

CROXLEY COMMON MOOR BREEDING BIRD SURVEY 2016

Fieldwork Dates

This survey was based on six early mornings of fieldwork (three pairs) between 23rd April 2016 and 9th July 2016. Specifically they were:

23rd April 06.25 - 09.20

1st May 06.35 - 10.20

22nd May 06.10 - 09.15

4th June 07.00 - 10.10

7th July 06.05 - 09.10

9th July 06.05 - 08.50

Methodology etc.

The survey methodology was loosely based on the now discontinued BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) CBC (Common Birds Census) although only six field visits were undertaken rather than 10. It was more rigorous than the current BBS (Breeding Bird Survey) methodology which uses two visits to two 1km transects across a 1km square and is more for equal effort comparisons between sites rather than trying to maximise coverage and record as many species as possible at an individual site. The chosen route (see map provided under separate cover) was walked in the opposite direction for each pair of visits. Therefore visits 1,3 and 5 were walked 'clockwise' and 2,4 and 6 'anticlockwise'. This is generally considered best practice and means that each end of the site is visited alternatively first thing when the birds' singing is generally most vigorous. The downside is that the middle of the site tends to always be visited at roughly the same time.

No Gulls spp. (*Larus* spp.) or Woodpigeons were recorded on the field sheets as previous experience has shown that this only tends to clutter things up especially where there are a

number of registrations close together as there were on occasions during this survey. Notes of records of these species were however made so they could be included in the species list.

The pencil lines drawn through the red registrations on the field sheets were merely used to avoid duplication when totting up registrations for each field visit during the production of the species list.

There is no preamble concerning the history of the moor or the various national and local designations that apply to it. It was felt that this was beyond the scope of the study, that recipients of this report would be aware of all of that in any event and it would simply be duplication. Neither has any rigorous desktop study of previous records (i.e. a perusal of previous county reports) been undertaken. That was also considered to be beyond the scope of the report. Records from the Herts Bird Club website @ www.hnhs.org for 2015 were however taken into account although it should be remembered that records on there aren't vetted to the same standard that a county report is. ¹

Scientific names for bird species have only been used in the species list section. Common names have been used exclusively elsewhere. Although this is not standard practice, to have used scientific names for the birds throughout would have, in the opinion of the author, rendered the report more 'cluttered' and less readable. Botanical scientific names have however been used throughout given that there were far less of them and not the same problem with 'clutter' that there would have been with the bird names.

There is some duplication between comments made in the various Bird Habitats, Species List, Discussion, Suggestions/Comments and Questions sections. The author apologises for this but the idea was that each section of the report could stand alone without the necessity for constant cross-referencing.

The 'main footpath' referred to is the one running from Moor Lane Crossing to the Mill Lane bridge. The 'diagonal boundary hedge' referred to is the one running from Moor Lane Crossing in a north-easterly direction and dividing the 'traditional moor' from the part that was ploughed during WW2. It also contains some mature, deciduous trees which is why it is referred to as a 'hedge' in inverted commas.

The report builds on comments made in the author's e-mail of 2nd May to Heidi Hutton (copied to Graham Everett) following the first two days of fieldwork and takes account of Heidi's response of 3rd May.

Thanks also go to Heidi Hutton for providing the blank field sheets which were excellent for the purpose.

Bird Habitats

1. Thick hedgerow/woodland boundaries with deciduous trees and scrub grading to more scrubby hedgerows with less tall trees. All around the boundary of the moor, including between the Gade and the canal, and along the diagonal dividing 'hedge'. Part of this habitat has been opened up to provide a number of damp 'glades' along

the eastern boundary with the main moor and this is to be welcomed in providing habitat diversity for birds as well as flora. The boundary of the 'ploughed moor' in the east with the industrial estate and the Ebury Way and further along the Ebury Way to the west consisted of scattered, taller deciduous trees out-with the boundary and a robust hedge, sometimes dense and sometimes broken within it. A similar 'hedge' with taller trees behind an inner 'hedge' was found between the River Gade and the canal. Species which were mostly found here included Stock Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wren, Blackbird, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Great Tit, Chaffinch and Bullfinch.

