

POSSIBLE CAUSES

Why are so many woodland birds showing such an alarming decline in population? Almost certainly, different combinations of factors will be affecting different species. We need to find out exactly what these are, and this will require a rigorous research programme.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to place certain things at the top of our list of possible causes. These may include:

LOSS OF TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT
In the past, rural communities used the materials which were provided by their local woods, and kept them in good health. Now, no longer managed in traditional ways, their complex mosaic of habitats has been lost.

DEER
Rapidly multiplying numbers of deer are implicated in changes to some lowland woods. Grazing pressure from deer may be intensifying the declines in woodland butterflies and birds.

CLIMATE CHANGE
This may be affecting the time of year when large numbers of caterpillars emerge on the leaves – a vital source of food for hungry woodland chicks.

SQUIRRELS
Predation of birds' nests by the introduced grey squirrel may be causing some bird declines.

LANDSCAPE
Woods can't be looked at in isolation. Widescale changes in our landscape may be having an effect. Air pollution could be affecting tree health. Vital woodland edge habitats may also be adversely affected by the management of adjoining farmland.

INVERTEBRATES
Vital in woodlands, they not only help to cycle nutrients but also provide food for birds. Anything which impacts on their number affects wild birds.

The RSPB intends to get to the root of why our woodland bird species are in such trouble.

YOUR GIFT TODAY WILL HELP THIS VITAL WORK.

NOTE: Bird population statistics in this leaflet are from data supplied by the British Trust for Ornithology.

Purple emperor butterfly *Apatura iris*
This large, fast-flying butterfly has iridescent wings which shine blue and purple as the sunlight catches them. The beautiful colours come from light being refracted through millions of small scales on its wings. The purple emperor has green caterpillars, marked with white and yellow, and with two long horns on their heads. They can be found lying on beds of silk in the middle of willow leaves.

Purple emperors are canopy dwellers and need large blocks of broad-leaved woodland or dense willow scrub for their habitat.



Richard Bevels (rspb-images.com)

WOODLAND POPULATIONS DECLINING

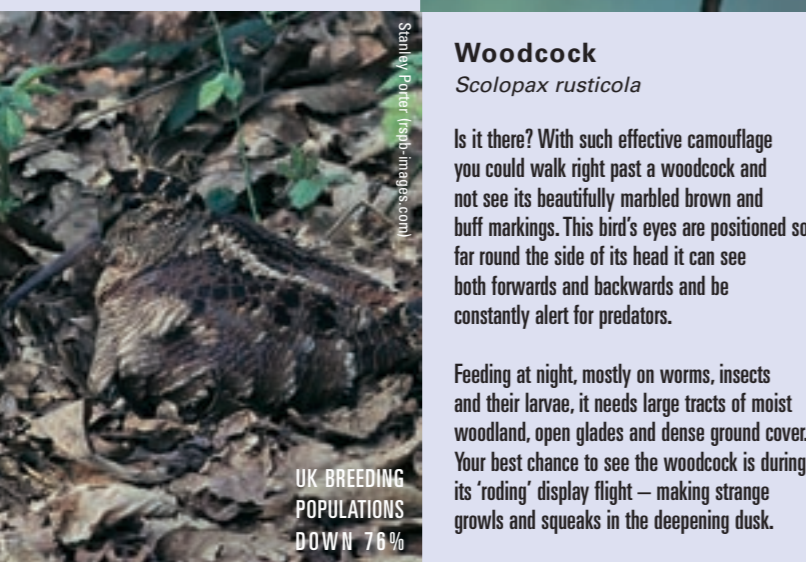
Willow warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
For many, the willow warbler's song is the essence of spring's arrival – a wistfully descending cadence, percolating through delicate new leaves. This little insect-eating bird, hardly more than four inches long, winters in Africa, south of the Sahara.

The willow warbler's colouring makes it difficult to pick out amongst summer foliage. Another summer visitor, the chiffchaff, looks similar, but their songs are utterly different. The chiffchaff's call – 'chiff (pause) chaff, chiff (pause) chaff' – is quite unlike the liquid cascade of the willow warbler.



