

# The RISE & FALL of the WHINCHAT

How did this once common British bird lose so much ground – and what can we do to help?  
By *Ben Macdonald*



↑ **PRICKLY PAIR**  
A male (left) and female Whinchat, complete with prey

→ PRIME LOCATION

Wales's Brecon Beacons is a stronghold for Whinchats

**I**N JUST A couple of months, the hillsides of the Brecon Beacons will be teeming with life. Here, above the chemical chaos below, Tree Pipits, Cuckoos and Redstarts hunt the 'fridd': the bracken and tree-studded hillsides that provide their summer home. But it's the Whinchat – white, black, brown and orange-pink, that often steals the show. Whinchats are both colourful and subtle. They are obvious and yet, if seeking their nests for study, wily, too. They are, like many British species, in decline. Today, we consider Whinchats an upland bird – but theirs is a story of retreat. Once upon a time, as they say, Whinchats were a common bird of our wider countryside.

In the 19th Century, Whinchats bred across Britain. Only Caithness, in the north, and some eastern counties, like Lincolnshire, did not hold breeding birds. Though commonest in Wales, Whinchats bred at high densities across southern England, from Devon to Kent. They were particularly common across the downs of the south-east, throughout the east Midlands, northern England, Borders and the southern Highlands. While early losses of subsistence agriculture spelt disaster for the Wryneck and Red-backed Shrike, the 19th Century showed little discernable change in Whinchat abundance. If some grasslands were vanishing, there were two quirks in Whinchat distribution that kept offering them new hope. Firstly, sheep were introduced to graze hillsides in the 19th Century. The Historical Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland suggests that such livestock, destroying all else but the bracken Whinchats prefer for nesting, would have benefited this species in the uplands. Secondly, Witherby (1938) noted an early 20th Century adaptation to nesting along railway cuttings and embankments. Even until the 1930s, few declines had been noted. Indeed, Lack (1944) noted no change in distribution between the 19th Century and the World War II.

Enormous declines

Between 1945 and the 1960s, however, the Whinchat underwent enormous declines in range. These occurred first in its lowland downland and grassland habitats – in the Midlands and south-east England.

By the First BTO Atlas, in 1968-72, Whinchats had been lost from the majority of 10km squares across south-east England, eastern England and much of the Midlands, but still bred across the North Kent marshes, the Somerset Levels, the New Forest, the central Midlands, and most of northern England.

By the Second Atlas, in 1998-91, the retreat was in full swing, with birds lost from widespread, disparate sites across West Norfolk, southern England, the Midlands and large lowland areas of north-east England.

Between the Second and New Atlas, in 2007-11, Whinchat decline has accelerated at a fairly breathtaking scale, with further withdrawals across its range, including Breckland and the New Forest. It has now consolidated in Britain's uplands. In southern England, birds breed on Bodmin Moor (just 17 pairs in 2013), Dartmoor, Exmoor and Salisbury Plain (a unique stable grassland population of 300 pairs). In Wales, birds are widespread: most abundant across the Brecon Beacons, the Cambrians, Snowdonia and Mynydd Hiraethog. In northern England, the northern Peak District, Bowland, some of the South and West



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Pennines, the North York Moors, across Northumberland (including the National Park, North Pennines and Kielder Forest) and the Lake District – including the coastal plain. In southern Scotland, birds breed continuously across the uplands, from Galloway Forest north-east to the Lammermuir Hills. In central Scotland, there are good numbers on Arran, the southern Highlands and the southern Cairngorms. In northern Scotland, there are populations along the Great Glen, the east-coast Firths and along the north coast, including lowland farmland in Caithness. In western Scotland, birds breed in good numbers on the Inner Hebrides (including Islay, Jura, Mull, Eigg, Rum and Skye) and along the west coast – from Kintyre north to Cape Wrath. There are small numbers on Tiree, Coll and the Outer Hebrides. Birds have, since 1909, continued to breed on the Isle of Man.

*There is nothing more uplifting, primal, beautiful, melancholy than the Blackbird. Its song connects on a level far deeper than words or music. To me, the Blackbird is the greatest sound of them all — and the true bringer of spring.*  
— Ben Macdonald, writer and researcher

Faced with a retreat into the uplands, and an overall loss of 55% of breeding Whinchats since 1995, it's probably best to ask what is Whinchat habitat – and why has the species had to specialise over the decades? Whinchats used to be a farmland bird, a downland bird, a grassland bird, a railway-cutting bird. In eastern Europe, they remain common where farmland fallows and abandoned croplands predominate. In France, they are more specialised – tied to late-cut upland hay meadows. And as the Salisbury Plain reminds us, Whinchats are, at their highest densities, a grassland species. If uplands are now offering the only key refuges for Whinchats in Britain, what went so drastically wrong in the rest of the country? What do Whinchats need?

