

SURVEY OF BIRD SPECIES, 2000 - INKBERROW MILLENNIUM GREEN

Report to the Meeting of Advisors & Trustees, Thursday 21st September, 2000

I've walked around the fields in the area of the moat on a regular basis for many years now, and always taken notice of the bird population from season to season, but at the beginning of this year I began keeping a more formal record. I'm also taking part in the Garden BirdWatch Scheme for the British Trust for Ornithology. This has been helpful in suggesting methods of making records, and the literature I get as a BTO member gives me information on nationwide trends in bird population.

In the second part of this report I'll outline the results of the survey so far, but first of all I'll explain how I'm going about it and what I want to achieve.

It isn't possible to do a survey on the Millennium Green using the same method as the BTO Scheme, as this is very precise, and it just wouldn't be practical on such a large scale.

What I've decided to do instead is make an approximate estimation of numbers of each type of bird every time I visit, and record them on a monthly basis, taking the largest number seen or heard at any one time during that month.

Obviously for a very few species, such as buzzard, sparrowhawk and perhaps green woodpecker, you can be accurate based on actual sightings, but with the smaller songbirds and warblers it has to be an estimation, based on the number of birds singing at any one time. On the record sheet I have prepared I've made a distinction between those birds actually seen, and those identified by song alone. This is because with many species it is usually only the male bird that sings, so it can mean that the total number present is twice that recorded, to take account of the female birds you don't hear.

I usually manage to walk over there about three or four times each week, which gives quite a good idea of what is around, but even so its not always possible to be there when the birds are at their most active and singing well, and its therefore difficult to get a complete picture. So that I can make these records as complete as possible, I have some ideas as to how to carry on with them in the future.

It would be really helpful to have two or three enthusiasts who would be prepared to help me by walking over there as often as they were able, and then phoning me with the numbers and varieties they hear so that we can have a much more complete record.

They wouldn't have to be experts on all birds ~~What is needed is~~. The object is not to be able to identify a rare and unusual bird so that we can all rush over to see it. That might be exciting, but it would only be a bonus to the main scheme. What is needed is as complete a record as possible of the total bird population of the area, monitored from year to year, and this will give us the most graphic picture possible of the success of the Millennium Green from a conservation point of view.

To do this, a volunteer would need to be confident of identifying by song, all of the more common countryside, woodland and garden birds which we could expect to find in the area. They really wouldn't need to be experts on the entire British bird population for the purposes of these records. Its also not necessary to make firm commitments on how often you can do this. Obviously as

often as possible is great, but if I continue to go three or four times each week, then anything anyone else can volunteer is useful and would be much appreciated. Could I ask anyone who would like to help with this to see me afterwards, and I'll let them have my phone number?

I began keeping records this year in April, which is when things start to get busy for the spring. The birds most numerous at that time were wrens, blue tits, blackbirds, wood-pigeon, great tits, robins, chaffinch and greenfinch – all resident birds you would expect to see. There was a gathering of about 30 starlings present at times, though these roosted at various sites round the village. Starlings surprisingly are one of the species giving cause for concern because of their recent decline, so it will be interesting to see how this number fluctuates.

Another bird on the decline is the thrush, and I recorded 2 singing in the Millennium Green, which hopefully meant 2 pairs.

There was a flock of about 8 – 10 long-tailed tits around on several occasions, and of course magpie, and collared dove. I haven't actually recorded the rooks and jackdaws, as although their noise is a constant feature of a walk around the Green, they are actually roosting in the churchyard, and I decided to leave them out of the survey.

In the first week of April, I heard the first chiff-chaff. This is a summer visitor, though a few do overwinter now. Throughout the rest of April, all of May and into June the chiff-chaff was very vocal, and I believe there were several pairs in the area.

I heard the first cuckoo on 23rd April, and in the last week of that month I heard a blackcap – another summer visitor. At the very end of the month I heard a Goldcrest. This is a resident bird, and much more common than you'd think, but rarely seen or heard, as it is very tiny, and with a very high pitched song which is quite hard to hear, and easy to miss if you are not listening for it.

The last week in April was very busy, as I also saw a buzzard, but Gareth did even better than that. He phoned me to say he had seen 2 buzzards and a curlew. This demonstrates the value of getting information from other volunteers to fill out the records

All I just run very briefly through the highlights of the rest of the year so far –

The buzzard count went up to 4 in May. They were circling around for several days during the middle of the month, and again in early June.

Also in May there were two skylarks singing. These weren't strictly over the Millennium Green, but high over the farmland at the back. I thought I'd stretch a point and include them in our count as the skylark is also a bird on the decline.

A sparrowhawk was sighted on several occasions, and that was seen with a youngster in August. There were plenty of housemartins around throughout the summer months, and a few swifts, but I didn't see any swallows.

The green woodpecker again bred successfully, though I only saw one youngster at any one time, and I'd really like to know if anyone has found where it nested. This is a bird that could give us an indication of

the success of the conservation scheme. It has been present in the area of the moat for several years now, and has successfully bred in the last three or four years. It will only inhabit areas of permanent pasture which are close-cropped by rabbits and sheep which encourages its main food source – ants. And of course they need trees, probably ash in this case, though they also like oak and beech.

