

A BIRD SURVEY OF THE HARNHAM WATER
MEADOWS TRUST AREA FOR THE PERIOD
NOVEMBER 2007 – OCTOBER 2008

Conducted by:

John Vickerman
46, Mill Road
Salisbury
Wiltshire
SP2 7RZ

Tel: 01722 334770

e-mail: jvickerman@talktalk.net

PREVIOUS BIRD RECORDS OF THE HARNHAM WATER MEADOWS

In the January 1998 edition of the booklet entitled “ Natural History of the Harnham Water Meadows”, there appears a bird list with generalised comments on their status which was produced from information supplied by the Wiltshire Ornithological Society and other individuals including John Vickerman over an unspecified period.

THE OBJECT OF THE 2007 – 2008 SURVEY

This survey is intended to provide more detailed information about the status of the bird population over a 12 month period of the birds associated with the Harnham Water Meadows Trust Area - hereafter referred to as “the meadows” - for feeding purposes, or simply observed flying over the meadows e.g. on migration or more localised movements, or breeding within the boundaries of the meadows.

Thus, with data gathered over a full year providing a basis of species variety and numbers of each species occupying the meadows, then a more accurate idea can be obtained as to how best to manage the meadows with their bird life in mind.

With the appropriate management of the meadows, it is expected that the number of species occupying the meadows and the total number of birds present at all seasons should increase.

METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY

The 12 month period from November 2007 to October 2008 will be split into 3 periods with, at the end of each period, a written report being submitted:

Period A November to February - winter records.

Period B March to June - mainly breeding season records.

Period C July to October - post-breeding and autumn records.

For each month of the survey period, it is intended to walk the meadows at approximately 2-weekly intervals. Visits will be usually made during the morning when birds are more active and are more easy to locate and record, and will last about 2½ hours. Weather will be a consideration with, if possible, generally dry, mild and not too windy days being chosen.

On a large scale map of the survey area, each bird sighting will be noted. The information marked on the maps will denote the bird species and its activity in accordance with the British Trust for Ornithology's 1 and 2-letter bird name codes and activity chart in common usage for national survey work. Such a chart is enclosed for reference purposes.

A summary report will be submitted at the end of each period laying out the bird species recorded and their numbers. Their positions on the meadows can be located on the monthly survey maps which will be submitted at the same time. There will also be additional comments on the state of the meadows with regard to their habitat condition and some recommendations will be made as to how the meadows may be enhanced to benefit their ornithological diversity.

At the end of the survey period, a final document, Part D, will be prepared which will provide an overview of the whole year's records. In addition, there will be further comments about the general habitat and condition of the meadows as perceived over the 12 month survey period, and recommendations for suggested habitat improvements.

**PART A A SUMMARY OF BIRD SIGHTINGS AND THEIR NUMBERS
ON THE MEADOWS FROM NOVEMBER 2007 TO
FEBRUARY 2008**

This summary represents an overview of the status of the 45 bird species recorded during the winter survey period November 2007 to February 2008.

- MS **Mute Swan** - *Cygnus olor* Off the R. Nadder, up to 6 seen in the water channels.
- CG **Canada Goose** - *Branta canadensis* From time to time, a flock of about 60 visit the meadows, usually to meadows 1 and 3.
- MA **Mallard** - *Anas platyrhynchos* About 20 birds frequent the Long Bridge area and another 20 frequent the Harnham Mill area as regular feeding occurs there. On the water channels of the meadows, up to 6 birds have been seen.
- PH **Pheasant** - *Phasianus colchicus* 3 males and 2 females have been recorded ranging all over the meadows. These birds are of introduced stock during the last 2 years and are intended to replace the original stock that was exterminated by the plague of foxes present on the meadows up until about 3 years ago.
- CA **Cormorant** - *Phalacrocorax carbo* 1 to 2 high flying birds have occasionally been seen over the area presumably commuting between the Steeple Langford gravel pits and the R. Avon south of Salisbury.
- ET **Little Egret** - *Egretta garzetta* Up to 2 birds regularly seen feeding along the water channels of the meadows.
- H **Grey Heron** - *Ardea cinerea* Perhaps surprisingly, only recorded once with 1 bird in mid December feeding in meadow 6.
- SH **Sparrowhawk** - *Accipiter nisus* Occasional sightings of probably 2 different birds judging by size variation - males are smaller than females - which hunt over the meadows.
- K **Kestrel** - *Falco tinnunculus* Occasionally seen with 2 present at the end of January.
- PE **Peregrine** - *Falco peregrinus* 1 seen in mid November over-flying westwards. Presumably a roosting bird from the cathedral heading off on a hunting foray.
- MH **Moorhen** - *Gallinula chloropus* Maximum of 4 birds seen in mid December. An often elusive species which can lurk unrecorded in dense riverside vegetation.
- CO **Coot** - *Fulica atra* Maximum of 12 birds seen off the main river systems and grazing on meadow 1.
- SN **Common Snipe** - *Gallinago gallinago* Occasionally seen with 3 being the maximum seen in mid December.
- GE **Green Sandpiper** - *Tringa ochropus* 1 seen in mid November in the water channel dividing meadows 7C and 7D.
- BH **Black-headed Gull** - *Larus ridibundus* Numerically, the most abundant species. A semi-permanent over-wintering colony frequenting the river and loafing on meadow 1. Maximum count of 80 at the end of February.

