

# Rural Action Group

## 5 March 2008

### Meeting notes

**Attendance** - Vic Fairbrother (Teessmouth Bird Club), Ruth Jackson (Natural England), Jessica Harrison (Wildflower Ark), David Spencer, (Redcar and Cleveland BC), Ian Bond (Hartlepool BC), Terry Douthwaite (Stockton Borough Council), Sue Antrobus (BAP Co-ordinator).

**Apologies:** Jennie Stafford (FWAG).

#### **Arable field margins Habitat Action plan (HAP)**

This is an existing HAP, but out of date and needs updating to new streamlined format. David Spencer to be new plan lead

#### **General discussion**

##### **Why is it a Tees Valley priority habitat -?**

- Large extent of habitat
- Potential for large impact on wildlife
- Also helps hedgerows
- Vital habitat for a range of species, including all our BAP farmland birds, invertebrate communities, small mammals, arable weeds
- Noted that the management of the margin (tussocky grassland, arable without herbicides) favour different wildlife communities
- Also connectivity with other habitats important e.g. ponds

Many different types of field margin management described (headlands, field margins, strips, beetle banks etc).

##### **Who are the drivers?**

Totally dependant on landowners and farmers taking up agri-environment schemes.

**Key partners**-Natural England-through the grant system

FWAG-throughout advisory and information with landowners

Other organisations in partnership do not have influence, unrealistic to expect members of Rural Action Group to have the level of knowledge and resources to work with landowners.

Are we missing any partners in this? Some other LBAPs have NFU, CLA and Game conservancy as key partners for this HAP.

##### **Current issues**

In Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) there is a choice of options and most farmers' choice easier options such as management plan and hedgerows. The management plan option is now no longer available. Current high grain prices make arable margins much less attractive to farmers.

##### **Ideas for possible actions**

- We need to find out what FWAG is delivering and incorporate their actions into the HAP. **Action: Dave to discuss with Jennie from FWAG**
- We need to know what the uptake of the arable field margins are in Tees Valley so we have some sort of information starting point – **Action: Ruth to do data inquiry on the NE database**  
Possible joint annual event in Tees Valley for farmers joint with FWAG?
- Ensure surveyors on our farmland surveys have leaflets e.g. RSPB leaflets, if requested
- Dave suggested a simple Tees Valley based leaflet for landowners on field Margins and biodiversity that is very simple-would need to liaise with FWAG

- We need to know more about our weed communities, probably under recorded.

**Action Sue to support Dave in working up draft action plan with info from natural England and FWAG for discussion at the next meeting.**

### **Heathlands HAP**

Progress reports on Bars have been updated for the old HAP.

A draft HAP for 2008-2012 was circulated. Dave was congratulated on this successful work on the management of what is a national priority habitat. Suggested in the bars habitat summary it was mentioned that the work was funded through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

**Action-Sue to write on behalf of partnership to Redcar and Cleveland Council, Head of Environment to note the successful work and its contribution to the Tees Valley BAP process.**

### **Farmland surveys**

Following discussion at last meeting Vic and Sue went to meet Ruth and Steve Pullen from Natural England.

- NE would find basic bird surveys on farms very useful especially if they had land use/crop planted information.
- One of the reasons why it was felt surveys became less popular was that they became too complicated over the years. Proposed 2004 version with 2 visits a year.
- Sue to contact farmers with individual letter to see if they are happy for 2008 survey (giving them a little feedback on what was on their farm)
- We went through list of people who had surveyed in previous survey, a lot of these have moved on, Sue to contact remaining to hopefully recruit.
- Work to recruit new volunteers at for example 30 March event. Try to place new volunteers with existing surveyors to pass on field skills.
- Jessica has a leaflet on how to recognise crop types that may be useful.
- Agreed it was vital that surveyors received detailed maps, which may have been one of the reasons why we only had two surveys in 2007

### **Harvest Mouse Species Action Plan (SAP)**

Ian gave an interesting update of work. The actions of the current action plan have been carried out. The reintroductions were probably not that successful despite good habitat conditions, this could be a result of a combination of factors from damp weather after release and predation.

Sue mentioned that Russ Bates of Kirklevington Prison is working on a reintroduction programme in partnership with Chester Zoo.

Action: Ian to put progress reports of current action plan and bars and produce a new plan for 2008-11 (which will be a short one).

**Action Sue-pass contact of Russ Bates on to Ian**

### **Local authorities indicator on management of SNCIs**

Ian raised discussion on the new indicator for local authorities No.197, this covers the active management of SNCIs in the last five years. Hartlepool have not adopted as core indicators but still need to measure. This is very difficult in Hartlepool as most of their SNCIs are not owned by the local authority but by farmers. This makes it hard to collect information on the indicator or to have any influence on it. This varies greatly between local authorities, for Middlesbrough most of the sites are urban/urban fringe and owned by the council. Ian is hoping that Natural England may be able to supply data on sites if farmers have received monies to carry out wildlife habitat work through agri-environment schemes.

**Action: Ruth to liaise with Ian over available data**

### **Next meeting**

At the next meeting we plan to tackle the unimproved grassland HAP with Helen as plan lead. And have a look at draft arable field margins HAP and harvest mouse SAP

***The next meeting will be on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2008 at 10 am at Stewart Park***