

Skylark conservation – a success story

by Jane Braham

Spring is here and skylarks may be heard singing high above the Park's grasslands. The song, a melodious unbroken sequence of whistling and chirruping notes, issues from a speck of life high in the sky – Shelley's "blithe spirit" – a bird probably more celebrated in poetry and music than any other. It is the male skylark that sings, to attract a mate and to define his territory.

Some Park visitors are incredulous to learn that skylarks nest on the ground. "Don't birds build their nests in trees?" The skylark's seemingly reckless strategy of breeding amongst tussocky grasses often requires several attempts to succeed. As an adaptation to their precarious position, the young nestlings quickly develop adult-sized legs. This enables them to disperse from the nest at an early stage and hide amongst the grasses, making it less likely that a predator will discover and take the whole brood at once.

The UK skylark population declined by 53% between 1970-2005. This puts it on the "UK Birds of Conservation Concern – Red list" (meaning numbers have declined by more than 50% in the last 25 years). Research into farmland skylarks has revealed that the modern practice of sowing winter wheat, instead of leaving stubble fields over winter, is a major factor in their decline. The early sown crop has grown too tall for the skylark to use by breeding time.

But why have skylarks declined in Richmond Park over the same period? A survey of singing males in 1968 shows them using 15 different grassland areas across the Park. By 2004 they had withdrawn to merely four. Their foothold in the Park is now tenuous. Over the period of the skylark's decline, visitor pressure on the Park's grassland has increased, suggesting that disturbance to breeding birds, particularly by dogs, may be a contributing factor.



Chris Gomersall (sps-images.com)

In 2001 the Richmond Park Bird Recording Group (BRG) decided to see if reducing disturbance in a known breeding area would improve the skylarks' prospects of success. Lawn Field, a large area of grassland lying between White Lodge and the lower Pen Pond, was selected as a Skylark Protection Zone. Pond Slade, situated to the north of the middle road between Ham Plantation and Pen Ponds Plantation was chosen as a control site for comparison, so that any fluctuation in skylark numbers due to weather could be discounted. Both areas were surveyed that year for skylarks and other ground-nesting birds.

The following year, 2002, with the support of the Park management team, the Protection Zone was set up. Signs were installed requesting visitors to Lawn Field to keep to the paths and keep their dogs on leads during the breeding season (March to

end July). Members of the BRG again surveyed both areas and were encouraged to discover that the number of skylark territories in the Protection Zone had increased from three to five. In subsequent years the number increased to six, at which level it remains, suggesting that the carrying capacity of the area has now been reached.

No parallel increase occurred on Pond Slade. This indicates that reduction in disturbance has indeed proved beneficial to the skylark. So the Protection Zone has become a permanent feature of the Park during the breeding season.

The deer are a major factor in maintaining the Park's grasslands, but some areas are also cut for hay. To give ground-nesting birds longer to breed and fledge, hay cutting takes place as late as possible in the season. The traditional farmland method of cutting hay starts from the field edges and progresses inwards, resulting in an ever-decreasing central island where young birds, small mammals and other wildlife become trapped and eventually destroyed. The Park employs a preferable method, cutting from the centre outwards, dispersing wildlife towards the headlands (uncut marginal strips), and to adjacent areas. The headlands themselves in recent years have been made broader, to provide a greater area of refuge.

Paul Donald, the RSPB's expert on the ecology of the skylark, was invited by the BRG to visit the Park and offer further advice. He suggested that the "structure" of the grasslands could be improved by leaving areas of uncut grass during hay mowing, so there would always be some denser, undisturbed areas of two or more years' growth. He also pointed out that skylarks avoid areas close to trees, where they may be watched over by birds of prey. Therefore new tree planting should preferably avoid

encroaching on large grassland areas suitable for skylarks. Both these suggestions have been adopted by the Park.

Finally, during his visit Paul observed power-kiting taking place on the polo pitches, which are adjacent to skylark breeding areas. He pointed out that this activity would definitely deter skylarks from attempting to breed in the vicinity. Accordingly, power kiting is no longer permitted in this area between March and July, and kite flying generally has been located so as to cause minimum disturbance to wildlife.

The BRG was interested to know if the Protection Zone and other conservation methods had also benefited skylarks in the wider Park. We were excited by the results of a Park-wide survey in 2007, which showed that skylarks were expanding their range again and were back in some areas they had been absent from for many years. It may be that the Protection Zone is now "seeding" skylarks into other areas of the Park, where improved methods of grassland management are offering them suitable habitat.

This conservation success story results from a vital partnership between the BRG, whose volunteers contribute their skills and long hours of work in the field, and Park management. Finally, and essentially, this partnership relies upon the co-operation of Park visitors. The Skylark's future depends upon it.

Jane Braham retired in 2005 as Assistant Superintendent of Richmond Park

The BRG was founded by Jacqueline Shane in 1999, as a sub-group of the Richmond Park Wildlife Group, to carry out the monthly Standard Walk bird survey.