

Steyning Downland Scheme Bird Surveys 2011 to 2021

Report by Bob Platt, June 2022

Introduction

Bird Surveys have been conducted on Steyning Downland Scheme since 2011 by a group of volunteers. The objective has been to maintain a record of birds occurring on the site throughout the year in order to add to understanding of the site's biodiversity and to help inform management decisions. Volunteers range from experienced and knowledgeable birders to beginners. Efforts are made to recruit volunteers of all levels of ability. Carrying out surveys is a useful way of learning to identify birds and also helps individuals to become familiar with the wildlife on the site.

The site

Steyning Downland Scheme is located on land belonging to the Goring family, owners of the Wiston Estate, lying to the west of Steyning and partly on the north-facing escarpment of the South Downs. The Scheme has been a registered company and charity since 2007, managed as a community facility and for its wildlife habitats. Several public rights of way pass through and round the site, but the public are allowed free access to most of the site by means of permissive footpaths. Many areas, however are not easily accessible owing to steep slopes and dense tree cover.

Habitats on the site include woodland (some of fairly recent origin), grassland, scrub and a chalk stream emerging at the foot of the rifle range coombe with ponds formed by dams built to store water for a mill on the outskirts of Steyning. While one section of the stream is easily accessible, some parts are surrounded by dense scrub and consequently inaccessible. The escarpment slopes are densely wooded, but Ash is a dominant species and Ash die-back has taken over. Trees have been cleared along public rights of way.

Areas of the site are managed to restore chalk grassland to some areas and to provide and enhance habitats for several species of butterfly. Efforts are made to prevent scrub encroachment over the chalk grassland areas, while leaving some scrub areas intact as a valuable habitat. Cattle grazing is used as a means to control scrub and thereby improve chalk grassland.

The site is used by many local people for recreation and is very popular with dog-walkers, and has been especially so during lockdown over the last two years or so. With the knowledge of the SDS, mountain bikers make use of the higher, steep woodland areas and have created trails and jumps.

Botany and butterfly surveys have been carried out on a regular basis and occasional surveys of other taxa, e.g. fungi, glow worms and adders have also been conducted.

Method

Surveys are conducted monthly, weather permitting, mostly on a Sunday morning starting at or soon after sunrise. Generally, between six and twelve people take part and form up into two or three groups comprising a combination of experienced and novice members and follow set routes around the site. Route 1 follows Nightingale Lane, around the ponds and through the Rifle Range. Route 2 takes the footpath from Mill Lane to Steyning Coombe, proceeds up Steyning Coombe, then turns

right onto the public footpath and returns to the north-west corner of the rifle range. Route 3 proceeds around Steyning Coombe and then follows the path around the Lower Horseshoe area. While Routes 1 and 2 have been covered on every survey, Route 3 has been covered much less frequently. In 2017 and 2018 surveys were conducted in the Pepperscoombe area in the late summer/autumn period to see if this area is frequented by birds on autumn passage.

All birds seen and heard and confidently identified are recorded, with numbers where practicable. Records are entered into BirdTrack, the BTO/RSPB on-line database. Survey records are entered on BirdTrack as "Complete Lists", BirdTrack's preferred type of entry. In addition species of interest seen on other occasions are recorded and entered into BirdTrack as "Casual Records". Many of the more unusual sightings were recorded as Casuals, in other words, not seen during a planned survey.

Results

A table of all species entered onto BirdTrack during the period, listed in order of frequency, is shown in Appendix 1. Altogether 101 species have been recorded over the period of 10 years. 50 species have been recorded at least once every year. Of those that have not been recorded every year, 15 species have been recorded more than 10 times.

The wide range of species reflects the range of habitats present on the site. The birds regularly recorded include those associated with ponds, woodland, scrub and open grassland. They include resident species, summer and winter visitors and passage migrants. The presence of some species recorded only once or twice, such as an Oystercatcher, sighted after a storm, are clearly one-offs.

Discussion

The site contains a range of habitats including woodland, scrub, grassland, a stream and ponds. As such, it provides a combination of habitats well suited to many of the commoner species of birds to be found in this region.

Species that have been recorded most frequently are generally those whose characteristics, behaviour, call and songs make them easy to see, hear and identify with confidence. The numbers are therefore probably a reasonable indication of their frequency and abundance. Species that are more retiring, have more limited calls and song and occupy less accessible habitats are likely to be under-recorded. This includes species such as Marsh Tit, which tends to occupy tree canopy, and Water Rail, which makes use of the dense cover surrounding the Lower Pond. However, this does not invalidate the results of the survey, but does indicate how the results should be treated, especially in relation to the more retiring species.