2. The rather barren, open area of the previously ploughed part of the moor with rank grassland. A Skylark was surprisingly singing here on 9th July. Otherwise there was very little of note.
3. Dry, open moor, becoming damper to the west, with scattered clumps of scrub. On both sides of the main footpath but not in the extreme west of the site which was much wetter. This area also included a number of mostly damper hollows, either natural or the result of human activity. Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) were found here on the more acid areas (the latter mostly to the east of the footpath in and around the new enclosure) along with Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Dog-rose (*Rosa canina*) and Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). The stronghold of the Petty Whin (*Genista anglica*). Bird species favouring this habitat were Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Mistle Thrush, Long-tailed Tit, House Sparrow, Linnet, Goldfinch and Reed Bunting.
4. Open areas with hummocky, short turf with numerous anthills (which are responsible for many of the smaller hummocks) (some of those anthills also being hidden beneath scrub in the previous habitat which was intermingled with this one). A favourite feeding area for Green Woodpecker, Jackdaw and Starling and the preferred habitat for migrant Wheatears.
5. The wet section at the west of the site dominated by Willow (*Salix spp*). A particularly strong showing of Ragged-robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) was on display here on 4th June and 8th June. Marsh Marigold (*Caltha palustris*) was in flower on 1st May and Great Burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) was in leaf (although, given that the latter species is somewhat uncommon and local in the southeast, the author may need to be corrected on that one). Wood Avens/Herb Bennet (*Geum urbanum*), and Cuckooflower/Lady's-smock (*Cardamine pratensis*) were in bloom on 22nd May and Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Purple Loose-strife (*Lythrum salicaria*) were coming into flower in early July. No bird species appeared to favour this habitat over at least one of the other habitats.
6. The small reed-bed (*Phragmites* bed) along the northwest bank of the lower part of the Gade supporting three or four breeding pairs of Reed Warbler.

7. The river Gade itself and banks. Most of the records of Little Egret, Grey Heron, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Mallard and Moorhen were from here along with the three records of Common Tern and the single record of Grey Wagtail on 7th July.

Species List and comments:

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Up to three in flight most often along the canal along the northwest boundary.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Up to two birds seen on a few occasions usually in the northern corner both in flight and feeding in the Gade.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Up to two birds seen on a number of occasions most often along the Gade and, like the previous species, both in flight and feeding in the river.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (Amber Listed)

Up to two birds seen along the length of the Gade and in flight on a number of occasions but there was no evidence of breeding this year.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

A pair on the Gade on 22nd May and 4th June had two goslings and maybe the same pair, now with three goslings, at the northern corner on 9th June.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (Amber Listed)

Ten birds were loafing at the northern corner on 4th June, a duck with three ducklings there on 7th July and two ducks with two ducklings on 9th July.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

One over at the western section on 23rd April was the only one but others were observed out-with the formal survey most often over the woodland to the northwest.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A male with prey flew north across the western section on 4th June.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Amber Listed)

One overhead at the western corner on 9th July.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

A tiercel (male bird) with prey on 9 July. Heading west from the centre of the moor, it was initially carrying a very large prey item for a male bird (possibly a Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)). It dropped this when it was hidden behind a tall ash tree and then carried on, pursued by a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) and perched on the pylon at the western tip of the moor.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Probably a couple of pairs along the Gade with a juvenile at the western corner on 9 July.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

Surprisingly not recorded until the last two visits with single birds along the northeast section of the Gade on 7th July and 9th July. Not recorded on data sheets.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* (Red Listed)

Up to 10-20 recorded throughout the survey mostly hanging about over the industrial estate along the southern boundary. Not recorded on data sheets to avoid clutter.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* (Amber Listed)

As for the previous species. Not recorded on data sheets to avoid clutter.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* (Amber Listed)

A single bird flying northeast along the Gade on 9th July. Single birds had previously been recorded behaving similarly on the morning of 8th June (attempting to fish) and on the evening of 1st July, within the survey period, but not formally part of it.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* (domest.)

Two over on 1st May and six over on 22nd May.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* (Amber Listed)

One or two singing birds mostly heard from the diagonal dividing 'hedge'.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Flight records on most dates. Not recorded on data sheets to avoid clutter.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Up to three birds most often around the northern corner and Moor Lane crossing adjacent to human habitation.

