

THE BIRDS OF EWELME WATERCRESS BEDS

October 2002 to November 2009

Tom Stevenson

1 Introduction

Towards the end of September 2002 I began keeping a record of bird sightings in the watercress beds.

Throughout the 7 years I have tried to walk the length between the downstream end of the site and the road bridge, in both directions on a weekly basis. Whenever possible I have also visited the top end of the site above the bridge. All of the species of birds seen during the visit were recorded. I pondered for some time if I should include species flying over or just those seen within the area and decided to include everything observed during the walk. My thinking was that it would be very difficult to decide where to draw the line. For example it would seem right to count swallows low over the water but at what height should they be excluded? It seemed easier all round to count everything. Also, that Kestrel hovering overhead might well have landed if I had not been present.

I have covered seven complete years in this note from the first comprehensive listing on 12 October 2002 to 30 October 2009. There are some “casual” records just before the start of the period which seemed better to include.

The photographs were all taken by the author, most of them within the site but some from elsewhere, locally. They can be accessed by clicking on the name of the bird if the text is coloured blue. To return to the report use the “back” button.

2 Systematic list with status of all birds seen in and from the site

This section lists all of the birds seen by me during the surveys of the Ewelme Watercress Beds. It should be noted that the information is based solely on my understanding, knowledge and observations and if any reader would like to comment on this section of the report contributions would be most welcome.

I am well aware of other species, not on the main list, that have been seen, some by me, but have only included those seen between September 2002 and September 2007. A list of some of the other species is provided at the end of this report.

The small table gives the percentages of visits on which the species was seen in each of the seven years covered by this note and the coloured block at the left hand end gives their official conservation status.

To explain this, seven quantitative criteria were used by leading governmental and non-governmental conservation organisations in the UK to assess the population status of each species and place it onto the red, amber or green list.

The Red Species List comprises birds of high conservation concern and the Amber Species List, those of medium conservation concern. Species that fulfil neither of these two criteria are green-listed.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

This spectacular addition to the Ewelme bird list turned up in late August 2007 and must have found the area to its liking as it didn't leave until March 2008. At one stage during the early part of its stay it was apparently joined by a second bird but it didn't stay and I never managed to see the two together.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	34%	2%

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

This large grey and white bird with long neck and dagger like yellow bill used to be a fairly common sight on the beds and in flight over the village but sightings have steadily declined over the years, though with a slight resurgence in the last two years.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	27%	17%	11%	8%	5%	18%	25%

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

The only wild goose seen from the watercress beds but perhaps wild is not the best description of this large goose which is present in this country as a result of introduction from its native North America. Up until 2007/8 I had only a three records; one of a pair in the pasture between the beds and Cottesmore Lane and two others of birds flying low over the beds. They could well have been prospecting for a nest site but, as they were not seen over a longer period, presumably didn't find anywhere to their liking. However, there were four records in 2007/8 and some evidence to suggest that they may have nested locally, though not on the beds. Just a single sighting in 2008/9 of a pair in the lower beds.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	2%	0%	0%	5%	11%	2%

Teal *anas formosa*

This, the smallest of our native ducks, is a very uncommon winter visitor to the beds with only a single sighting on 1st February 2003. This may well have been a regular visitor in the days of the trout pond as away from the coast the seeds of spike-rush and creeping buttercup together with aquatic midge larvae are common items of their diet. These are more usually associated with ponds and lakes rather than flowing water. Teal were fairly regularly seen on the lake at Grundons Pit a few years ago.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

A very common resident duck of the Watercress Beds which breed in the bankside vegetation.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	71%	100%	100%	95%	100%	84%	96%

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Fifteen years ago it would have been unthinkable to see this species featured in a list of local bird species but since the re-introduction programme by the RSPB, English Nature and Joint Nature Conservation Committee this magnificent raptor is frequently seen soaring over the cress beds and surrounding area.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	49%	44%	46%	60%	63%	82%	82%

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Numbers of Sparrowhawks have increased dramatically since the banning of DDT and they are now almost as numerous as Kestrels, though not so visible. Sightings increased slightly over the five years from 16% to 22%, though down by half in the latest year - the changes were probably not significant with this species spending little time on the site, views being restricted to a rapid low level hunting pass which is easily missed.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	16%	20%	21%	22%	22%	21%	9%

