



WOODLAND
& WILDLIFE

A project of Sedgefield Development Trust



Common Bird Census Report 2022

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THE 2022 COMMON BIRD CENSUS

Woodland and Wildlife Community Woodland, Sedgefield

Introduction

During March to June 2022, the second breeding bird censuses was carried out at the Woodland and Wildlife community woodland in Sedgefield, following on from the inaugural survey carried out in 2021.

From the mapping fieldwork, an estimation of the number of bird territories at the woodland is then calculated. This report summarises this data, makes comparisons with the previous year and looks at the overall UK bird population trend for selected species. Using the data collected, it is possible to better understand the birds at the woodland to enable proactive habitat management to conserve and protect these species present and encourage wider biodiversity.



Yellowhammer (Sue Turnbull, Woodland & Wildlife Facebook)

Front Cover – Looking East, April 2022 (Frederick Milton)

The Common Bird Census Methodology

The Common Bird Census (CBC) is based upon a simple mapping method devised by the British Trust for Ornithology, in which eight to ten visits are made to a defined site over the breeding season, March to June. All contacts with birds, by sight or call, are recorded by species code on a large-scale map. Additional symbols are added to denote whether the bird is singing, calling, or moving in a certain direction, its sex if known, if there is nesting behaviour and whether the species is involved in any territorial boundary disputes with another bird. This additional behaviour is crucial. A registration of a singing male bird immediately identifies it as a bird holding or marking territory. Similarly, nesting behaviour indicates the existence of a nest and therefore a species holding territory. Territories are defined, for the purpose of the study, as a bird being present in the same area over a 14-day period. Unless a nest or similar evidence exist, birds which are recorded less than three times in the same area are not deemed to be holding territories.

At the end of the season these 'visit' maps are examined, and each site visit given a visit letter: A, B, C etc. Each record on the visit map is transferred to separate 'species' maps' to show how each type of bird is distributed across the site and the individual bird's breeding territories. From this, an estimate of breeding density for the site can be calculated. Nest boxes installed on the site were also checked and this additional information feeds into the CBC analysis.

The Survey Site



Outline of surveyed area (Google Map 2021)

The Woodland and Wildlife site is a strip of land to the north of Sedgefield village in County Durham. The site is approximately 13 acres in area and is bounded on two sides by roads – William Armstrong Way on the west side and on the east, the B1278 Salters Lane, Fishburn to Sedgefield road.



Looking west – Grassland and Pine Wood (Frederick Milton)

The north of the site is mainly bounded by rank vegetated fields of principally Rosebay willowherb (*Chamaenerion angustifolium*) a valuable food source for numerous species of moths and butterflies, a useful nectar source for pollinators, including bees, and a superb habitat for many bird species, particularly Common Whitethroat. The north side also includes hedgerows, agricultural farmland, farmsteads, and then Hardwick Grange, a new housing development. To the south lies the NETPark or North East Technology Park Science park, mixed housing and then Sedgefield village. The west side of the site was previously agricultural land, the remainder formed part of the grounds of the now demolished Sedgefield Hospital. This legacy includes remanent ‘ornamental’ tree species, such as Laurel and Privet, as well as some ancient Beech trees.

The site is best described as a blend of parkland and ‘marginal’ land. There are some notable habitat features. These include a small Scots Pine woodland (the ‘Pine Wood’), mixed hedgerows and plantations of Dogrose, Sweet Chestnut, Ash, Buckthorn, Sycamore, Hawthorn, Elder, Beech and Alder, a small overgrown drainage pond dominated by Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), and a mature woodland of mostly Sycamore, Ash and Beech (‘Salters Lane Wood’).



Pond, reedbed and scrub (Frederick Milton)

There are also areas of marginal grassland which has a rich mosaic of flora and some mown lawns managed by the NETPark site. Since 2018, the site has been managed for wildlife by the Sedgefield Woodland and Wildlife community group who have organised regular litter picks, erected bird nesting boxes, carried out footpath maintenance, undertaken grassland management and managed tree-planting. Saplings of native tree species have been planted in three phases, the most recent being a mixed species hedgerow in 2021. Several footpaths traverse the site, and these are well used by local residents, particularly dog-walkers.

