

Point Count Bird Surveys Report

Wadhurst Park

April to June 2024

Dr Richard Black

General Comments

This year had the warmest meteorological spring on record and wettest since 1986. April was wet with temperatures slightly above average. May was very warm and wet with Wadhurst seeing higher rainfall but fewer hours of sunshine than usual. Provisional data suggests more than 125% of average rainfall but less than 90% of average sunshine in the Wadhurst area.

By contrast June was cooler than average due to northerly winds from the arctic, as was July. The summer felt also dull with lower than average sunshine in the Wadhurst area. There was also lower than average rainfall.

In comparison to previous surveys there was a notable absence of fledged young of open nesting species, such as thrushes. This might have been chance but it is also possible that the rainy weather had an impact on these species.

The majority of woods in this survey are relatively narrow ghyll woodlands running along streams. Wet woodlands are typically quite species diverse but smaller, narrower woodlands might be expected to have fewer birds. These woodlands have quite a long boundary compared to their area and because light can penetrate along the edge of the woodland are likely to have reasonable scrub development, at least where deer browsing is not high. Biodiversity in these ghyll woodlands would benefit from them being allowed to expand creating a wider buffer of trees and bushes alongside the stream. This would help keep moisture within the woodlands, making them better insect habits and that would benefit birds in turn. Additionally increasing the woodland buffer would help trap and filter run-off and so would improve the water quality.

Due to the widely dispersed nature of the points and the distances between the patches of woodland, the surveys take a comparatively long time for point counts.

Surveys and Comparisons with 2022, 2020 and 2018

Six surveys were undertaken, two in each survey area. For full details of the surveys see the separate data sheets.

Some comments on individual points are provided below under the “Rolf’s Farm West”, “Wadhurst Central” and “Wadhurst North” headings. The previous three surveys showed a steady increase in bird numbers but this year showed a slight decrease from 2022 survey.

I have compared the 2024 data with the previous surveys in 2022, 2020 and 2018 using the same comparative measures used in the earlier reports. These are:

- The total number of different species recorded from each point averaged for each survey area and for all three combined.

- The mean number of individuals recorded at each point averaged for each survey area and for all three combined.

Please note that because for species the **total** number of species at each point are used and for numbers of individuals the **average** number at each point over all visits is used the number of species is sometimes higher than the number of individuals.

Due to the splitting of the original Wadhurst North Survey area into “Wadhurst North” and “Wadhurst Central” and the addition of six extra points between the two surveys, only “Rolf’s Farm West” is exactly comparable with 2018. However, the survey points are identical with those from 2020.

Year	Survey area	Species per point	Av. no. of individuals
2024	Rolf's Farm West	14.20	16.80
	Wadhurst Central	16.13	16.06
	Wadhurst North	14.00	17.31
	Wadhurst Total	14.73	16.73
2022	Rolf's Farm West	16.6	18.25
	Wadhurst Central	17.63	19.56
	Wadhurst North	17.63	17.31
	Wadhurst Total	16.62	18.37
2020	Rolf's Farm West	14.7	16.75
	Wadhurst Central	15.75	16.125
	Wadhurst North	14.75	16.75
	Wadhurst Total	15.04	16.56
2018	Rolf's Farm West	14.5	13.45
	Wadhurst Central (3 points only)	14.33	14.33
	Wadhurst North (7 points only)	14.43	15
	Wadhurst Total	14.45	14.125

Table 1. Average number of species and average individuals per point across Wadhurst Park Estate.

The average number of species per point decreased from 2022. This is a change in what had, up to now, been an upward trend, albeit with relatively few data points. It is possible that this was an artefact of the particular survey dates chosen but the fact that numbers were down in each survey area makes this less likely. In fact, the averages both for the individual areas and the site as a whole were very close to the numbers for 2020. As in previous years the highest number of species per point was in Wadhurst Central. This is in part due to the water bodies which meant that some points recorded water associated birds such as Grey Wagtail, which are not typical for woodland point counts. The average number of individual birds seen per point also decreased from 2022, not only across the whole site but also at each site individually. Again, the numbers were very close to those from 2020.

