

Farmland Bird Survey Instructions

March 2026

*Thank you for undertaking a VMFW bird survey this year. **Please read through these instructions carefully.** If you have any questions, please email us at farmsurveys@rspb.org.uk.*

What to take with you

- **Map/s showing the boundary of the area you will be surveying**
- **[Farmland Bird Survey Recording Form](#)**
- **Binoculars**

A farm boundary map will be emailed to you. You will need a paper copy, so please let us know if you cannot print it out yourself. For large farms, we may send you more than one map so that the farm area is covered at a suitable scale for recording. You can also further enlarge parts of the map yourself, to make your recording easier.

The recording form can be accessed via the link and downloaded, but again, you will need a paper copy as the form cannot be filled in online (yet!).

Please also remember to set out with anything you need for your personal safety and wellbeing.

If there is anything you need to carry out your survey that you don't have or can't get, please contact us.

Initial farm visit

This visit must take place before any surveys are carried out and can be done before the start of the survey season on 1st April. The purpose of the visit is to meet the farmer and cover the following:

- Health and Safety Checklist
- Preferred methods of communication
- Planning the survey route

Health and Safety checklist

The checklist can be found at the end of the [Health and Safety Information for VMFW Farm Surveyors](#). Please read this document thoroughly and work through the checklist with your farmer so that they can advise you of anything you need to be careful of when walking around the farm.

Please also ask the farmer if there are any new hazards each time you visit the farm.

Preferred methods of communication

It is important that you maintain contact with your farmer, so that you can inform each other of anything that may affect your access to the farm or changes in your availability to complete the surveys.

Please make sure you **contact the farmer prior to each visit to the farm to discuss what time you plan to arrive and leave.**

You should aim to give at least **a week's notice** to the farmer before any visit and be willing to change days if they are not suitable. This is to ensure that they know when to expect you on their land and can rearrange the visit if necessary, for example if certain farm activities are being carried out, such as spraying.

You must also let the farmer know when you *actually* arrive and leave the farm.

Planning the survey route

When planning your route, try to include as much variation in the habitat as you can. For example, on a mixed farm, make sure you are including both arable land and pasture in your route.

Ask the farmer to show you on the map where they have actions for nature in place and focus your route on those areas. This may be, for example, where there are permanent grassy field margins or strips of land sown with a pollinator or wild-bird seed mix, or where they have created in-field features such as beetle banks. If a farm has taken little or no conservation action, just choose a route which includes a variety of vegetation, if this is possible.

Try to cover as many fields as you can. The route should go along the *edges* of fields. You do not need to walk around a whole field – just one edge is sufficient. Avoid walking down both sides of the same field boundary to minimise the risk of counting the same birds twice.

This recording method is a Timed Species Count (TSC), and we would like you to record birds for 2 hours. For guidance, your route will probably be around 3.5 to 5km long, depending on terrain and your surveying pace.

In this example, the green patch is the farm area, and the pale blue line is a route which takes around 2 hours to survey. The route does not have to be circular, but it may be most convenient for it to be so.



The route can be approximated on the farm map before you set out and then refined on the ground. We recommend that you walk the survey route during your initial visit to the farm, perhaps with the farmer, so that you can familiarise yourself with the route and have the opportunity to address any access issues.

Remember that you are not there to survey the whole farm but are surveying a representative area of the farm according to a standardised method. **The time you spend counting birds is the key factor, not the distance you cover.**

If you have any concerns or questions about setting up the survey route, please contact us for advice.

Survey visits

Two survey visits to the farm should be made:

- **First visit** between **1st April** and **14th May**
- **Second visit** between **15th May** and **30th June**

Please make the visits **around a month apart**. A longer interval is fine, but please don't make the visits closer than three weeks apart. This is so that you see the maximum number of species as different species are more obvious at different times of year.

Try to complete each visit by 10 a.m., which means starting by 8 a.m., but if you cannot manage this timing, just do the best you can. Bird activity is higher at this time of day, so you will be likely to see more birds and get better results. Record the date of the visit, and the start / end times, on the recording form or on your survey map.

Pick a day for the survey visits when the weather is reasonable, as wind and rain can suppress bird activity. Walk the survey route at a slow and steady pace, recording all the birds that you see or hear, trying to make sure you don't double-count birds as you go. You can pause to scan for birds, but do not stop for long periods.

Recording birds

Record all the **adult birds you see or hear** as you walk your survey route, using either just the survey map, or a combination of the survey map and the recording form.

As a minimum, you should record the location of the key 'species of interest' on the map, as described in the next section, but for the remainder, we just need numbers, so the recording form would be sufficient. You may find it easier to record everything on the survey map and not use the recording form at all, or you may prefer to use a combination of the two to avoid the map getting too crowded.