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

If that large bird soaring high over the area hasn't a forked tail it is probably one of these. Numbers of Buzzards have increased as Red Kites have become established but whether there is a connection is unclear though probable. The frequency of sightings fluctuates widely from year to year, probably dependant on the location of the nearest nest site. During a workday in 2007 six were seen soaring together over the Watercress Centre.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	26%	9%	16%	22%	15%	13%	18%

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

The most common raptor in the area, often seen hovering over the site searching for voles, which constitute a large part of their diet. Most birds of prey have a large hunting territory which accounts for the differences in observation statistics.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	20%	39%	23%	22%	12%	29%	25%

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

A very rare visitor to the skies above Ewelme. It's main diet consists of dragonflies but they will also catch and eat Swallows and Martins. This latest fact often gives away a Hobby's presence in the area as the Swallows and Martins form a close flock and call loudly as they ascend skywards when a Hobby is hunting locally. Just a single sighting in each of the first five years covered by the survey, three sightings in 2007/8 but none in 2008/9.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%	8%	0%

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

This, the larger of the two partridges and with a distinctive black and white face, is fairly common in the fields around the village though not often seen during my regular visits. This species, introduced from the continent, is more common than the

rapidly declining Grey Partridge, mainly due to many being bred for release by gamekeepers locally.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	4%	7%	11%	8%	2%	0%	2%

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

Nationally the decline in numbers of Grey Partridge is causing great concern but this species can still be seen in reasonable numbers on the farmland surrounding the site though only a single sighting has been recorded and that was in the first year of the survey – 2002/3.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

This very distinctive game bird was introduced to this country more than 900 years ago and is commonly reared for game shooting. Although favouring woods and copses it is fairly common in the area and observed on around half of the survey visits back in the early years of the survey but declining of late.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	55%	50%	48%	43%	27%	24%	23%

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

We are lucky enough to play host to several of these delightful little secretive skulkers during the winter months. They require thick-reeded shallow lakes and sedge marshes for breeding and so the watercress reserve is not suitable but perhaps one day? They can be very difficult to see but with patience good views of them can be had – easier in very cold weather when they venture out in the open more. Sightings and winter populations are very dependent on weather conditions so the rather large variation in sightings may not be significant, though the very large number of trips when Water rails were sighted in the last three years is pleasing.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	24%	7%	16%	19%	43%	56%	48%

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

This common bird of ponds, rivers and almost anywhere wet can be seen all the way along the beds. This dark brown and black bird with a red bill and forehead is usually seen walking along waterside banks with jerking, chicken-like movements of the head. They breed on the site in small numbers. This is one of the first indicators of the presence of Mink on the site as Moorhen chicks make easy picking. With such high percentage recording and increasing numbers we can be fairly certain that Mink are not present and have not been in the last five years.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	84%	91%	91%	95%	100%	100%	100%

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Although not recorded until the winter of 2005/6 it is more than likely that this was either bad luck or not looking in the right direction at the right time as they are not an unusual sight flying over the area with Lapwings between feeding and roosting sites.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	3%	2%	3%	0%

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Sightings of this attractive wading bird of farmland and wet meadows have been restricted to small flocks over-flying the watercress beds.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	4%	2%	5%	3%	2%	0%	5%

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

This long billed wading bird can be seen in small numbers most winters. Unfortunately it is difficult to obtain more than a fleeting view as they fly up from the lower beds. Numbers and indeed their presence at all is very dependent on temperature – during cold icy spells numbers can be in double figures but as soon as the temperature rises above freezing they seem to disperse to locations with more available food. Numbers appear to be declining with only a single sighting in 2006/7 and 2007/8 but a return to more regular sightings in the final cold winter.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	13%	7%	14%	5%	2%	3%	11%

Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

Another long billed wading bird first seen, at the lower end of the beds, on 13th January 2009. This individual was probably disturbed from the wood above Ewelme by the winter's cold weather.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