In 2022, habitat work was low key and consisted of maintaining the planted areas, path maintenance work including the creation of 'dead hedges' to better guide path users, scything of grasslands to encourage wildflower spread, some small-scale tree planting to replace dead saplings, litter picking and the installation of further bird nest boxes. A small bird feeding station was also maintained and this attracted expected species such as finches, tits and thrushes. The winter storms of 2021-2022, and particularly Storm Arwen in November 2021 which devastated some north-east woodlands, surprisingly, given the exposed elevation of the site to the northerly storm force winds, caused little damage.

Site Visits

Ten visits were carried out in March to June 2022. All were undertaken, where possible in the early morning, when the site is less disturbed and to maximise the number of singing birds recorded.

VISIT LETTER	DATE	TIME	WEATHER	COVERAGE/COMMENTS
A	07.03.22	1000-1200	Sunny, Light SW Wind. Mild 5-8C	Bird activity high
B	19.03.22	0630-0800	Sunny, Nil Wind Frost at beginning 2-4C	Bird activity high owing to sunny conditions
C	02.04.22	0730-0900	Sunny, Nil Wind Frost & some snow lying 0-4C	Moderate bird activity
D	16.04.22	0630-0800	Cloudy, Light SE Wind. Cold 5-8C	Moderate bird activity
E	30.04.22	0600-0730	Sunny, Nil Wind. Cold at beginning. 5-10C	Low bird activity
F	08.05.22	0600-0800	Sunny, Nil Wind. Frost at beginning Cold 3-7C	High bird activity. Public event - not all birds recorded.
G	21.05.22	0700-0830	Cloudy, Intermittent Sunshine, Light SW Wind. Warm 10C	High bird activity
H	29.05.22	0730-0900	Rain showers, heavy at times. NW Wind Chilly 8C	Low bird activity owing to rain
J	11.06.22	0630-0800	Cloudy. Moderate SW Wind. Chilly 10C	Moderate bird activity owing to blustery wind.
K	25.06.22	0615-0800	Sunny. Moderate SW Wind 14C	Moderate bird activity owing to blustery wind.

The table above illustrates the 10 complete CBC visits made during the year, one more than in 2021. Visit weather conditions largely reflected the monthly UK weather data of cold spring mornings and unsettled conditions with a dry May and unseasonal June, although 'our' cool March temperatures did not appear to match the national picture of above average figures.¹ A total of 16.25 hours fieldwork was carried out, although on the visit of 8 May, full fieldwork was not carried out owing to a guided walk for the local community.

¹ 'Seasonal Assessment – Spring 2022', Available at https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/uk_monthly_climate_summary_spring_2022.pdf

Nestboxes

Prior to 2022, a small number of nest boxes were already in position. These included six small 'tit' boxes and two specialist boxes for Kestrel and Little Owl. In February 2022, a well-attended community event constructed 30 new nestboxes, 16 of which were then installed around the site.



New nestbox in situ (Rudolf Reichel)

In May, these boxes were inspected as follows. Nine boxes were occupied, and at various stages from eggs laid to young birds close to fledging. Those boxes with eggs or young birds are shown below.

- Robin 1
- Great Tit 6
- Blue Tit 2

Two boxes were later found to have been damaged, most probably by Great Spotted Woodpecker attempting to predate the young birds. It is likely that these boxes were not successful. Of the remaining 7 'new' boxes, 5 were found to be unoccupied, and 2 were not inspected to avoid unnecessary damage to undergrowth vegetation. The design of the pre-2022 boxes prevent them from being examined without causing possible damage to the box and its contents. To also avoid disturbance, the 2 larger boxes remained unchecked, with Kestrel later being confirmed as utilising one of these facilities.



