



Cirl bunting *Emberiza cirlus*

Status

Red listed: BD, BR
SPEC 4 (S)
Schedule 1 of WCA 1981

National monitoring

National breeding surveys in 1982 (BTO) and 1989 (RSPB and Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society).

Complete annual censuses 1990–93 and sample censuses 1994–97 (RSPB/EN).

Full national census 1998 (RSPB/EN); next will be 2003.

Rare Breeding Birds Panel.

Population and distribution

One of the UK's rarest resident passerines, currently distributed along the south Devon coast between Plymouth and Exeter (88–91 *Atlas*). The population in central and south-east Europe appears to have remained stable whereas there has been a long-term range contraction in north-west Europe (*Birds in Europe*). The UK range and population declined considerably up to 1989, when there were an estimated 120 pairs (Evans 1992). Habitat change and changing farming practices were the main causes of decline. The population has recently increased to about 350 breeding pairs, which may be attributable to the introduction of set-aside (A D Evans pers comm). This species is thought to be mostly sedentary in the UK, with the wintering range very similar to that in the breeding season (Cole 1993).

Ecology

Breeding habitat preferences are for coastal scrub adjacent to arable land, or lowland agricultural land with hedgerows. A diversity of land-use including arable, pasture, horticulture and hedgerows appears to be important within a territory. A clutch of 3–4 eggs is laid from the end of April to August. Second broods are common and third broods are likely (*Red Data Birds*). The preferred winter habitat is sheltered stubble, such as barley stubble, particularly that with hedge or tree cover. Sites with insubstantial hedges and trees are less likely to hold wintering cirl buntings. Other suitable sites are grass slopes and meadows which have not been treated with fertilisers or sprays. Stock feeding areas often attract cirl buntings, as may garden bird-feeders.

Breeding season survey – population

Information required

- estimated number of possible, probable and confirmed breeding pairs
- map of the locations.

Number and timing of visits

A minimum of two and a maximum of four visits. One visit should be in late April or early May, one in late May or early June, and the remainder in June–August.

Time of day

Between dawn and 1100 BST, or from mid- to late afternoon.

Weather constraints

Avoid poor weather.

Sites/areas to visit

Any suitable habitat (see *Ecology*, above).

Equipment

- 1:25,000 OS map
- Schedule 1 licence.

Safety reminders

Tell a reliable person where you are and when you are due back.

Disturbance

Do not disturb breeding birds and nest-sites; under no circumstances approach a nest. It is not necessary to find a nest to prove breeding. The locations of all sites should be treated in strictest confidence.

Methods

Map the survey boundary. Decide on a route which gets to within 150 m of every point. Walk systematically along the route at a slow pace. Wherever access allows, try to vary the route between visits to increase the overall amount of ground covered.

Cirl buntings are most easily located in late April/early May when males are singing. From early May to late May/early June birds are elusive. Subsequently, failed pairs and birds feeding their first broods become more obvious.

The song of the male is audible from up to 500 m on a good day and can resemble that of greenfinch, wren, yellowhammer or lesser whitethroat, with individual males varying their song within a song bout.

On each visit, map the position of every cirl bunting, indicating its behaviour with a code (see below). Clarify which observations refer to which visit, eg with a small '1' for the first visit, '2' for the second, etc, preferably in red. After your final visit, circle those sightings from a single territory and give the dates for each visit.

Behavioural codes and their interpretation are as follows:

<i>Possible breeding</i>	✓	Bird recorded in breeding season in suitable habitat
	S	Male singing
<i>Probable breeding</i>	P	Pair in suitable nesting habitat
	T	Territorial behaviour
	D	Display
	N	Visiting probable nest-site
	A	Agitated behaviour
	BB	Carrying nest material

Confirmed breeding FL Recently fledged young
FY Carrying food for young

If you see any birds with colour rings, please note the colour combinations, and the legs the rings were on, and report the sightings to the RSPB.

Report the number of possible, probable and confirmed breeding pairs within the survey area.

Winter survey

Information required

- maximum number of individuals found on four visits
- map showing the boundary of the survey area and all bird registrations.



Number and timing of visits

Four visits, one in each month from December to March.

Time of day

Start early in the morning.

Weather constraints

Avoid poor weather, in particular high winds and heavy rain.

Sites/areas to visit

Any suitable winter habitat. Winter sites are often close to the breeding areas.

Equipment

- 1:25,000 OS map.

Safety reminders

As for the population survey (above).

Disturbance

Obtain permission to enter agricultural fields, even if permission was obtained in the summer.

Methods

Locating wintering flocks is difficult and initially time-consuming. Once a flock has been located, however, it should be relatively easy to find again. Mark the area to be surveyed on a map and decide beforehand on a route to walk. Ensure the route takes you through each field and to within 30 m of each field boundary. Randomise the starting point and

direction of each visit. Take careful notes on where any flushed birds land, and check birds for colour rings. This will help to ensure that the same flocks are not counted more than once.

There are likely to be many species of bird feeding in the same field, although cirl buntings will stick together and will not feed out in the centre of the field. In stubble fields it may be necessary to flush birds before they are seen. The distinctive flight-call will be heard and the flock can then be counted.

The maximum number of birds seen in an area on any one visit should be reported along with a map of their location. Note the field type in which any flocks are seen feeding.

Reference

- Cole, A (1993) *In Search of the Cirl Bunting*. Alan Sutton, Stroud.
Evans, A D (1992) The number and distribution of cirl buntings *Emberiza cirlus* breeding in Britain in 1989. *Bird Study* 39: 17–22.