


2019



Report on
Birds and Conservation
at
HE HALL FARM
MARDEN

An aerial photograph of a winding river or stream flowing through a rural landscape. The river is dark and reflects the sky. On either side of the river are fields, some of which are brown and appear to be recently plowed or harvested. There are clusters of trees, some bare and some with green foliage. In the background, there are rolling hills and a small village with houses and buildings. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

The family farm of H E Hall and Son Ltd has been farming in Marden for over a hundred years and now operates on six separate sites around the village. The farms produce a mixture of organic and conventionally farmed fruit, arable crops, and grapes for sparkling wine.

Wildlife and conservation also take pride of place on the farm. A mixture of natural habitats is created around the farm with substantial areas devoted entirely to conservation. Arable areas are managed sympathetically for wildlife so that native plants, insects and birds continue to exist alongside the production of food. Special crops are planted specifically to provide food for birds through the winter when natural supplies are depleted.

As other farms make space for nature too, the Marden area boasts significant numbers of red-listed farmland and other birds. Thanks to the efforts of volunteers, other nationally scarce or declining wildlife is being steadily identified and encouraged to thrive in our hedgerows and field margins.

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Peter's bit



Construction of a wetland for flood management was completed at Christmas 2018. Although regeneration of surrounding vegetation is a slow process on the poor soil, water plants are colonising the lake and its banks, insects are arriving followed by fish, frogs, newts and the birds that feed on all of them. An early September evening witnessed a splendid spectacle of Daubenton's bats caught in torchlight as they careered up and down the length of the lake scooping up their insect prey. A late summer visitor over several days was an osprey, seen circling the immediate area on its late summer migration from northern UK to its African wintering ground.

Water Habitats

As well as kingfishers, mallard and Mandarin ducks, and three species of geese, other visiting water birds include cormorant, grey heron and the little egret – until a few years ago a bird confined to the tropics and Mediterranean regions.

Wintering green sandpipers are a regular sight in Marden, but are now more easily seen if you make a slow, quiet approach to the lake where they feed along the shoreline. Common sandpipers have begun using it too as a refuelling stopover on their annual migration from Africa to breed in the Arctic.



Farmland streams and ponds are home to water dependent birds. Kingfishers nest in banks and scarce grey wagtails breed under sluice gates in spite of the presence of American mink. This voracious predator is an invasive alien species which has decimated many populations of our native fauna such as water vole. When possible they are trapped and humanely destroyed. Where there is dense bank-side vegetation around ponds and ditches, reed warblers and reed buntings proclaim their territories with song during the breeding season. This autumn sightings of a dabchick (little grebe) took the number of bird species recently recorded on the farms to a hundred; it is probably only a matter of time before its bigger relation, the great-crested grebe, adopts the new wetland.

Dragonflies like the migrant hawker and blue-tailed damselfly provide colourful glimpses of the myriad insects found in damp places where natural vegetation is allowed to flourish. Dragonflies are aerial hunters but are themselves hunted by hobbies – falcons that specialise in catching these large insects, dismembering and eating them in flight. Hobbies are adept at taking house martins and swallows too, both of which are drawn to wetland habitat and the insects to be found here. Up to four hobbies have been seen hunting together over the farm this summer. Our damp and waterlogged areas are relatively unexplored, with interesting plants and animals still waiting to be discovered by anyone with time to look.



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Marden's Special Birds



In summer, the gentle “turr-turr” of nesting turtle doves drifts from dense, scrubby hedgerows. With RSPB help, local farmers create seed-rich strips of bare ground alongside crops to help these rare birds achieve peak breeding condition after their migratory flight from Africa. The Low Weald, especially the area around Marden, now holds one of Kent’s largest concentrations of this once common, but now threatened bird, high on the ‘red list’ of the UK’s most threatened species.



A display featured the RSPB’s work with local farmers at the ‘Art in the Garden’ exhibition at Mill Farm House in September.

£800 from entry money was generously donated to the RSPB for its local work to save these beautiful birds.

Nightingales, yet another red-listed bird, have long nested locally, so wild areas are being managed to help maintain their numbers.



Carefully managed hedgerows around arable fields with generous 'weedy' margins provide nest sites for breeding yellowhammers. Although another threatened species on the 'red list', its "little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese" song is still a familiar summer sound. In autumn and winter birds from surrounding areas create hundreds-strong flocks in fields sown with seed-rich crops containing, for example, mixtures of sunflowers, linseed and wheat to help birds survive the cold. Enlightened landowners also strew seed directly on the ground to provide supplementary feeding strips.

Providing additional food benefits many species, including linnets. Another bird on the 'red list', linnets are drawn in their hundreds to feed - an estimated thousand birds were counted during a Winter Farmland Bird Survey carried out this year by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) on behalf of DEFRA.





Bird Ringing



An established ringing programme is carried out throughout the year by trained volunteers licensed by the BTO. Birds are trapped, measured and weighed, then fitted with uniquely numbered ring before being promptly released. Knowledge acquired in this way informs scientific research on which national conservation policies are based, and provides a yardstick to assess local efforts to improve wildlife. In 2019, 1231 birds of 42 species were ringed.