Mark Heathcote (rspb-images.com)

UK BREEDING POPULATIONS DOWN 44%



Shirley Peacock (rspb-images.com)

UK BREEDING POPULATIONS DOWN 76%

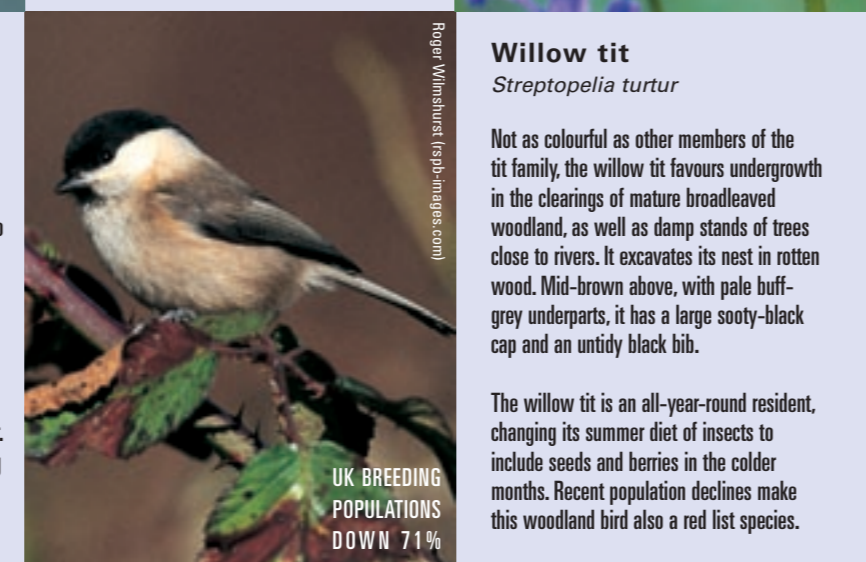
Bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*
For many people there is no more joyous sight than a bluebell-carpeted wood in spring. But the sight of a rich carpet of vibrant blue in our springtime woods is gradually becoming rarer.

Changes to woodland management have undoubtedly contributed to this disappearance. Climate change may also be implicated. And many people still think it acceptable to dig up wild bluebells to plant in their own gardens, or to sell for profit.



Andy Hely (rspb-images.com)

UNDER GENETIC ATTACK



Roger Wilmshurst (rspb-images.com)

UK BREEDING POPULATIONS DOWN 71%

Spotted flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
Spotted flycatchers are long-distance migrants. They arrive from Africa mainly in May, and leave again in July and August – yet in these few summer weeks they can produce two broods of 4-6 chicks. Spotted flycatchers feed in open woodland with clearings.

Both sexes are grey-brown, with the off-white breast and forehead streaked darker grey. Perching conspicuously to watch for passing insects, they dart out to snap them up, and then fly back. Several insects may be caught this way and held together in the bill. Their diet includes not only small flies, but plump moths, butterflies and even dragonflies.

Recent dramatic population declines have put them on the red list.



Roger Wilmshurst / RPA

UK BREEDING POPULATIONS DOWN 73%

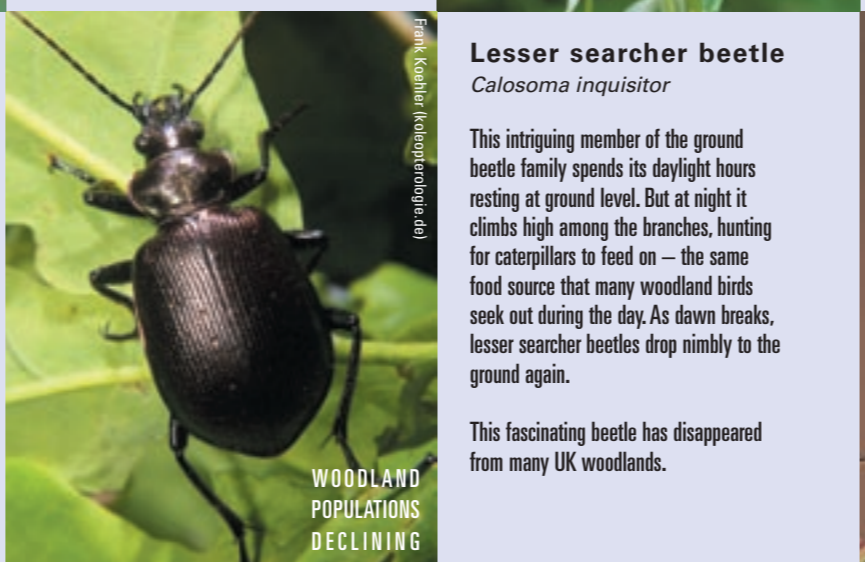
Greater butterfly orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*
In areas of woodland with dappled light you may find this impressive white-flowered orchid. It originally got its name because it was thought to be pollinated by butterflies, but this function is now believed to be performed by night flying moths – such as the elephant hawk-moth.

