



## Turtle Dove advisory report: Holton Pits CIC



Site visit: 17/01/2025

Advisors: Eliza Leat and Louisa Claxton

Holton Pits has a geological SSSI and is a County Wildlife Site (CWS)

### Priorities:

There is currently good nesting habitat for Turtle Doves and accessible water at Holton pits. The very sandy soils and flora recorded on previous surveys of the site suggest that there should be a variety of accessible seeds for Turtle Doves in the spring and summer, though a further site visit can help us to confirm this. Therefore, the priority is to provide supplementary feeding according to the Operation Turtle Dove protocols, on or around Holton Pits.

## Disclaimer

All recommendations are based on information supplied to the RSPB from the landowner(s)/ occupiers. This report may not deal with every aspect of how the management should be applied to particular circumstances and should not be treated, or relied on, as a substitute for specific advice relevant to particular circumstances. Accountability and responsibility for the land management remains with the landowner(s)/ occupiers. No responsibility is accepted for any loss which may arise from reliance on the information provided.

Please note:

- The client must check the information provided on which the recommendations of this report are based.
- Accountability and responsibility for land management remains with the landowner(s) (e.g., compliance with Agri-Environment Schemes (AES) such as Countryside Stewardship agreements).
- (For AES agreement holders only) The report is not intended to address all the prescriptions required by your AES. You are responsible for ensuring the requirements of your AES agreement will still be met.
- The advice in the report does not supersede:
  - Responsibility to meet Defra regulations, including Farming Rules introduced by Defra.
  - Any legal obligations including planning requirements and/or consents.
  - AES management prescriptions.

## Habitat requirements for Turtle Doves:

Turtle Doves are a migratory dove, slightly bigger than a Blackbird and are obligatory seed eaters. They require three key habitats in the UK:

- **Food** – Turtle Doves need seed rich habitat with 30-60% bare ground and low vegetation (<15cm) to be able to access it. Unlike many farmland birds, Turtle Doves don't feed their chicks insects but create a crop milk from seeds. They feed on a wide variety of seeds of arable plants like chickweed and fumitory, and brassicas like oilseed rape.
- **Nesting habitat** – In the UK Turtle Doves nest in large dense thorny hedgerows and scrub, which provides protection from the weather and predators.
- **Accessible water** – A seed-based diet is low in water content, so they need water to be able to make crop milk for their chicks.

The Turtle Doves decline in the UK and Western Europe is associated with the following factors:

1. Food shortages on their breeding grounds.
2. Unsustainable levels of hunting on migration.

The best way to help Turtle Doves thrive is to provide extra resources in areas where Turtle Doves are still present, so they can have more breeding attempts per season and fledge more chicks. Whilst supplementary feeding is recommended as a short-term, important emergency measure, there should also be a focus on providing other abundant and good quality foraging habitat, nesting habitat and water sources.

## Turtle Dove Food

*Turtle doves typically feed on a mixture of crop seeds and arable plant seeds. Ideal foraging habitat for turtle doves is considered to have the following characteristics:*