Part of the reason for the decreased number of species is undoubtedly that some of the rarer species such as Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Hobby and Little Owl were not detected this year. With only two visits to each survey area it is inevitable that some of these species will be missed in any given year but, equally, others might be picked up. Redstart and Collared Dove were seen on the point count surveys this year.

Rolf's Farm West

Two visits on 01/05/24 and 12/06/24

Cuckoo was not heard at Rolf's Farm this year. This compares to three or four calling males in 2020 and one in 2022. Dunnock, the principal host species found at Wadhurst Park, was, if anything more prominent than in previous years. It seems probable that this simply reflects the continuing decline of the species in England. Bullfinch made a welcome reappearance, having not been seen at Rolf's Farm in 2022.

Chiffchaff and Blackcap nests confirmed that those species were breeding and recently fledged Great Tit, Blue Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker showed those species had also bred. Grey Squirrel were seen during the surveys and there was evidence of heavy deer impact both from the number of slots and characteristic browsing signs.

Point 7 (2024 total species: 15, average individuals: 16.5)

(2022: 14, 13.5)

(2020: 17, 17)

(2018: 17, 17)

Point 17 (2024: 14, 13.5)

(2022: 19, 20.5)

(2020: 12, 17)

(2018: 16, 13.5)

Both points are in woodland running north along Rolf's Ghyll. This is a wet woodland with a reasonable scrub understory, which is looked more developed but being to become a bit "leggy" in places. Point 7 more species than in 2022 and the number of individuals were comparable two the first two surveys. Point 17 returned a lower number of species and individuals than in 2022, both species and number of individuals have fluctuated curiously between years at this particular point. No Marsh tits were heard at the points themselves but there were at least two Marsh Tit territories in this stretch of woodland.

Point 11 (2024: 13, 14.5)

(2022: 21, 21)

(2020: 12, 20)

(2018: 16, 11.5)

This point is not actually currently in woodland but is part of an area that is being allowed to go through succession. The scrub has developed further and the point is now quite enclosed. This undoubtedly contributed to the reduced number of species and individuals detected both because the scrub was more uniform around the point and because the point being enclosed made it more difficult to detect species at range. Whitethroat, an early succession species, was not detected this year but four different Garden Warbler, a late succession species, were heard singing from the point. Skylark could still be heard from the field to the east. North of the point the scrub was less developed and Whitethroat was heard singing on the walk to the next point.

Point 41 (2024: 16, 16)

(2022: 19, 23)

(2020: 21, 23)

(2018: 14, 17)

This is in an area of tall trees with a fairly open canopy and a mix of broadleaf and conifer. The understory has developed considerably. The dead hedge that protected the regrowth has now collapsed but has done its job in allowing the understory to get away. Indeed, it has got away so much that the stake marking the point was rather hard to find. The area combines with the neighbouring Combe Wood to create a larger woodland area but Combe Wood is mainly enclosed by high canopy. It would be worth managing the understory on rotation to increase its diversity and/or maintain a glade as a feature of the woodland.

Point 22 (2024: 16, 18.5)

(2022: 13, 19)
 (2020: 14, 22)
 (2018: 16, 14.5)

The scrub in this area at the top of Twelve Acre Ghyll has continued to develop and the point that has become enclosed and quite difficult to access. Blackcap and Garden Warbler were both still present and a Bullfinch was heard piping from the canopy.

Point 31 (2024: 12, 13.5)

(2022: 10, 9)
 (2020: 10, 9.5)
 (2018: 8, 8)

Coppicing has begun in this woodland and this has created some much needed diversity. A number of species not previously seen in this area of the estate. Some of these were heard from the point, although at distance, accounting for the increase in species and individuals. The area around the point itself is still over-stood sweet chestnut coppice with little understory. A coppice rotation will certainly help improve the habitat. Some planting to increase species diversity would also be beneficial.