The green woodpecker plays a very important role in the conservation of other species. Each bird usually excavates more than one hole before nesting, and although it may inhabit the same tree for ten years or more, it almost always excavates new holes each year.

The old disused holes provide nest sites for tits, flycatchers, doves, jackdaws and starlings. The cavities also encourage populations of insects and beetles, so we should really do everything possible to encourage the green woodpecker to stay around.

I didn't actually see any of the nest boxes in use, though they did have peck marks round the holes, showing that they had been investigated.

The moorhen was a bit of a mystery, as I only ever saw one parent bird – but nevertheless it had one small chick in early Spring, and a second brood in June. There were 3 juveniles and 1 adult bird around in late August.

Although an early brood of mallard chicks did not survive, there were 2 more broods, each of five, in May. One of these broods was orphaned when very young, but they nevertheless survived until almost adult. I lost track of them when we were on holiday in August but at the end of that month I saw a large group of mallard on the middle of the three ponds, one adult and 8 juveniles. This could have been an amalgamation of both broods, and they certainly looked old enough at that stage to survive.

In the last week of August I saw a grey wagtail walking on the muddiest part of the moat. Despite its name, the grey wagtail is quite a distinctive bird, with a grey back and bright yellow underparts. The pied wagtail is a frequent visitor to gardens around the village, but the grey wagtail is much less common, and generally prefers areas of fast-flowing water. To give you a comparison, there are upwards of 500 thousand pied wagtails in Britain, but only around 25-50 thousand grey wagtails.

Finally, in early September I saw a flock of goldfinches feeding on thistle heads and burdock – which goes to prove the value of leaving at least some of the thistles to flower and seed.

I'd like to finish by mentioning some of the birds I didn't see – and if anyone else did, then please let me know –

I didn't see either the nuthatch or the tree-creeper, though I know they are elsewhere in the village. I also didn't hear a Willow Warbler. This is a very common countryside bird, and can be heard almost anywhere you go on a country walk, and I find it surprising that it is missing from this area.

When I began this survey I only had one objective – that is, apart from the enjoyment of it. I wanted a record of the bird population of the area to monitor from year to year how it is affected by the changes being made to the Millennium Green, whether for good or for ill.

But you might feel that a secondary purpose should be to provide information and perhaps education to visitors to the Green. In which case perhaps we should be thinking in the future of something like a descriptive leaflet of birds in the area, or indeed make it a part of a leaflet on all the flora and fauna of the area.

But first things first – my request for two or three enthusiasts to help me keep fuller records. Would anyone like to volunteer now?

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Bird Count to September, 2000

| | April | May | June | July | August | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|--------------------|--|-----|------|------|--------|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Blackbird | 3+ | 3+ | 3+ | 5 | 5 | 2+ | | | |
| Blackcap | 1+ | 1+ | 1+ | 1+ | 1+ | | | | |
| Bluetit | 8e | 10e | 12e | 16e | 20e | 6e | | | |
| Bullfinch | | | 2 | | | | | | |
| Buzzard | 2 | 4 | 4 | | | | | | |
| Chaffinch | 4+ | 6+ | 8+ | 8+ | 6+ | | | | |
| Chiffchaff | 4+ | 5+ | 5+ | 4+ | 1+ | 1+ | | | |
| Collared Dove | 5 | 4 | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| Crow | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| Cuckoo | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Curlew | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Duncock | 2+ | 2+ | 1+ | 1+ | | | | | |
| Goldcrest | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Goldfinch | | | | | | 6e | | | |
| Great-tit | 3+ | 3+ | 4+ | 4+ | 2+ | | | | |
| Greenfinch | 5e | 5e | 6e | 8e | 8e | | | | |
| Green Woodpecker | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | | | |
| Grey Wagtail | | | | | 1 | | | | |
| House Sparrow | 4e | 4e | 6e | 6e | 4e | | | | |
| Kestrel | | | 1 | | | | | | |
| Long-tailed Tit | 8e | 8e | 8e | 6e | | | | | |
| Magpie | 3 | 4 | 4 | | | | | | |
| Mallard | 6 | 13 | 13 | 11 | 11 | | | | |
| Moorhen | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | | | |
| Robin | 2+ | 3+ | 3+ | 2+ | 2+ | 1+ | | | |
| Skylark | | 2 | | | | | | | |
| Songthrush | 2+ | 2+ | 2+ | | | | | | |
| Sparrowhawk | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | | |
| Starling (approx) | 30e | 30e | 30e | 30e | 45e | 45e | | | |
| Swift /Housemartin | - present in numbers, but unable to estimate | | | | | | | | |
| Woodpigeon | 3e | 2e | 4e | 4e | 2e | | | | |
| Wren | 5+ | 5+ | 5+ | 2+ | 2+ | | | | |

+ Birds identified by song or call (male only – female possibly present also)

e Estimation figure (as with groups of tits or finches)

Figures standing on their own are birds visually identified, or so distinctive as to be sure of an accurate count, eg. cuckoo, collared dove, green woodpecker, etc.

(Although rooks and jackdaws are always heard in the area, I have not included them in the survey as they roost in the churchyard).