

North-South divide as bird numbers fall

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Farmland birds in southern England have suffered worse declines than their northern cousins in the face of more intensive farming and the "small but growing" impact of climate change, experts have suggested.

Populations of birds which rely on farmland to feed, nest and breed fell by 11 per cent in England between 1994 to 2008, according to official figures.

But the statistics expose a "north-south" divide in the fortunes of 19 species monitored.

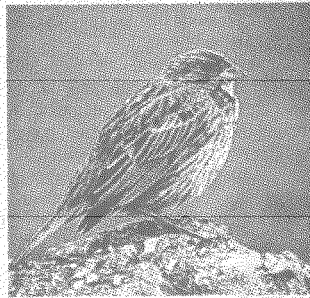
While populations in the North East, North West and Yorkshire held relatively stable over the 15-year period, numbers in the South East have dropped by almost a quarter (23 per cent).

Numbers also declined by more than 10 per cent in the South West, the South East, the East of England, the East Midlands and the West Midlands, the figures published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said.

Birds such as corn buntings, linnets, grey partridges, yellow wagtail, starling and turtle doves all saw their populations decline by more than a quarter over the 15-year period.

But others, including jackdaws and woodpigeons, saw numbers increase.

There were also indications that declines in populations were slowing, with overall numbers increasing by two per cent between 2007 and 2008 – following a six per cent drop in



11%

The amount by which populations of farmland birds such as the corn bunting – pictured above – have fallen since 1994

populations in the previous year.

Richard Gregory, head of species monitoring and research at the RSPB, said: "This report emphasises the continuing north-south divide in farmland bird populations.

"This is largely a result of

changing farming practices and land use patterns across England.

"With more fertile arable land in the south, the effects of agricultural intensification have been felt more severely."

And Mr Gregory said: "Another possible factor is the small, but growing, impact of climate change on the UK's wildlife.

"The impacts of global warming are being felt first in the south.

"Habitat loss and degradation are still the biggest issues facing wild birds, but we cannot ignore the new climate threat," he added.

Gareth Morgan, the RSPB's head of agricultural policy, said there were "encouraging signs" that the rate of decline in numbers of farmland birds – considered a key indicator of the health of the environment – may be slowing.

And he said: "We are confident that if farmers across the country get on board the industry's Campaign for the Farmed Environment and put environmental measures in place on their land for wildlife these figures will begin to turn around.

"Farmland birds such as skylarks, yellowhammers and lapwings have suffered in recent decades but there are ways farmers can make a positive difference."