This large wading bird with a long downward curving bill is more normally associated with muddy coasts and estuaries but we are lucky to have them breeding close by. The airfield is their favoured site and from about February to June or July they can be heard over the area. They commute between the airfield and surrounding damp meadows and occasionally overfly the watercress beds. There is an interesting record of a Curlew on the airfield sighted on 4 April 1999 wearing plastic coloured rings. This was reported to BTO and the bird was identified as one that was ringed as part of a PhD study at Scoughall, just east of North Berwick on the Firth of Forth on 15th April 1985. It was ringed as a male in its second year making it 15 years old in 1999. I was never able to determine whether this bird was breeding locally or resting on its journey north but as Curlews can live for up to about 30 years there could be several years left to check this out. They almost certainly didn't breed locally in 2007/8.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	4%	9%	0%	3%	2%	0%	0%

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

It was good to see this small wader's return to the Watercress Beds in the winter of 2007/8 and added to the list. It was once a very reliable overwintering species here but for some unknown reason deserted the area to return in December 2007. It, or another, returned in the following winter.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	24%	16%

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Just a single sighting of this small wader in September 2006. Common Sandpipers are relatively common, inland, on spring and Autumn passage

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

One of the commonest gulls in the area is Black-headed Gull and these are widespread, in the winter months. They can frequently be seen flying overhead travelling between Oakley Wood rubbish tip and various water bodies. They can occasionally be seen in the summer, but at this time of the year they are mainly confined to flying along the river. These summer birds are probably from the local breeding population from either Radley or Farmoor. This gull's name can be somewhat confusing as the adults in breeding finery have chocolate brown heads rather than black and young birds or adults during the first part of the winter have only a dark "smudge" behind the eye.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	13%	24%	25%	11%	20%	32%	23%

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Larger than Black-headed Gulls and easily told apart by their dark upper wings. Commonly seen flying overhead in the winter and this species tends to occur more frequently than their smaller cousin in the summer. These summer birds are normally young birds not yet mature enough to breed.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	15%	22%	34%	38%	42%	58%	59%

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Larger than Lesser Black-backed Gulls but not so common away from water. Probably occurs more frequently than recorded but I do not find high flying individual Gulls that easy to identify – in fact only a single record in 2004/5.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

This species, better known in city centres, can often be seen in the area. They have been seen on hanger roofs at RAF Benson and over Ewelme village. This name tends to be used for any pigeon/dove that is not one of the other recognised species and covers racing pigeons and various hybrids.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	11%	4%	25%	19%	24%	61%	80%

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

This small relation of the Woodpigeon is best distinguished by the lack of white on the neck and wing and it's generally blue/grey appearance. Stock Doves nest in holes in trees and are closely associated with farmland where they feed on seeds and grain. With the changes in farming practices this species is in serious decline but can still be seen sometimes over the beds.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	9%	15%	7%	3%	10%	16%	11%

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

The white neck flash and broad white wing bar across the open wings easily identifies this, the largest of the pigeons. It is a common species throughout the area and can occur in very large numbers.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	98%	96%	96%	100%	100%	97%	100%

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

The Collared Dove represents an amazing success story. They first arrived in this country back in the 1950's and bred for the first time in 1958 in Norfolk. Since then they have rapidly spread throughout the country and seem to have taken to gardens like the proverbial duck to water. Not quite so common outside gardens but a frequent visitor to the site.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	42%	54%	43%	38%	63%	71%	80%

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

In the past the arrival of this summer visitor was a sign that spring had arrived. In recent years, however, the decline in numbers of Cuckoos might lead one to believe that spring, or at least the Cuckoo never arrives. The favoured species for the Cuckoo to parasitise are Reed Warbler, Dunnock, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail and Redstart. Of these only the Dunnock is common around the cress beds. I have only a single record of this species on 25 May 2003 at the back of the Trout Pond.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

This small owl was introduced to the UK in the 19th century. It can often be seen in daylight, usually perching on a tree branch, telegraph pole or fence post. They feed on Small mammals and birds, beetles and worms. It will bob its head up and down when alarmed. In flight it has long, rounded wings, rapid wingbeats and flies with a slight undulation. It was first recorded on 18th May 2005 but, as with other species of Owl it is probably under recorded as most of my time on the site is during the day.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	2%	0%	5%	5%	2%

Common Swift *Apus apus*

Although Swifts look rather like members of the Swallow family they are not related but are more closely linked to the Nightjar. A regular summer visitor which nests in the roof space of some of the

older houses in the village. It does, however, require a location where it can fly straight in and drop vertically out in order to gain flying speed. These remarkable birds virtually live on the wing, feeding, drinking, collecting nest material, mating and sleeping whilst flying. It has been estimated that each parent flies some 500 miles (800 kilometers) a day collecting food and cold wet weather may force them to forage far from the nest for long periods. The eggs are resistant to chilling and the young can withstand several days of starvation when they become torpid at night, their temperatures falling from the normal 38°C to as low as 21°C.

