



BTO Research Report No. 382

**Westfield Farm, Cambridgeshire (Plot 1572)
The Countryside Restoration Trust
Report on Breeding Birds 2003**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This was the second annual survey of the breeding birds of Westfield Farm, Comberton, Cambridgeshire, using a territory mapping methodology (Marchant *et al.* 1990). This survey followed a baseline survey in 2002 before any management practices were modified to benefit birds and other wildlife (Carter & Glue 2003).

In winter 2002/03 various habitat changes were made to Westfield farm, chiefly internal hedge planting and the sowing of a pollen and nectar strip, as well as the installation of an adjacent beetle bank. In addition, a small patch of triticale and quinoa was sown in the southwest corner and the area near the stream entered the first year of a meadow recreation scheme. The one large field of winter wheat surveyed in 2002 has been converted into four fields, each with 6m margins, of winter wheat and barley, set-aside and oilseed rape.

The surrounding land is mostly arable with a disused railway line running along the southern boundary. There is a small nature reserve in the southwest corner. Bourn Brook runs along the southern edge of the area.

2. METHODS

A complete mapping census of the breeding birds was undertaken using the methodology laid down by the BTO's Common Birds Census (CBC) scheme (Marchant *et al.* 1990). This involves recording, on large-scale maps, the location and activities of all birds seen or heard. Twelve complete visits were made between mid-March and the end of June, including two evening visits in early May and late June to detect crepuscular species. Coverage was excellent, with 24 hours of observations, compared with 9 visits (13 hours) in 2002. It is important that coverage is standardised from year to year.

3. RESULTS

In total, 50 species were recorded on, or flying over the area during the census visits, compared with 47 species in 2002 (Table 1). This included 32 species that were considered to be holding territory, compared with 27 in 2002. As in 2002, some interesting species and species of conservation importance occurred including: Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Turtle Dove, Skylark, Yellow Wagtail, Linnet, Bullfinch and three species of Bunting (Table 1). This indicates that the site has definite potential for farmland birds.

3.1 Waterbirds

Cormorant (amber-listed) was observed as a flyover on two occasions while one Grey Heron flew over on 5 June. Canada Goose (not noted in 2002) was another flyover on two occasions, involving three birds. None of these species were considered to be holding territory on the farm. The two Mallard territories and the three Moorhen territories recorded in 2002 were maintained in 2003.

3.2 Diurnal Birds of Prey

No Buzzards were recorded in 2003 (seen once in 2002) but two Sparrowhawks were seen on the first visit (new for CBC visits). Kestrel was recorded on four occasions and was considered to be holding territory in the southern half of the farm. This is in contrast to the single sighting in 2002. Hobby was recorded for the first time during a CBC visit with one sighting in the southwest corner.

3.3 Gamebirds

As with Lark Rise Farm, gamebirds were relatively numerous on the farm. There were estimated to be three territories of Red-legged Partridge, the same as in 2002. As in 2002 no young birds were seen but pairs of birds were seen on several occasions. Only one pair of Grey Partridge (red-listed) was considered to be holding territory which stretched from the meadowland to the winter barley. This represents a decline from the two territories located across the wheat field in 2002. No young birds

were seen during CBC visits, in contrast to 2002 when on one occasion 10 young were seen near the southern edge. Pheasant, with seven territories, an increase from five in 2002, was the most numerous gamebird. They were mostly observed in the set aside, oilseed rape and meadowland (one territory in winter barley). No young were observed during CBC visits.

3.4 Waders and Gulls

Lapwing, and Common and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were all new species for the site but were only recorded as flyovers on one occasion each.

3.5 Doves

Stock Dove (amber-listed) had five territories, up from three in 2002. Two territories were centred on the winter barley, one in the oilseed rape and farm buildings, one along the meadowland and the final one in the set-aside. The eleven Wood Pigeon territories, similar to the twelve territories in 2002, were spread over the whole area. As in 2002 no nests were located and some large, non-territorial flocks were also seen. Encouragingly, one Turtle Dove territory was confirmed late in the breeding season in 2003, near the stream, after it had not been recorded in 2002 at all.

