Land managers play a “crucial role” in UK songbird survival, say organisers of the 2021 GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count, 5 – 14 February

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“As custodians of the largest songbird habitat in the country, farmers, land managers and gamekeepers play a crucial role in the survival of the UK’s farmland birds,” says Dr Roger Draycott of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT). “The GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count aims to encourage even more of them to include conservation measures in the daily running of their farm, estate or shoot.”

The count’s organisers are asking land managers to spend 30 minutes, between 5 and 14 February, recording the farmland birds they see in one area of their land. “Many land managers carry out vital conservation work, largely unseen by the public,” continues Roger. “By taking part in the count year on year, they can see how the conservation work they are doing is having an impact and our scientists can build a picture of the health of the UK’s farmland bird species. The GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count is a very positive way to showcase what can be achieved.”

Tim Walters, a farmer from Hampshire who regularly takes part, says: “I really enjoy doing the Big Farmland Bird Count each year. As we continue to be involved in stewardship and environmental work on the farms, it is really interesting to spend half an hour each year counting wild birds. It is a good break from the rigours of day-to-day commercial farming and shows how beneficial the work is that so many farming colleagues do to manage the countryside.”

Last year’s count saw more than 1500 land managers take part. The GWCT hopes to beat that number this year. The Trust’s advisory service provides guidance to land managers, based on decades of research, on ways to boost their wild bird populations.

“Modern farming methods mean that there is often not enough natural food left in the countryside in late winter and early spring for wildlife,” continues Roger Draycott. “One of the best ways to support wild and game birds is to provide extra winter seed food. Supplementary feeding is particularly beneficial for birds of conservation concern like grey partridge, yellowhammer and corn bunting.”

The use of ‘conservation headlands’ – wide field margins where little or no pesticides are used – is also highly beneficial to farmland birds. Allowing broad-leaved weeds to flourish boosts insect populations which are a food source for birds. Planting and preserving hedgerows also provides crucial food, as well as nesting habitat and a safe haven from predators.

“We also encourage land managers to maintain small wet areas around the farm, such as ditches, scrapes and even old horse ponds,” says Roger. “These can help to attract wading birds and provide nesting and foraging sites for a wide variety of birds ranging from mallard to threatened species like snipe and lapwing.”

Lapwing, once common on farmland, have declined by 45% since 1970 and they are now a “red list” species. One of the main factors has been the widespread switch from spring-sown to autumn-sown crops, which has dramatically reduced habitat suitable for nesting. By leaving an area of uncropped, cultivated land farmers can provide suitable nesting and foraging areas for lapwing, and other birds which prefer to forage on open ground, such as skylark, stone curlew and turtle dove.

“Farmers and gamekeepers look after 71% of the UK’s countryside, so their commitment to conserving it is vital,” says Roger. “It is brilliant to see so many of them giving up their spare time to record the bird species they see for the GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count.”

Regular count participant Paul Clayworth, from Berwickshire, says “I find the count to be most rewarding as, for the sake of half an hour, you get a real feeling for the good that you’re doing for birdlife on your patch.”

The GWCT Big Farmland Bird Count is sponsored by the NFU. **NFU President Minette Batters** said:

“Alongside producing climate-friendly food, farmers are working hard to maintain and improve the iconic British countryside by enhancing habitats, supporting pollinators and soils, and protecting wildlife. The

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Big Farmland Bird Count is always a fantastic way for farmers to record the birdlife found on their farms. I am pleased that the NFU is able to sponsor this event and I would encourage all farmers to take part."

As most participants count on their own land, alone or with family members, the count can be safely carried out within Covid restrictions. **Find out how to take part at www.bfbc.org.uk**

Notes to editors

View videos and updates on the BFBC launch day, 5 February, on Twitter at **#bfbc**

The National Farmers Union is the main sponsor of the Big Farmland Bird Count.

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The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies. The Trust is also responsible for several Government Biodiversity Action Plan species and is lead partner for grey partridge and joint lead partner for brown hare and black grouse.

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