During winter months ringing takes place mainly where farmland birds congregate around the fields planted with winter bird crops. Resident bird populations are swollen by those escaping the harsher continental winter weather. As well as our local yellowhammers, reed buntings and linnets, Scandinavian bramblings, redwings and fieldfares are attracted to feed, along with continental blackbirds, thrushes and chaffinches to swell the resident population.



Summer ringing is concentrated in wooded or scrubby parts of the farm as this is where many summer migrants from the Mediterranean and Africa come to breed.

Six species of insect-eating warblers are regularly ringed, along with kingfishers, grey wagtails and spotted flycatchers. Species like pied flycatcher, that use the farm as a refuelling point on their migration, have also been ringed here.



Our ringing data confirms the variety and quality of the local habitat provided for wildlife. Results from ringing on other local wildlife-friendly farms also demonstrate there is currently a degree of 'connectivity' in the farming landscape. This is an important plank in the government's '25 Year Plan for the Environment' to avoid fragmenting wildlife populations and causing further declines.

Martins, Swallows and Swifts

A number of years ago eighteen artificial house martin nests were fixed to the oast barn at Little Mill Farm. At the time Marden boasted a thriving colony of these summer visitors on the village centre shops. Although that colony has reduced in numbers, those using the artificial nests have increased in number and this year constructed nine additional nests of their own - possibly as the new wetland is providing both mud for the nests and insects for the young. We estimate they raised between twenty four and forty eight broods this year.

Although probably fewer in number than in past years, swallows still nest successfully in farm buildings, but swifts are absent as a nesting species. The coming summer, therefore will see swift boxes erected around the area and a further fifty artificial house martin nests provided. We are also creating an artificial bank of nests on the lake to attract sand martins, a species so far absent from Marden.



Birds of Prey



and

Hornets



Apart from moths, butterflies and dragonflies, insects are a group of animals we still have to get to grips with, as only casual observations have been made of other species during the year. Some bumble and solitary bees have been identified previously, but the last two years have been notable for our attention being drawn to colonies of common wasps and European hornets. Unfortunately this is because they have taken over nest boxes erected for barn owls or kestrels, in some cases actually usurping the birds from their nest and eggs. This is perfectly natural behaviour and doesn't indicate anything unusual. However, from numbers seen and heard calling during the breeding season it is almost certain that that barn, tawny and little owls have nested in the area, along with kestrels, sparrow hawks and buzzards. Healthy numbers of other birds have also attracted peregrine falcons on the hunt



A portable trap has been used since August this year to begin listing moths to complement our records of butterflies. The trap is sited in different areas to sample the variety of habitats present. Led by David Newman, we have already identified sixty-eight species.



The variety of moths drawn to the trap, with their beautiful patterns and colours, were a popular attraction at the 'Art in the Garden' exhibition when visitors were entertained by their strange-sounding names like Mother of Pearl and Rosy Footman.



A further, summer-long study by a Reading University scientist was also carried out and we await his report with interest.

Butterflies and Moths

Twenty butterfly species have been seen so far. There are hopefully more to be found by someone looking specially for them - an ideal excuse for someone to wander the farm on sunny summer days. The perfect idea for a school summer holiday activity too. Willing volunteers of all ages will be enthusiastically welcomed!



Monthly surveys have again been conducted by Sam Crocker and Rob Manvell. So far nineteen species have been recorded and it is likely that all breed here. The insects lay their eggs directly into the water or on rotting wood and vegetation, so this has been deliberately added to the new wetland lake to encourage further expansion of the local population. Dragonfly larvae (their young) look nothing like their parents and spend several years underwater where they are fierce predators of underwater creatures (small fish included) so as life in the lake increases, so should the dragonflies.



Dragonflies

Eventually they climb out of the water on the stem of a plant and, after drying in the sun, their skin splits and the animals emerge as stunningly coloured adults.



The southern hawker shown in the photograph has just emerged and takes some time to inflate and dry its wings and several days to acquire its full colour. Its old 'skin' can be seen still attached to the plant beneath it.

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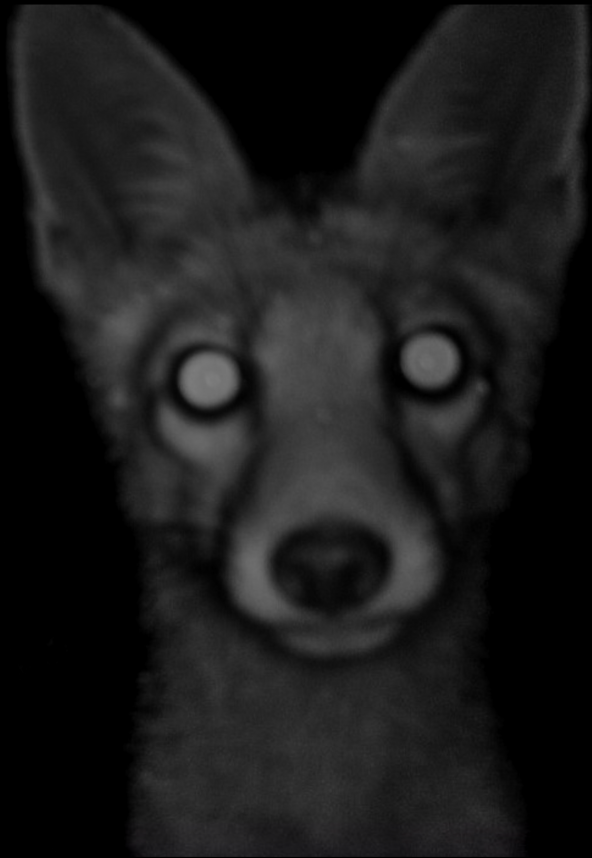


