

# Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group

Annual Report 2023



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# **Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group**

The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group (SACWG) was launched in February 2012, after consulting local groups and organisations. The group covers a broad area around the Stretton Hills (right). This boundary is not fixed, so activities can be extended according to the location of members and study subjects.

Since 2013 the group has been co-ordinated by a committee, elected from the membership at the Annual Public Meeting. Survey activities are



adopted by members at the Annual Public Meeting, on the condition that they meet the following criteria.

Each activity requires a leader, who will be responsible for organising surveyors, ensuring that useful data is collected, distributing survey forms (if necessary), analysing data for the SACWG annual report and submitting records to Shropshire's County Recorders. The survey manager will be responsible for ensuring that any necessary training is provided.

<u>SACWG has its own section on the Community Wildlife Groups website, where you will be able to keep updated with survey activities and the latest discoveries. We would like to encourage all members to share their wildlife experiences and photographs. If you have seen something interesting or taken a good wildlife photograph, please let the web manager know by emailing <u>SACWG\_WebAdmin@shropscwgs.org.uk.</u></u>

This year has seen the 'Nature in the Strettons' cooperation, steered by SACWG, continue - with improved communications between all the various local organizations and the added benefit of a shared website where members can share information about forthcoming events and meetings (managed by Joan Arnfield). The website provides an easy way for local residents to learn about all that is going on and make contact with the different groups.

Committee members (bold) and project leaders 2023: **Isabel Carter (chair), Julie Cowley (secretary), Penny Bienz (publicity), Sally Mawhinny (website), Will Priestley (treasurer), John Bacon, Leo Smith, Steve Butler,** Mike Carter, Caroline Uff, and Sandra Whitlock.



# Survey Activities and Results

# Stretton Wetlands

# **Cudwell Meadow**

### Management

The year began with the removal of a fallen willow hanging over the stream, aided by an expert tree surgeon and volunteers to remove the timber and place in brash piles. In January the flooded meadow froze solid. The very wet winter and spring meant that no sheep could come in to graze the mostly flooded meadow in the early spring resulting in an abundance of long grass.



Volunteer numbers were very good during the summer months with some new regulars turning up for work parties (1<sup>st</sup> Thursday of each month 1.30 to 3.30). Their inputs have made a real difference in weed control (the dreaded dock in particular). Paths have been mown to facilitate visitors. The water trough (which had disappeared from sight) has been unearthed and given a thorough clean ready for sheep. A large donated bat box was attached to a pollarded willow tree by the stream.

The warm dry weather in May and June soon warmed up and dried out the meadow. It looked particularly lovely with the early summer flowers and in consequence 'Open Sundays began early to enable people to enjoy it all. As well as casual visitors dropping in on Sundays, we also have two 'walking for health' groups from Mayfair that enjoy walking around. We welcomed a group from Middle Marches in July for a tour and update on developments.

The meadow was mown for Haylage at the end of July - later than usual due to the wet weather. The soil was still damp and soft after all the recent excessive rainfall, so a fair amount of damage was done by the machinery which required some repairing to fill in the ruts. 16 rams then moved in for the autumn and did an excellent job of munching through the aftermath helping to make up for the lost grazing during spring. In recent months parts of the meadow have been permanently underwater.

#### Bee walk set up

In May a monthly Bee Walk was set up in and around Cudwell meadow and registered with the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust. In June the regular **monthly bee walk** yielded an impressive total of 10 different bumble-bee species, including two gypsy bumble bees and the first sighting of bilberry bumble bees in the meadow.



### Bioblitz

The June Bioblitz was blessed with perfect weather – sunny all day but not too hot. We had lots of good folk come and help identify fauna and flora. We were blessed with two spider experts from Shropshire Spiders, Nigel and Jim, complete with their 'Heath Robinson' spider catchers (which also gently scooped up loads of other



species too). They were very pleased to identify 31 species of spiders within the meadow. Spiders can be very attractive and they included the pink Candy Stripe and the bright Cucumber Green spider.



Lots of shield bugs were scooped up by them too, together with good numbers of their juvenile stages known as 'instars' which indicate they are happily multiplying in the meadow. For full reports on the bioblitz findings please look on the SACWG website

#### Invertebrate findings – 2023

• 31 species of spiders including the pink Candy Stripe and the bright Cucumber Green spider

- 6 species of Shield Bug including Bishops Mitre & Red Legged
  - 26 Beetles included a few new species -Red Hazel Leaf
- Roller weevil and Green Nettle Weevil
- Dragonflies Azure, Southern Hawker and Ruddy Darter
- 13 species of moth and butterfly moths including Peacock

caterpillars, Essex skipper, Scarlet Tiger and a Dark Green Fritillary

A particular highlight was a quite splendid Bee Chafer, discovered by a member of the Shropshire Spider group when they visited in July. These are rare, with around 1 sighting a year for Shropshire so understandably caused lots of excitement. They breed in old birch trees, of which there are a few nearby so it may reappear next year.

Some yellow meadow ants are moving in and busily constructing two large nests by the bank. They are usually an indicator of undisturbed meadows.