Seen regularly over the beds and village between mid May and early August.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	18%	17%	11%	14%	10%	8%	7%

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthi*

Probably the most exotic and certainly the most colourful of the birds to be seen in at the Watercress beds. Unfortunately views are often restricted to a streak of bright blue as the Kingfisher flashes past low over the water. It has been recorded as having bred on site but not in recent years. More commonly seen during the winter months indicating that they probably breed further downstream near the Thames.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	11%	17%	32%	19%	20%	29%	27%

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

The Green is our largest woodpecker, well known for its loud cackle from which it gets its country name of "yaffle". It is associated with woodland and large trees but its fondness for feeding on ants brings it down to lawns and open fields.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	2%	5%	8%	5%	21%	11%

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is mainly a woodland bird but seen occasionally in gardens and elsewhere. Some people can be confused between this species and the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker but the difference in size is very obvious. The Great is about the size of a Blackbird whereas the Lesser is only the size of a Sparrow.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	9%	2%	7%	8%	5%	8%	11%

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

This ground dwelling bird occurs in the farmland surrounding the beds and on the airfield but is more often heard than seen when in its characteristic towering song flight. They sing from a considerable height, often making it difficult to see the bird. There has, in recent years, been a considerable reduction in numbers of Skylarks, in part due to a lack of suitable winter stubble for feeding and also because of the lack of insects during the summer for feeding young.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	4%	0%	0%	0%	2%	8%	9%

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

The Swallow is a regular summer migrant, arriving in late March and April and most have gone by mid October. They breed in barns, sheds, garages and other outbuildings with open access, so that they can

fly straight in to the nest, which is usually built on top of a beam or ledge. They are often seen in fast acrobatic flight in search of flying insects over the beds and dipping down to the water surface to drink. They are gregarious during migration, gathering in large numbers over suitable feeding areas.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	32%	41%	27%	32%	21%	29%	27%

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

The House Martin is a regular summer visitor, most of which arrive during the second half of April and depart to Africa between mid August and mid October. They build a nest of mud, shaped like a cup, which is stuck to the underside of eaves on a house, especially where the roof rafters project outside. They nest in the village of Ewelme but, unfortunately, their numbers, nationally, have declined markedly in recent years.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	23%	30%	30%	30%	12%	18%	25%

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

This species is an irregular visitor to the beds, mostly as a passage migrant and winter visitor. They used to be seen on the edge of the airfield and occasionally strayed over to drink or feed from the beds below the bridge.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	9%	0%	0%	3%	0%	3%	4%

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

The yellow wagtail is a small graceful yellow and green bird, with a medium-length tail, and slender black legs. It spends much time walking or running on the ground. It is a summer visitor, migrating to winter in Africa. It appears to have been in decline since at least the 1980s, most likely due to loss of habitat for breeding and feeding. The Yellow Wagtail was first recorded on the beds during the summer of 2005 and was seen again the following year. A group, possibly a family group, visited the beds outside the centre on 6th September 2009.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	2%	3%	0%	0%	2%

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

This is the most graceful of the wagtails with its nimble actions and handsome plumage. The grey head and back, contrasting with bright lime yellow under the tail, eases identification. They are resident on the Watercress Beds throughout the year and one or two pairs breed on the site. One pair successfully breed in an artificial nest box most years and in 2007/8 they successfully nested in a hanging basket on the wall of "Brownings"..