Nestbox contents at various development stages: Great Tit and Blue Tit (Frederick Milton)

Results of the 2022 Common Bird Census

As in the previous year, a total of 50 bird species were seen during the 2022 surveying hours. These included winter migrant Redwing and overflying Grey Heron. Several species of Gulls were noted, but not recorded. No 'rarities' were seen. The taxonomy below largely follows the IOC World Bird List.²

Ducks to Woodpeckers

Mallard was recorded on several dates flying over the site. There was no evidence to suggest a territory was held. As in 2021, 3 pairs of **Pheasant** held territory. **Stock Dove** was recorded, but there was insufficient evidence to prove a territory being held. **Woodpigeon** was again the fifth most abundant bird on site, with 8 territories held, the Pine Wood and Salters Lane woodland being their favoured areas. The first **Collared Dove** territory mapped was centred on the Sycamore hedge in the middle of site. Overflying **Oystercatchers** were noted on several dates. The species breeds nearby at Bishop Middleham and on the rooftops of Sedgefield Community College. The second wader species seen was **Woodcock** in the Pine Wood on 16 April. Winter migrants from Scandinavia arrive in small numbers each autumn, and this may have been a late returning individual. It may also have been a locally breeding bird from the small numbers that doubtless breed in surrounding woodlands – displaying or 'roding' males have been seen calling over Sedgefield village at dusk in May.



Kestrel (Sue Turnbull, Woodland & Wildlife Facebook)

Three raptor species were recorded. **Kestrel** and **Buzzard** held territory, with the former successfully breeding on site. Just a single **Sparrowhawk** was seen, a female drifted through on 8 May and did not prove a territory. As in 2021, one **Great Spotted Woodpecker** territory was mapped in the mature beech trees, an ideal habitat for the

² British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) (2018), 'The British List: A Checklist of Birds of Britain (9th edition)' *Ibis*, 160, pp. 190–240.

species. Unfortunately, the species probably predated some of the nest boxes on site, necessitating the need for some protective box plates in due course.

Crows to Warblers

Magpie numbers increased from 2 to 4 pairs, with an active nest recorded just outside the survey site adjacent to Hardwick Grange. **Carrion Crow** numbers also increased from 2 to 3 territories. By a distance, **Rook** remains the commonest breeding bird at the site. It is also the only species that is not logged using the mapping technique. Instead, as it is a colony nester, the number of active nests are counted. This remained static at 28 nests from the 2 distinct rookeries of 9 nests and 19 nests built in Salters Lane Woods. None of the trees here were damaged by Storm Arwen. This stable Rook population is good news, as the UK population, after undergoing an increase before the 1990s is now in decline, with a 22% fall in numbers in the period 1995-2018. More worryingly, the Northeast England Rook population has undergone a massive 42% fall in numbers in the period 1995-2020. Factors affecting this decline include a decrease in brood size.³



Skylark (Sue Turnbull, Woodland & Wildlife Facebook)

A single **Coal Tit** territory was again mapped in its preferred habitat of the Pine Wood, although birds were also noted in Salters Lane woodlands. The new bird boxes boosted both the numbers of **Blue Tit** and **Great Tit**. The former increasing from 7 pairs to 9 pairs and the latter moving from just 2 territories to 6 territories. All 6 Great Tit pairs were thought to be utilising the new boxes. It was striking that no Great Tits were recorded in the Salters Lane woodlands where there were no boxes. Both species were also commonly seen around the small feeding station near to the site 'lock-up' and this, allied to the mild winter may have also led to an increase in numbers, with Great Tit being the more dominant species, possibly outcompeting the smaller Blue Tit. Notably, all the boxes in the centre of the site hosted only Great Tits.

³ S.J. Harris *et al.* (2021), 'The Breeding Bird Survey 2021', *BTO Research Report*, 745. Available at https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/publications/bbs_report_2021.pdf

Surprising, given that both species are regarded as ‘common’ garden birds, their populations contrast. In the period 1995-2000, within Northeast England, Blue Tit numbers have fallen by 20%, whilst in the same period Great Tit have increased by 49%.⁴ Wet summer weather affects the breeding success of both species, whilst increased garden bird feeding has been suggested as a factor driving Great Tit population increases.⁵ Two **Long Tailed Tit** territories were mapped; one in the Pine Wood, and the second in the Sycamore hedge in the centre of the site.