#### Changes in the flora

Nine members of the SACWG Botany group monitored the vegetation and they were pleased to identify two new species for the meadow, Ragged Robin around the pond and Teasel. Changing the management from pasture to hay meadow three years ago has brought plenty of benefits with 166 flowering plants so far recorded – but there are some negatives too with much less Marsh Yellow Cress, Marsh Bedstraw and Fools watercress and an increased amount of dock and rush – largely due to the removal of regular grazing.

#### Mammal and amphibian sightings – 2023

- 37 bird species new species include Kingfisher, Woodcock and Sparrowhawk
- Mammal species include badger, fox, moles otter, harvest mice, water, bank vole and shrew.
- Bat walk noted Pipistrelle, soprano Pipistrelle and possible Daubenton
- Toads and frogs breed in abundance each year attracting otter.cs

Nigel of **Shropshire Spiders** comments; "the site is small but very interesting" and is encouraging other experts to visit!

### Isabel Carter, February 2024





# Dormice in the Strettons

There are known to be small, fragmented populations of dormice in the Strettons area. One of the ways in which we monitor them (as well as helping to provide nesting sites) is to use nest boxes. All existing dormouse boxes are checked at least once a year for signs of activity. Three sites showed continued confirmed presence of Dormice – Horderley, Gulley Green and All Stretton. A new hedgerow was planted by SACWG (with support from Stepping Stones) to link two areas of potential dormouse habitat in All Stretton. Hedgerow links are essential to allow movement of dormice between woodlands.



It was particularly rewarding to find continued good numbers of nests at Gulley Green. Here, most of the nests were in front-opening bird boxes, situated quite high in the trees (checking the boxes was carried out in winter when all bird and dormouse nesting activity had ceased). The presence of dry, but green leaves is a good indicator of dormice and can been seen in the picture above, where a dormouse has built its nest on top of an old birds nest.

It was also good to discover dormice breeding in one of the new boxes in the Horderley area, where the young were still active in late November – unusually late.

A summary of the results of the box checks is given in the table below. No specific nut searches were carried out.



Site (owner)	Results
All Stretton	6 new boxes checked – no dormice but one active woodmouse nest. Linking
(Private)	boundary identified for hedge restoration in 2022 and restored with trees
	provided from the Stepping Stones project and with the help of volunteers in
	spring 2023. Hedge trees and shrubs are all doing well.
	Dormouse presence confirmed in the All Stretton area through a cat kill.
Bushmoor	20 boxes checked but no definitive signs of dormice. Woodmice and birds'
Coppice (SOS)	nests present, including one woodmouse nest with young.
Comley Quarry	10 boxes checked but no signs of dormice
(Shropshire	
Wildlife Trust)	
Gulley Green	31 boxes (mainly bird boxes) checked. Six dormouse nests were present - all in
(Private / Local	bird boxes. Also pied flycatcher, tit and woodmouse nests.
Wildlife Site)	
Horderley	6 new boxes checked. Nest with two young dormice in one and bird nests in 3
(Private)	others.
Ragleth Wood	20 boxes checked. No confirmed signs, but as last year, stripped bark present
(National Trust)	in two boxes, including some loose weaving, indicative but not verification of
	dormouse activity.
Ward's Coppice	9 boxes checked (most new). No confirmed dormouse signs, but pygmy shrew,
(SOS)	woodmouse nest and various birds' nests present. Stripped bark, noted in June,
	indicative of possible dormouse active, but not verifiable.

All records have been shared with Peoples Trust for Endangered Species who lead the 'National Dormouse Monitoring Programme', as well as with the landowners and Shropshire Mammal Group.

Thanks for help from Steve Butler, Julie Cowley, Deborah Davenport, Howard Davies, Michele & Andy Gannon, and Gill Silk. *Images taken by Deborah Davenport.* 

### Caroline Uff, February 2024



# Swifts in the Strettons



# Purpose and objectives of the project

The swift (*Apus apus*) is red-listed as a bird of conservation concern (due to falling population numbers) and it is thought that the loss of nest sites due to modern building methods and materials has played a key role in their decline. By recording known nest locations, it is possible to monitor whether these sites continue to be used in subsequent years or whether new sites are selected and, importantly, to liaise with residents, builders and planners when works to improve properties is carried out to ensure the preservation of nesting opportunities.

Surveying also indicates where it might be worthwhile installing artificial nest boxes to increase colony size – the birds are sociable and tend to nest within close range of each other.

Swifts are commonly observed in and around the Strettons but there was no formal recording of the locations of nest sites or the number of birds until 2014, when the first "Swifts in the Strettons" was inaugurated by the Stretton Area Community Wildlife Group, under the leadership of Peta Sams. Observations were carried out in 2015 and 2016 which enabled the earlier study to be built on and extended. Recording of sites has continued since that time and in 2023 a survey was conducted, using the same methodology as previous years.

The location of the nest sites recorded will be passed to Shropshire Council, Church Stretton Town Council, RSPB and British Trust for Ornithology survey apps, and the county bird recorder for use when proposals for maintenance or modification of buildings occupied by swifts are filed with planning authorities, and to establish the presence of swift populations in the county.

