

English Twite Recovery Project Update Autumn 2017

By Katie Aspin, Twite Project Officer

Hello. Welcome to your autumn Twite Recovery Project update. I wanted to share with you some of the work that we have been doing this year, but first a quick recap.

The Twite Recovery Project was set up in 2008 in response to the decline in twite numbers and range in England, where populations are estimated to have declined by 72% since 1999. The project is a partnership between Natural England and the RSPB and aims to halt this decline and increase the population breeding at new/existing sites. To do this we have been working with South Pennines landholders to change the way that meadows and pastures are managed to increase the availability of twite food plants during the breeding season. The key achievements of the project so far include:



Photo Credit - Tom Marshall

- 68 landholders signed 10 year agri-environment agreements with options to benefit twite.
- This includes approximately 585 ha of land that is now managed to provide natural food sources for twite throughout the breeding season.
- Approximately 285 ha of land has been reseeded with twite friendly food sources (dandelion/common sorrel/autumn hawkbit) and restored back to hay meadow habitat.

We have been continuing to work with landholders this year, here are some of the things we have been doing.

Farm visits

Annette Evans (NE Land Adviser, Yorkshire Pennines team) and I have been out visiting as many landholders as possible over the summer. During the visits we completed plant surveys in the meadows and pastures that are managed for twite, recording the amount of key twite plant species, as well as other wildflowers. We have also been offering advice on ways that management can be tweaked to further increase the amount of wildflowers. We have really enjoyed meeting the project landholders and seeing how well the hay meadows are establishing.



Hay meadow with key twite food plants

Filling twite food gaps

The habitat monitoring work that was done in 2016 on a sample of reseeded sites showed that there were food gaps early and late in the twite breeding season. We have been working on ways to fill these food gaps.

To fill the early food gap, we have been asking farmers to take part in a hay strewing management trial. This will involve strewing species-rich hay/haylage along wall edges in March and April 2018 when twite return to the South Pennines from their wintering grounds. This will hopefully provide a supplementary food source for twite when natural food sources are scarce. We are hoping to monitor whether this is an effective approach with the help of volunteers.

We were able to secure some Natural England funding to buy more than 3000 autumn hawkbit plug plants this year. Autumn hawkbit flowers and sets seed in late July right through to early October, providing twite with a much needed late food source. The plug plants were planted on five farms in September with the help of some excellent volunteers. A big thank you to the volunteers and landholders involved.

Twite volunteer survey

11 volunteers carried out surveys for breeding twite this year. This included coverage of traditional twite breeding sites as well as areas that have not previously been surveyed. The volunteers were very dedicated and made a total of 31 visits and spent approximately 100 hours surveying. Twite were recorded at four of the sites. A particular hotspot was Wessenden Head Reservoir, where twite were regularly observed feeding on seeds of blinks and water forget-me-not in the reservoir outlet channel. A massive thank you to those involved and the landowners who gave us permission to survey.

Twite ringing project

Since 2014, Jamie Dunning has been working with other volunteers to mark twite with a unique combination of lightweight, coloured leg rings in order to track various aspects of their ecology. Over the four years, they have caught and colour ringed approximately 500 twite.

With the help of a network of scientists and birdwatchers who check flocks of twite for these leg rings, Jamie has been successful in showing where they spend their winters when not in the uplands, as well as where the birds choose to feed and nest in relation to one another. Jamie tells us how his ringing data has been able to show how a twite that hatched in West Yorkshire spends its year:



3215 plug plants ready for planting



Volunteers planting autumn hawkbit plug plants above Baitings Reservoir, Ripponden

“Z380975 was ringed in September of 2015, having hatched shortly beforehand from a nest somewhere on the moors either side of the M62 motorway. She was observed in a large flock of juvenile birds before capture and was released back into the same flock along with attending adults. It is not unusual for twite to form ‘nursery parties’ where adults will look after a large flock of younger birds regardless of parentage, shortly after fledging.



Photo credit – Jamie Dunning

Colour ringed adult twite feeding juvenile

In January 2016, our bird was in Norfolk amongst 30 others, including birds from the small group, which breed in Derbyshire. They stayed in Norfolk up until around 1 February, when they moved south to Dunwich pools, Suffolk. This again is fairly typical. Although we believe that twite have favoured and known wintering sites, birds will wander over the winter in order to find the best food sources. We have had birds as far south as Kent in recent years.

In May 2016, this twite was back in West Yorkshire, where she had paired with a male and was attending a nest near Rishworth. Unfortunately we don't know the outcome of this nest. She was last seen in March 2017; it's possible that she went on to breed a second time and may then have moved back to Norfolk for the winter months. This is so far unconfirmed.”

If you spot any colour-ringed twite, please report them to Jamie (jamedunning8@googlemail.com). A big thank you to Jamie and the volunteers working on this project.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this update. 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.

For further information please contact -

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The project is currently funded by RSPB and Natural England with contributions from Marshalls and Yorkshire Water.