Cuckoo *Cuculus clamorus* (Red Listed)

One or two birds singing in the western section of the moor on 23rd April but none subsequently. This species' principal nest hosts are Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) and Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) although they do predate on other species less regularly. There were a maximum of four breeding pairs of the previous species on the moor

this year and they arrived later (see subsequent records). There were none of the latter. The likely conclusion therefore must be that this Cuckoo/these two Cuckoos simply moved on

Swift *Apus apus* (Amber Listed)

Ten overhead on 9th July.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (Amber Listed)

One near the Mill Lane bridge on 23rd April.

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

A maximum of five on 9th July. A flock of 16 flew east past Mill Lane bridge on the evening of 1st July (not part of the formal survey).

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Two to six on each date, both seen and heard, with three juveniles together on 7th July.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

A drumming bird in the woodland to the north on 23rd April and 1st May. Subsequently, up to four birds both seen and heard.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (Red Listed)

Totally unexpectedly, one was singing above the centre of the 'ploughed moor' on 9th July.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Two over on 23rd April and three over on 22nd May.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (Red Listed)

One near the Mill Lane bridge on 7th July.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

A ubiquitous species singing all over the open moor and from the adjacent hedgerows on nearly all survey dates. A maximum of 24 (all singing) on 23rd April and 23 singing birds on 1st May.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis* (Amber Listed)

A common species both in open and denser scrub habitat. A maximum of 16 registrations on 23rd April.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

A common species both in open and denser scrub habitat. A maximum of 31 registrations on 1st May.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (Red Listed)

A maximum of nine singing birds on 22nd May. This may be an overestimation due to this species being audible over very long distances (500m+) and having the well-recognised ability to 'throw its voice'. Unlikely to have been less than five breeding pairs on and around the moor though.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* (Red Listed)

At least two (including a singing bird) on 1st May and two again on 22nd May. No real evidence of breeding though.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

A common species mostly along the boundary hedges/woodland. A maximum of 27 registrations on 23rd April.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

One singing between the Gade and the canal on 22nd May.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Fairly common along the hedgerows with a maximum of eight singing birds on 22nd May.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Four singing birds on the western part of the moor (in Habitat 3) on 23rd April and one singing briefly in the northern corner on 8th June (not part of the formal survey). A pair were observed nest-building by two other observers (Marrett & Thompson), also on 23rd April, but the author saw no subsequent evidence of breeding as part of the formal survey. It is quite likely that this species, which occupies a rather similar ecological niche to the following one, Common Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*), (although it generally prefers denser thickets of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) etc.) may have suffered from inter-specific competition with that species, especially given the numbers of that species present on 1st May.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

The maximum count was 37 registrations on 1st May. This was a huge total more characteristic of a coastal migrant 'fall'. Of those, 29 were singing birds! Of those 19 were west of the main footpath and 10 east of it. Although the area of traditional open moor to the west of the footpath is roughly twice that to the east, which would suggest a similar density of singing birds, the wetter part of the western moor dominated by Willows spp. (*Salix* spp.), is not particularly attractive to this species and the eastern total also includes more birds singing from the hedgerows including the diagonal dividing one. The perception therefore was that, in suitable open habitat, the density of singing birds was greater on the western half of the moor than in the east. In addition, all four of the singing birds of the previous species, Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*), on 24th April, were in the western half too.

After this numbers declined with a maximum count of 17 registrations on 9th July which included at least some juvenile birds and the perception was that the species was more

evenly distributed. The maximum number of singing birds after 1st May was 11 on 22nd May and I would estimate that being close to the breeding total which is still very good.

Therefore, it would seem that a number of the 'bumper crop' of birds recorded on 1st May were still on migration, had stopped off at the moor on their journey north, and moved on prior to 22nd May. It is quite usual for these birds to sing vociferously in that circumstance.

This onward movement may have been due to:

1. It having been a particularly good year for Whitethroats nationally, locally or both and the suitable habitat on Croxley Common Moor being insufficient to sustain all the birds recorded on 1st May to remain and breed. Therefore, the least competitive moved on.
2. The birds that left were intent on heading north to breed in any event and their leaving was not particularly due to intra-specific competition.
3. A combination of 1 and 2.

