

YELLOW WAGTAIL *Motacilla flava* SPECIES ACTION PLAN

DESCRIPTION

There are a number of different races of yellow wagtail that occur across the western Palearctic with almost the entire population of the sub-species *flavissima* breeding in the UK. The bright yellow breast and upperparts and the olive green tinge to the wings and back distinguish yellow wagtails from the similar grey wagtail. Yellow wagtails winter in western Africa and return to breed in the UK in late April or early May. Breeding occurs in a variety of habitats often associated with wetland areas. Yellow wagtails feed on small invertebrates that are taken either on the ground or in flight.

LOCAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

The yellow wagtail has always been considered a characteristic bird of the hay meadows and pastures of the Yorkshire Dales. Although there is very limited comparable population data, there appears to have been a widespread decline in the population and range of yellow wagtails in the Yorkshire Dales National Park that has accelerated over the last ten years. Recent local survey work in other areas of the country suggests that yellow wagtail population declines may be more widespread.

NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

Yellow wagtail is on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern and receives general protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

CURRENT ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES & THREATS

The precise ecological requirements of yellow wagtails are not known as there has been relatively little research work carried out for this species and the exact causes of the population decline are not known. In the Dales yellow wagtails breed in hay meadows and pastures and any changes in the management of these habitats is likely to have affected yellow wagtail populations. Similarly habitat loss in the western African wintering grounds and on migration routes may have contributed to population declines.

It is likely that the change from hay to silage production with earlier cutting dates will have resulted in the loss of nests and young. Research by ADAS has shown that the peak fledging period for yellow wagtails in the Pennine Dales ESA is in the last week of June with any meadows cut before this likely to result in nest losses. However in many areas of the Dales meadows are not cut until early July and meadows in ESA agreements cannot be cut before 7th July (Tier 1) or 15th July (Tier 2). It is also possible to negotiate a cutting date after 15th July for meadows in CSS agreements. Where possible all sites with breeding yellow wagtails should be cut after 15th July to ensure that any late nesting pairs can successfully fledge young before meadows are cut.

The increase in the number of sheep and a decrease in the number of cattle in the Dales is also likely to result in a shorter sward height in pastures that may have reduced the suitability of some of these breeding sites. Yellow wagtails have often been associated with cattle and cattle grazed areas presumably due to the number of associated dung invertebrates. A reduction in the number of cattle and possibly the use of avermectins to

control gut parasites in sheep and cattle may have reduced this important source of food. There are a number of research projects currently being undertaken looking into the use of avermectins and the effect on dung invertebrates. Any appropriate research findings or best practice recommendations should be implemented in the Dales.

The drainage of wet marshy areas may have reduced the number of suitable feeding sites for yellow wagtails. Encouraging small-scale re-wetting of pastures adjacent to suitable breeding habitat may help yellow wagtail populations. There is a need to undertake research to identify the ecological requirements of yellow wagtails and to determine precise habitat requirements. Once these have been identified they need to be incorporated into agri-environment scheme prescriptions in known yellow wagtail breeding areas and used to improve the habitat in potentially suitable areas. Although re-wetting prescriptions are available under CSS there is currently no specific re-wetting option available under ESA schemes. This needs to be addressed at the forthcoming agri-environment review. The majority of land in these areas is some of the most important from a farming and farm business perspective and changes in agri-environment scheme incentives should reflect this.

Due to the concerns from a number of organisations and individuals about yellow wagtail declines, the Yellow Wagtail Study Group was established in 2001. The objectives of this group are to collate existing population and habitat data from local and regional studies and to encourage further studies. The long-term aim is to disseminate any research data and habitat management advice to individuals and organisations involved in yellow wagtail conservation.

AIMS OF THE SPECIES ACTION PLAN

- To ensure that there is no further decline in the distribution and status of yellow wagtails in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.
- To increase in the long term the population and distribution of yellow wagtails in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

OBJECTIVES

To achieve these aims we need to:

- Determine the distribution of yellow wagtails in the Yorkshire Dales National Park by 2004.
- Determine the precise ecological requirements of the yellow wagtail and use this information to produce appropriate habitat management advice by 2006.
- Promote appropriate habitat management where yellow wagtails are known to be present within the Yorkshire Dales National Park by 2007.
- Promote appropriate habitat and conservation management in areas of potentially suitable yellow wagtail habitat by 2010.

ACTIONS & TARGETS

To achieve these objectives the following actions should be carried out and the targets achieved within the time-scale given:

Actions	Target date	3 year cost £
Undertake survey work to determine the current distribution of yellow wagtails in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.	2004	Officer and Volunteer Time
Devise and implement a program to monitor yellow wagtail populations in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.	2002	Officer and Volunteer Time
Determine the ecological requirements of, and causes of the yellow wagtail population decline through funding a PhD research project.	2006	45,000
Using the results from this research, produce guidelines detailing the habitat requirements of yellow wagtails.	2006	2,000
Where appropriate, encourage landowners and managers, through the use of advice and management grants, to implement positive conservation actions for yellow wagtail populations into existing and new agri-environment agreements in areas where yellow wagtails are known to be present (80% of known nest sites in agri-environment agreements by 2007).	2007	Agri-environment Scheme Funding
Where appropriate, encourage landowners and managers, through the use of advice and management grants, to implement positive conservation actions for yellow wagtail populations into existing and new agri-environment agreements in areas of potentially suitable yellow wagtail habitat.	2010	Agri-environment Scheme Funding

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTION PLAN?

Lead Agency	Key Partners
Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority	Landowners and managers English Nature Royal Society for the Protection of Birds DEFRA/RDS Volunteers University of Leeds