



# Breeding Curlew (Crottag; *Numenius arquata*) in the Isle of Man



**CURLEW ACTION**

Report for 2025



## Contents

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Behaviour & Ecology
- 2025 Recording Methodology
- 2025 Recording Results
- 2025 Engagement & Training
- Comparisons and Relationships with Similar Projects
- Future Work & Acknowledgements



## **Executive Summary**

- Curlew are a specially protected, red-listed bird of significant conservation concern in the Isle of Man.
- In 2025, 65 Curlew breeding pairs were identified across the Isle of Man.
- This represents an 83% decline since the first Manx breeding bird atlas (1998-2003).
- Significant and expanded conservation interventions are required to arrest the local decline of this species.
- Without targeted and well-resourced conservation intervention, it is probable that this species will become locally extinct as a breeding species within the coming decades.
- Thankfully, this report highlights that there is much to be positive about, and that unlike other farmland birds including Lapwing and Yellowhammer, it is not too late to save the Isle of Man's regionally important population of breeding Curlew.

## **Introduction**

### **Description**

The Eurasian Curlew (Crottag; *Numenius arquata*) is the largest of all the European waders. A familiar bird to most, it is renowned for its song and its remarkably long and down-curved beak. It has greyish-brown streaked plumage and long legs. It can reach 50–60 cm in length with a wingspan of up to 100 cm. While males and females are the same colour, at maturity females are larger and have a longer beak, which can be a reliable way to determine sex when in groups.

### **Eurasian Curlew International Status**

All species of Curlew are in decline. Globally, Eurasian Curlew are classed as Near Threatened with extinction (IUCN 3.1). Across Europe, the species is red listed (SPEC1) by BirdLife International (2017). The Isle of Man supports around 0.1% of Europe's breeding population and 0.3% of Europe's over-wintering population, which is significant given the Island's minuscule size compared to the rest of Europe.

### **Eurasian Curlew Status in Britain and Ireland**

The state of the Eurasian Curlew in Britain and Ireland is one of severe decline, with Isle of Man, Great Britain and Ireland populations all red listed as Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) due to habitat loss, predation pressures, agricultural changes and insensitive afforestation. Ireland has faced extreme losses, with a 96-98% decline in recent decades, with the species facing almost certain extirpation on Ireland without significant conservation intervention. While Curlew numbers are still decreasing across Britain, increasing conservation efforts focused on habitat management and predator control show some promising results in specific areas.

Based on the population figures from *Birds of Conservation Concern in the Isle of Man 2021* (BoCCIoM), the Isle of Man supports 0.7% of the combined Manx and UK breeding population and 1.2% of the combined Manx and UK over-wintering population, which is highly significant given the Island's small size when compared to the UK (the Island forms only 0.18% of the combined land area).

### **Eurasian Curlew Status on the Isle of Man**

Here on the Isle of Man, ground-nesting species such as Curlew and Lapwing are in jeopardy, threatened similarly by loss of habitat, disturbance and predation. As a result, both the Curlew and Lapwing along with many other ground-nesting species are on the BoCCIoM 2021 Red List, being considered as of the greatest conservation concern. For Curlew, the 1998-2003 Manx census found a

population of 402 breeding pairs across the Island, along with approximately 100 pairs of Lapwing. Lapwing are now believed to have been functionally lost as a Manx breeding species, with only one or no reported pairs in recent years. For Curlew, the 2006-2016 census found a stable population to that found in 1998-2003, however anecdotal evidence would suggest that the Manx Curlew population had begun a decline between the two Manx censuses.

In terms of over-wintering birds, the only recent overwintering census (1998-2003) found 500-1,500 individual Lapwing, which was subsequently revised down to 100 individuals under BoCCIoM2021.

For Curlew, <2,000 overwintering individuals were estimated under the 1998-2003 census, with the latter figure being revised down to 1,500 individual Curlew under BoCCIoM2021.

***Both the Curlew and Lapwing are listed as specially protected birds on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Act 1990, meaning it is illegal to intentionally or recklessly disturb them when they are nesting or in the vicinity of their nest.***

**Global Distribution**

The Eurasian Curlew has a breeding range across Europe and Asia, from the British Isles and Scandinavia to Siberia. In the non-breeding season, they migrate to wintering grounds in coastal Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, and southern and eastern Asia. Some populations, such as those in the UK and Ireland, are non-migratory and are found year-round. The Eurasian Curlew is a migratory bird that prefers open landscapes for breeding, such as wetlands and farmland. In winter, Curlew often gather in large flocks at coastal sites including mudflats, beaches and wet grassland.