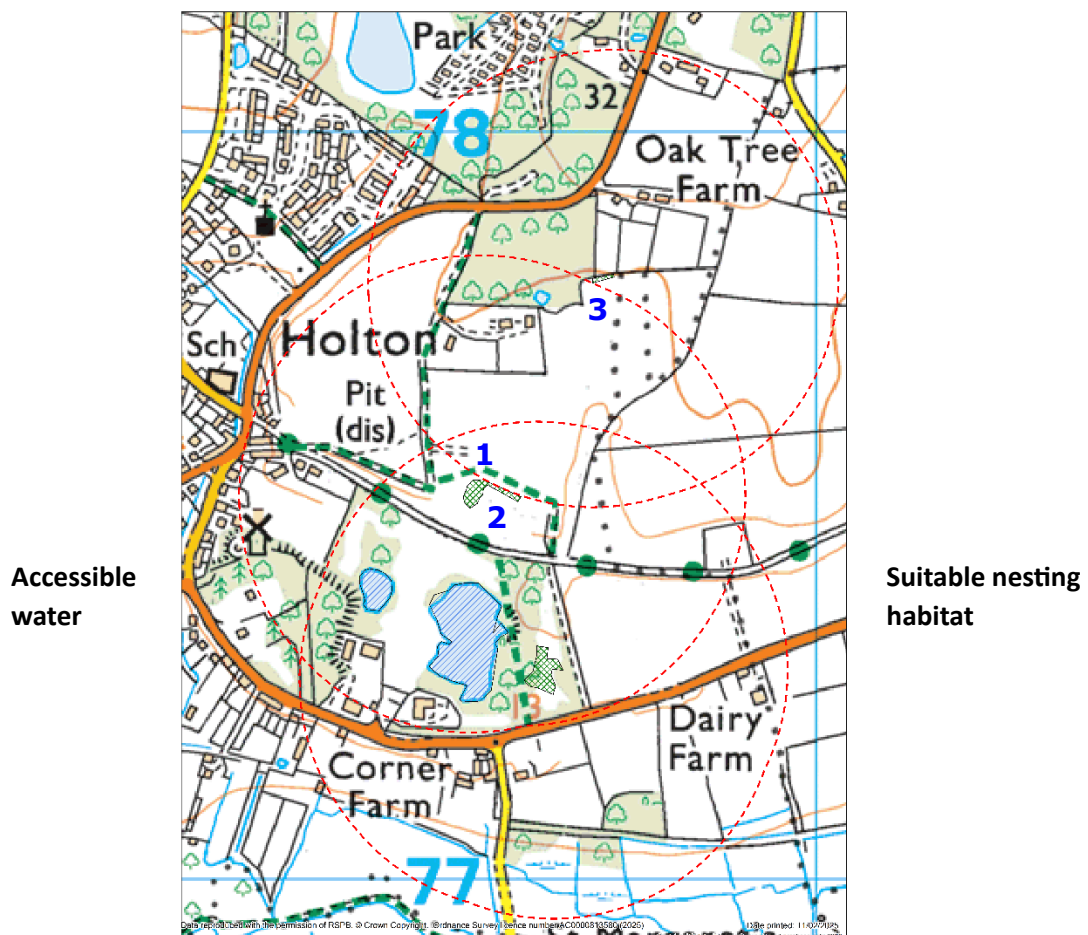
- *At least 30% bare ground, preferably 50-60% (for birds to land and access seed)*
- *Annual plants to provide a seed resource for foraging birds throughout the breeding season (April-September), with vegetation height under 15cm.*
- *Taller flowering and seeding vegetation next to bare ground or short vegetation, such as a farm track, will also provide foraging opportunities for turtle doves.*

*Foraging habitat should be available within 300m of nesting habitat to benefit fledglings which stay very close to the nest in the 3 weeks following fledging.*

## Supplementary feeding

Supplementary feeding is an immediate measure which can be deployed at sites with suitable nesting habitat for Turtle Doves. Small seeds distributed weekly at a low density according to the Operation Turtle Dove protocols can provide much needed seed when there isn't much available in the landscape. Potential supplementary feeding options marked on the map in Figure 1:

- 1) A concrete pad located on Kinda Education land would be perfect for a co-ordinated approach. It is within 300m of the best nesting habitat on both sites and will not require additional habitat management to maintain access throughout the season.
- 2) Holton pits could provide supplementary feed on the area of short vegetation at the base of the SSSI cliff. However this approach would mean that Kinda Education would need to feed at site 3 on the map.
- 3) Kinda Education could provide supplementary seed near the new pond at the north of the site. This would require regular mowing to maintain a short sward so the seed is accessible.



**Figure 1: Map showing approximate locations of the best nesting habitat with 300m buffers showing the foraging range of Juvenile Turtle Doves after fledging. The three potential supplementary feeding options are indicated by blue numbers.**

## Natural forage

The sandy soils at Holton pit and disturbance by people and animals (for example rabbits) encourages both the type of plant species which Turtle Doves often feed on, and the vegetation structure for them to access this seed. It is a very good site to try and encourage Turtle Doves.