Long Tailed Tit (Brian Clasper)

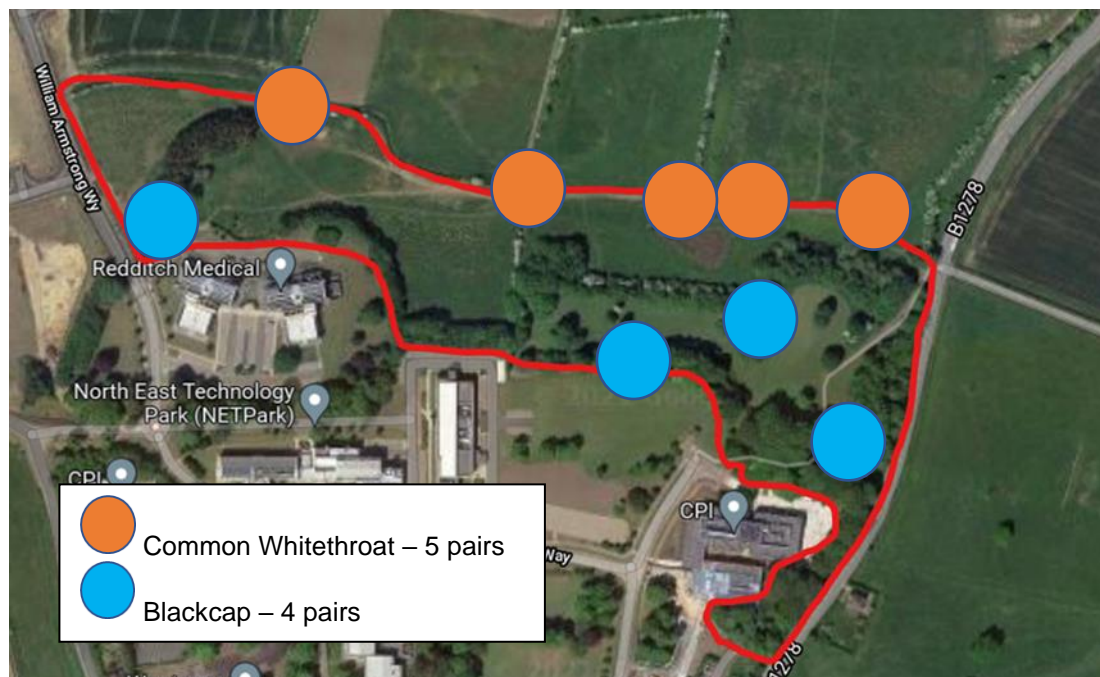
A single **Skylark** territory was mapped on the northwest border of the site. Again, **Swallow** and **House Martin** were recorded, though they were both late arrivals on site owing to the cooler spring and were also unable to take advantage of any wet mud for nest building because of the relatively dry conditions. The fortunes of six species of Warbler differed. **Willow Warbler** was lost as a single territory holding species. Underlining its national decline in numbers, just a single bird was seen singing on 29 April, with no evidence of territory holding. In marked contrast, **Chiffchaff** territories increased from 2 pairs to a remarkable 5 pairs. A single pair was in the Pine Wood, with others found in the centre of the site and the edge of Salters Lane woodlands. Nationally, Chiffchaff numbers are on the up, with increasing overwinter survival thought to be a factor for this population increase.⁶ **Sedge Warbler** was also lost as territory holder. Just 2 registrations in 2022 were insufficient to prove territory holding. **Blackcap** lost its status as the most abundant Warbler on site. Numbers fell from 6 to 4 territories. **Common Whitethroat** remained static at 5 pairs, again all located in the ‘marginal’ scrub hedgerow and weedy fields bordering the north of the site. Blackcap and Whitethroat have different habitat preferences, the first is primarily a woodland

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ I.D. Woodward *et al.* (2020), ‘BirdTrends 2020: trends in numbers, breeding success and survival for UK breeding birds’, *BTO Research Report*, 732. Available at www.bto.org/birdtrends

⁶ *Ibid.*

species, whilst the later, is a scrub dweller. This is clearly illustrated in the map of territory distribution for both species.