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

A maximum of six registrations on 4th June including three singing birds all in or adjacent to the strip of reed-bed along the Gade indicating a minimum of three breeding pairs.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (Amber Listed)

One singing in the middle of the moor on 1st May and one calling from the hedgerow at the eastern corner on the same date. No evidence of breeding though.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Fairly common in boundary hedgerows and woodland with a maximum of ten registrations on 1st May including six singing birds.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Two juvenile birds in the woodland along the northeast boundary on 7th July.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Fairly common and widespread, mostly along the hedgerows, with a maximum of 14 registrations on 23rd April. Surprisingly, all the 13 registrations on 1st May were in the eastern half.

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*

Fairly common. A maximum of 15 registrations on 9th July which included a number of juveniles.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

A flock of ten in broom to the east of the new enclosure on 7th July was the only significant flock although the species was recorded on most dates.

Magpie *Pica pica*

Common all over the moor with a maximum of 21 registrations on 9th July.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

A maximum of five registrations on 1st May.

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Seven feeding on short turf with Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) on 22nd May was the best count.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

One flying west beyond the northern boundary of the site on 7th July.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Fairly common on and around the moor throughout the survey period.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (Red Listed)

Seen flying about around the moor and feeding on short turf throughout the survey with 30 feeding with Jackdaws (*Corvus monedula*) on 22nd May the best count.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

One on 1st May and three on 22nd May.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

A maximum of 12 singing birds, mostly along the hedgerows, on 1st May.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (Red Listed)

A male on 23rd April and four on 1st May. No evidence of breeding.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Recorded on every survey date, mostly flying overhead or twittering in the bushes and flying between them. Three birds were singing on 4th June and three breeding pairs would be the minimum breeding population. A feeding flock of 18 birds was present on both 7th July and 9th July, which contained both adult and juvenile birds, and added to the evidence for breeding.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

A maximum of 13 registrations with eight singing birds on 7th July. A good population given the recent decline of this species due to infection by trichomonosis disease.

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (Amber Listed)

A male in the hedgerow between the Gade and the canal at the southwest corner on 22nd May.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* (Amber Listed)

A maximum of six registrations on 1st May and two singing birds on 22nd May. Probably two or three breeding pairs.

58 species

In addition, it is worth taking note of the following species which were not recorded as part of the formal survey:

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Up to two recorded during the previous autumn and winter mostly over the woodland to the north-west.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (Amber Listed)

One on 23rd March (presumably at the wet, western end). (Marrett & Thompson).

Common Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*)

A male on 30th March (Lapworth & Clark) and two males on 18th and 19th April (Lapworth & Thompson). The short, hummocky turf on the open moor is perfect for this migrant species (which doesn't breed in the county but has a more northerly breeding distribution at higher altitude). Other favourite stopovers in the county include reclaimed landfill sites and farm waste tips!

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* (Red Listed)

Single figures along the Ebury Way boundary on various dates during the previous winter.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* (Red Listed)

At least 40 birds flying about on 16th December 2015.

Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*)

Rather surprisingly, **NOT** recorded. Anecdotal evidence suggests the species has been recorded in the recent past (and a desktop search through previous county reports would probably confirm this). The juxtaposition of reed-bed and scrub habitat along the lower section of the Gade does look perfect for it. However, there were four singing birds at Stocker's Lake on 14th April (and the species was recorded by various observers there between 10th and 22nd April) but they didn't stay to breed which may have been due to inter-specific competition with Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) or simply that those birds were intending on heading north anyway or both. Therefore, it may also have been that this species was present adjacent to the reed-bed along the Gade at our site prior to the commencement of this survey but that they didn't stay to breed for similar reasons.

Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*)

One calling from a bush on the western part of the open moor on 8th June.

The annotations Red Listed or Amber Listed refer to those species being currently of high and medium concern respectively (according to the BTO/JNCC/RSPB lists of species of conservation concern). 2,3

References

1. www.hnhs.org
2. www.bto.org.uk
3. www.rspb.org.uk

Graham Clark

25th July 2016