On the Isle of Man Curlew are typically only found in coastal areas outside of the breeding season (when there is a significant but declining influx from elsewhere). During the breeding season birds move inland to agricultural and upland settings away from the coast.



Figure 1: Global distribution of Eurasian Curlew

## **Behaviour & Ecology**

### **Breeding**

The nest of a Curlew is a bare scrape in a meadow, heath or similarly open habitat where some cover is available. The average clutch size is four eggs which are laid between April and May. Both adults share incubation duties for four weeks until hatching. If eggs are predated early in the breeding season, Curlew can re-lay and try a second attempt to raise young. Eggs predated or otherwise lost late in the season are not replaced, with that season's breeding attempt abandoned with an early return to their non-breeding grounds. When the young hatch, Curlew chicks are precocious, meaning that they are almost immediately able to feed for themselves, with the parents providing overwatch and guiding them to food-rich areas. They remain at inland breeding sites until the young are able to fly, when they return to coastal areas for the non-breeding season.

### **Feeding**

The long down-curved bill helps Curlew probe into soft mud, soil or sand for food. Their diet changes seasonally. In winter, they focus on marine invertebrates on tidal flats, like lugworms, crabs, and shellfish. During summer, on their breeding grounds, they eat mainly insects (adults and larvae) and earthworms.

### **Predators**

Despite the Isle of Man not having many ground-based predators (e.g. fox & badger) to predate Curlew, certain mammal and bird species still predate Curlew (particularly their eggs and chicks), which can cause a notable reduction in breeding productivity. Mammals such as feral cats, Hedgehogs, domestic ferrets (often incorrectly known locally as 'polecats' or 'polecat-ferrets') and Stoats can stop the Curlew breeding successfully. Corvids (crows), particularly Hooded Crow (known locally as 'Gray-backs'), Carrion Crow and (to a lesser extent magpie) are a significant predator of Curlew eggs and smaller chicks. Raven, Gulls and raptors may also predate Curlew chicks. In recent years, domestic livestock have been proven to both trample and surprisingly eat wader eggs.

## **2025 Recording Methodology**

### **Project Background**

A Manx Farmland Birds Recovery Group was established in 2022, recruiting shortly thereafter myself as the Farmland Birds Recovery Officer to focus on the most pressing species: Lapwing, Tree Sparrow, Curlew and Barn Owl. In 2024, a major focus was the monitoring of the Curlew breeding population in and around the Southern Hills and foothills of the Isle of Man, an area which has subsequently been nicknamed *Curlew Country*. This geographic area was chosen to expand the longstanding DEFA-led Curlew project in this area, noting also a breeding population on Dalby Mountain, where Manx Wildlife Trust own two reserves. In addition, records were made of incidental reports and public/DEFA reports of breeding pairs across the Island. Thanks to donations from private individuals and a partnership funding agreement with the Wildlife Park Conservation Fund, we were able to repeat and expand this survey and monitoring effort again in 2025.

### **2025 Recording Effort**

- Historical, suitable and reported breeding sites were visited to see if breeding birds were present.
- A list of sites was gathered from reports from the DEFA Upland Rangers, farmers, birders, members of the public and data from previous editions of *Peregrine*, the Manx natural history journal. Contemporary reports were investigated to confirm identification and see whether they constituted breeding sites, feeding sites or just birds stopping to rest. These sites were visited at least twice through the breeding season to confirm whether they were