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	91%	72%	77%	73%	78%	95%	80%

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii*

The elegant black and white plumage and graceful actions of the Pied Wagtail are a familiar sight around human habitation. However, they are not as common on the Watercress Beds as one might expect. It is possible that the Grey Wagtails "rule the roost" and chase off the Pied but I have no evidence to support this.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	13%	4%	5%	16%	12%	8%	2%

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

A very common resident. Sometimes overlooked because of its habit of skulking in deep undergrowth but rather spoils the secretive behaviour by singing very loudly for such a small bird. Very common on the beds especially in the winter where, because of the warm water, their food source of mainly insects, is plentiful.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	89%	76%	82%	87%	81%	97%	82%

Dunnoek *Prunella modularis*

A very common resident again attracted to the warm winter conditions for insect food.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	74%	71%	73%	70%	83%	79%	80%

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

A very common resident.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	89%	72%	89%	92%	95%	100%	98%

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

A very common resident.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	96%	87%	93%	92%	98%	100%	100%

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Harsh chuckling calls from passing Fieldfares are a characteristic sound of farmland in winter. They arrive from Northern Europe, in late October and return over a protracted period from February to April. It is a very dark looking thrush, about the size or slightly larger than a Blackbird. It can be easily recognised as it flies away, as it has a very dark tail with a whitish grey rump. Small flocks can sometimes be seen feeding on fallen apples or Hawthorn berries in the area.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	2%	9%	3%	7%	3%	11%

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Widespread but in serious decline, especially since 1975 though from personal observation I think there could be a bit of a recovery in recent years. Although it is hard to imagine now, the Song Thrush was more common than the Blackbird before 1945.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	28%	20%	18%	16%	17%	58%	55%

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

The Redwing is a common winter visitor from northern Europe (mostly Finland and Russia), arriving in October and departing between March and April. It is our smallest thrush, even smaller than the Song Thrush. Apart from its reddish underwing, it can be recognised easily by its very distinctive eyestripe and heavily streaked underparts. Like the Fieldfare, small flocks can sometimes be seen feeding on fallen apples or Hawthorn berries at or around the beds.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	9%	9%	27%	3%	17%	11%	16%

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Our largest resident thrush with grey brown plumage on the back and round spots on the breast (they are streaked on the Song Thrush). The Mistle Thrush is widespread but not common. They tend to be associated with larger trees and open fields. Seen on three visits in the first year of the survey but very infrequently since.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	6%	0%	2%	3%	2%	5%	2%

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

First seen in 2008 in the Blackthorn Thicket in the top meadow. As it, and that in 2009, were single sightings and in April it is very likely that they were birds was on migration.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	2%

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Can be identified from Common Whitethroat as they are slightly smaller but more importantly, greyer plumage, a darker head and darker legs. It is not as common as the Whitethroat and is much more likely to go unnoticed as it is more skulking and is quite happy to sing from the middle of a bush. Prefers old hedgerows with thick undergrowth and adjacent rough grassland. There is no evidence to suggest that they breed on the beds but most sightings have been late summer indicating post breeding dispersion.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	4%	7%	3%	0%	5%	0%

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

As the name implies it has a white throat, warm brown shoulder feathers and brown legs. This species breeds close to but probably not in the area of the Watercress beds. It prefers hedgerows which have a good undergrowth and tend to be quite conspicuous, choosing to sing from taller shrubs. Recent studies show that the number of these birds depends, not only on their breeding success, but on the conditions in their winter quarters in Africa. Common Whitethroats arrive in April and depart in September.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	8%	2%	0%	5%	2%	0%	2%

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

A bird remarkable for having no distinguishing markings, noticeable for its drab dull brown plumage. Garden Warblers bred within the reserve during the first two years of the survey but, since then,

sightings have steadily declined. They favour open woodland and scrubland so the area suits them. Unlike most of the warblers which have very distinctive songs, that of the Garden Warbler is very similar to the Blackcap. As birds are recorded by song as well as sight it is possible that some of the Garden Warbler records refer to Blackcap and vice-versa – especially early in the season before I get my ear in.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	15%	9%	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

With good views the Blackcap is easily recognised but they have an annoying habit of sitting in hedges well above head height when the black cap of the male or brown of the female can be very difficult to see. They breed in thick hedges. Our local breeding birds migrate to Mediterranean Countries but Blackcaps are not uncommon during the winter, these birds having migrated here from Europe. Blackcaps breed in the area below the bridge.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	53%	22%	27%	22%	27%	29%	39%