- HG **Herring Gull** - *Larus argentatus* 1 seen associating with the Black-headed Gulls at the end of February on meadow 1.
- WP **Wood Pigeon** - *Columba palumbus* Numerically, the third most abundant species. A fairly constant presence of up to about 50 birds recorded in all parts of the meadows.
- CD **Collared Dove** - *Streptopelia decaocto* 1 to 2 birds recorded in November and December on and near Scout's Island.
- KF **Kingfisher** - *Alcedo atthis* 1 seen along the water channels through the middle of the meadows throughout the winter.
- GS **Great Spotted Woodpecker** - *Dendrocopos major* Not more than 1 bird seen on any survey, but twice identified as a female. Sightings have ranged from West Nadder copse in the west to Scout's Island.
- MP **Meadow Pipit** - *Anthus pratensis* 2 seen in November on meadow 7C. Likely to have been late autumn passage migrants.
- PW **Pied Wagtail** - *Motacilla alba* Sometimes, 1 seen over-flying the meadows. In late December, 8 seen feeding together on meadow 1.
- WR **Wren** - *Troglodytes troglodytes* Always an elusive and skulking species, but up to 7 individuals located at the end of December in the denser hedgerow stretches.
- D **Duncock** - *Prunella modularis* Just 3 records at meadow 6 and near Rotary Copse.
- R **Robin** - *Erithacus rubecula* Up to 11 birds located across the meadows in the hedge areas.
- B **Blackbird** - *Turdus merula* Up to 30 birds located at the end of December. Some of these are most likely to be over-wintering birds of continental origin.
- ST **Song Thrush** - *Turdus philomelos* Occasionally located with a maximum of 3 birds found in mid December in the thicker hedgerows.
- RE **Redwing** - *Turdus iliacus* Numerically, the second most abundant species. Throughout the period, a loose flock of at least 50 birds has spent the winter roaming around the meadows foraging mainly amongst the hedgerows and under trees. Winter visitors only.
- M **Mistle Thrush** - *Turdus viscivorus* Regularly seen with 4 birds present on the meadows with 2 in and near Scout's Island, and 2 between Rotary Copse and West Nadder Copse.
- CW **Cetti's Warbler** - *Cettia cetti* Not located on any of the designated survey visits. However, it is important to report that 1 was heard in song in the willow/reed-bed area immediately down stream of the Long Bridge during the first week of January. This area will be carefully monitored to attempt to verify any breeding attempt of this vulnerable Schedule 1 protected species.
- GC **Goldcrest** - *Regulus regulus* 1 located in Rose Cottage garden at the end of November.
- LT **Long-tailed Tit** - *Aegithalos caudatus* Seen on most visits. Up to 6 birds located at the end of December in the thicker hedgerow tangles.