This orchid stands about a foot high and has two glossy leaves folded around the base. The white flowers, slightly tinged with green, smell faintly of vanilla.



Richard Bevels (rspb-images.com)

RARE AND VULNERABLE



Frank Koenig (Koenigedigital.de)

WOODLAND POPULATIONS DECLINING

Lesser spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*
Hardly bigger than a sparrow, this elusive bird is the scarcest of our resident woodpeckers. The best time to see one is in early spring, when leaves are still sparse. Black and white, the male is distinguished from the female by his bright red crown. His 'drumming' – made by making rapid blows on resonant wood with his bill – is softer and more prolonged than the more familiar great spotted woodpecker's.

Lesser spotted woodpeckers depend on decaying wood: to excavate for nest holes, and in which to find wood-boring grubs. When looking for larvae and spiders to eat they creep along the upper branches or flutter from branch to branch. The highest density of this woodpecker's population occurs in the south east of England, but its decline is worrying, and it is now on the red list.

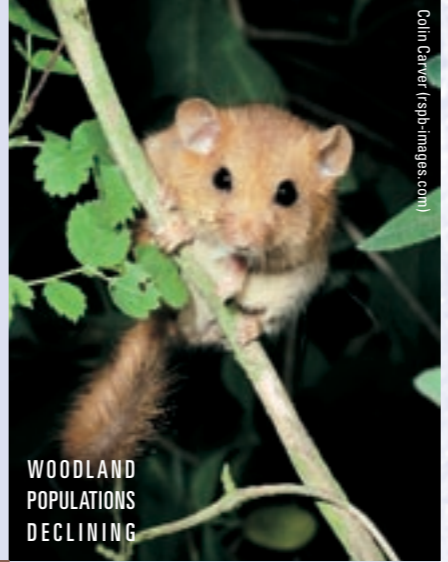


George McDermott (rspb-images.com)

SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

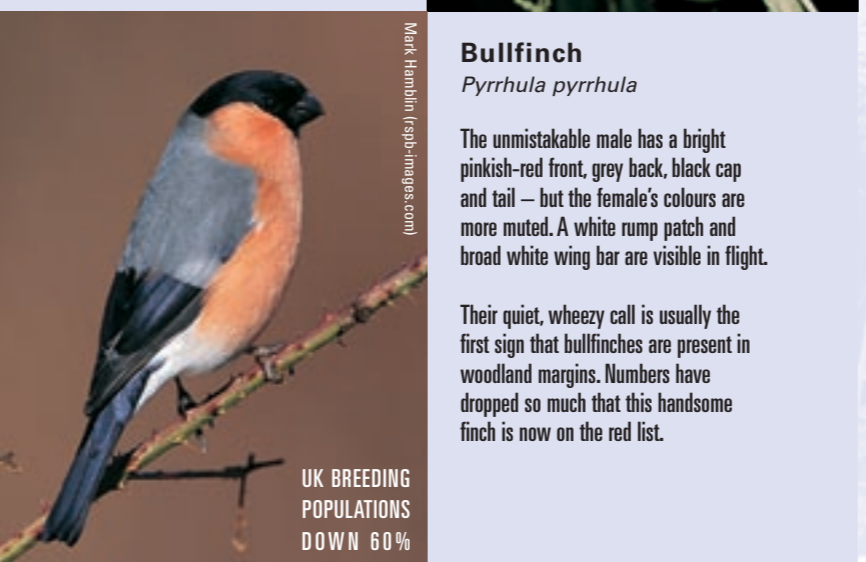
Dormouse *Muscardinus arvellanarius*
Empty hazelnut shells with a small hole gnawed smoothly in the side are clues to dormouse activity. With a body around three inches long, these plump, furry-tailed rodents live in hazel coppices and deciduous woods where there is honeysuckle for them to feed on.

They spend daylight asleep in loosely woven nests, climbing branches in search of food at night. Before hibernation they double their weight. Dormice are mostly found in the south of the UK, but numbers are declining. Loss of coppiced woodland and changes in climate could be responsible.



Colin Carter (rspb-images.com)

WOODLAND POPULATIONS DECLINING



Mark Heathcote (rspb-images.com)

UK BREEDING POPULATIONS DOWN 60%



Working for woodlands – a lifetime's commitment

You might think all that's needed for a healthy wildlife-rich wood is to plant trees and let them grow. But the fact that we now have more woods in the South East than we have had in recent decades shows it's not nearly that simple. The key question is: how are those woods being looked after?

