

4.3 Passerines

If you want to increase passerine¹ birds on your moor, this fact sheet helps you understand their habitat and diet requirements.

The species covered are the commoner moorland passerines that breed in England and Wales:

- Meadow pipit
- Skylark
- Stonechat
- Whinchat
- Wheatear
- Ring ouzel

Broad habitat relationships

The study examined detailed abundance relationships for the first five species and coarser presence/absence relationships for the last one above. Several other passerine species breed on moorland, from the widespread wren to the rare and highly localised twite, but these were not included in the study.

Meadow pipit and skylark occur widely on moorlands, with the ubiquitous meadow pipit being the most abundant moorland bird.

Wheatear, whinchat and stonechat are more restricted in where they are found. They tend to be most abundant at lower altitudes and sometimes on relatively steep ground. Wheatears are often associated with old sheepfolds and stone walls that are often used as nesting sites.

The increasingly rare ring ouzel is restricted to steep sided valleys and gullies on moorland, often where crags and scree occur. They are found breeding from the lower ground on moorland, up to altitudes of over 800 m.

Biodiversity value & status

Of the moorland passerine species considered in this study:

- Skylark and ring ouzel are red listed in the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern
- Meadow pipit and stonechat are amber listed in the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern

¹ Passerines are songbirds that perch

- Skylark is on both the England and Welsh Section 74 lists of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act of species the conservation of which will be promoted by the Governments

[Note: Skylarks are red listed because of declines on lowland farmland largely, and stonechats are amber listed because of an unfavourable conservation status in Europe. Updating of the national Biodiversity Action Plans could add further species to the high status list above].

The moorland passerine community, and meadow pipits in particular, provide an important prey source for some moorland raptors that are of high conservation importance (e.g. hen harrier and merlin). Maintaining high passerine densities on moorland may therefore have direct effects on the status of other species of higher conservation importance.

Habitat Requirements

The key associations with vegetation characteristics identified in the current study detailed below.

Main preferences of different moorland breeding passerines for compositional and structural features of moorland vegetation

Meadow pipit	Grass-heather mix, with 30 – 40 % heather cover. High cover of sedges and/or <i>Sphagnum</i> moss. Moderately dense vegetation structure, with little vegetation of <15 cm tall.
Skylark	High cover of grasses and sedges, low heather cover. Extensive short (<15 cm), open, vegetation.
Wheatear	Grass-heather mixes with high bracken cover. 40 – 60 % cover of short (<15 cm) heather and other dwarf shrubs, and high variability in vegetation height.
Whinchat	High cover of bracken, plus grass-heather mix, with 30 – 40 % heather cover. Extensive dense, tall (>30 cm) vegetation, but with patches of shorter vegetation interspersed in the sward.
Stonechat	High cover of tall (>30 cm) heather, but with bracken and grass interspersed in the sward. Low sedge cover. Tall (>30 cm), dense, sward overall, but with high level of variability in height.

No useful information on ring ouzel habitat requirements was produced from this study. However, from other studies it is known that they select tall, dense, heather for nesting, but short (<15 cm), open, grass patches for foraging, with these often part of a grass-heather mosaic.

Dietary Requirements:

As with other moorland birds, a wide range of invertebrate groups are taken by passerines (see the Birds Overview fact sheet 4 and invertebrates fact sheet 5). However, some groups are of particular importance.

- Passerines feed on both sub-surface invertebrates and invertebrates that are active on and above the ground surface. Overall, they tend to take more foliar insects, such as bugs and moths and caterpillars than do other bird groups on moorlands
- The bulk of ring ouzel's diet generally comprise earthworms (at least until the chicks have left the nest). This is a rare or unique phenomenon amongst moorland breeding passerines. Adult beetles and leatherjackets are also important in the diet of ring ouzel chicks
- Moorland breeding meadow pipits feed largely on larval and adult craneflies, caterpillars, and adult and larval moths, and beetles during the breeding season
- Beetles (adults and larvae) and adult and larval sawflies can be important to moorland breeding whinchat

Information Sources

See details in fact sheet 4.

A Project funded by Defra, English Nature and Countryside Council for Wales undertaken by ADAS, CEH, IGER, RSPB, Scottish Agricultural Colleges, University of Newcastle and Penny Anderson Associates Ltd.