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

You are usually alerted to the presence of Chiffchaffs by the song which is a monotonously repeated “chiff chaff”. They look very similar to the Willow Warbler but are much commoner. They differ in only having the barest hint of yellow on the breast and the legs are blackish brown. They are associated with thick, often tall, hedges, arriving mid March and departing mid September. Like the Blackcap some over winter though they are more easily overlooked. They breed in the bushes beside the watercress beds.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	28%	26%	9%	14%	27%	21%	23%

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Somewhat surprisingly this species was not seen on the beds until 16th April 2009 and, then, only on a single occasion. Presumably a migrating bird that stopped here for “re-fuelling”.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

This, the smallest of our birds, was fairly common considering their preference for conifer trees and the absence of these trees in the survey area below the bridge. The relatively high recording rate was mainly due to winter records when these birds are wider ranging, often associating with mixed foraging flocks of tit species.

A	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	11%	11%	18%	5%	7%	11%	18%

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caedatus*

The Long-tailed is not a true Tit and differs from all the other tits in that it is the only one not to nest in holes. They favour thick, tall hedges of Hawthorn or Blackthorn where they build a domed nest decorated with Lichen and lined with as many as 2000 feathers. The records show a healthy increase in observations during the five years covered.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	6%	13%	23%	16%	39%	26%	34%

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

An infrequent visitor to the site with no record before October 2005. Perhaps this is a little surprising but they are mainly birds of Woodland, especially conifer woods. Now I have installed a bird feeder perhaps they will turn up more frequently.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	2%	3%	5%	8%	5%

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*

A very common resident making full use of the nest boxes provided.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	94%	85%	91%	81%	93%	82%	82%

Great Tit *Parus major*

As its name would suggest this is the largest member of the tit family. They can be easily recognised by the shiny black cap and bib joined by bold black lines enclosing white cheeks and a black stripe down yellow bib and belly. The Great Tit is a common resident with similar habits to the Blue Tit though they tend to feed on the ground more often. They have a wide variety of calls and song and, "that strange bird call you hear in the woods" is more often than not a Great Tit. They also nest in the wooden nest boxes.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	83%	85%	86%	95%	90%	79%	89%

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

This essentially woodland bird has only been seen on a single occasion, on 12th January 2007.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Another woodland bird that has only been seen on a single occasion, this time on 22th August 2006.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

A colourful woodland member of the crow family, but rather secretive. It is mainly sedentary and feeds on a wide variety of food such as small vertebrates, including small birds and their eggs and chicks and in winter on beechmast and acorns. Only single sightings of this species during the first and penultimate years of the survey.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%

Magpie *Pica pica*

The Magpie is a widespread and common resident whose numbers steadily increased from 1960 to 1990. The population is now stable. Like the Jay it will feed on a wide variety of foods. It has been blamed for the decline of many of the farmland and song birds but, although it may be a factor, it is probably minor compared with other factors.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	72%	61%	41%	65%	54%	71%	61%

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Jackdaws nest in holes in trees and will readily take over a chimney if the fire is no longer in use. They are widespread and common and tend to be associated with the buildings alongside the watercress beds rather than the beds themselves.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	62%	74%	86%	84%	88%	87%	91%

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

The Rook is a common resident in the area and, with the large Rookery just down the road at Fifield Manor, they spend a great deal of time flying over the site or feeding on the adjacent airfield.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	74%	96%	91%	97%	95%	97%	98%

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

The number of Carrion Crows has been steadily increasing in recent years. They nest locally and are scavengers, eating a wide variety of foods. Despite the belief that large black birds in flocks must be Rooks and ones or twos must be Crows this is not always a reliable method of identification. Crows will gather into flocks of a hundred or more birds. The best way to separate them is by looking at the bill; long, pointed and greyish white on Rooks, shorter, stumper and black on Crows.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	32%	24%	43%	30%	27%	53%	48%

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

A widespread and common resident, but whose numbers are declining. They nest in any hole that is large enough, often in roof spaces if there is access. After the breeding season Starlings gather into flocks of several hundred. These flocks can become quite large when immigrants arrive from Eastern Europe but nothing to compare with the 1950's when there were sometimes flocks in excess of a million birds.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	51%	70%	43%	76%	49%	58%	55%