Point 15 (2024: 16, 15.5)

(2022: 13, 13.5)
 (2020: 18, 15)
 (2018: 13, 11)

This is on the corner of a large block of woodland most of which lies outside the Wadhurst Park boundary. It is, itself, quite close to the woodland edge on two sides and has an open understory. As in the previous surveys most of the birds were beyond 25m. These included Marsh Tit. Song Thrush and Stock Dove. However, both Treecreeper and Goldcrest were heard close to the point.

Point 38 (2024: 19, 25)

(2022: 18, 21)
 (2020: 15, 15)
 (2018: 19, 18.5)

On the edge of Little Plantation which is a single age cohort but with something of a scrub layer and some heterogeneous surrounding habitat, with a variety of ages and species of trees, including yew close to the point count location. Except in 2020 it has returned some of the highest counts of species and individuals. I seem to find one Spotted Flycatcher on the point counts each time and this year it was here.

Point 24 (2024: 11, 18)

(2022: 18, 19)
 (2020: 15, 15.5)
 (2018: 15, 14.5)

Point 42 (2024: 14, 17)

(2022: 21, 22.5)
 (2020: 13, 13.5)
 (2018: 10, 9)

These points are in a small wood much of which is relatively recent plantation. A ghyll runs along the southern edge and there are a number of larger trees as well as a wide ride with some well-developed scrub along the edge. The point locations themselves are in areas of fairly recent plantation although some recent tree falls have created some more open areas. Counts dropped at both points this year after having increased in 2022. As in 2022 Bullfinch was again heard from Point 42, as the habitat is currently suitable for them.

Wadhurst Central

Two visits on 04/05/24 and 08/06/24

As on previous surveys this area had the highest number of species recorded due to the large water bodies and associated species present. The early survey here was the only time I recorded Cuckoo on the estate this year, just after leaving Point 47. Interestingly, Dunnock were less prominent here than in the other survey areas but as in previous years Meadow Pipit, one of the other principal host species, was recorded on this part of the estate. Among the other species seen on this survey area but not the others were Lapwing, Kingfisher, Willow Warbler and Redstart. Lapwing were present during the survey last year but this was the first time I have recorded Redstart during the point count surveys. This individual, probably a juvenile, was recorded on the north side of the lake. The species has been recorded by Martin Allison in Batt's Wood previously. Again, I included free flying White Stork on the species list even though these are introduced birds. Recently fledged young of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wren, Long-tailed Tit, Great Tit and Blue Tit was evidence of successful breeding of those species.

Point 3 (2024 total species 15, average individuals 16)

(2022: 19, 21)

(2020: 14, 15)

(2018: 18, 19)

This point is in woodland with some larger trees, verging on veteran age, as well as younger trees and scrubby understory. Species count and number of individuals had dipped from 2022 and were similar to those in 2020. More data Marsh Tit were again present.

Point 5 (2024: 17, 21)

(2022: 16, 18.5)

(2020: 20, 19)

(2018: 13, 11.5)

This point is on a former fence line dividing an area of woodland with understory to the north and east and an area of tall trees with almost no understory to the south and west. The scrub has developed as compared to two years ago and I could not find the stake making the point and had to rely on the GPS point. Counts for both species and individuals had increased slightly.

Point 1 (2024: 20, 17)

(2022: 14, 18)

(2020: 16, 17)

(2018: 12, 12.5)

This point is in an area with an open structure, some tall trees and some wet ditches. It has a high canopy and virtually no understory. There was no very obvious change in the habitat but the number of species increased and the number of individuals dipped slightly. Species of note included Stock Dove, Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Marsh Tit.

Point 25 (2024: 15, 14)

(2022: 18, 17)

(2020: 18, 17)

(2018: Not surveyed)

This point is at the western end of a patch of woodland along a stream that runs east. The Starlings seem to have abandoned the wood as a nesting site and were not seen were again seen in this wood but didn't appear to be using the small barn. There is little understory and most of the birds were in the canopy and over 25m away from the point.

