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## Balancing Biodiversity with Intensive Land-use

The past year has seen a remarkable shift in the outlook for arable farmers. While much of the economy may look shaky, farm prospects for cereal growers are the best they have been for a decade. This time last year a farmer could expect some £60 per tonne for his wheat; now he could be looking for £180 or £200. Poor weather world-wide, bio-fuel production, and increasing demand in Asia have been the causes for this shift. The inevitable result will be that in UK land will be farmed more intensively.

One further result may be a significant set-back in Britain's conservation plans for the countryside – in particular the Biodiversity Action Plan, started in 1995 and due to complete in 2010. Two developments indicate this:

- The loss of set-aside land (8% in 2006/7; 0% in 2007/8)
- The now uncompetitive Agri-Environment Schemes which were largely costed on a profit-forgone basis.

What can be done? While there are important changes that should be made to the Common Agricultural Policy, it is a good time to recognize that to retain biodiversity in an intensively-used countryside, we need to manage wildlife too and not leave it to chance. There are lessons to be learnt from game management, which has always left as little to chance as possible when it comes to game production.

Research by us and the RSPB shows that controlling predators can significantly improve the breeding of birds like lapwing, curlew and golden plover (*The predation of wild birds in the UK*. RSPB, Sandy, 2007). Further, work in progress by us indicates that this is likely to be true for some songbirds too, like blackbird, song thrush, chaffinch and dunnock (*Songbirds at Loddington*. Stoate, White and Szczur, GWCT, 2008). Predator control to help rare birds, like the capercaillie or stone curlew, is simpler to argue for than, for example, the control of magpies to help thrushes and blackbirds. It seems to go against the "balance of nature" concept.

Two facts, however, suggest a "balance of nature" in this context is misplaced:

- Control of pests and predators has been part of farming and the countryside at least since Tudor times. It was not just a Victorian invention to support game shooting. (*Silent Fields*. Roger Lovegrove, Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Changing Britain's land-cover from forest to farmland altered our original biodiversity and allowed opportunist predators to flourish. (*A Question of Balance*. Tapper, GCT. 1999)

Who would fund a more managed approach to wildlife? Apart from some special conservation cases, in general we think game interests to a large extent already do. They simply need encouragement and more support in the legislation.

Dr Stephen Tapper. 17 March 2008