

Turtle Doves at Sunrise

It's sunrise on a chilly May morning. I get rather wearily out of my car, and instantly hear the delightful 'tur-turr' of a turtle dove, perching on the telephone wires nearby. All fatigue lifts immediately, and suddenly the morning is golden and magical! I am setting out on a farm survey, plotting all farmland birds onto a map, in order to map their territories later in the season. It will take me at least three hours, and I'll be drenched in dew from the thighs down, but that sound has made it all worthwhile...

I am the new Community Projects Officer for Operation Turtle Dove in Suffolk. Operation Turtle Dove is a collaboration between the RSPB, Natural England, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust and Fair to Nature. The RSPB works internationally for the conservation of the Turtle Dove. They have been instrumental in the total ban on hunting Turtle Doves in France, Spain and Portugal over the last 4 years, and Operation Turtle Dove also works with landowners in England to improve habitat and feeding conditions for the birds.

My particular role is to assist smaller landowners and community groups to do what they can for Turtle Doves, particularly in areas where they have been known to breed in the past. After the 4-year ban on hunting, the numbers of the Western European Flyway Population have begun to bounce back – over 30% in the first 3 years of the ban. The turtle doves which arrive on our shores are part of this population, wintering in west Africa. We are on the extreme north-western edge of their natural range however, so it may take a bit longer before we start to see an increase here in Suffolk. When they do arrive back, what they need is actually quite simple, but not always common. Thick, scrubby, thorny hedges or thickets to nest in, easily accessible water, and seed. Studies have shown that seed is often the limiting factor, as farming methods now often don't leave a lot of space for the sort of arable 'weeds' that provide the seed that the doves need. On sandy soils, we advocate cultivating the soil and leaving the seeds in the soil to germinate and grow. On heavy soils, it is often necessary to sow a mixture of arable plants, as the soil seed bank does not seem to germinate as readily on clay. We have advisers who work with farmers as well, who are familiar with the agri-environment schemes which can enable the work. For smaller landowners, I have a small cultivator, which is quite adequate for creating the 5 x 8m plots we recommend. In time I also plan to recruit a team of volunteers, with whom I will be able to offer free help to small landowners (in Turtle Dove priority zones) for scrub / hedge management and pond maintenance, thus helping to maximise the amount of good Turtle Dove habitat in the area.

So, if you have Turtle Doves on your land, or have had in the recent past, then please get in touch! It is a free service, and I can visit to see how we may be able to optimise your patch for Turtle Doves and other wildlife... Also, if you hear or see a Turtle Dove, please submit your sighting to BirdTrack (<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack/about-birdtrack-app>).

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