Point 47 (2024: 12, 10)

(2022: 17, 19)

(2020: 9, 6.5)

(2018: Not surveyed)

This point is not currently in woodland but rather in an area of grassland that is marked out to return to scrub and woodland. There is no stake marking the point and the temporary bamboo marker has also disappeared so I located the point with the GPS. The scrub has no real progress and the site looks much as it did in 2018. The counts here for both species and numbers are

mostly of birds heard from a considerable distance, although a Meadow Pipit got up only a few metres away from the point, very possibly from a nest.

Point 10 (2024: 12, 13.5)

(2022: 21, 18)

(2020: 15, 11.5)

(2018: Not surveyed)

This point is at the southern end of a strip of woodland running south to a pond. No Grey Wagtail was detected this year but Stock Dove, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush and Treecreeper were all present.

Point 44 (2024: 24, 20)

(2022: 18, 16.5)

(2020: 15, 19.5)

(2018: Not surveyed)

This point is at the southern end of a strip of woodland running south to Wadhurst Park Lake. Again, there is no stake at this point and it was located by GPS and the landmark of a fallen tree. The point overlooks the boathouse and a small wooded island. This point had high counts of both species and individuals. Grey Wagtail was again singing this year having not been here in 2022. A pair of swallow perched on a dead branch.

Point 45 (2024: 14, 17)

(2022: 17, 28.5)

(2020: 19, 23.5)

(2018: Not surveyed)

Again, there is no stake at this point and it was located by GPS. It is in a small open copse with almost no understory and quite small trees. It is surrounded by grassland and there is a woodland with larger trees to the east. The count included some birds that were within the copse itself but also birds in the grassland and further woodland. A Willow Warbler was heard briefly singing from the latter.

Wadhurst North

Two visits on 09/05/24 and 09/06/24

Point 14 (2024 total species 15, average individuals 21.5)

(2022 16, 21.5)

(2020: 16, 17.5)

(2018: 15, 15.5)

Point 29 (2024: 10, 17)

(2022: 18, 17)

(2020: 18, 16.5)

(2018: 13, 15)

Point 21 (2024: 17, 17)

(2022: 13, 17)

(2020: 15, 15)

(2018: 16, 17)

Point 46 (2024: 17, 21)

(2022: 19, 21)

(2020: 15, 18)

(2018: Not surveyed)

These are in Butcher's Wood, a damp ghyll woodland running along a south flowing stream. There is scrub along the stream and near the woodland edge. Three of the points overlook the stream. The other, point 46, was introduced in 2020 and is further to the east close to a large Beech tree. There is no stake at this point and it was located by GPS and by using the Beech tree as a landmark. The wood again contained several Marsh Tit territories and although there was no Lesser Spotted Woodpecker detected here this year it remains good habitat. It would be a good area to target for deadwood creation. Opening up the canopy in places, particularly along

the ghyll, to create more understory would also be beneficial. This would also require reducing deer pressure as this was very evident. Three fallow deer were seen on the first visit and deer slots were very common throughout the wood.

Point 32 (2024: 12, 13)

(2022: 14, 13)

(2020: 15, 20)

(2018: 11, 12)

This point is in the corner of the southern end of a shave of woodland. The number of species had dropped for the second survey in succession. There was still a Willow Warbler territory but the habitat could do with being refreshed to maintain its suitability for the species. It would also benefit from some more deadwood creation.

Point 34 (2024: 16, 20)

(2022: 15, 20)

(2020: 13, 19)

(2018: 17, 16)

Point 16 (2024: 15, 13.5)

(2022: 13, 13.5)

(2020: 12, 13)

(2018: 13, 14)

Point 19 (2024: 10, 15.5)

(2022: 17, 15.5)

(2020: 14, 15)

(2018: 16, 15.5)

These are all in Railands wood. No Cuckoo was present this year. The scrubby area at the southern end, near Point 19, is even denser and taller than in 2022 and the point was difficult to reach. Species numbers at this point had dropped and it may be that the scrub has “gone over”. The habitat at Point 16 seemed little changed Again, creating a more varied understory would be beneficial. The amount of deer slots again indicate that this might require either control or fencing. However at Point 34 some there was well developed bramble which may reduce deer pressure enough for other scrub to develop.