Bug eaters

Whinchats are large invertebrate specialists – an attribute shared with other declining chats, like Redstart, and other sympatric species, like Cuckoo, and, formerly, Red-backed Shrike. Very few studies provide an exact breakdown of Whinchat diet.



SINCE 1990, FARMLAND BUTTERFLIES, A FOOD SOURCE, HAVE FALLEN BY 49%

↑ NEST SITE

A Whinchat's bright blue eggs – but is there enough food to go around to raise a healthy brood?

← WHIN WIN SITUATION

Whinchats need meadows and wild grassy areas. This is a lovely spring male

SPECIES FACTFILE

WHINCHAT

Scientific name: *Saxicola rubetra*  
Length: 12cm  
Wingspan: 22cm

UK numbers: 47,000 pairs in summer

Habitat: Open country, grass meadows

Diet: Invertebrates, particularly caterpillars



Britschgi (2006), however, discovered the importance of larger invertebrates as prey items for chicks – and found that smaller invertebrates were eaten only by adults. This Alpine study emphasised the importance of ‘profitable’ prey – the larger protein parcels that Whinchats prefer to feed their nestlings – thereby maximising nutrition and foraging efficiency. Like Red-backed Shrikes, most food is obtained by sallies to the ground. As a result, diet is 80-90% insect-based. Flies, caterpillars and beetles are of primary importance. As a ground-feeder – like the Redstart – Whinchats require a variety of ground-based insect food to be accessible – within range of their sally points and, particularly, their nests. Andersson (1981) found that Whinchats search for food most intensely around a central point in their territory. The higher the density of invertebrate food, the closer Whinchats forage to the nest. Overall, Whinchats forage based on efficiency. Like Spotted Flycatchers, they seem to hunt on ‘strings’ – minimising energy loss by hunting from a single, central place within a territory. For Whinchats to thrive, the area of ground around their hunting perch must be invertebrate-rich, and such food must be readily accessible. Grazed valley slopes, fallows, grasslands and marginal habitats can all provide such combinations of perches, cover and open ground.

Nesting preferences are likewise specific. Whinchats today are largely bracken nesters – especially in the uplands. But an analysis of UK Nest Record Cards by Fuller (1977) shows that since 1939, when the NRS began, 58% of Whinchat nests were in grasses – particularly in agricultural situations – with just 14% of nests in open bracken. Other nests were in mixed low vegetation, with just 5% of nests in gorse and shrubs. Today, bracken has become especially important, but only because Whinchats have vacated agricultural grasslands. In the South Pennines, Stillman (2004) found Whinchats closely tied to bracken cover, whilst Pearce-Higgins (2006) found bracken preferred in a study of nine moorland sites. Calladine (2012) provides a neat summary of Whinchat habitat as consisting of “young, sparse shrubs and

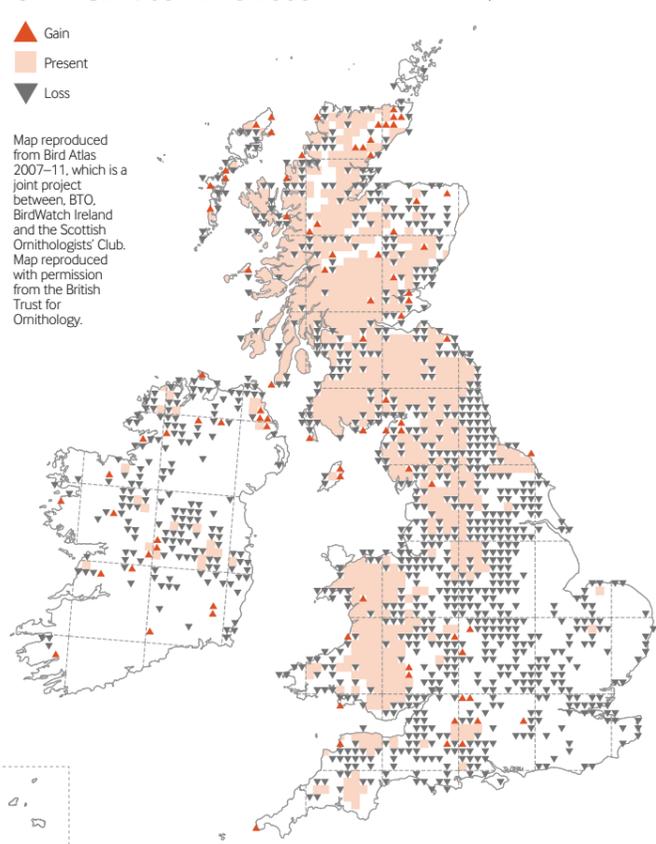
developing ground vegetation”.

