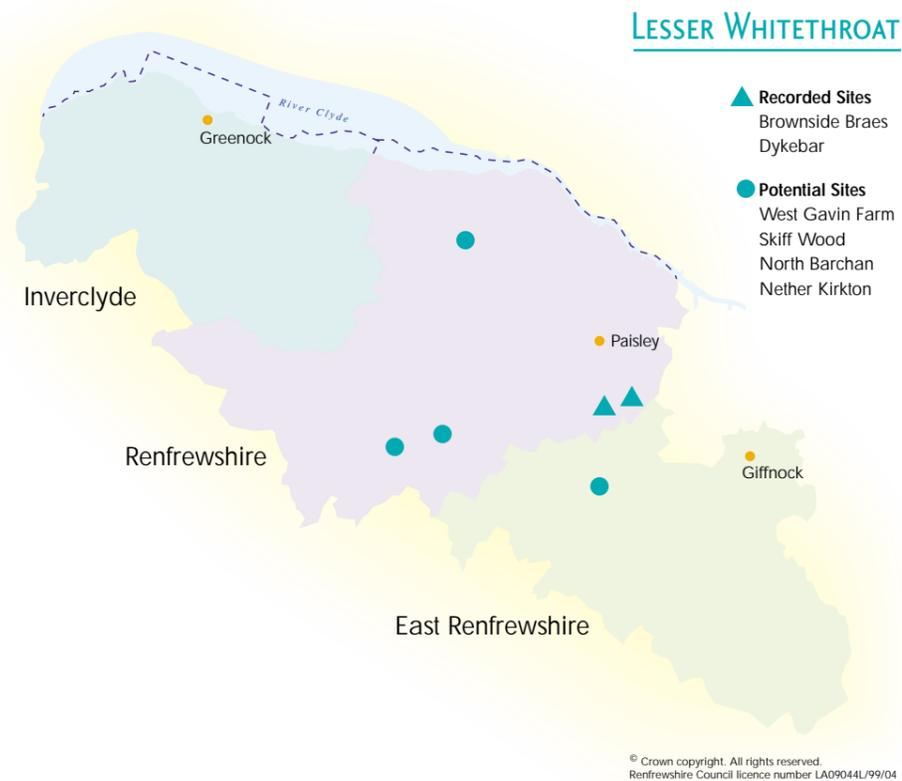


Current Status - UK and Local

LBAP Partnership area Status: Local Priority Species

The Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*) is probably the least familiar of all the British scrub warblers and is certainly the most secretive of the group. Both sexes are alike in plumage colouration, their smaller size and distinctive black face mask separating them easily from the Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*). Lesser Whitethroats are summer migrants to the UK and usually return to their breeding territories during late April to early May. Some males can become quite visible and animated then, as they perform their rattling song openly from the scrub canopy. The song period is unusually short for a warbler species, 4-14 days, and this makes field surveys and population estimates rather difficult.



According to the New Atlas of Breeding Birds, the Lesser Whitethroat breeding population in the UK has been estimated at around 80,000 territories. The main UK stronghold for the Lesser Whitethroat is to be found in southern England, where breeding densities can be as high as 3-6 pairs per km² in prime chalk downland scrub habitat. Other habitat types include coastal scrub, old overgrown hedgerows, and long-established scrub woodland on disused railway embankments and mineral workings.

The breeding distribution of this species becomes notably sparse the further north and west one travels in the UK. However, range expansion in the north and west of England occurred during the 1960's and 70's. In Scotland there has been a well-documented range expansion occurring in most regions since the mid seventies. The major Scottish stronghold is in the Lothians where The Breeding Birds of South-east Scotland estimates a breeding population of 180-200 pairs, while 9-12 territories were recorded in South Strathclyde. Regular breeding territories are localised to just three "core sites", i.e. Brownside Braes / Dykebar in Renfrewshire, Heads of Ayr in Ayrshire and Baron's Haugh / Strathclyde Park in Lanarkshire. All territories are located in ungrazed hawthorn scrub with a dense understorey of bramble, dog-rose and gorse. This particular type of habitat is very scarce in Strathclyde, hence the localised breeding distribution of the Lesser Whitethroat.

Ecology and Management

The small breeding population of Lesser Whitethroats in the LBAP Partnership area has been intensively studied since 1983. This research has given us an insight into the species' habitat requirements and feeding ecology. Ringing work within the last four years has shown strong site fidelity in both sexes between years and territorial interchange between individual males. Ringing work carried out in northern England has also shown strong site fidelity in both sexes and good survival return rate for breeding adults.

Habitat plays an important part in territory selection as mature hawthorn scrub provides the ideal feeding and nesting biotope required by this species. As an indicator species, the presence of breeding Lesser Whitethroat in those sites denotes the underlying quality of such habitat. Such core sites also hold other important breeding bird species such as Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) and Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*). These birds are designated as Priority Species of Conservation Concern, so in protecting the Lesser Whitethroat and its habitat we also safeguard other important species.

This habitat type is extremely rare in the LBAP Partnership area and the core site at Brownside Braes must rank as the largest known area in Strathclyde (3-4 hectares in extent). The sheer density and plant species complexity of hawthorn, bramble, dog-rose and gorse creates a mosaic-like layer at the one metre height level. This particular combination is important for the Lesser Whitethroat's nesting requirements. Mature hawthorn canopies, spaced out and not enclosed, allow sunlight to penetrate down to ground level, thereby allowing this mosaic-like layer to develop. Both sexes feed unobtrusively on invertebrates high up in the hawthorn canopy, taking mostly various species of flies. When feeding young however, adults seek out moth larvae of a particular size range. When feeding young, adults will always utter a contact call on approaching the nest site. The distinctive "tac" sound is a very reliable indicator of breeding success when surveying dense areas of suitable habitat during late June.