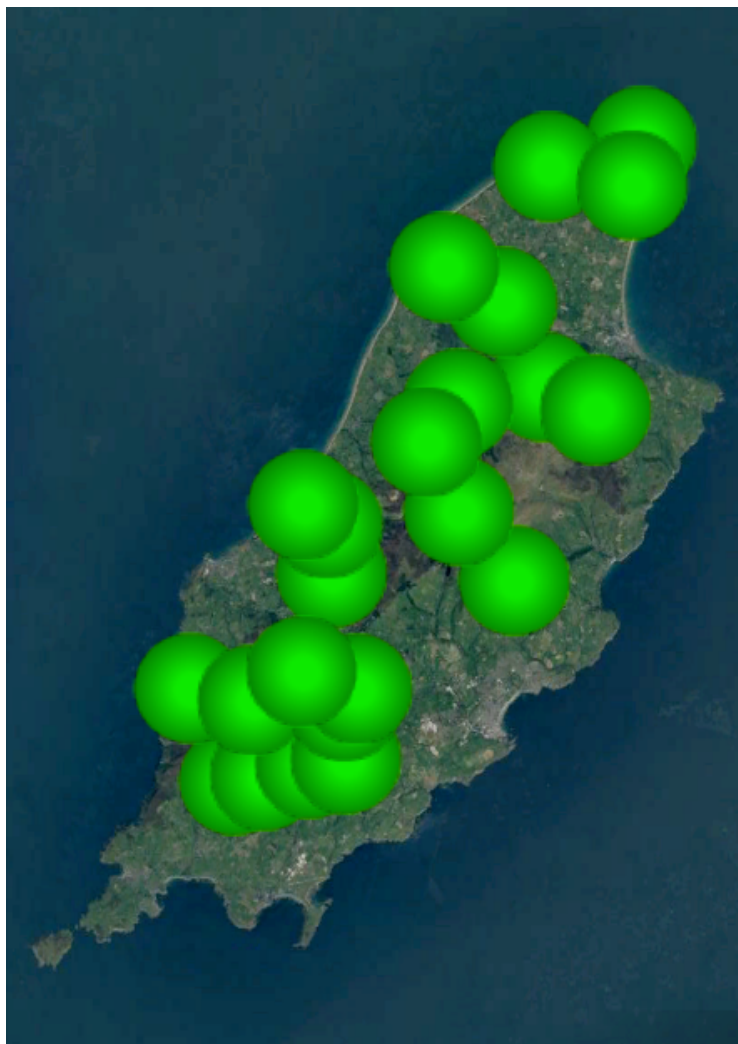
breeding and if so (wherever possible, and under DEFA licence), how successful they were at hatching and fledging young.

- Most site visits were done from a distance using a spotting scope and binoculars to minimise disturbance.
- Two Curlew nests were located on farmland, with advice given to the farmers on how to help the Curlew produce young whilst continuing to farm the land. Guidance and support were also given on applying for the DEFA Agri-Environment Scheme.

## **2025 Recording Results**

Reports of Curlew gathering inland, at or near suitable breeding grounds began in March. Inland gathering sites were Kionslieu, Glion Cam (the garee above the Devil's Elbow), Langness, Cronk Breck (near Lhen Bride) and the Point of Ayre.

Across the Isle of Man, 65 pairs of Curlew were recorded exhibiting breeding behaviour, although not all were successful and the outcome of many pairs was unknown. The first eggs were seen on 12<sup>th</sup> May, the first chicks seen on 22<sup>nd</sup> May with fledging around 15<sup>th</sup> July. The last inland sighting reported from a known breeding area was on 26<sup>th</sup> July.



*Figure 2: Identified Curlew breeding areas in 2025. Circles represent either single pairs or colonies.*

- 45 pairs of Curlew were recorded breeding north of the central valley, with 20 pairs south of it.
- 30 pairs of the total 65 were breeding in the uplands and 35 pairs in the lowlands.
- In the Southern Hills, the Cross Vein area had six nests, all of which hatched young. Fledging success was unknown but not thought to be successful. Cross Vein had a lower number of pairs compared with recent years (when up to 11 pairs have been recorded), however pairs were recorded nesting in previously vacant upland sites in the central hills, suggesting a potential relocation of some pairs.
- Dalby Mountain had three pairs breeding (the same as in 2024), and at least three young fledged (from two nests).
- Unusually, a single first-year Curlew was seen feeding at an inland, high-altitude site at Geaylin ny Creggyn on South Barrule (SC262764) on the late date of 29<sup>th</sup> September 2025. This could be an unusually late fledging bird hatched nearby or a juvenile bird of the season from an unknown local on post-fledging dispersal.
- The Ayres National Nature Reserve (NNR) and surrounding heath and farmland supported an impressive 26 pairs of Curlew breeding. Fourteen pairs were still showing defensive behaviour in mid-July, indicating that young were still feeding in the area and nearing fledging. This compares to only four pairs in the same area back in 2000.
- Glen Auldyn, a site acquired by Manx Wildlife Trust during the breeding season, held four breeding pairs of Curlew, with one pair seen with three young almost ready to fledge on a visit in late July.