The overall number of species reflects the enthusiasm of the surveyors and the birdwatchers' natural tendency to want to add more species to their lists. Many of the species recorded just one or more times were lost, blown off course, passing through, or temporary visitors for whatever reason. The fact that they did not stay confirms that the habitat available is not suitable for them.

Of the 50 species recorded in every year, 43 are British residents and seven are summer visitors. Most of them are likely to be making use of the range of habitats on the site. The combination of woodland, scrub and grassland provides feeding, nesting and roosting opportunities for a large number of common species to be found in this country. The scrub and open areas are important breeding areas for Linnets and Yellowhammers (which are both red listed species) as well as Whitethroats - which are delightful.

Evidence of breeding is not collected on a formal basis, but many of the more frequently recorded species are seen and heard through the spring and summer months, indicating the likelihood of breeding on site, and the breeding status (following the BirdTrack methodology) is recorded for the more interesting species is noted where known. As many as 46 species may have bred, or attempted to breed on the site. It would be useful in future years to carry out surveys and record evidence of breeding.

Raptors include Buzzard, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk with fairly frequent records. All three may have bred on site. Peregrine and Red Kite have been recorded less frequently. Tawny Owl behaviour means that it is unlikely to be recorded during early morning surveys. However, casual records indicate that it is present and it would be useful to conduct evening surveys during periods when birds are calling to gain an idea of numbers and areas occupied. There have been a few casual records of Barn Owl.

The ponds area next to Nightingale Lane is difficult to access. This is an advantage to the species that use the area as they are protected from disturbance, but makes it difficult to see many of the species occupying it and song and calls are relied upon to identify those present. The lane gets its name from the Nightingales that occur there in the spring and typically two or three singing males are heard in the spring. A small flock of Teal make use of the ponds during the winter and can be heard calling and occasionally seen flying in the vicinity. The dense cover suits a shy bird, the Water Rail, which has been seen once and heard on several occasions making its 'squealing pig' call. Kingfisher has been seen on the lower pond on a few occasions, and may visit more frequently, but is unlikely to be heard, so may be under-recorded.

Mallard, Moorhen and Coot, are all seen frequently on the Upper Pond and there is evidence of breeding. Grey Wagtail has been recorded a dozen times and may have bred recently.

Redwings and Fieldfares, and Meadow Pipits, are the only winter visitors regularly recorded, Redwings in more years than Fieldfares.

The most frequently observed passage migrants during late July to late September are Spotted Flycatchers which seem to have a favourite feeding spot at the top of Steyning Coombe. But several species of warbler pass through, and Redstarts are recorded most years. There is always the chance of something unusual, eg Pied Flycatcher and Whinchat have been recorded in recent years.

Conclusion

The surveys have shown that Steyning Downland Scheme offers a range of habitats that support a surprisingly large number of bird species. The data provides a useful measure of the success of management initiatives and provides a benchmark against which to measure the effect of habitat changes that may take place in the future such as management interventions and Ash Dieback.

It has also shown the willingness of local people to get involved in wildlife survey activities.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Bird Species recorded on Steyning Downland Scheme since the commencement of regular surveys in 2012.