- BT **Blue Tit** - *Cyanistes caeruleus* Up to 10 birds located. This population could well be expanded by the provision of nest boxes.
- GT **Great Tit** – *Parus major* Up to 12 birds located. Another species which could undergo a population expansion with the provision of nest boxes.
- TC **Treecreeper** - *Certhia familiaris* A furtive and thus elusive species to locate. 1 was seen on Scout's Island at the end of November, and 1 was in song - possibly the same bird - in the hedgerow trees between meadows 2B and 3 in mid February.
- MG **Magpie** - *Pica pica* Maximum count of 19 birds at the end of February. Birds ranged widely over all meadows during all surveys.
- JD **Jackdaw** - *Corvus monedula* 1 to 2 birds recorded over-flying the meadows.
- RO **Rook** - *Corvus frugilegus* Not recorded except for a flock of about 50 birds in early January over-flying the western part of the meadows heading towards Harnham Hill.
- C **Carrion Crow** - *Corvus corone* Up to 6 birds seen probably representing 2 pairs occupying the area to the east of the Town Path and 1 pair to the west of the Town Path.
- SG **Starling** - *Sturnus vulgaris* Occasionally recorded. The only foraging flock recorded was a flock of 20 on meadow 6 at the end of December.
- CH **Chaffinch** - *Fringilla coelebs* Up to 9 birds located scattered along the hedgerows and at Scout's Island.
- GR **Greenfinch** - *Carduelis chloris* Up to 19 birds roaming widely along the hedgerows and at Scout's Island.
- GO **Goldfinch** - *Carduelis carduelis* Up to 11 birds associating with the Greenfinches in the hedgerows.
- SK **Siskin** - *Carduelis spinus* Recorded once. A flock of 7 feeding in an Alder tree near Scout's Island at the end of January. A winter visitor only.
- RB **Reed Bunting** - *Emberiza schoeniclus* 1 recorded regularly in the willows of the R. Nadder west of Fisherton Mill House, and in the thick hedges surrounding meadows 7 and 7A.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING THE CONDITION OF THE HARNHAM WATER MEADOWS TRUST AREA AS OBSERVED FROM NOVEMBER 2007 TO FEBRUARY 2008

The Effects of the Sheep Grazing Regime on the Meadows during this Period

Sheep, and to a certain extent cattle, are very much a traditional part of the ecosystem and management of ancient water meadows, but the number put out to graze and the timings of their grazing need to be very carefully monitored.

Until mid January, a large flock of sheep continually grazed the meadows. It would appear that significant over-grazing occurred with the grass being cropped very short. Despite generally mild and damp weather conditions throughout this period, the grass could not regenerate itself quickly enough to feed the large number of sheep present.

The result was that several parts of the meadows became very muddy and totally devoid of any grass or other vegetation of any kind. This has been particularly apparent at and near gateways and bridges over the water channels. It will be many months before some parts can recover from such churned up areas.

Such a sustained period of heavy grazing during this period of the year without the ability of the grass and other plants to slowly grow and stabilise to an acceptable height and density rendered the meadows in general to be unsuitable for cover and for feeding for winter birds e.g. for Snipe, and there were no records at all of Lapwing or Curlew.

It would appear that winter grazing by so many sheep maintained for the length of time that they were present on the meadows during this period was unsustainable and needs to be reviewed for future winters.

A Proposal for some Development to Meadow 1

It is understood that this meadow will never be suitable for regeneration back to the condition whereby it could be integrated back into the ancient water meadows system and as a part of the rest of the meadows.

Therefore, it is not unreasonable to consider how else this large meadow may be managed in a somewhat different way to the other meadows but so as to still be an important wildlife rich part of the whole.

Mention has already been made in a previous report (The Canada Goose by John Vickerman, 2007) that a shallow water scrape, or water flash, with very gently shelving muddy edges in this meadow and covering some 1000 square yards in area could have a major positive influence in encouraging back

previously breeding birds of the water meadows such as Lapwing, Curlew and Redshank.

To best achieve this objective, it would be necessary to review the entire management of this meadow. The Canada Goose situation would need to be addressed as would the grazing regime for any animals in this meadow. Over use by both would lead to eutrophication of any essentially wet area thus rendering necessary invertebrate life non-existent plus degradation of the area surrounding the wet area caused by the feet of animals churning up this area.

In essence, a much more limited grazing regime, or other means of vegetation management allowing taller and denser vegetation through the winter than exists at present and on through the bird breeding season, would be required. A healthier and more diverse vegetation would encourage insect and other invertebrate life to flourish on this meadow which could in turn sustain target bird species such as Lapwing, Curlew and Redshank with the objective of aiding their return as breeding birds to, at least, this part of the meadows system.

The Future of the Copses

There are three copses which were planted some 10 - 15 years ago, namely, West Nadder Copse, Rotary Copse and Seven Acre Copse.