Most of our finest ancient woods – those with the richest variety of plants and wildlife – are that way because they have been valued and managed for generations. The tallest, strongest trees, for instance, were tended by keeping them clear of encroaching scrub when they were young. Some decayed giants would have been left where they fell, providing a rich store of food to vast numbers of insects, fungi, birds and other wildlife.

Elsewhere, clumps of trees were valued for coppicing – a centuries-old woodland management system by which selected trees are cut off just above ground level. The stumps sprout a valuable crop of straight new stems that can be harvested regularly for building, hedging, fuel and animal fodder.

Traditional coppice management allows light to reach the woodland floor, benefiting wild flowers, and creating a perfect environment for dormice, nightingales and butterflies.

Keeping a wood in good health is a lifelong task. Woodlands need constant and regular management to provide the diversity of tree structure which is needed to sustain a variety of wildlife.

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www.rspb.org.uk

Registered charity no 207076



A woodland walk

Roger Wilmshurst / RPA



George McCarty (rspb-images.com)



Roger Wilmshurst / RPA



Steve Knill (rspb-images.com)



Richard Rees (rspb-images.com)



Urgent action is needed to find out why our woodland birds are in decline



for birds
for people
for ever

Paul Collin (rspb-images.com)



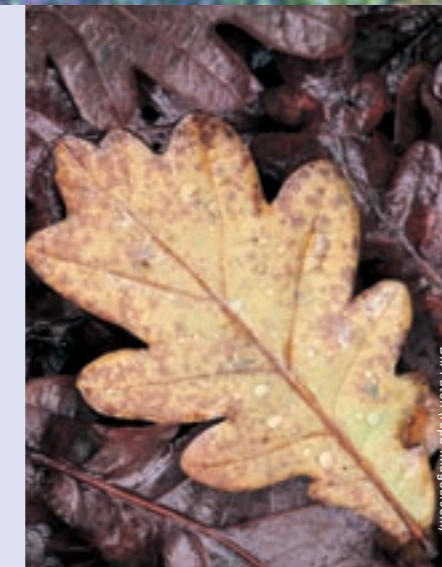
Mark Heath (rspb-images.com)

Woodland edges, and the sides of rides and clearings, are extremely important to birds and other wildlife. Here in sunny patches sheltered from the wind, insects and flowers flourish. Without proper management these patches can become overgrown and the rich variety of life shaded out.



Bill Peck (rspb-images.com)

Decaying wood can be home to hundreds of fungi as well as beetles, flies, slugs and snails, providing food for them all. These invertebrates in turn provide an invaluable source of food for the chiselling bills of woodpeckers, and for many other woodland species.



Bill Peck (rspb-images.com)

Where last year's leaves have fallen, they rot and return their nutrients to the soil. Specialist plants, fungi and invertebrates help this composting process. As a bonus, the insects, snails and worms which thrive here also provide tasty meals for ground-feeding birds and other wildlife.



Richard Rees (rspb-images.com)

High above us as we walk between their trunks, mature trees flower, and a myriad insect dances in the sunshine, unnoticed in our earth-bound lives. Among the upper branches, insect-eating birds like the lesser spotted woodpecker hunt for caterpillars to feed their hungry chicks.

Over the last thirty years the populations of many species of woodland birds, as well as other wildlife, have shown an alarming fall in numbers. Something is going seriously wrong in our woodlands – but what?

The RSPB is now undertaking urgent action to find out, in detail, the factors affecting so many woodland birds. Proper management, it's clear, plays a key role in the vitality of woodland wildlife. At Tudeley Woods for instance – the RSPB woodland nature reserve in Kent where a great deal of effort has been put into maintaining traditional management techniques – key woodland bird populations have not gone down.

We already have research projects in place. An intensive study is being made of factors affecting the willow tit, and more are in the pipeline. Finding out how to improve the fortunes of the lesser spotted woodpecker is high on our list of priorities.

As a key member of the Woodland Bird Group, we are working with the BTO on a wide scale follow-up survey of woodland birds. In addition, we are collaborating with a number of organisations deeply involved in woodland management.

The RSPB has an excellent track record in identifying and solving complex habitat problems. At Abernethy nature reserve, research over a long period of time helped us discover what Scots pinewood wildlife needs in order to thrive. Our work with lowland reedbeds is also helping to improve the fortunes of birds to whom this habitat is essential, such as the bittern and bearded tit.

We are now determined to do the same for the birds of the broad-leaved woodlands, like the lesser spotted woodpecker and the willow warbler.