3.6 Owls to Wagtails

The aerial feeding Swift, Sand Martin and Swallow (latter two amber-listed) were only recorded as flyovers with no suitable nesting sites nearby. Kingfisher was recorded on one occasion, for the first time. Green Woodpecker (amber-listed) had one territory, as in 2002, located along the stream. Great Spotted Woodpecker was recorded for the first time in 2003 and was considered to be holding one territory, again as with Green Woodpecker, in the stream area. Skylark (red-listed), with 17 territories, was the most numerous species and showed a large increase compared with 2002 (twelve territories). The territories were scattered over the whole arable area but were concentrated in the set-aside. Meadow Pipit (amber-listed) held two territories compared with just two records in 2002. Most of the observations were centred on the set-aside field. As in 2002 Yellow Wagtail (amber-listed) had one territory but Pied Wagtail was lost as a territory-holding species.

3.7 Thrushes and Allied Species

Wren, with 9 territories, one down from 2002, was the fifth most numerous species. Nearly all of these territories were found along the southern edge near the brook. Dunnock (amber-listed) held only one territory, compared with three in 2002. This was located along the brook. Robin held eight territories, the same as in 2002. Most of the observations were along the stream.

The ten Blackbird territories, twice the number found in 2002, were found mostly in the stream area, especially in the southwest corner. The only Song Thrush (red-listed) territory was in the southwest corner, near the brook, as in 2002. Fieldfare, as in 2002, was recorded as a flyover.

3.8 Warblers

Four species, Sedge and Reed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Willow Warbler (amber-listed), were recorded in 2002 but were not considered to be holding territory. There were no records of these species in 2003. Whitethroat, with eight territories, compared with ten in 2002, was the commonest warbler. All territories were along the edges of the plot. The single Blackcap territory, down from three in 2002, was along the stream in the southwest corner although there was another record of a singing bird further east along the stream. The single Chiffchaff territory was in the same area. Garden warbler, a new species for the site, was heard singing on one occasion.

3.9 Tits

Three of the four Blue Tit territories, up from two in 2002, were located in the southwest corner; with the last being in the northeast corner. Great Tit territories also doubled between 2002 and 2003 to two

territories, one being in the southwest corner and the other on the eastern side of the plot. In contrast to 2002, no young birds were seen. One Long-tailed Tit territory was confirmed along the stream area. This is another new species for CBC visits.

3.10 Corvids

Rook and Magpie were not observed in 2003, in contrast to 2002. Only two Jackdaws were seen flying over the site on the first visit in contrast to 2002 when two flocks of Jackdaw were recorded in the southeast corner and one bird was seen in the southwest corner. Jay was observed to fly over the northern area on one occasion. In 2002 it held one territory located in the southwest corner. Carrion Crow, in contrast to the other corvids, increased its density from four to seven territories. These were spread over the whole farm.

3.11 Starling, Sparrows and Finches

Starling (red-listed) was present on four occasions in the northeast corner but there was no evidence of breeding. No sightings were made on the plot in 2002. There were no sightings of House Sparrow (red-listed) during the census. There had been one sighting in 2002. Chaffinch was the commonest finch, maintaining its ten territories, with the majority of them along the southern boundary near the brook and set aside, as in 2002. The rest of the territories were along the edges of the area. Greenfinch which had been present in 2002 was not observed in 2003. Goldfinch held one territory; it had only been present in 2002. Bullfinch (red-listed) was again not deemed to be holding territory. Linnets, with five territories, down from six, was also relatively common. The territories were mostly centred on the oilseed rape and winter barley fields.

3.12 Buntings

The three bunting species had mixed fortunes on the farm. Corn Bunting (red-listed), which had only been recorded once during the census in 2002, held two territories in 2003. Both were located in the oilseed rape field. Yellowhammer (red-listed), with six territories, down from seven in 2002, was the commonest bunting. Reed Bunting (red-listed) declined dramatically. It held only one territory in 2003 compared with five in 2002. The single territory was spread widely over the set-aside and oilseed rape fields.