A single **Lesser Whitethroat** was seen and heard singing on 8 May. Given the ideal habitat of rank vegetation, it was again a surprise that Grasshopper Warbler remains unrecorded on the fieldwork. Similar habitat exists in Hardwick Park, and a pair was present in 2022.

Crests to Buntings

Goldcrest numbers remained level, with a territory in the Pine Wood. A single **Treecreeper** pair was recorded, adjacent to Salters Lane woods. The species is very difficult to survey owing to its diminutive size, weak call, and cryptic plumage, so it may be under recorded. A calling **Nuthatch** on 16 April was a new species for the site. This was not a surprise. The species is regularly seen in Sedgefield village, for example in Cedesfield and Hardwick Park. Nuthatch abundance in the UK has increased rapidly since the mid-1970s, particularly expanding its range into northern England. Factors for this are thought to be a rise in mean winter temperatures and increased brood size.⁷ **Wren** moved to become the second commonest bird on site, with an increase of 2 territories on the previous year to 13 pairs. Being very susceptible to cold weather, the mild temperatures of the 2021-22 winter would have probably been a factor in this small rise in numbers.⁸

Three thrush species held territories. **Song Thrush** increased by a single pair to 4 territories, whilst both **Mistle Thrush** and **Blackbird** numbers were unchanged at a single and 12 territories respectively, with Blackbird as the site's third commonest bird. **Robin** numbers were also constant. Seven pairs were mapped, including one nesting in one of the new boxes in the Pine Wood. Despite the increased availability of nesting

⁷ Woodward *et al.*, 'BirdTrends 2020'.

⁸ *Ibid.*

sites, no **Tree Sparrows** occupied the boxes, but their numbers increased to 2 pairs in the Pine Wood and increasing numbers can now be found in Sedgefield gardens.

Dunnock was another species with a static population. Eight pairs were mapped, mainly in the 'hedgerow' habitats. A single **Grey Wagtail** was seen on the first site visit. Birds probably breed on the nearby River Skerne and Hardwick Park. A single **Pied Wagtail** territory was again mapped. **Chaffinch** numbers dipped slightly from 10 to 8 territories, with a noticeable lack of singing males. In contrast, other finch species had a good year. **Bullfinch** numbers rose, from 1 to 2 pairs, with both pairs around the pond area. **Linnet** also increased by the same number. Another finch on the increase was **Goldfinch**, which moved from 4 to 6 pairs across the site. The first **Greenfinch** territory was also mapped, with individuals recorded on 5 separate dates. Just one record of a singing **Yellowhammer** marked its loss as a territory holding species. A single **Reed Bunting** pair was again mapped in the hedgerow and reedbeds of the pond.

Summary

2022 can be regarded as a good year. Thirty-three species held territory, an increase from 28 species in 2021, and the total numbers of birds holding territory grew from 139 to 153 pairs. Probable factors for this may include the increased number of nest boxes available as Great Tit and Blue Tit saw population rises, the relatively mild winter (the 8th mildest since 1884) that may have boosted Wren numbers and habitat maturation as planted areas developed.⁹ Further nestboxes installations are planned, so Tit numbers, and hopefully Tree Sparrows, may continue to increase. Other positives include increased numbers, albeit small, of Goldfinch and UK-vulnerable species such as Song Thrush, Greenfinch, Linnet and Tree Sparrow. On the negative side, Chaffinch numbers dropped, Yellowhammer and Sedge Warbler were lost as breeding species as was Willow Warbler, whose national population continues to tumble. In contrast, the UK population of Blackcap has undergone a 70% rise since 2008, though 'our' birds dropped from 6 to 4 pairs.¹⁰ With regards to these population shifts, it is important to underline that this census survey is merely an estimate in bird numbers at a relatively small site. All changes hitherto are relatively marginal and can also be affected by other factors such as fieldwork weather conditions, which in 2022 were not always conducive to carrying out surveying. The summer of 2022 will long be remembered for record breaking hot sunny days, as the year was confirmed as the warmest on record. Fieldwork ceased before the hot weather, and it will be interesting to see if this long hot and dry period influenced breeding and post-fledging success, particularly on those species, such as Song Thrush and Blackbird that feed on gastropods (snails and slugs) which are heavily impacted by dry conditions.