*Figure 3 - Curlew adult male (middle right) and two juveniles (left) at Glen Auldyn on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. Photograph taken under DEFA licence by Robert Fisher.*

***Comparing data from 1998-2003 with that for 2025 indicates an alarming 83% decline in the number of known breeding pairs of Curlew on the Isle of Man.***

**2025 Lapwing Recording Results**

There were no confirmed 2025 breeding records for Lapwing on the Isle of Man, building upon fears that the species is either locally extirpated as a breeding bird, or that any remaining remnant population is functionally extinct.

Encouragingly, although not a confirmed breeding record, unverified reports of a pair were received from a farm to the east of Foxdale in Marown parish (where a confirmed sighting of a pair was documented immediately after the 2024 breeding season). Similarly, a confirmed sighting of a pair was reported from nearby Kionslieu on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025 followed by a probable juvenile being documented at Kionslieu on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2025. Elsewhere, two Lapwing were seen at the Manx BirdLife Point of Ayre National Reserve on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2025 and a single juvenile Lapwing was seen at Ballelby on the Dalby coastline on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2025.



*Figure 4 – A probable juvenile Lapwing at Kionslieu, Foxdale on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2025 by Robert Fisher.*

**Notes on 2025 Weather Conditions**

Throughout the breeding season (March - July 2025), the Isle of Man experienced a historically dry and mild spring followed by a record-breaking hot summer in terms of average temperatures, but not necessarily extremes. March was exceptionally dry, breaking records for low rainfall, while the temperature remained mild. This was followed by a summer that was the warmest on record to date. This mild and dry weather will have helped the incubation of eggs and lowered predation efforts by supplying corvids with plenty of food easier to catch than Curlew eggs. However, due to the dry weather, Curlew will likely have struggled to find sufficient food for their young. Conversely, at the end of May and into early June (coinciding with the TT Races) there were two weeks of very unsettled and wet weather. Wet weather is when most chick predation occurs, especially by species that perch and wait for opportunities. Prolonged wet weather can also cause direct chick mortality, especially where the nest site is in long, wet grass.

## **2025 Engagement and Training**

During Manx Wildlife Week (26<sup>th</sup> April to 5<sup>th</sup> May 2025) three *Curlew Country* guided walks were held around Dalby Mountain to explain and demonstrate the identification of Eurasian Curlew and their ecological requirements and their cultural importance in the Manx landscape. Attendees learnt the different habitats needed for feeding and nesting, the breeding process and how the public, farmers and landowners can help breeding Curlew. These walks were well attended with a combined total of 42 attendees and considered worthy of repeating in 2026.

Manx Wildlife Trust had a stand at the Royal Manx Agricultural Show (in partnership with Manx Telecom) where the theme was farmland birds with one of the target engagement species being Curlew, with taxidermy and photographs on display and related activities for children. Information was provided on preferred habitats and different life cycles throughout the seasons. A well-received interactive activity for children focused on mimicking a Curlew feeding on a beach in winter, collecting imitation lugworms and crabs from deep in the sand using chopsticks to mimic their long bill.

### **Training and Research**

I undertook a visit to Yorkshire where a 170-acre farm reported a pair of Curlew nesting in a lowland hay meadow next to a public right of way. I was able to observe a new initiative where the RSPB had installed a temporary solar-powered electric fence around the nest, complete with a motion camera.

This initiative is to protect the nest from passing people, dogs, farm machinery and ground predators such as foxes, badgers, feral cats and other mammals. The motion camera documents any activity without any further human disturbance. All fencing was installed within a 20-minute window to minimise disturbance. The protected plot was enclosed by 15m x 15m of electric fence and required the following materials (with 2025 prices indicated for future reference):

<b>Product &amp; Description</b>	<b>Unit Price (£)</b>	<b>Quantity Required</b>	<b>Total (£)</b>
Steel posts (pack of 25)	102.64	2	205.28
Steel post insulators (pack of 25)	12.91	6	77.46
Steel wire on hand reel (600m)	163.61	1	163.61
Solar energiser (Defender S5)	289.90	1	289.90
Plastic fence post insulators (pack of 25)	10.99	1	10.99
Earthing anchor post	30.00	1	30.00
Wooden corner fence posts	25.00	4	100.00
Motion camera	40.00	1	40.000
			<b>917.24</b>

Seeing this intervention in practice provided an ideal opportunity to review this method with a look to replicate on the Isle of Man. Although we do not have issues with foxes and badgers, livestock, cats, dogs and feral ferrets etc remain a concern.