Species recorded	No. of records in year										Total All Years
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
Total number of records	605	655	436	572	524	650	585	666	614	471	5778
Total number of Species	63	68	61	64	65	72	69	71	65	66	99
Blackbird	30	34	21	29	24	29	27	25	22	18	259
Woodpigeon	28	30	22	30	25	29	25	25	20	17	251
Blue Tit	26	32	22	26	23	25	24	26	22	18	244
Carrion Crow	29	28	21	26	23	27	24	25	21	15	239
Robin	27	29	23	25	23	27	18	26	23	18	239
Wren	24	29	23	23	23	27	25	23	22	17	236
Great Tit	27	27	20	28	21	20	24	25	22	16	230
Chaffinch	27	26	20	25	19	24	21	23	17	12	214
Song Thrush	24	25	16	19	15	20	16	20	14	9	178
Dunnock	18	19	12	21	20	19	21	19	17	13	179
Goldfinch	19	21	16	18	20	21	11	23	16	15	180
Chiffchaff	15	15	12	18	15	25	17	25	20	18	180
Green Woodpecker	22	23	14	17	12	21	14	18	13	18	172
Great Spotted Woodpecker	22	22	15	11	14	18	15	20	17	16	170
Yellowhammer	16	19	10	11	18	24	21	14	15	16	164
Greenfinch	18	11	12	19	14	16	14	21	13	11	149
Blackcap	12	13	7	9	16	15	19	24	14	9	138
Jackdaw	19	9	9	12	10	21	17	16	8	14	135
Long-tailed Tit	13	12	11	9	8	14	20	15	17	15	134
Stock Dove	14	15	9	10	11	14	16	10	14	8	121
Whitethroat	7	10	5	11	12	15	16	14	13	11	114
Moorhen	11	9	9	13	10	16	10	13	8	10	109
Buzzard	6	19	6	15	11	9	9	13	10	9	107
Jay	4	7	5	8	9	12	16	16	17	15	109
Goldcrest	12	12	1	14	11	10	7	8	16	6	97
Herring Gull	10	9	5	13	10	15	7	9	12	6	96
Linnet	13	5	8	5	8	7	7	8	19	12	92
Mallard	3	4	10	9	9	11	10	12	10	7	85
Starling	7	16	3	7	2	7	9	8	9	6	74
Pheasant	11	8	3	10	5	7	4	10	10	6	74
Kestrel	11	9	4	4	4	10	10	7	6	10	75
Treecreeper	3	8	3	7	9	7	12	7	7	2	65
Nuthatch	10	13	8	3	2	5	5	4	8		58
Skylark	10	7	4	9	1	5	3	8	10	1	58
Swallow	13	3	6	3	2	6	7	12	4	8	64

Bullfinch	10	4	6	9	3	6	8	4	5	5	60
Marsh Tit	2	4	3	5	5	5	9	8	10	7	58
House Sparrow	9	7	3	1	3	7	2	5	13	3	53
Nightingale	6	9	6	4	7	1	2	6	2	4	47
Teal	5	8	5	4	2	7	3	7	2	5	48
Sparrowhawk	1	12	1	9		3	5	5	6	1	43
Coot	4	7	1	5	7	3	3	1	8	5	44
Rook	3	10	1	5	2	4	3	8	2	1	39
Mistle Thrush	4	5	2	3	4	4	5	2	5	6	40
Meadow Pipit	1	1	1	6	7	5	1	4	6	2	34
Cetti's Warbler	2	3	5	3	4	2	1	6	5		31
Coal Tit				6	5	6	1	9	3	9	39
House Martin	1	7	2	3	3	3	7	3		1	30
Swift	5	3	4	1	2	2	4	3	5	1	30
Redwing	4	1	5	2	2	5	4	6		6	35
Spotted Flycatcher			2	2	4	1	3	3	8	3	26
Willow Warbler		2	1	1	2	5	4	2	3	2	22
Raven	2	2	2		2	3	3	1	5		20
Stonechat	1			1	3	1	1		12	3	22
Black-headed Gull			1	1	3	3	3	3	3	1	18
Collared Dove			2	2	3		2	3	3	1	16
Lesser Whitethroat	1	6			1	2	1	2			13
Firecrest	1		2		1	1	4	4		3	16
Grey Heron		1		3	2	4		2		1	13
Grey Wagtail	2	1			1			3	5		12
Fieldfare			1	1	4	1	1	3		2	13
Red Kite		1	1		3	1	1	2			9
Redstart		1				4	1		3	4	13
Grey Partridge		1				2	1	4	1	1	10
Hobby	2								5		7
Pied/White Wagtail	1				1	1	2	1	1	1	8
Cormorant	1		1	1	1			2	1		7
Snipe			2			1			2	2	7
Cuckoo		4						1			5
Gadwall	1	1		1				1			4
Kingfisher	1	1			1	1					4
Tawny Owl	1	1		1				1			4
Lapwing	1			1			1	1		1	5
Peregrine		1		1				1			3
Sand Martin						1	1		1	1	4
Water Rail									3		3
Garden Warbler		2				1				1	4
Siskin						1	1				2

Wheatear				1					1		2
Barn Owl	1					1					2
Bittern							1				1
Canada Goose		1									1
Curlew							1				1
Greylag Goose					1						1
Little Egret				1							1
Little Grebe		1								2	3
Nightjar			1								1
Oystercatcher									1		1
Red -legged Partridge			1								1
Reed Warbler		1								1	2
Ring Ouzel						1					1
Sedge Warbler								1			1
Shoveler		1									1
Tufted Duck		1									1
Whinchat	1										1
Willow Warbler							1			1	2
Wood Warbler								1			1
Yellow Wagtail						1					1
Woodcock						1					1
Total Species											
	63	68	61	64	65	72	69	71	65	66	99