

## **Enclosure of nesting site on St Mary's Lands during 2021 breeding season.**

The following has been written by qualified and experienced ecologists and ornithologists to clarify information relating to the protection of ground nesting birds at St Mary's Lands and provide further details on questions raised by FoSML.

Traditionally skylark use agricultural land for breeding. However, due to agricultural intensification in northern and western Europe since the 1960s a significant decline in numbers has been observed. However, the habitats of skylark are widespread and varied and rely mainly on areas where they will be no disturbance. For example, an old study (Delius, 1965) found that coastal dunes provided significantly higher productivity than agricultural habitat. Similarly, grasslands are one of the habitats that are used by skylarks for breeding. Grasslands regularly mown make them unsuitable for breeding skylark. Highly fertilised grass or crop fields grown for food are also unsuitable for breeding skylark (Wilson et al, 1997) and fields grown for silage have been shown to have low fecundity for skylark (Buckingham *et al*, 2015). It is recognised that grassland is the natural habitat of Skylark and agricultural intensification has caused a significant decline of this species due mainly to re-seeding, increased fertiliser levels and frequent mowing, which has shortened the breeding season and resulted in loss of nests (EC, 2007). However, meadow grasslands, which are not intensified such as the grassland at SML, although it grows tall, provides a mosaic vegetation structure of benefit for breeding skylark as has been seen since the fencing was erected.

At St Mary's Lands the protective fencing is erected in February/March which allows the grassland to remain undisturbed during the breeding season. Once the fence goes up, grass paths and the flying strip continue to be cut by the Council, the race day parking area is cut by the race course but no mowing is carried out in the central area grassland until August/early September. This management strategy is necessary, due to the risk of skylark chicks being killed or eggs being destroyed, which would also be illegal under British law.

Nesting and breeding skylarks have adapted to grass growing tall during the summer and will still raise several broods as normal. Grass management follows best practice in regards to the breeding bird season, where the Council must wait until ground nesting species such as skylark and meadow pipit have fledged their final young. Until then, the grass will grow as normal and the ground nesting birds have adapted over a long period of time to successfully rear their young.

The FoSML report cites websites with generic information on skylark and meadow pipit. In order to fully understand the reasoning and methods for protecting ground nesting birds at St Mary's Lands, it is important to appreciate the complexity of habitats this species inhabits. That information contained within the Bird Report (ELM, 2020) and the Study on Ground Nesting Bird Study and Potential Effects of User Activity (ELM, 2020) ensures that scientific facts and evidence on skylarks and their conservation is fully explained.

From informal conversations with dog walkers and other users at St Mary's Lands during bird survey work and monitoring visits showed that many were supportive of fencing, as long as the interpretation signs were clear explaining why such fencing was needed.

Subsequently, the Council produced very good temporary fence and clear signage for all users.

The skylark population has dropped from at least 60 pairs in the 1960s at St Mary's Lands to 11 pairs currently. This is a very severe drop in breeding pairs at the site and follows the national trend and the skylark is a red listed bird of conservation concern (RSPB, 2021). Without protective intervention to reduce disturbance e.g. temporary fencing, the skylark numbers will continue to drop to an extent where they will be in danger of extinction at St Mary's Lands, due to too few pairs to make a viable breeding population at the site.

The temporary fencing has been shown to be effective in ensuring that dog walkers are not accidentally traversing the main breeding grounds for skylark and meadow pipit. This has been personally observed by the ornithologist during 2021 from frequent visits to St Mary's Lands. During 2021, no dog walkers were observed within the enclosed area. Without any doubt, this is a key reason why the skylark numbers have gone from 8 to 11 pairs. We would predict that this number will increase further in 2022 as long as the fencing is installed again and possibly expanded to enclose further skylark pairs. The fencing is temporary and only used during the key months for skylark breeding e.g. April to August as they are multi-brooded. During the rest of the year, there is no fence present on Lammas Field. There is still a very large amount of land present for dog walkers in the spring and summer months, when the fencing is present.

A rope type fence would not provide adequate protection as this would easily be breached by dogs running loose. During 2019, we observed dog walkers and their dogs walking through skylark territories in grassland that was not enclosed. This happened often and such activity will not only disturb skylarks from their normal breeding behaviour, dogs can also kill chicks or damage eggs when found. The enclosure prevents this from happening as was the case in 2021. Essentially, this is why protection is needed and why the fencing provides a solution to secure ground nesting bird breeding at St Mary's Lands. During 2021, we observed dog walkers near the spinney, walking through unenclosed grassland with their dogs, right through skylark territories that were outside of the fence line. This would pose a direct danger to skylarks especially if happening on a daily basis. For this reason we have proposed that the fencing is expanded so further pairs of skylarks can be protected.

The Council recognizes that there must be a balance between user groups and nature conservation at St Mary's Lands. For too long, not enough action has been taken to protect ground nesting birds. The temporary fencing used, also used by organisations use such as the RSPB, has meant that the skylark population at St Mary's Lands has stabilised and slightly increased after an historical decline. Without the protective fencing, ground nesting birds would continue to decline and the nature conservation value of this site would be degraded as a consequence, given that skylarks are an iconic species for St Mary's Lands.

It is imperative that in order to protect skylarks at St Mary's Lands the structurally diverse meadow grassland must be maintained and enclosed by temporary fencing. It is our professional opinion and as a life-long ornithologist, that the temporary fencing must remain in use every year from now on at St Mary's Lands, if skylarks and meadow pipits are to continue to breed for future generations to enjoy.

## References

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