

Bird surveys Report

Wadhurst Park

April to June 2023

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Transect Surveys

The more open areas of Wadhurst are being surveyed by means of transects. In 2023 I conducted two transect surveys at Great Pigstod and Sharnden. See the separate excel spread sheets ("Pigstod Bird Transects 2023" and "Sharnden Bird Transects 2023") for the birds and weather at both sites. At both sites every effort was made to avoid double counting: a bird that had already been seen or heard from one transect was not re-counted if it was heard or seen from another transect. Where there was doubt I erred on the side of caution and did not count a bird if it seemed likely that it could be a repeat individual. The order of the transects was changed for the second visit at each site to vary the time of day that each transect was walked. Some additional notes on Great Pigstod and Sharnden follow:

Great Pigstod

Dates: 25/04/2023 (05:50 – 09:20)

12/06/2023 (04:50 – 09:10)

Comments

Transects 1, 2 and 3 are fields with a stream running to the north. The stream is fenced off to allow riverine scrub development, which would be a very valuable habitat. However, there has been very little scrub development over the last four years which suggests that something is preventing it establishing. Seven Fallow Deer were seen on the second visit whereas previous in years only Roe Deer in ones and twos were encountered. This might imply an increase in deer grazing pressure on site. It might be worth trying completely excluding deer from some areas with a full height deer fence, to see if that allows the scrub to establish.

Encouraging more scrub in the field corners while allowing the hedgerows to bush out would definitely be beneficial for wildlife.

Many of the fields are naturally wet and rushy, especially those covered by transects 1, 2, 7 and 9, but the site as a whole could be improved ecologically by some Natural Flood Management (NFM) measures designed to hold the water on the land for longer over the summer. Creating scrapes or using woody debris dams in ditches or across flow-paths could do this and also create a greater variety of habitat niches.

Great Pigstrood is a relatively compact area and the nine transects provide very good coverage. Indeed the transects would be a good route to use with the Common Bird Census (CBC) methodology. I would expect to have picked up most of the bird territories over the two visits.

On the first visit many resident birds were in song notably Collared Dove, Wood Pigeon, Stock Dove, Dunnock, Robin, Wren, Nuthatch, Goldcrest (three territories this year), Great Tit, Blue Tit, treecreeper, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Yellowhammer, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Skylark and Reed Bunting. There were more migrants in song than on the first visit than in 2021 with Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, and Chiffchaff all on territory already.

There was less Great Spotted Woodpeckers activity than in previous years with only one bird seen, although there were four recorded on the late visit.

House Sparrow and Linnet were again present near Great Pigstrood Farm (transect 8) but Starling was, surprisingly, not recorded on site.

Yellowhammer territories increased for the second survey in a row with six (possibly seven) territories compared with five (possibly six) in 2021 and three (possibly four) in 2019. Reed Bunting numbers were also up with at least three territories and possibly four or even five. More, or longer, visits would be needed to get a more accurate estimate. Bullfinch were again present on site suggesting their absence two years ago was an aberration, as suspected. The two visit survey technique provides a good baseline but can miss rarer or less conspicuous species that require more visits to pick up consistently. Recently fledged juveniles of Great Tit, Wren, Robin and Blackbird were evidence of successful breeding for those species. Pied Wagtail flew over during both surveys and must have been breeding close by if not necessarily on site.

Two species that were not detected this year were Cuckoo, which was very vocal two years ago, and Meadow Pipit. The latter had only one territory recorded last year and it is possible it may have been missed this time with the two visit protocol. Meadow Pipit is one of the main Cuckoo hosts in the UK, which may be relevant. The others are Dunnock, at least three territories, and Reed Warbler, which does not currently breed on site. An ambitious project for the site would be the creation of a reed bed.

There were two particularly exciting sightings, both on the early visit. The first was in the rushy area at a Jack Snipe that flushed in characteristic manner from Upper Brook (transect 1). It got up from right under my feet, zigzagged away and dropped quickly back down into cover. This was a wintering bird, although quite a late one. The second was a pair of Turtle Dove that flew out from the hedge close to the beginning of transect two. They were clearly together as they flew off in tandem but the date is an early one for Turtle Dove migration, peak arrival is in May, and I did not relocate them on the late visit so I suspect they may have been passing through. However, it is encouraging that they were there and could perhaps be encouraged to stay by the creation of more thick scrub, for nesting, and crucially, the provision of a water body, scrape or pond, with shallow sloping edges. Easily accessible water, within 100 metres of nesting habitat, is critical for breeding Turtle Dove. The banks of the stream and ditches are likely too steep to allow Turtle Doves to access the water.

Sharnden

Dates: 29/04/2023 (05:50 – 10:20)

04/06/2023 (04:50 – 10:35)

Comments

The landscape at Sharnden is composed of large fields with hedgerows and woodlands. Most of the woodlands are “shaws”, being relatively long and thin. The exception to this is where transect 5 runs through the southern end of Combe Wood. Sharnden is a much larger area than Great Pigstod and the transects are much more widely spread out. A much smaller proportion of the birds at this site are typically detected on the surveys.