At a territory level, Whinchat site selection is also influenced by aspect. Calladine and Bray (2012) found that south and east-facing slopes, below 300m, had an 80% chance of Whinchat occupation in their study area. North or west-facing slopes, however, had just a 40% chance of occupation. By 500m, probability of any occupancy declined to 20% or below. So, whilst Whinchats may have been driven upwards into upland margins, they’re not by any means an upland bird. Indeed, Calladine found that “territory size increased with altitude” in response to decreased availability of food. Occupation of lower altitudes (below 300m), however, was probably restricted by “intensive agricultural land-use”. Whinchats in Britain are caught between two deserts – intensive lowland farmland, and insect-poor uplands. High altitudes, above 400-500m, rarely provide adequate food supply because, in general, invertebrate densities decrease in relation to altitude. Pearce-Higgins (2006) identifies today’s Whinchats with inhabiting low-altitude moorland fringes. Sheltered, grazed, bracken-rich slopes below 300m have become the Whinchat’s ‘sandwich’ refuge in much of modern Britain.

**Habitat erosion**

What has happened since the Second World War has been the gradual erosion of the lowland, grassland-based food refuges that Whinchats once thrived in. It’s the same, industrial narrative that has driven declines from the Wryneck to the Starling – the continual simplification, intensification and reduction of nest sites and food supplies, as Britain has turned its heterogeneous countryside into a production line for food. Since the 1940s, within farmland alone, 97% of

**WHINCHAT BREEDING DISTRIBUTION CHANGE 1968-72 TO 2008-11**



**DIET IS 80-90% INSECT-BASED**

**←SIGN OF THE TIMES**

Whinchats have been affected by the same changes as many British farmland and open country birds

**↓ ON THE UP**

Abandoned fields in western Poland are holding increasing numbers of Whinchat

Britain’s neutral unimproved grasslands have been lost. So have 95% of herb-rich meadows, and 80% of calcareous grassland – the Whinchat’s favoured habitat across much of southern England. The effects of these losses are twofold. Nesting sites are reduced because the structures for concealment – tussocky grasses – disappear, as fallows give way to new crops. Invertebrate abundance is reduced, through lack of cover and food plants, as a result of intensification. And then, of course, there has been six decades of herbicide application – reducing insect food plants – and six decades of direct insecticide use.

The result has been that beetles, a key Whinchat food resource, have plummeted. In the last 15 years alone, trapping across varied sites in Britain by the Rothamstead Institute has revealed a >30% decline in carabids, with over 80% of all species in decline. Caterpillars – another key Whinchat food – are in trouble. Since 1990 alone, farmland butterflies have fallen by 49%. But this is the tail end of a 100-year narrative of invertebrate decline – from total abundance to utter scarcity. The landscape-level fallows that supported British Whinchats have, almost entirely, vanished into insect-poor monoculture.

Visit the farmland of western Poland and it’s a rather different story. Here Whinchats are stable and even increasing. Orłowski (2004) found that 94 abandoned fields on the Wrocław plain, in western Poland, held 101 Whinchat territories. Larger fields were preferred, with up to 14 territories in a single large field. In spite of being an intensified landscape, a high level of abandonment within that landscape – and across a large spatial area – provided perfect conditions for Whinchat persistence. Frankiewicz (2008) found that an arable mosaic in Opole Province, western Poland, supported Whinchats across numerous connected habitats: uncultivated fields, herb-rich meadows and

young pine plantations. Breeding success here, across five seasons, was 74%. In such areas, Whinchats were often sympatric with another vanished British grassland bird – the Red-backed Shrike. Both thrive in the presence of abundant, accessible, larger invertebrates on the ground.

