



English Twite Recovery Project Newsletter, December 2019

By Hilary McGuire, Twite Project Officer

Hello! For those of you I haven't met yet, my name is Hilary and I am the Twite Recovery Project Officer, covering for Katie Aspin while she is on maternity leave. Although I have only been in the role for about 6 months, the Twite Project is undergoing another change! I am moving into another role within the RSPB in December, so from January 2020 onwards the main contact for the Twite Project will be Seonaidh Jamieson who can be contacted at seonaidh.jamieson@rspb.org.uk. All project work will go ahead as planned, and further updates about farm visits, volunteer opportunities and upcoming habitat interventions will come from Seonaidh or another member of the conservation team.

This newsletter will provide an update on the work of the Twite Recovery Project in 2019 but first, here is a quick recap of the project background.

Project Background

The English Twite Recovery Project (ETRP) began in 2008, working to halt the severe declines in twite abundance and range. The ETRP has 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, and over 200 ha of land has been reseeded with these key food plants. Despite this work, the most recent monitoring in 2016 showed that there are fewer than 170 pairs of breeding twite left in England. This could be due to several factors: grassland restoration takes time and the beneficial effects of this work may not yet be apparent, and other factors related to nesting habitat and wintering ground food sources may be affecting twite populations.

What is the project doing to address declines?

Protecting and enhancing existing twite habitat remains a top priority for the project. Here are the key actions we have taken in 2019:

Care and Maintenance Visits

I had a great introduction to the project, visiting about 20 farms and talking to farmers about how they are managing their meadows and pastures to provide food for twite. I was pleased to see that growing conditions this year have been much better overall than in 2018 when the summer drought severely reduced wildflowers, as well as hay yield and grazing availability. A few themes emerged in the advice I gave farmers to enhance the wildflower cover of their twite fields:

1. Increase spring and autumn grazing to keep grasses from becoming overabundant, allowing wildflowers the space and light they need to



A pasture in August with excellent sward height and diversity, and lots of twite food!

grow. If grazing during the summer this should be less intensive, giving the wildflowers the chance to flower and set seed.

2. Keep on top of rushes so that they do not spread across fields, choking out wildflowers and reducing grazing availability. Your scheme prescriptions will indicate the acceptable level of rush cover for your fields. Rush management advice can be found here: https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/documents/farming-advice/rushmanagementadvisorysheet_england_207540.pdf

If I didn't make it to your farm this summer and you would like advice on improving your fields for twite, please do get in touch.

Autumn Hawkbit Planting and Monitoring

Autumn hawkbit is a key foodplant for twite as it flowers and sets seed late in the summer, providing a food source right through to October. In 2017 over 3,000 autumn hawkbit plug plants were added to farms in key locations for twite and these were monitored in 2018 and again this year. We have found that there were more growing in the planted areas than in similar areas elsewhere, with the plants persisting into their second year. Result! It became clear from speaking to farmers that the autumn hawkbit grew particularly well in fields where grazing pressure was high in early spring, and then eased off in summer.

Another 3,250 autumn hawkbit plug plants were added to five farms in September and October of 2019. Thank you to the hardworking volunteers who joined me in the planting work. This habitat enhancement work directly addresses the late season gap in food supply that has been identified by our research.



A July hay meadow bursting into bloom with autumn hawkbit

Heavy Grazing Trial

I would like to say a huge thank you to those farmers and volunteers who took part in the heavy grazing trial this spring! 10 farms participated and 12 volunteers put in an amazing 189 hours of monitoring work, looking at the effects of increased stocking density on dandelion germination. Dandelions are among the first flowers to set seed each spring, providing an important source of food for twite when they return from their wintering grounds. The heavy grazing trial aimed to reduce vegetation height and create areas of bare ground from the footfall of livestock, creating positive conditions for dandelion germination.

An analysis of the results showed that the heavy grazing significantly reduced the vegetation height, which is good news for dandelions and wildflowers that require space and light in order to germinate. There was no significant difference in dandelion abundance between control and treatment fields, but we did not expect to see a difference in the first year of the trial. We are aiming to repeat the trial in spring of 2020, so if you would like to get involved please contact Seonaidh!

Supplementary Feeding Stations

Driven by research and previous trials, 2019 saw the establishment of 5 new supplementary feeding stations in addition to the 7 that have been in operation for several years. Dedicated volunteers put out nyjer seed in key areas next to known twite breeding locations and then monitor these sites for usage by twite once or more each week. The aim of this work is to ensure that twite have a constant supply of food early in their nesting period when it is most needed and natural food is scarce. From March to May we had 196 twite sightings at the feeding stations, with 25 sightings of colour-ringed birds. This information is invaluable in understanding where twite are breeding, their use of food and their survival rates from year to year. Thank you to the volunteers who dedicate so much time to helping our favourite little brown bird!



Twite feeding on nyjer seed at a supplementary feeding station. Photo: Phil Kenyon

Population Modelling

Last year's newsletter provided an update on the population modelling study the RSPB Conservation Science team has conducted. The study has identified several likely environmental causes of decline, these include late season food availability, and lower nest productivity in bracken compared to heather. The project steering group is putting together proposals to address these causes and to gain further information where necessary.

Twite Ringing Sponsorship

Members of the public were given the opportunity to sponsor their own ringed twite in 2019 for a suggested donation of £25. 19 birds were sponsored and £485 was raised, with all funds going directly to twite conservation efforts in 2020. BirdGuides sponsored their own twite and ran a naming competition, generating welcome publicity for the project.

Next Steps for the Twite Recovery Project

Our project priorities for the next few months are as follows:

Repeat of the heavy grazing trial – From March-May 2020 we will be repeating the heavy grazing trial to see if heavy ground disturbance leads to increased dandelion germination.

Supplementary feeding for an extended time period – Driven by the results of the population modelling study, we plan to provide supplementary food at feeding stations in late summer/early autumn as well as in the spring. We hope that this extra food will improve the condition of twite prior to their migration to their coastal wintering grounds. Some generous donors have sponsored our feeding stations in 2020, ensuring that we can continue providing extra food for twite when they most need it.

Continued care and maintenance for farmers managing their land for twite – Enhancing habitat for breeding twite in partnership with farmers and land managers continues to be a priority for the project. Care and maintenance visits will form an important part of this; if you would like advice on how to increase the availability of food or nesting habitat on your land, please get in touch!

If you spot any colour-ringed twite, please report them to Jamie Dunning, who has been working with other volunteers since 2014 marking twite with a unique combination of lightweight, coloured leg rings to track their movements and ecology. Jamie can be contacted at (jamiedunning8@googlemail.com).

For advice on land management for twite, to find out more about volunteering for the project or for further information please contact Seonaidh Jamieson, RSPB Twite Project Officer (phone - 07736722177, email – seonaidh.jamieson@rspb.org.uk)

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