

England Twite Recovery Project Update, November 2020

By Katie Aspin, Twite Project Officer

Hello and welcome to the 2020 Twite Project newsletter, in what has been a particularly tough year. I hope that you are all keeping safe and well during these testing times. I'm very happy to be back working on the project after more than a year off on maternity leave and then furlough and would like to thank Hilary and Seonaidh for their excellent work over the past year.

I would like to update you on what we have been doing so far this year and on all the exciting things we have planned for next year. Firstly, as some of you are new to the project, I want to start by giving a bit of background to the project and why it's so important.



Photo credit – Tom Marshall

An introduction to Twite

- Twite are hardy seed eating finches that live in remote upland and coastal areas, mainly in Scotland but with small numbers in North Wales, Northern Ireland and the Pennines.
- In England, twite were once a common sight in the Pennines, so much so that they gained the nickname of Pennine Finch.
- However, over the last few decades they have undergone dramatic declines, due in part to the reduction in hay meadows and the resulting reduction in their food supply.
- This has contributed to a 72% decline in the English twite population since 1999.
- It's now estimated that there are less than 170 breeding pairs remaining in England, the majority of which are in the South Pennines.

Project Background

The England Twite Recovery Project (ETRP) began in 2008, working to halt this decline in twite abundance and range. During this time, staff have worked with farmers in the South Pennines to restore and improve traditional hay meadows and pastures to increase key twite food plants, including dandelion, common sorrel, and autumn hawkbit. Nearly 700 ha of land is managed to benefit twite through agri-environment schemes, and over 200 ha of land has been reseeded with these key food plants. The project has also trialled various new methods to fill twite breeding season food gaps. These measures not only help twite, but many other upland species in the South Pennines.

Work so far this year

After a pause in work due to Covid, we have been busy with field work since the end of August. We managed to plant over 3000 Autumn Hawkbit plants at 6 sites, including on 4 farms and on National Trust and Yorkshire Water land close to twite



A volunteer plants Autumn hawkbit near to twite breeding grounds in the Wessenden Valley.

nesting grounds with the help of our excellent volunteers. These plants will flower and set seed late summer/early autumn next year, providing juvenile and adult twite with a much-needed food source before they migrate to the east coast for the winter. This brings the total Autumn hawkbit planted by the project to over 9000 since 2017.

Upcoming work for 2021

We are in the process of planning lots of innovative and exciting new projects to help twite for next spring, including:

Heavy grazing trial repeat – The purpose of this trial is to see if grazing an area heavily and causing lots of disturbance creates more gaps for dandelion germination, an important food plant for twite. We completed the first stage of this trial in 2019, where 10 farms kindly took part and volunteers monitored the impact of the heavy grazing on sward height and dandelion abundance. Unfortunately, Covid put a stop to our repeat of the trial this year, but we are planning to complete this again in 2021 at the same 10 farms and hopefully some additional farms too (please get in touch if you want to be involved!). If this trial is successful, it's something that could easily be rolled out to more South Pennines farms in the future to benefit twite in the early part of their breeding season.

Feeding stations – We will again be setting up feeding stations to provide twite with a supplementary food source when natural food is scarce. A small number of these will start running in January to provide food for twite overwintering in the South Pennines, followed by at least 12 feeding stations dotted around the South Pennines running between the end of March and mid-May and then re-starting again between mid/late July and the beginning of October. Volunteers will help to manage these feeding stations and monitor for use by twite and other species.



*Twite feeding on nyger seed at a feeding station.
Photo credit – Phil Kenyon.*

Care and maintenance visits – I really missed getting out and about visiting the farms and seeing the beautiful hay meadows this year, so I will be looking forward to this next year! We will be offering management advice to the farmers who manage their land to benefit twite to make sure the meadows and pastures provide as much food for twite as possible. The key twite management includes:

- Late cutting dates for meadows (at least after 15th July, but preferably longer)
- Leaving areas of the meadows uncut (meadow edges and corners)
- Spring and autumn grazing, preferably with cattle to keep grasses in check



One of the restored meadows in full bloom.

- Sticking to low grazing levels in pastures through late spring and summer
- Controlling rushes so they don't take up valuable wildflower growing space

Please continue to stick to your agri-environment prescriptions and get in touch if you need any advice.

Monitoring – The twite nest sites were last monitored in 2016, so we are keen to re-monitor in 2021 to see if our interventions so far have had an impact on the size and range of the English twite population. This would involve surveying the same 18 monitoring sites between May and June 2021.

Predator fence pilot – we think that predators may be having an impact on the nest success of our South Pennine birds, in particular those that nest in bracken. We are therefore planning to fence off one of the nest sites to firstly assess the practicalities of putting a fence up and getting it to stay up in an upland environment, and secondly to see if it is successful at deterring predators. This is something which has generally been done for waders, so it's going to be interesting to see if it works for ground nesting passerines, particularly in an upland environment. If the pilot is a success, this is something which would be rolled out to other nest sites in the South Pennines.

Winter fodder crop – in Scotland and Ireland winter fodder plots have successfully been used to provide a food source for twite over winter. We want to try this in the South Pennines by planting a crop of fodder radish in spring, leaving it to grow over summer and into autumn to be ready to start providing seed for twite from October through the winter. We will monitor to see if twite use this, including whether it results in more birds overwintering in the South Pennines. If you are interested in getting involved with this and have some land we could use, please get in touch.

Doveholes Quarry – with the help of volunteers we hope to work with the quarry owners, Cemex, to monitor the twite population at Doveholes after we sadly had to cancel the monitoring this year due to lockdown. The volunteers, Peter and George, have continued to run the feeding station next to the quarry, with birds using it at varying times through the year. Peter and George have made detailed records of the colour ringed birds using the feeding station and 30 additional birds were colour ringed at the site this year.

Tree planting – we are continuing to keep in touch with organisations including the Woodland trust, National Trust and Yorkshire water regarding proposed tree planting schemes, so the habitat needs of twite are considered when tree planting plans are being prepared.

Long term strategy – we are developing a long-term strategy for the English twite population, with conservation measures in place for the next few years that will aim to turn around the species decline and make twite once again a common sight in the South Pennines.

Twite ringing sponsorship – We will be continuing to run the twite ringing sponsorship that was started in 2019. You can sponsor a ring(s) for one of the South Pennines twite for a suggested donation of £25 per ring. All income will be used to cover the costs of ringing; any surplus will be used to support the Twite Recovery Project. You can also sponsor a feeding station for a suggested donation of £62, with all money going toward buying the seed. For further information or to donate contact mike.harris@rspb.org.uk. Please send any colour ringed twite sightings to jamedunning8@gmail.com.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this newsletter. Many thanks for your continued support of the Twite Recovery Project. With your help we will continue to work towards our aim of securing the future of twite in England.



Photo credit – Phil Kenyon

For advice on land management for twite, to find out more about volunteering for the project or for further information please contact -

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With thanks to our partners



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