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

A bird strongly linked to mans activity. Although widespread and common it has been in steady decline since 1979 both on farms and in gardens. They nest in holes but will occasionally make a very untidy domed nest in ivy or trees. They will also sometimes take over a House Martins nest. They breed in houses alongside the beds and can be seen on forays to the beds to feed and drink.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	45%	65%	73%	62%	51%	50%	32%

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

The Chaffinch is widespread and a common resident whose population is stable. They breed in the reserve, building a neat, cup shaped nest in hedgerows. The population levels increase in winter due to immigration from Europe.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	83%	78%	86%	92%	90%	97%	96%

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

It was good to welcome a small party of around six individuals to the beds during the winter of 2007/8. They were around the site of the old mill on and off between February and April 2008.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

The Greenfinch is a widespread and common resident whose population is stable. It is a regular visitor to the watercress beds throughout the year though less so during the summer as they often nest in evergreens which, apart from Ivy, we are short of.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	45%	63%	59%	73%	66%	50%	48%

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

A favourite for cage bird enthusiasts early this century, but thankfully no longer - at least in this country. The Goldfinch is a seed eater, which does well on unkempt areas, especially where teasel, burdock or thistles flourish. They were only seen on about one in ten visits during the first two years covered by the survey but this increased significantly as some of the improvement schemes took effect in the latter four years.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	11%	11%	36%	46%	34%	61%	68%

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

The Linnet is present throughout the year. In winter they gather into large flocks, augmented by birds from Europe and are to be seen on rough ground and stubble where they feed on weed seeds. They have been in serious decline since 1974 though recently they have benefited from set-aside and have taken a liking to Rape crops. Although the records suggest a big decline from the first year of the survey this was probably due to one or more pairs breeding locally in the first but not subsequent years.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	26%	0%	2%	3%	2%	0%	7%

Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*

This small finch has undergone several major fluctuations in population size, being numerous early this century and during the late 1960's and 1970's, but since then has declined again. It favours damp Birch

woodland, so it is not seen during the breeding season. A pair, or possibly three birds, were seen feeding on weed seed on two occasions in December 2003 and again in October 2005.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	4%	5%	0%	0%	0%	2%

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

The Siskin is a small finch, about the size of a Blue Tit and with similar agility. They are generally yellowish-green and yellow with a dark streaked belly and striking yellow rump, wing bars and sides of the forked tail. The legs and bill are dark brown. The male has a black cap and bib and bright yellow cheeks. The female does not have a black crown or bib and is more heavily streaked. A very attractive bird which mainly feeds on Alder cones but sometimes can be seen on garden bird feeders.

Unfortunately I have only seen Siskin on the beds on a few occasions in March 2006, December 2008 and March 2009.

G	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	5%

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

The adult male Bullfinch is unmistakable in splendid pink, grey, black and white plumage. Females retain the black cap and white rump but are much drabber. They feed on fruit as large as sloes, and, in late winter when seed supplies run out, Bullfinches turn their attention to young tree buds, and for this reason was once regarded as a pest. Numbers have declined rapidly since 1975 and the days are long gone when they were so numerous that boys earned a few coppers by scaring them from fruit trees in orchards.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	2%	9%	7%	3%	0%	3%	0%

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

The Yellowhammer is probably best known for its song which is often written as "little bit of bread and no cheese". They are widespread and common along hedgerows and rough grassland associated with open farmland but, somewhat surprisingly, rarely stray on to the nature reserve. Numbers have been declining since 1988 which may, in part, be due to the change to autumn sown cereal crops with the resultant lack of winter stubble fields.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	2%	2%	3%	0%	0%	0%

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

The Reed Bunting is sparrow-sized but slim and with a long, deeply notched tail. Male birds have a black head, white collar and a drooping moustache. Females and winter males have a streaked head. This farmland and wetland bird has suffered a serious population decline, possibly in part, for the same reasons given for Yellowhammer.

R	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
	0%	2%	2%	3%	0%	3%	0%

Species known to have occurred but not featured in above note

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus*

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*