4. DISCUSSION

Ten red-listed species were present on the farm during the breeding season in 2003. Two species were gained (Starling, not holding territory, and Turtle Dove with one territory) and one species was lost (House Sparrow) compared with 2002. Of the eight species present in both years, four declined between 2002 and 2003 (Grey Partridge, Linnets, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting) two remained stable (Song Thrush and Bullfinch) and two increased (Skylark and Corn Bunting). The English trends for these species were generally stable between 2002 and 2003, the only exception being the significant 17% decline in Starling populations (Raven *et al.* 2004).

Fourteen amber-listed species were present on the farm in 2003 compared with only nine in 2002. Only two of the six species gained however were considered to be holding territory (Kingfisher and Meadow Pipit). Willow Warbler, which had been present but not holding territory in 2002, was not observed in 2003. Of the eight species that were present in both years; one declined (Dunnock), five were stable (Cormorant, Green Woodpecker, Swallow, Yellow Wagtail and Fieldfare) and two increased (Kestrel and Stock Dove). As with the red-listed species, the English trends for the ten potential breeding species (*i.e.* excluding Cormorant, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Fieldfare) were all stable except for the significant 39% increase in Kestrel populations (Raven *et al.* 2004).

Most of the non-listed species holding territory were stable, in line with trends in England. Pheasant, the commonest gamebird on the farm, increased in line with the increase in England between 2002 and 2003 of 13% (Raven *et al.* 2004). Blackbird showed the biggest increase although in England

populations were stable between 2002 and 2003. Worryingly, some of the warblers (Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Whitethroat and Blackcap), in line with declines in England, all showed declines on the farm. In contrast, Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits increased between 2002 and 2003, whereas English population trends were stable. Carrion Crow also increased between the two years, again in contrast to the stable English population trend.

Overall the number of species holding territory increased from 27 to 32 species but this increase must be treated with some caution as the monitoring effort in 2003 was much greater; twelve visits compared with nine in 2002 and an almost doubling of the time expended to 24 hours. The latter was also presumably due to the division of the large field in 2002 into four fields with the planting of internal hedges and various crop margins. As in 2002, the bulk of the bird territories were along the southern fringe, near to the brook, disused railway line and meadow land. The southwest corner, in particular, was favoured.

Changes in management practices on the rest of the plot will almost certainly influence bird distributions as the hedgerows mature. The mixture of crops will also help some farmland birds with the set-aside and oilseed rape being particularly beneficial.

5. References

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Table 1. Number of breeding territories on Westfield Farm in 2002 and 2003.

Species	2002	2003
Cormorant	Present	Present
Grey Heron	Present	Present
Canada Goose	-	Present
Mallard	2	2
Sparrowhawk	-	Present
Buzzard	Present	-
Kestrel	Present	1
Hobby	-	Present
Red-legged Partridge	3	3
Grey Partridge	2	1
Pheasant	5	7
Moorhen	3	3
Lapwing	-	Present
Common Gull		Present
Lesser Black-backed Gull	-	Present
Feral Pigeon	Present	-
Stock Dove	3	5
Woodpigeon	12	11
Turtle Dove	-	1
Swift	Present	Present
Kingfisher	-	Present
Green Woodpecker	1	1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	-	1
Skylark	12	17
Sand Martin	-	Present
Swallow	Present	Present
Meadow Pipit	Present	2
Yellow Wagtail	1	1
Pied Wagtail	1	-
Wren	10	9
Dunnock	3	1
Robin	8	8
Blackbird	5	10
Fieldfare	-	Present
Song Thrush	1	1
Sedge Warbler	Present	-
Reed Warbler	Present	-
Lesser Whitethroat	Present	-
Whitethroat	10	8
Garden Warbler	-	Present
Blackcap	3	1
Chiffchaff	1	1
Willow Warbler	Present	-
Long-tailed Tit	-	1
Blue Tit	2	4
Great Tit	1	2
Jay	1	Present
Magpie	Present	-
Jackdaw	Present	Present
Rook	Present	-
Carrion Crow	4	7
Starling	-	Present

Species	2002	2003
House Sparrow	Present	-
Chaffinch	10	10
Greenfinch	Present	-
Goldfinch	Present	1
Linnet	6	5
Bullfinch	Present	Present
Yellowhammer	7	6
Reed Bunting	5	1
Corn Bunting	Present	2