Dragonflies



Mammals

Dormouse nesting tubes were put out last winter to investigate the suspected presence of dormice. Our check at the end of the year revealed several dormouse nests confirming they are indeed in the area. Nesting boxes have now been placed in suitable locations for this protected species to use.



Arrangements are in hand for a member of farm staff to undergo the two-year training to become licensed to handle dormice. A formal monitoring programme to track small mammals across the farm can then be started.

Tiny harvest mice and shrews are also present, as are wood mice that frequently take over birds' nest boxes. From barn owl pellets dissected by local school children, and actual sightings, we know we have a range of small mammals using the farm.



With the acquisition of our own bat detectors we have begun to build on a survey by Kent Bat Group in 2016. To start us off, local ecologist Simon Ginnaw led an excellent bat walk in September during which we were treated to the sight of bats hunting almost, on some occasions, within an arm's length of us.



Bats



Apart from the brief KBG survey there has been no systematic investigation of local bat populations. However, our newly acquired bat detectors have now been enthusiastically deployed on two more farms on the other side of Marden. With seven species already identified, the indications are that the surrounding area could be home to other, rarer species. As bats are declining due to loss of habitat, reduction in insect prey and an increase in light pollution, further investigation is a priority.

David Newman continues to compile a list of fungi and has so far identified seventy three species, most with tongue-twisting Latin names, such as *Calobolites radicans*.

The list of plants found on the farm is slowly being added to and now stands at two hundred and eighteen. Although many species, with the notable exception of small teasel, are relatively common, it is highly likely there are more to discover by anyone interested enough to look. Volunteers with a few hours to spare would be welcome to roam the farm in search of them.



Plants and Fungi

Fungi are similar to small animals - insects, spiders, worms and the like - that don't attract the same level of interest as birds, mammals and reptiles, but are nevertheless vitally important for the healthy environment on which humans depend. Anyone interested in sparing a few hours from time to time to help us identify these, or any of the wildlife you have read about, is very welcome to join us.



A range of equipment has been purchased (or constructed) to help us do this: as well as over a hundred nest boxes for various species (they will all need regular checks during the breeding season – help!), we have a moth trap, bat detectors (that fit on a smartphone), camera traps, small-mammal traps, pond dipping equipment and a thermal imaging camera. Our volunteers include school and university students, people in employment (one working on Pattenden Lane uses his lunch hour to look for birds) and those enjoying an active retirement.

Contact Ray Morris (lepiaf@hotmail.co.uk) if you'd like to know more.

Staplehurst Primary School

As the world grapples with the climate crisis and increasing loss of biodiversity, it has never been more important to educate people of all ages about the environment, so we continue to seek ways to engage young people in learning about their local wildlife.

Once again pupils at Staplehurst Primary School investigated the diet of barn owls as part of their science curriculum. Children from two Year 4 classes identified the bones of small mammals and birds when they dissected pellets disgorged in nest boxes by roosting owls.

Teacher Sally Seymour said “The children just love this activity ... [and were] very keen to share their work with their families! Such a valuable learning experience for the children.”



Education and Health

Duke of Edinburgh Award

Conservation activities carried out through the year provide volunteering opportunities that can count toward the DoE Award. We currently have a young village resident enjoying being part of the ringing team.

Living Memories Cafe

As part of Marden's work to become a 'Dementia Friendly' village, Living Memories members and their carers took part in two talks about changes to farming and farm wildlife.





This report has only been made possible with help and assistance from many people who have given generously of their time during 2019. My appreciation and thanks, therefore, go to:

Lou & Richard Carpenter, Sam Crocker, Bethan Dalton, Alex *, Claire Dominic, David Errey, Bob Francis, Simon Ginnaw (Forestry Commission), John Haddaway, Terry Hilsden, Nicole Khan (RSPB), Mary Lockwood, Derek McWalter, Maria Mak, Rob Manvell, Lyn Moody, Lys Muirhead, David Newman, Darren Nicholls, Jan Pritchard, Sally Seymour and Y4 pupils at Staplehurst CPS, Ros Sim, Jack Slattery, Jac Turner-Moss, Brian Watmough, Paul Weiss, Ginny Wenban.

A special thank-you is due to Peter Hall for his support and encouragement, and to Duncan Simmons for his enthusiasm and practical help in making things happen, sometimes at the drop of a hat!

Ray Morris, February 2020

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