Transect 1 is a short transect around Sharnden Old Manor Farm and Farm Cottages. The end of transect 5 comes into the same area. There are quite a few habitats clustered here. Collared Dove and Pied Wagtail were once again seen on the buildings. A Bullfinch was notable as this was one of only two territories I found. On the early survey a Goldcrest was singing from the pines, a typical habitat for the species. A Tawny Owl was heard calling from

the same area. This species had been recorded in the 2019 survey but not in 2021. It is likely there was a territory in the latter year but the owl simply did not call during the surveys. There was no sign of the Grey Wagtail, which had been prominent on the first transect in both 2019 and 2021, but one was picked up not far away on the early visit to transect 2. This might imply a change of nest site.

Transect 2 is a long transect following a hedgerow beside large open fields. There was a good selection of common species along the hedgerow including a Song Thrush doing some nice mimicry of other species. Mistle thrush, its rarer cousin, was again recorded singing in the wooded ghyll between transect 2 and 3. Near this wooded area at the end of the transect a family of Marsh Tits had ventured into the hedgerow to feed. This is a species that doesn't like to fly across open ground and hedgerows are important not only as feeding sites but also as dispersal corridors.

Transect 3 runs north beside a ghyll woodland through a narrow sloping field that has well developed scrub at the southern end. As in previous surveys, birds favouring scrubby mosaics were found here including Whitethroat, Blackcap, Garden Warbler and Bullfinch. It is also clearly good hunting ground as, like in 2021, a Sparrowhawk was seen. This is a valuable area because scrub is a relatively rare habitat on the estate, much of the woodland has little understory, with deer grazing pressure likely a major factor in this. UK species evolved in a world that was a mosaic of open ground, woodland and scrub and it is the last of these that is in the shortest supply. The hedgerows, especially where they are being laid and thickened are acting as a proxy for scrub but creating more scrubby habitat would be very beneficial to birds and other species, including invertebrates. This would be especially beneficial as the current scrub grows on and becomes unsuitable for early succession species. Allowing field corners and woodland edges to develop scrub would be beneficial. This could be done with temporary deer fencing to allow growth to establish. Once established cutting back the growth or allowing some grazing would encourage thicker growth and, on some species, more thorns. Ideally there would be enough scrub to manage on rotation so that there would always be all growth stages available on site.

Transect 4 runs crosses fields between blocks of woodlands. A Treecreeper was singing from one of the woodlands and a croaking Raven flew over.

Transect 5 runs through woodland. The woodland here is quite uniform and would benefit from some management to open up the canopy, letting in light to allow understory and develop variety in the age structure. A Marsh Tit was holding territory on the first visit and on

the second visit an adult Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen feeding young at a nest hole proving breeding for that species.

Transects 6, 7 and 8 pass through similar habitats, smallish fields surrounded by woodland. The most notable record was on transect 7, a brief snatch of song that I thought at once was Redstart. However, I did not hear it again and I could not locate the bird visually so I would regard it as a probable rather than definite record.

Transect 9 passes through Minepits Shaw. As in 2019 and 2021 there was a Marsh Tit holding territory as well as other woodland birds including Treecreeper, Stock Dove and Goldcrest. Between transect 9 and 10 is an open section giving a view to the fields to the north. Swallows were hawking and a pair Buzzards soaring over the barns. As in 2021, a Pied Wagtail was seen carrying nesting material. Transect 10, which passes through in Sandpit Wood, has very similar habitats to transect 9 and typically has a similar mix of species. No Marsh Tit territory was found this year but a Firecrest was singing as were both Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush.

Transects 11, 13, and 14 follow hedgerows on the edge of more open fields. The laid hedge along transect 11 has developed and already looks to be good nesting habitat for Dunnock and Wren. Transect 12 travels roughly west to east along a stream with scrub along the edge and woodland on the southern bank. A single Swallow flew overhead this transect. Along the stream the birds in song included Treecreeper, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Goldcrest. These transects produced the expected mix of woodland and woodland edge birds, but no farmland specialists. Transect 14 did contain a second Garden Warbler territory and, on the early visit, a soaring Sparrowhawk.

Cuckoo was less conspicuous than in 2021 with a single male calling on the late visit to transect 14. In 2021 there were probably at least two and possibly more males calling. Dunnock, likely to be the main host species at Sharnden seemed to be, if anything, in higher numbers than on previous surveys so, unless it was an artifact of the small sample size, the decline is likely to be a result of the continuing England-wide decline in the species.

Far more fledged juveniles were seen on the second visit than in 2021, although not as many as in 2019. Four different family parties of Long-tailed Tits were a welcome sight as this early breeder has nest failure rate that is typically over 80% with most of these being predated. Other species seen with recently fledged young were Robin, Song Thrush, Chiffchaff, Wren, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Marsh Tit and Coal Tit.