A comparison of the species on the plant list accessible on the Holton pits website and those found in Turtle Dove diet studies shows that there is a large overlap. Table 1 lists the species which occur at Holton pits and have been recorded in Turtle Dove diet studies. These should be treated as examples of the kinds of species which Turtle Doves have been recorded eating and not an exhaustive list. There are comparatively few studies of Turtle Dove diet and they only give us a snap shot in time and space, there are likely to be many other plant species which Turtle Doves eat the seeds of if they can access to them. This overlap in species occurring at Holton pits and those recorded in Turtle Dove diet leads me to strongly recommend a focus on encouraging flowering plants already found on site rather than sowing any seed from elsewhere. A site visit in the spring or summer to look at species in flower and the vegetation structure would be very useful to help us to advise you on any potential habitat management options.

**Table 1: Species recorded at Holton Pits and in Turtle Dove diet studies**

Common Name	Taxon Name	Common Name	Taxon Name
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>
Creeping Bent	<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	Cut-leaved Crane's-bill	<i>Geranium dissectum</i>
Scarlet Pimpernel	<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>	Dove's-foot Crane's-bill	<i>Geranium molle</i>
Bugloss	<i>Anchusa arvensis</i>	Yorkshire-fog	<i>Holcus lanatus</i>
Bur Chervil	<i>Anthriscus caucalis</i>	Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Mugwort	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	Rough Meadow-grass	<i>Poa trivialis</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>
Shepherd's-purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Spear Thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Hairy Tare	<i>Vicia hirsuta</i>
Field Bindweed	<i>Convolvulus arvensis</i>	Common Vetch	<i>Vicia sativa</i>
Cock's-foot	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>	Field Pansy	<i>Viola arvensis</i>

## Nesting habitat

*To be considered suitable for turtle doves, existing scrub and hedgerow nesting habitat must have the following characteristics:*

- *Tall (at least 3 metres and preferably higher with some taller mature trees within providing variation).*
- *Wide (at least 4 metres) and dense.*
- *Containing thorny species such as hawthorn and blackthorn, bramble, as well as native climbers such as ivy, clematis and dog rose.*

Scrub is a notable feature of the site, listed in the County Wildlife Site citation for the Holton pits. Scrub is a succession habitat; left undisturbed grassland is colonised by scrub species such as bramble, hawthorn and blackthorn. In turn if left unmanaged scrub will be succeeded by woodland as tree saplings shade out the light that pioneering scrub species need to thrive. There is currently a variety of ages of scrub at Holton pits which is fantastic for wildlife, including areas suitable for Turtle Dove nesting.

In the long term it is worth considering how to manage the scrub on site on a long rotation so the site continues to provide this diversity in the age of the scrub available for wildlife. Figure 2a shows an area of scrub with some sections which are tall enough to attract Turtle Doves to nest. The lower sections will support other nesting species including warblers and perhaps even nightingale. Figure 2b shows an example of scrub which has reached a stage where coppicing or conservation laying would be beneficial to support more nesting birds. As pointed out on the day this habitat (2b) will still provide resources for wildlife (pollen, fruit, homes for invertebrates, shelter for birds) and has value for biodiversity but if all scrub on the site was at this stage of succession you would lose some of your breeding bird species.

I will share guidance on scrub management for Nightingale which are more particular about their scrub condition than Turtle Dove are. Any management of scrub for Nightingale will provide habitat for Turtle Doves at a later stage of growth as they like to nest approximately 2m above the ground with some vegetation above them. As a rule of thumb something like 1/15 of the scrub areas on site should be managed in any one year. The area of conservation hedge laying is a good example of how this might be done and the scale. Any management must take place outside of the bird nesting season, eg. March to Sept. The key things to think about are that any coppiced or conservation laid areas aren't in too much shade as this will slow regeneration, and to keep an eye on deer browsing pressure which can prevent scrub growth.



**Figure 2 a) Scrub suitable for Turtle Dove nesting at Holton Pits b) An example of scrub which could be rejuvenated by coppicing or conservation laying c) An example of a Turtle Dove nest**

## Accessible water

*Accessible water is important for turtle doves to drink and bathe, as their obligate seed diet contains little water. Ideally this should be within 300 m of their nesting habitat. Turtle doves either need sloping edges with low or no vegetation, or perches to access water from.*

There is plenty of accessible water for Turtle Doves at Holton pits. The Suffolk ponds project run by Suffolk Wildlife Trust is the best local source of advice on pond management.