- **Do not record juvenile birds.** We recognise that it is not always easy to determine juveniles, particularly later in the season, so just exclude the obvious 'baby' birds.
- If you see a large group of birds, please try to estimate the number of individuals in the group. Only count adult birds. Please record this as an exact number (rather than a range or 'n+'), even if you are not 100% sure of it.
- If you wish, **record any breeding evidence** you notice. The full list of breeding evidence codes can be found here: [Breeding codes](#). The simplest behaviours to spot are usually a singing male, a male/female pairing, or activity around a nest. But don't worry if you don't feel confident in identifying breeding evidence; we do not need you to record it.
- Any **field notes** you wish to make about each sighting can be entered into the Comments field in BirdTrack. This is not obligatory, and we will not use anything in the Comments field in a formal way, but it could help us to understand more about how birds are using the farm.
- Birds that are just passing over the site (e.g., a flock of gulls or a single heron flying high) should be recorded but noted as "**flying over**". Even if they are unlikely to be using the farm habitat, they may still be of interest to the farmer. Birds can be flagged as flying over under the Breeding evidence function in BirdTrack.

Mapping 'species of interest'

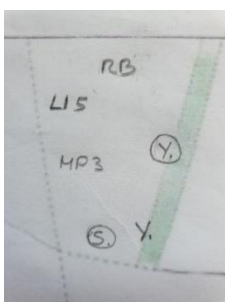
THIS IS REALLY IMPORTANT, AS IT IS A KEY PART OF THE REPORT FOR THE FARMER!

The recording form shows a number of species which are coloured **red**, **amber**, or **green**, with an asterisk beside them, e.g. **Skylark***.

We have called these 'species of interest' and have defined them as those species for which there is specific conservation action that can be taken by farmers to help them, e.g. Turtle Dove, or species which farmers particularly like to see, such as Barn Owl.

By mapping the locations of these species, we can create a map for the farmer in their report which shows them where the more notable species were found on their farm. These maps are very popular with our farmers!

Plot the coloured birds on the survey map, using the correct code from the list on the recording form, e.g. Y. for Yellowhammer, RB for Reed Bunting.



This example shows how you might record birds on the survey map. It shows the precise locations of a Reed Bunting, five Linnets, three Meadow Pipits, one singing male Yellowhammer, another Yellowhammer (not singing), and a singing male Skylark.

When you submit your results in BirdTrack, you will be able to use the 'Pinpoint' function to generate an accurate grid reference for each species sighting. This is what we will use to create the farmer's map.

Photos and confidentiality

We do not require you to take photos, but if you have the opportunity to take pictures of any of the birds that you see, we would love you to share them with us. Also, the [VMFW BirdTrack Instructions](#) tell you how to upload photos of birds for identification purposes with your data.

Please treat all sightings as confidential and do not divulge them either in person or in writing, including social media.

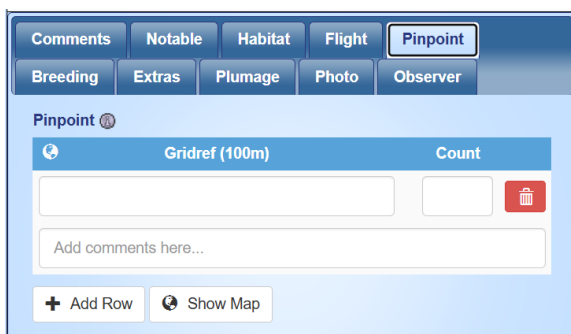
Bird identification resources

Consider installing an app on your phone, for example the Collins Bird Guide app (£7.99) or the Merlin Bird ID app. Some of the advantages of using an app are that searching for a bird is quicker, you can zoom in on detail, and you can play sounds and calls in the field for immediate comparison to what you are hearing.

If you are looking to buy a book, consider the paperback version of the Collins Bird Guide (3rd Edition) or consider the [Collins BTO Guide to British Birds](#).

Submitting your survey results

Please submit your survey data via BirdTrack, making sure you use the pinpoint function to indicate the location of the 'species of interest'.



Gridref (100m)	Count

Add comments here...

+ Add Row Show Map

Full instructions on how to do this this can be found in the [VMFW BirdTrack Instructions](#).

If you are not confident using BirdTrack or would like us to enter the data for you, you can send us a neat copy of your recording forms and survey maps so that we can lift the data from them.

If you need any help with this, please contact us at farmsurveys@rspb.org.uk.

The results from the bird surveys will be used for analysis and the creation of individual reports for the farmer and summary reports for sharing more widely. The data will also feed into national datasets which are providing evidence for how bird populations are changing across the country.

Please submit your results to us AS SOON AS POSSIBLE after you have finished your surveys, and by 31st July at the VERY LATEST. We would like to get the reports out to farmers promptly so that they can make land management decisions and act for nature over the coming autumn and winter period.

Thank you from the whole VMFW team. Enjoy your surveying!