Whilst there were several birds whose populations fluctuated, it was also heartening to see that for 17 species, numbers remained static, particularly for birds such as Rook and Whitethroat, which have been recently listed as 'Amber' species of Conservation

⁹ 'Seasonal Assessment – Winter 2022'. Available at https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/weather/learn-about/uk-past-events/summaries/uk_monthly_climate_summary_winter_2022.pdf

¹⁰ Woodward *et al.*, 'BirdTrends 2020'.

Concern following population declines.¹¹ For the latter species, it is also vital to underline its total reliance upon the rank vegetation and fragmented hedgerows that form the northern borders of our site and may be subject to future development work.

Remarkably, given its size and fragmented habitat, and heavy footfall, as this census work demonstrates, Sedgefield Woodland and Wildlife Community Woodland is home an abundant variety of birds. This survey, and that of the year before, are now forming a solid picture of the birds on site to support its future management and conservation.

Potential New Species

In the results section of this report, the absence of Grasshopper Warbler was highlighted. A number of other species, given the site location and habitat might also be expected to be looked out for over the coming years. It is worth speculating on possible additions to our growing avifauna list.

The evocative but scarce **Cuckoo** was seen and heard several times in June 2020 along Butterwick Lane in Sedgefield. Dunnock is a popular Cuckoo host species, so a late May calling bird would not be unexpected. The migratory **Hobby** was seen on several dates at nearby Bishop Middleham in 2022. It is not unrealistic that this dashing falcon might be seen in June pursuing Hirundines. **Red Kite** has done remarkably well in establishing a growing population from the multiple RSPB re-introduction programmes, the nearest in the Gateshead Derwent Valley. Birds have been recently seen over Sedgefield and Bishop Middleham, so a bird overflying our site should be expected soon. No species of Owls has been recorded yet on the census. **Little Owl** breeds in the farmland hedgerows around Sedgefield village, and the Pine Wood and northern site boundaries seem good for a sighting. **Tawny Owl** and **Barn Owl** are also likely candidates for an evening visit, or, in the case of the former, breeding in one of the larger nest boxes.

A little more open water in the pond should encourage **Moorhen**, and even a **Water Rail**, whose 'pig squeal' call gives it away. Both are commonly seen at Hardwick Park. **Garden Warbler** remains unrecorded, and although not as common as Blackcap in the local area, the developing sapling areas should prove attractive. **Willow Tit** is the fastest declining resident bird species in the UK. Its population has declined by 86% between 1995 and 2020, though the Northeast remains a stronghold as the species favours 'brownfield sites' such as mineral lines where mature Elder trees are present as the relatively soft wood of this tree species is a favourite for the birds to excavate their nest holes. This habitat is available at our site and could tempt Willow Tit from nearby Bishop Middleham and Hardwick Park, where they were recorded in 2022.¹² Carrying out survey work in the spring reveals migrant birds on the move, for example Meadow Pipits are commonly seen flying overhead or feeding in the short grassland. Potential 'new' migrant birds for the site may include **Wheatear**, an annual spring visitor in small numbers to lowland farmland across the county as it migrates to the upland fells to breed. Sadly, **Spotted Flycatcher** is another bird in sharp decline. Just

¹¹ A. Stanbury *et al.* (2021), 'The status of our bird populations: the fifth Birds of Conservation Concern in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man and second IUCN Red List assessment of extinction risk for Great Britain', *British Birds*, 114, pp. 723–747.

¹² V. Amaral-Rogers (2022), 'Results from the National Willow Tit survey'. Available at <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/science/posts/results-from-the-national-willow-tit-survey>

a decade ago, a pair bred at Cedesfield. A singing male was seen in Hardwick Park in 2020, so all is not lost, and the mature beech trees fringing Salters Lane wood are ideal habitat and may tempt a pair to breed in the soon to be installed nest boxes.

This is not by all means an exhaustive list of potential new species, there is always the possibility of something new and exciting to see and add to the growing list. Role on spring 2023!

Acknowledgments

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