

# UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)

## Current status

The bullfinch is a fairly common and widespread resident species found in woodland, in orchards and on farmland, where it is closely associated with dense shrubs, scrub and untrimmed hedges. It occurs throughout most of the UK, although it is scarce in the far north and west, and almost absent from the Western and Northern Isles. There are some gaps in distribution elsewhere which are typically in areas with a dearth of woodland, such as the Fens and parts of north-west Scotland. Whilst there has been only a small decrease in range between the two atlas periods (1968-72 and 1988-91), numbers in Britain have decreased from an estimated population of 300-350,000 pairs in 1984 to 190,000 by 1988-91. The Common Bird Census indicates that there has been a 75% decline on farmland and a 47% decline in woodland between 1968 and 1991. The species is common and widespread across much of mainland Europe and may be expanding in the north and west of the range.

The bullfinch is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under licence, it may be killed (usually by shooting) or taken in cage traps for the purpose of preventing serious damage to the buds of fruit trees. A general licence was issued for commercial fruit growers in Kent for the 1996/97 winter; elsewhere, growers may apply for individual licences. Bullfinch is also protected under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and EC Birds Directive.

## Current factors causing loss or decline

Recent analyses of long-term data sets by BTO and RSPB have not pinpointed definite causes of the bullfinch decline. An analysis of CBC data has not found a correlation between the decline and the increase in the populations of sparrowhawk and magpie. Nor has ongoing work on ringing recoveries and nest record card data found strong evidence for a link between the decline and variations in breeding performance or survival. The bullfinch decline is likely instead to involve one or more of the following:

Removal of farmland trees and hedgerows, and reduction in quality of remaining hedges due to frequent trimming. The main impact on bullfinches has been loss of nesting habitat, particularly hedges and thickets, and loss of food sources (buds, seeds and fruits).

The loss of winter food sources through the use of herbicides and loss of winter stubble fields (in common with other declining seed-eating farmland birds). However, the bullfinch does not forage far from hedgerows and woods, and so is much more confined to field margins than other farmland species.

Trapping. Despite its recent large decline, bullfinches are still being trapped. The numbers taken each year vary according to the availability of other food sources, particularly ash seeds, and on the severity of winter weather (eg in Kent over 1000 were taken in 1990/91, and 300 in 1996/97 - MAFF data).

Under new licensing arrangements, which came into force in October 1996, trapping under general licence is only permitted in Kent. This level of mortality is unlikely to have an effect at the UK population level, but local impacts are possible.

## Current action

Until very recently the bullfinch was not regarded as a species in need of assistance and targeted conservation action. However, establishment and management of broadleaved and mixed woodland will have benefited it, especially if plantings included native seed- and berry-bearing species.

The new Hedgerows Regulations will protect the hedges most likely to be favoured by the bullfinch. Sympathetic hedgerow management (eg hedge laying, coppicing, gapping up, replanting and less regular trimming) is encouraged by agri-environment schemes such as Countryside Stewardship and ESAs. Some elements of these schemes, most notably the pilot Arable Stewardship Scheme, also encourage land management that may benefit the bullfinch, for example, the sympathetic management of field margins.

The species is also likely to benefit from the Orchard Scheme recently begun by CCW, which seeks to restore management to neglected orchards and encourage new planting.

## Action plan objectives and targets

In the short term, halt or reverse the decline in numbers of the bullfinch by the year 2003 so that the Breeding Bird Survey index is at least at 1996 levels.

In the long term, see a sustained recovery in numbers, so that the BBS index is at least 50% higher than 1996 levels by 2008.

## **Proposed actions with lead agencies**

### **Policy and legislation**

Take account of the need to recover bullfinch and other farmland bird populations when developing agricultural policy and CAP reform; consider how to extend the Arable Stewardship Scheme if the pilot is successful, and how to substitute for the benefits of set-aside, if this is further reduced or abolished. Retention of hedgerows, thickets and other scrub/wooded habitats on farmland should be encouraged. (ACTION: DANI, FA, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Where appropriate, incorporate new management prescriptions when reviewing agri-environment schemes, especially ESAs, Countryside Stewardship, Tir Cymen and Countryside Premium Scheme, in order to reverse some of the recent changes in farm management outlined in Section 2. (ACTION: CCW, DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Seek uptake of a more cautious and targeted use of pesticides and fertilisers on farmland to reduce the impacts on potential food sources for the bullfinch. This could include encouraging integrated crop management, organic farming, and the more widespread adoption of initiatives such as the recently begun Scottish 'TIBRE' project. (ACTION: DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Review licensing procedures regularly to ensure that they remain appropriate to the status of the bullfinch. (ACTION: MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

### **Site safeguard and management**

None proposed.

### **Species management and protection**

None proposed (but see 5.1.4 above).

### **Advisory**

Promote methods other than trapping to fruit growers as a means of reducing the problem of bullfinches in orchards. (ACTION: MAFF)

Consider producing advisory material for orchard owners on the provision of alternative sources of natural food for bullfinches. (ACTION: CCW, DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD)

Promote the sympathetic management of hedgerows and farmland scrub for the benefit of bullfinch and other farmland birds. (ACTION: DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

### **Future Research and Monitoring**

Ensure appropriate monitoring of numbers through continuation of the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey and consider the setting up of an equivalent survey to monitor winter populations. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, JNCC, SNH)

Undertake an autecological study of the bullfinch to identify appropriate habitat management. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, FC, JNCC, SNH)

Ensure completion of analyses of long-term data sets on ringing recoveries and nest record cards to help determine the causes of the bullfinch decline. (ACTION: JNCC)

### **Communications and Publicity**

Promote the bullfinch as a species in need of conservation assistance. (ACTION: CCW, EHS, EN, JNCC, SNH)