The presence of all three copses seems to be a feature which is out of keeping with the traditional make-up of a typical ancient water meadows system.

Moreover, the tree species chosen to be planted in establishing these copses have very limited ornithological benefits as defined by their poor or nil ability to bear suitable seed or berries to provide food for birds, or to sustain a good diversity of insect life, and the tree structure is such that safe bird nesting opportunities are poor. In their present state, these copses have little benefit except as refuges for Wood Pigeons, Magpies and Crows. So what is to be done with these copses?

There would appear to be two obvious options:

1. Remove the copses in their entirety and return the areas they cover to the original water meadows system,

or,

2. Remove about half of the trees selecting for removal the thinner, leggy and least wildlife useful ones, and replace with useful berry bearing trees and bushes. At the same time, top the remaining trees to a manageable height so as to encourage a more spreading shape rather than a vertical dash for light as has been their growing habit so far by

dint of their being too closely planted at the outset. Action along these lines could bring added benefits to the whole of the meadows area as indicated later in this report.

There is a fourth copse, namely, Scout's Island which adjoins the R. Nadder across the river from the Harnham sports field. This copse was created several decades ago and is now a mature area.

Fenced and thus free from sheep, this small yet well wooded area has a good density of fairly mature trees including Alders (*Alnus glutinosa*) which are especially useful as seed bearing feed trees in winter for tits and finches.

There is also a good under story of brushwood and plants allowing useful ground cover and foraging capability for birds and small mammals, and for insect life.

Minimal, or no active management would seem desirable at this time.

The Future of the Hedgerows

It became very clear in the early part of this survey that the hedgerows - such as they are - were vital feeding and cover areas for many of the bird species recorded. However, the hedgerows are in a generally very poor condition though a few stretches are usefully thick.

There are some thick tangles e.g. on the north side of Rotary Copse, the north/south stretch of some 50 yards between meadows 7 and 7E and the riverside boundary hedge west of Scout's Island towards Harnham Mill. These three separate short stretches do hold a reasonable density of several bird species.

However, no significantly long and connecting stretches of hedgerow exist - the whole hedge network is woefully fragmented.

Hedgerow management within the meadows has to be urgently addressed. There is a compelling case for the immediate restoration of hedges to fill in the gaps in existing hedges, and to extend the hedges along their former lines so as to provide a connecting network of hedgerows throughout the meadows. This one single commitment to restoration would hugely enhance the existing bird densities and allow additional species to flourish, e.g. various warblers, finches and buntings.

Additional benefits of such a commitment to hedgerow restoration would be an expected proliferation of small mammal and insect life with all elements combining together to provide a well balanced bird, small mammal and insect rich habitat.

In restoring hedgerows, great care must be exercised in the selection of traditional hedge species to be used. An appropriate mix of such species as

Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Field Maple (*Acer campestre*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and a corner or two of Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) are all good traditional hedging species. Intersperse at sensible intervals with stand alone trees allowed to mature above the hedge height such as Oak (*Quercus robur*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*), Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and Willow species (*Salix* sp.). Then add in some trailing plants such as Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), White Bryony (*Bryonia dioica*), Black Bryony (*Tamus communis*), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and Traveller's Joy (*Clematis vitalba*). These are all traditional hedging species and associated plants found in old hedgerows which provide good cover, and fruit and berry food for birds, small mammals and insects.

Proposals for Renewing a Breeding Birds Nest Box Scheme

Careful placement of various types of nest boxes in a given area often provide an extra boost to bird populations by offering additional breeding sites.

Kestrels, owls, tits and Robins are all examples of species that can take advantage of additional sites created in this way. Nest boxes would need to be in place by the end of February in any given year to permit optimum take up of such additional breeding sites during the same year.

Strategically placed nest boxes in hedgerows, hedgerow trees and, as indicated in a previous paragraph discussing the future of the copses, placed in retained and modified copses could tip the balance of the argument in favour of retaining the three copses in question rather than removing them completely.

In addition, nest boxes always have a huge human interest value and benefit in educational terms. When children become involved during educational visits, viewing of the comings and goings of parent birds to and from nest boxes never fails to capture their interest.

Such provision of nest boxes in the modified copses could create a new, if not typical experience in an ancient water meadows landscape, but would never the less, provide a harmless yet immensely beneficial educational experience for young and old alike.