Additional Comments

It is difficult to be certain of the causes of the lower bird counts during the surveys this year as compared to two years ago. The dull, wet weather made have contributed and there may have been other factors that would require more time in the field to identify.

However, my working hypothesis would be that it is related to the quality of the available scrub habitat and, possibly, the availability of invertebrate food. The latter is based on the known continuing decline across the country and the impression I had of fewer invertebrates during this year's surveys than in previous years. However, this was, of course, not a quantitative survey for invertebrates.

Much of the scrub that existed two years ago has grown up further and is reaching a “late succession” stage. However, there doesn't appear to be very much new young scrub coming through to replace it.

The UK avifauna evolved in landscape that was “managed” by the actions of large herbivores, including keystone species like Wild Boar, Aurochs (wild cattle) and, of course, Beavers. This created a mosaic of woodland, open land and scrub. Of the three scrub tends to be in the shortest supply in our modern landscape as it is often managed out. Wadhurst Park has more scrub than many sites, but it is just not the presence of scrub but its heterogeneity that is important.

Scrub

My impression is that the scrub heterogeneity has reduced and I think it would be worth encouraging young scrub in new areas, which is likely to require deer control or deer fencing. Using the latter method a mobile deer fence could be employed, being left long enough to allow scrub to establish before allowing animals in to create variety in the habitat by browsing or breaking the bushes. The deer fence could then be moved to a new area. New patches of scrub could be encouraged to develop in field corners and along woodland edges. The ecotone where scrub blends into grassland or woodland is often the richest in flowering plants, fruits, seeds and invertebrates. This would particularly be valuable along the wooded ghylls

Another option would be to allow cattle into some of the areas of well grown scrub, using GPS collars, to break up the habitat thus regenerating it and creating more diversity. Originally variety would have been created in the scrub, and other habitats, by the actions of predators which would have moved herbivores across the landscape, preventing them from browsing and grazing areas to nothing. They would also have reduced impact example along waterbodies

Hedgerows

Hedges are a proxy for scrub and it is great to see hedgerows on the estate being laid in the traditional fashion. Cultivating hedgerows with a thick base will help to create a healthy network of habitat corridors, allowing species to move easily across the site. Planting additional hedgerows to break up some of the larger fields would help improve this network. New and existing hedges could be allowed to widen into the fields and become more blended and sinuous in their profiles, again creating more edge habitat niches for invertebrates.

As even most seed eating bird species feed their young on invertebrates, they are critical during breeding season. In addition to creating varied scrub invertebrate numbers can be boosted by decaying wood, nectar rich habitats and Natural Flood Management.

Decaying wood

The invertebrates associated with decaying wood are very diverse and of exceptional value for wildlife, but this is another habitat that is often managed out of the environment. This is not the case at Wadhurst and the woods on the estate are already significantly above average as regards dead and decaying wood, especially as dead wood is generally left where it has fallen. There are, however, relatively few ancient or veteran trees and more could be created by using a technique called *veteranisation*. This creates dead wood niches through tree surgery and includes inoculation with fungi, creating woodpecker-like holes, breaking branches and damaging the bark and trunks. It aims to mimic structures and damage that would be naturally created by age, storms, lightning, herbivores and woodpeckers making them suitable for species dependent on old trees.

Nectar rich habitats

Nectar is the main energy source for adult pollinators, so increasing the number and variety of nectar rich flowers and shrubs will benefit them, and consequently the birds. The aim should be to ensure that there are plants that flower consecutively throughout the active pollinator season from March to October. As I only visit Wadhurst Park on half a dozen occasions between late April and early June, I do not know to what extent this already happens but offer it as a suggestion for consideration.

