrw.wallonie.be/dgrne/sibw](http://www.mrw.wallonie.be/dgrne/sibw)

10. What are the **3 top priorities that you consider for the further development of management and monitoring schemes for farmland birds in Europe**?
   - Providing finances for the development of proper general monitoring schemes in each country and of analysing methods on an European scale.
   - Development of systems for proper evaluation of agriculture impact on reproductif success and year-round survival
   - Development and financial support for large-scale farmland management systems in particular in the accession countries and stimulating (oblige?) actual member states to fulfill at least a minimum management programme (in relation to a ‘greener’ CAP).

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