On a subsequently follow-up site visit, the Curlew had fledged and had moved to field nearby where their activity indicated young present in the area. Six adult Curlew were seen in flight and a juvenile was witnessed jumping and flying short distances.

This was an interesting and cost-effective technique that we could easily replicate on the Isle of Man when Curlew are found in lowland farmland settings and threatened by agricultural activity.



Figure 5 - Curlew documented via automated motion camera near the Yorkshire nest (right top/bottom) Electric fence set up (left)

## Comparisons and Relationships with Similar Projects

### **Forest of Bowland Moorland Group Project**

In the Forest of Bowland there is a GWCT satellite tagging programme for breeding adult Curlew. Data has been shared which show interaction with the Isle of Man during migration to Ireland. This shows the importance of the Isle of Man as a migratory stepping stone in the middle of the Irish Sea.



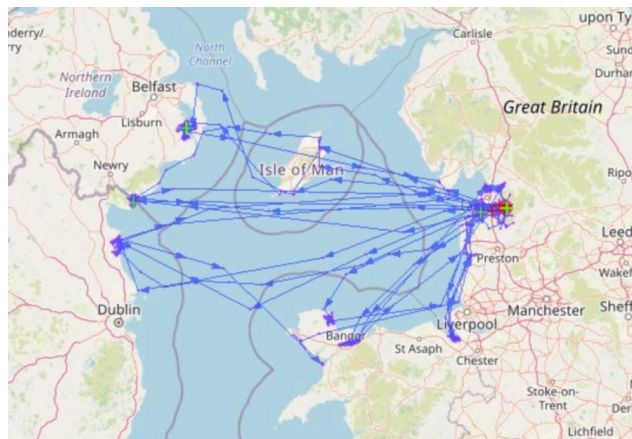
#### **Forest of Bowland Moorland Group**

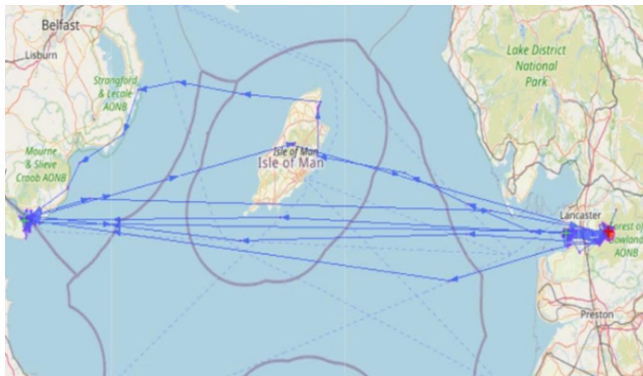
12 May · 🌐

Where do our Curlew go in winter? In 2022 and 2023 a GWCT project aimed to find out. 8 Curlew were fitted with satellite tags during the breeding season so we could closely follow their movements. Rather than spending the winter on nearby Morecambe Bay, 6 of the birds headed further west to Ireland and south to Wales. One bird had been previously ringed in North Wales in 2006!

The birds have been adopted by local primary schools who are kept upto date with their movements.

The data from these birds is used by the GWCT to investigate habitat use.





2 of the Curlew satellite tags have just updated, and unfortunately a male has gone to winter quarters at Sunderland Point, too soon after hatching for chicks to have fledged successfully. Curlew chicks take 5 to 6 weeks to fledge. We're unsure what has caused the losses of the chicks, but the fields are on a gull flight path.

A female which nests in a neighbouring field, has returned to Carlingford Lough. We are not sure if she was successful or not as most females leave before the chicks fledge to replenish their reserves after egg laying and doing most of the incubation. There are Curlews with chicks in the field where she nested but we can't be sure if they are the same family.