Natural Flood Management (NFM)

Water is also extremely important for invertebrates. Natural Flood Management techniques include building woody debris dams across watercourses, which imitate the actions of beavers, re-meandering streams, creating riparian buffer strips and digging scrapes. These slow the flow of water off the land and create more niches for invertebrates, which also benefit birds. For example, Lapwing chicks will benefit from scrapes that have levels that drop gradually during the summer exposing muddy edges where they can feed.

	Visit 1	Visit 2	Visit 3	Visit 4	Visit 5	Visit 6
Date	01/05/2024	04/05/2024	09/05/2024	08/06/2024	09/06/2024	12/06/2024
Place	Rolf's Farm West	Wadhurst Central	Wadhurst North	Wadhurst Central	Wadhurst North	Rolf's Farm West
Blackbird	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackcap	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull					✓	
Blue Tit	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bullfinch				✓		✓
Buzzard		✓		✓	✓	
Canada Goose		✓		✓		
Chaffinch	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Chiffchaff	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove		✓	✓			
Coot				✓		
Cormorant		✓				
Cuckoo		✓				
Crow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Duncock	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Egyptian Goose		✓				
Garden Warbler	✓	✓				✓
Goldcrest	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goldfinch			✓	✓		✓
Great Crested Grebe		✓		✓		
Great Sp Woodpecker	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Green Woodpecker	✓	✓		✓		
Grey Heron		✓	✓	✓		
Grey Wagtail		✓		✓		
Greylag Goose		✓		✓		
Herring Gull				✓		
Jackdaw		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jay			✓	✓	✓	✓
Kingfisher				✓		
Lapwing				✓		
Long-tailed Tit		✓		✓	✓	✓
Magpie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard		✓		✓		
Marsh Tit	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Meadow Pipit		✓		✓		
Mistle Thrush	✓	✓				
Nuthatch	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pheasant	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven				✓		✓
Redstart				✓		
Robin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Skylark	✓	✓				✓
Song Thrush	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Flycatcher						✓
Stock Dove	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Swallow		✓		✓		
Tawny Owl					✓	
Teal		✓				
Treecreeper	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck				✓		
Whitethroat	✓				✓	✓
White Stork		✓		✓		
Willow Warbler				✓		
Wood Pigeon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wren	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Squirrel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bird species per visit	27	42	26	43	29	31

Table 2. Bird species seen on each individual survey visit to Wadhurst Park.

Species	Rolf's Farm West	Wadhurst Central	Wadhurst North
Blackbird	✓	✓	✓
Blackcap	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull			✓
Blue Tit	✓	✓	✓
Bullfinch	✓	✓	
Buzzard		✓	✓
Canada Goose		✓	
Chaffinch	✓	✓	✓
Chiffchaff	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove		✓	✓
Coot		✓	
Cormorant		✓	
Cuckoo		✓	
Crow	✓	✓	✓
Duncock	✓	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose		✓	
Garden Warbler	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	✓	✓	✓
Goldfinch	✓	✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe		✓	
Great Sp Woodpecker	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	✓	✓	✓
Green Woodpecker	✓	✓	
Grey Heron		✓	✓
Grey Wagtail		✓	
Greylag Goose		✓	
Herring Gull		✓	
Jackdaw	✓	✓	✓
Jay	✓	✓	✓
Kingfisher		✓	
Lapwing		✓	
Long-tailed Tit	✓	✓	✓
Magpie	✓	✓	✓
Mallard		✓	
Marsh Tit	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit		✓	
Mistle Thrush	✓	✓	
Nuthatch	✓	✓	✓
Pheasant	✓	✓	✓
Raven	✓	✓	
Redstart		✓	
Robin	✓	✓	✓
Rook	✓	✓	✓
Skylark	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Flycatcher			
Stock Dove	✓	✓	✓
Swallow		✓	
Tawny Owl			✓
Teal		✓	
Treecreeper	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck		✓	
Whitethroat	✓		✓
White Stork		✓	
Willow Warbler		✓	
Wood Pigeon	✓	✓	✓
Wren	✓	✓	✓
Bird species per visit	33	54	32
Total bird species	58		

Table 3. Full list of all 58 bird species recorded.