The fact that British Whinchats once flourished on railway margins suggests that they were capable, until the 1940s, of surviving in small-scale fallows – provided these fallows were sustained across the wider landscape. Today, the presence of unimproved grassland across large areas of land is a thing of the past. One great exception to this, however, is the Salisbury Plain. This is the only place in Britain where Whinchats still thrive in their preferred grassland habitat. And it’s one of few, if any places in Britain, where Whinchats are holding their own.

**Stronghold**

A 2005 survey of Salisbury Plain SSSI yielded 300 Whinchat territories. BTO studies have now revealed this population to be stable. In southern England, the Salisbury Plain acts – together with the New Forest, Dartmoor and Exmoor – as a landscape-level food refuge. It has remained unimproved since purchase by the military, in the 1940s. It has escaped the grassland simplification, intensification and invertebrate loss affecting the rest of the country. Whinchat densities here are the highest in Britain. There are, for example, 26 pairs on the Imber Range alone. Measurement of food abundance in territories here has revealed a proliferation of chafers, caterpillars, flies and other beetles in sheltered valleys across the Training Area. Such densities have, in all probability, changed little in the past 60 years. The Salisbury Plain, with its exceptional density and stability of breeding Whinchats, reminds us that Whinchats are, if given



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the choice, a fallow grassland species. And the Plain now acts as a little 'time bubble' for Whinchats – a place where historical nesting preferences still play out in the 21st century.

And the Whinchat's preference for military abandonment is far from a British phenomenon. In the 1970s, Dr Kai Frobél was studying Whinchats along the former east-west divide in Germany. He noticed that 90% of territories fell within the Iron Curtain belt. Totally abandoned by man as a "no go zone", no fertilisers were sprayed into this border, nor was there any agricultural improvement. Frobél noted that, like Salisbury Plain, this exclusion zone was "full of the small bushes and types of grass that had been wiped out elsewhere, as the result of farming on an industrial scale". These findings, alone, drove one of the most inspirational conservation projects in Europe. From the 1980s onwards, the German government started buying up land close to the Iron Curtain – to prevent it being developed. Then, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. And, just one month later, with remarkable swiftness, the German government created the 'Grünes Band', or 'Green Belt'. Europe's largest and longest nature reserve, stretching from the Baltic to Bavaria, it today encompasses 861 square miles. The designation of the Iron Curtain nature reserve began not with Black Storks or Eurasian Lynx – but the scratchy song of the Whinchat across abandoned land.

### The way forward

The crucial lesson to be learned from this – and from western Poland – and from the Salisbury Plain – is that Whinchats are not declining because they are migrants. They are declining because extensive, food-rich fallows have been ripped out of modern Europe. Where agricultural abandonment prevails on a massive scale, birds thrive. By contrast, British Whinchats, like Red-backed Shrikes until the 1970s, are now using a suboptimal retreat for nesting. A preferential grassland species, their refuge has become grazed moorland margins – much as the shrike's final refuge became natural heathland.

Whinchats are getting by, but, if given a chance, they reach their highest densities in grasslands below 300m. Their use of uplands is not a preference – it's simply a necessity. In the uplands, unlike the Salisbury Plain, abundance is reduced by a sparser food supply. In France, Boyer (2009) notes that Whinchats have now retreated to above 1,000m, but thrive only in late-cut hay meadows.

The only way to save the Whinchat is to learn lessons from Salisbury Plain, the Iron Curtain and western Poland. We must cultivate abandonment on a massive scale. Whinchats are birds of dereliction – they thrive where we leave grasslands to grow wild. If we rely on saving them in uplands, we'll probably fail. But if we rebuild food-rich grasslands, and isolate large tracts of land, we are more likely to succeed. It's the courage to abandon and leave well alone that will benefit the Whinchat – along with numerous other fallow specialists, like Red-backed Shrikes and Long-eared Owls, and millions of invertebrates. We need, even on a smaller scale, at least one more wild plain – a place that government, charities and individuals set aside for glorious dereliction.

Today, the motif of the Grünes Band is not a Wolf or a bear – it's a Whinchat. Whinchats should inspire us, as they inspired our German neighbours, to create Europe's largest nature reserve. And if these lovely summer visitors can inspire a similar movement in Britain – a movement to buy and abandon, and to rebuild our food chain – then we may yet hear their scratchy song for centuries to come. 🐦