

## A6.98 Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

### 1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 1(1) Schedule 4	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 2 Unfavourable conservation status (vulnerable) and concentrated in Europe
Migratory		Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 4
Wintering	✓	EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	Extinct

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	1,500	15	1,102 (73% of GB population)
Ireland			
Biogeographic population	1,050,000	10,500	1,102 (0.1% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Wotton & Gillings 2000

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

### 3. Distribution

The Woodlark has a restricted global range that mostly lies in Europe. It breeds from southern Fennoscandia (south of 60°N), south to the Mediterranean and North Africa, and from Iberia east to the Urals and Iran (Cramp 1998; Tucker & Heath 1994). It is polytypic with two sub-species described. The nominate race *L. a. arborea* occurs across most of Europe, south to Portugal, northern Spain, northern Italy and Ukraine. *L. a. pallida* occurs further south of this range in North Africa, as well as further east, as far as Iran and Turkmenistan (Cramp 1988).

Woodlarks are widely distributed across Europe from Iberia to the Russian steppes, but have a generally southern distribution, occurring only in the southernmost parts of Scandinavia and Britain. This reflects its preference for Mediterranean and temperate climatic conditions with warm summers and mild winters. Western populations are sedentary, but further east birds migrate west and south from summer breeding areas to avoid severe continental winters. The species is absent from Ireland (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997).

In the UK, breeding is confined to southern England with most birds occurring in Dorset, Hampshire (especially the New Forest), Surrey, Sussex, Breckland and the Suffolk Coast.

Small populations have also recently become established in north Norfolk and the east Midlands. The preferred breeding habitat in England varies with location. Birds in the south-west use agricultural habitats, whilst those in southern England are largely found on heathland, and those in East Anglia depend on recently cleared or restocked forestry plantations (Gibbons *et al.* 1993).

Migratory behaviour also varies across the species' English distribution. East Anglian birds largely desert their breeding grounds in the winter, although a greater proportion of the birds in southern England remain on breeding areas throughout the year.

#### **4. Population structure and trends**

The European population of Woodlark is estimated at 1,050,376–2,239,048 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Numbers have fluctuated widely during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in north-west and central Europe, with several countries experiencing long-term declines. Up to two-thirds of the known European population is currently experiencing a reduction in range, particularly in Spain and France. Similarly in the UK and Finland, the northern limit of the range has moved south, and the species is now absent in Ireland. These declines have been attributed to the loss of dry grassland, fallow land and pasture to intensive agriculture, abandonment and afforestation, and the loss, or degradation of lowland heathland to agriculture, scrub invasion and development. Severe winters in north-west Europe may also cause local extinctions where numbers have already been reduced by habitat loss (Tucker & Heath 1994).

Woodlark populations have also fluctuated widely in the UK. Between the 1920s and early 1950s the population expanded and the species became widely distributed in England and Wales as far north as Yorkshire (Parslow 1973). This was followed by a rapid decline and contraction of range. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the population is thought to have fluctuated between 100–400 pairs (Sitters *et al.* 1996). The number of 10x10 km squares occupied in the breeding season in the UK decreased by 62% between 1968–1972 and 1988–1991. However, the population has since increased from an estimated 250 pairs in 1986 to around 1,500 pairs in 1997 (Wotton & Gillings 2000). The recent increase is thought to be largely because of a recent increase in the availability of breeding habitat in forestry plantations due to storm damage and clear felling.

#### **5. Protection measures for population in UK**

##### **SPA suite**

During the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Woodlark supports, on average about 1,102 pairs. This amounts to about 73% of the British breeding population. Woodlarks do not breed in Northern Ireland. The suite contains about 0.1% of the international population (Britain lies on the edge of the European range and numbers in the UK are small compared to elsewhere in Europe). The SPA suite contains seven sites (Table 6.98.1) where Woodlark has been listed as a qualifying species.

##### **Other Measures**

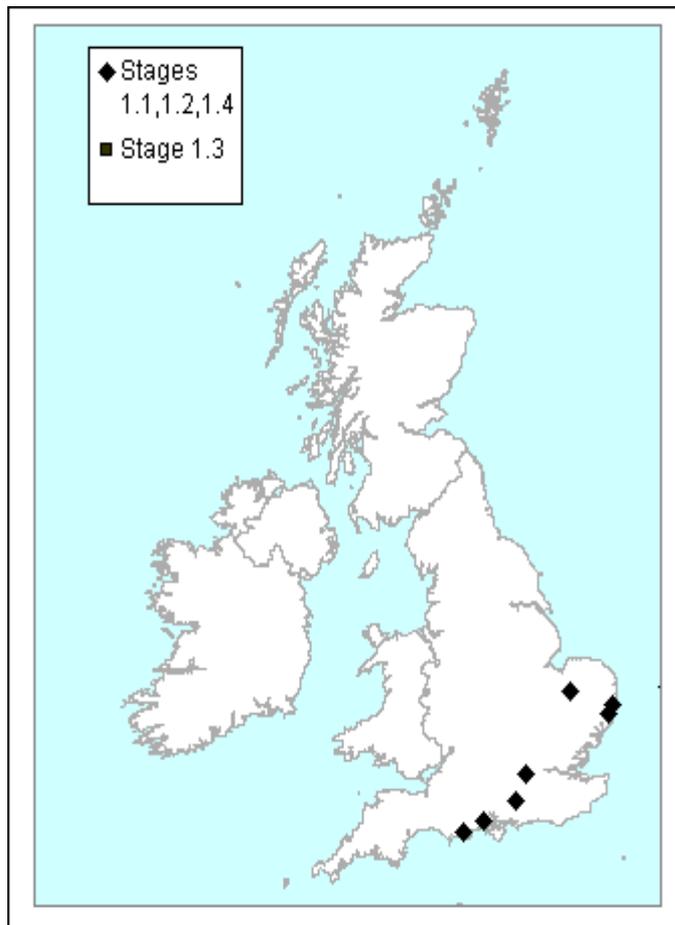
A Biodiversity Action Plan has been published for this species (Biodiversity Steering Group 1998) and is being implemented as part of the UK's national response to the Biodiversity Convention.

## 6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that support more than 1% of the national breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. All sites selected are multi-species SPAs, and are distributed in southern England and East Anglia, reflecting the distribution of Woodlarks in Britain.

Given that the selection of sites under Stage 1.1 resulted in a suite which gives very good coverage of Woodlark population and range in the UK, it was not considered necessary to select additional sites using Stage 1.4.

### Distribution map for breeding Woodlark SPA suite



**Table 6.98.1 – SPA suite**

<b>Site name</b>	<b>Site total</b>	<b>% of biogeographical population</b>	<b>% of national population</b>	<b>Selection stage</b>
Breckland	430	<0.1	28.7	1.1
Minsmere-Walberswick	20	<0.1	1.3	1.1
Dorset Heathlands	60	<0.1	4.0	1.1
New Forest	184	<0.1	12.3	1.1
Sandlings	154	<0.1	10.3	1.1
Thames Basin Heaths	149	<0.1	9.9	1.1
Wealden Heaths	105	<0.1	7.0	1.1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1,102</b>	<b>0.1%</b>	<b>73.4%</b>	