Factors Causing Loss or Decline

There has been no overall change in the Common Birds Census Index for Lesser Whitethroat in the past 30 years, although large fluctuations have occurred. Results from the 1988 - 91 Breeding Atlas indicate that there has been a noticeable extension north and westwards in the UK breeding distribution. This extension has also been reflected in Europe, notably in Scandinavia and France.

The vast majority of breeding Lesser Whitethroats within Strathclyde are restricted to the three core areas. In the LBAP



Inverclyde
Renfrewshire
East Renfrewshire
LBAP



Lesser Whitethroat © Norman Tait

LESSER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia curruca*)

The Lesser Whitethroat has a white throat that contrasts with its head, back and wings. The head and its relatively short tail are grey, while its back and wings are grey brown. The cheeks are dark grey.

Length 13.5cm Weight 10 – 16g Wingspan 17 – 19cm

Smaller than the similar whitethroat, the dark cheek feathers contrast with the white throat and give it a 'masked' look. The Lesser Whitethroat is quite skulking and often only noticed when it gives its rattling song, or 'tacking' call. When it flits from cover the Lesser Whitethroat shows white outer tail feathers.

Partnership area, all known breeding territories are concentrated within a single 1km square. Any major loss of scrub habitat within that relatively small area would undoubtedly bring about the species' demise.

Factors which could contribute to loss of the scrub habitat include:

- ★ Removal to prevent loss of grazing or grassland habitat
- ★ Removal to extend arable field area
- ★ Removal to facilitate proposed development, e.g. landfill or housing
- ★ Natural succession of existing habitat to woodland
- ★ Decline in management of scrub sites leading through succession to mature, species-poor dense scrub
- ★ Vandalism through direct or indirect action, e.g. cutting or burning scrub.

Lesser Whitethroat breeding sites have already been threatened by developments, e.g landfill and sports developments. A review of the Gleniffer Braes Country Park management plan for this important site is essential to maintain the Lesser Whitethroat habitat integrity.

As summer migrants to this country, Lesser Whitethroat populations can also be affected by changing conditions in their winter quarters or migration routes. During autumn the entire UK population migrates southeast through the Eastern Mediterranean to winter in the Nile valley and Ethiopian highlands. It is in these African countries where climatic conditions and habitat destruction may influence the returning UK population. Evidence from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) common bird census shows that this species has a cyclic population pattern, which may indicate changes in their winter quarters.

Opportunities and Current Action

The Lesser Whitethroat is protected under the terms of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the EC Birds Directive. The species was included in the 'long list' of Species of Conservation Concern in the UK Biodiversity Steering Group Report 1995.

The Lesser Whitethroat is not regarded as a species for conservation action in Britain, however, the species is of strong local concern because of its rarity value. The breeding population in the Partnership area is at the very northwest

edge of the species' European breeding distribution and is regarded as being very vulnerable. The Lesser Whitethroat is a good indicator species with regards to habitat quality. Its hawthorn scrub woodland habitat in this area also supports over thirty breeding bird species within a single 1km square, including Song Thrush, Linnet and Yellowhammer which are UK Priority Species, as well as high densities of other breeding birds such as Willow Warbler (an 'amber listed' Species of Conservation Concern).

The main "core" breeding site in the Partnership area is located southeast of Paisley at Dykebar and Brownside Braes. This site also has the largest area of prime continuous hawthorn habitat to be found anywhere in the area. Between one and three Lesser Whitethroat territories have been recorded most years, along with passage birds, i.e. 'transient' males.

Action Plan

Key priorities are to ascertain occupation of known territories within the core breeding site and to encourage further surveys to establish the true population distribution. The current known populations are within the Gleniffer Braes Country Park and so could benefit from management agreements with local land users and the staff resources to enable sufficient monitoring. Liaison with farmers and landowners over the existence of relic sites or access for new surveys will be necessary outside of the park.

Objectives and targets

- Objective 1 Maintain the current populations of Lesser Whitethroat in the LBAP Partnership area.
- Objective 2 Increase the breeding population of Lesser Whitethroat in the LBAP Partnership area.
- Objective 3 Increase knowledge of site fidelity, movement and survival rates.
- Objective 4 Promote awareness and positive perception of Lesser Whitethroat.
- Objective 5 Review this plan on an annual basis, beginning in 2005.

We will achieve these objectives by:

Action	Actioned by	Timescale
Ensuring no net loss of species numbers or range	LAs	2004-07
Developing policies which promote management practices that enhance and restore suitable breeding habitat	LAs	2004-07
Expanding the annual monitoring programme and maintaining the ringing programme	Clyde Ringing Group RSPB Scottish Ornithologists Club	2004-07
Supporting educational and local community initiatives that increase the positive perception of Lesser Whitethroat	LAs LBAP Officer	2004-07
Monitoring and recording actions towards these objectives	LBAP Steering Group LBAP Officer Local Records Centre	Ongoing / annual

Further Information can be obtained from The Biodiversity Officer 0141 842 5281