Figure 6 - Map showing movements of Curlew across the Irish Sea

### **RSPB Curlew LIFE Project in Northern Ireland**

RSPB Curlew efforts in Northern Ireland are focused on two areas: Glenwherry in the Antrim Hills and RSPB Lough Erne. The Glenwherry Curlew project is supported by project partners including Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs DAERA.

Recent annual reports from this project have highlighted significant successes in Curlew breeding productivity in the Glenwherry area thanks to significant conservation interventions, though the species still faces severe decline across Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a whole. Recent reports were reviewed for comparison with works being undertaken on the Isle of Man. These reports are available here: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/so-many-ways/explore/follow-the-call> and are summarised below.

### **Key Findings from Recent RSPB Glenwherry Annual Reports**

**Decades of decline:** Very similar to the Isle of Man, the Curlew population in Northern Ireland declined by 82% between 1987 and 2022, placing the species at risk of extinction in the country. The success in Glenwherry provides hope that the trend can be reversed.

**Key interventions:** Successful conservation strategies in Glenwherry (7,000ha) include habitat management by over 100 farmers, targeted predator control (foxes, corvids) and the use of temporary electrified fences around nests.

#### **2021 breeding season:**

- Twenty-eight chicks fledged.

#### **2022 breeding season:**

- A record-breaking 69 chicks fledged in Glenwherry, more than double the count from 2021.
- The results exceeded the productivity rate needed to maintain a stable Curlew population (0.46 chicks per pair per year) and were largely attributed to a high number of targeted nest fences installed by RSPB teams.
- The success is the result of long-term collaborative conservation efforts between the RSPB, farmers and DAERA's Environmental Farming Scheme.

#### **2023 breeding season:**

- 55 Curlew chicks fledged in Glenwherry. Habitat improvements, such as the creation of wet pools (scrapes) for foraging and winter rush-cutting to improve nesting habitat, were completed in late 2023.

### **2024 breeding season:**

- Ringing of chicks was carried out in 2024 to track the survival and movement of the birds in future years.
- The number of breeding Curlew pairs in Glenwherry increased from 37 in 2023 to 52 pairs in 2024, representing a 40% increase in just one year, the highest number of pairs in Glenwherry since the 1990s Juvenile pairs made up an estimated quarter of the breeding population.
- 29 nests were located, and 28 of these were fenced. Hatch rate was 89% inside fences and 23% outside fences. 25 broods fledged 50 chicks (0.98 per pair, the lowest in a few years but well above the 0.46 required to maintain a stable population).
- Nest detection by specially trained dogs and the use of colour ringing were commenced.
- At the end of the 2021-2024 Curlew LIFE project, a phenomenal total of 202 Curlew chicks successfully fledged from 94 nests (of which 87 were fenced) in Glenwherry. The project continued during 2025 under alternative funding.

### **2025 breeding season:**

- 45 Curlew pairs recorded. 21 nests located, 18 of which were located early enough to warrant fencing. One nest failed immediately, leaving 20 nests with broods. Sixteen broods fledged a total of 41 chicks successfully (0.91 chicks/pair, above the 0.46 annual minimum to maintain a long-term stable population).

## **Future Work & Acknowledgements**

Using the Manx data collected during 2024 & 2025 we will draft a Curlew Biodiversity Action Plan which will identify further required conservation actions for this key species, including reaching out to other Curlew recovery projects in the region to share and gain knowledge of novel conservation practices.

Special thanks are due to our conservation colleagues at DEFA; Upland Rangers Shaun Gelling and Anna Clarke-Smith; Biodiversity Warden Louise Samson and Ecosystem Policy Officer Sophie Costain. Notable thanks are also due to the staff at DEFA Agriculture who provide annual priority habitat management payments to so many farmers with breeding Curlew on their land.

Thanks also to my MWT colleagues for your support throughout the year. We also thank the many Manx farmers, birders and members of the public who provided sightings.

We record our sincere gratitude to the numerous private individuals who have made extremely kind and generous donations to this project in recent years, including the purchase of a 4WD vehicle. We also thank the Curraghs Wildlife Park Conservation Fund for assistance with funding the Farmland Birds Recovery Project.

Robert Fisher  
Farmland Birds Recovery Officer  
On behalf of the Farmland Birds Recovery Group  
1<sup>st</sup> December 2025