#### RESULTS

#### **General Observations of Swifts in the Strettons**

The first confirmed sighting of swifts within the Strettons was 6 May 2023, 3 days earlier than reported in 2022. During the months of May and June more sightings were observed but recorded nest sites were low in number. The spring of 2023 (April and May) was cold and windy and it has been mooted that bad weather in Europe during April held some birds back. There is no doubt that some longstanding, well established sites did not have a breeding pair in 2023.

By June the weather had improved and warm balmy evenings meant there were a few screaming parties around. This was likely to be mainly juvenile birds returning to their natal grounds and prospecting for future nest sites. However, overall observations of swifts were intermittent, and a few people even asked if they had in fact left early. During July and into early August as the nestlings started to grow there was more daytime activity by foraging parents but unusually the larger screaming parties were quite often absent. The total number of nests recorded was up compared to 2022 although there was variation on nest site location, with the Essex Road colony completely lost barring one pair. Similarly, the colony along Watling Street South was also lost except for one location, but there is no locally driven explanation for this. 30 nest sites in buildings were confirmed (ie birds entering a consistent location two or more times, or feeding young, or presence of young), see Figure 1. An additional 5 swift nest box sites were also recorded. 4 of which are on one building.

The last date of observation of a swift was 14 August 2023.





#### Figure 1: Number of swift nest sites year on year in the Strettons since 2015.

#### **Swift Nest Site Locations**

Nest aspect is varied although the main preference is East (see table 1).

	Table 1: Nest As	pect for Confirme	d Nest sites	(where know	n) in 2023.
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ASPECT OF NEST	<b>CONFIRMED SITES</b>
Ν	8
S	5
E	20
W	2

Of the confirmed nest sites 21 buildings were used, mainly in Church Stretton. All Stretton reported one site and Little Stretton has two sites (although one is unconfirmed and therefore not included in these results).

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the 2023 survey season results:

- Nest observations were up compared to 2022 and one factor influencing these results is that additional surveyors were recruited in 2023 (end of post Covid precautions)
- The swift population in the Strettons is variable and can be influenced by environmental factors year on year, as well as the local threat of nest site loss



• The original hotspot areas in the town centre are no longer utilized, and the sites on Essex Road are also lost as breeding sites. The loss of the Essex Road colony may be a consequence of the re-roofing programme and substitute boxes put up in 2022 being unsatisfactory. Certainly the colony number, which reduced in 2022, has now gone from Essex Road. Whether these birds have

relocated to other nest sites is not known. Breeding pairs on Watling Street were also significantly down, from 5 pairs to 1 pair

- Multiple nest boxes installed on one property (Figure 2) has resulted in a high occupancy rate and this finding supports swift conservation work elsewhere in the country whereby nest boxes can provide a short to medium term breeding opportunity. However, the lifetime of the boxes is not long compared to the decades generations of swifts can occupy a building. One example is Essex Road, where a former local resident had swifts nesting in the roof space for over 40 years. Unfortunately this is one of the sites lost!
- The swift population is locally vulnerable and requires long-term intervention to prevent any further decline. Climatic factors can affect migration, insect availability and nestling survival, but local renovation and restoration work on buildings where swifts breed is also a significant cause



Figure 2: Swift emerging from nest box on local building. (Photo by Sandra Whitlock).

#### **ACTIONS**

- Propose all new housing have swift bricks installed by the developer as a mandatory requirement for all new builds or renovations
- Encourage local residents to install swift bricks or boxes (Figure 3) on their homes.





Swift box

Swift bricks

Figure 3. Examples of swift bricks and boxes.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Whilst 2023 recorded a higher number of nest sites compared to 2022 there is cause for concern over the loss of the town centre and Essex Road sites, as well as those on Watling Street, and positive action is required if no further losses are to occur. The actions recommended are to ensure that the Strettons



community does all it can to prevent the decline of the swift population by increasing the opportunity for swifts to breed locally.

Early in the season the number of returning adults was low and whilst the warm weather in June bolstered aerial counts due to juvenile birds arriving it was evident that a number of longstanding nest sites had been abandoned for this year. The aerial counts waned after June and anecdotally local observations found the number of swifts in screaming parties, and the frequency of the parties, was down on previous years. The breeding pairs absent from Watling Street are important in that it is understood that no renovation work has been undertaken at any of the properties. This means that these birds simply did not return this year.

Of interest, the number of colonial nest sites has increased (more breeding pairs per building) and this makes these buildings even more important to the future of the Strettons swift population.

Finally, it should be noted that between 2020 and 2023 no formal group surveying was carried out and this makes a comparison of recorded sites over time more difficult. The group surveying re-commenced in June and July 2023 and it progressed this year's survey considerably: the more people watching for sites the more likely sites will be recorded. It is hoped that in 2024 the group surveying can continue.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This survey would not have been possible without the efforts of Steve Mellor, June Holloway, Tony Jones, Isabel Carter, Kate Hudson, Richard Bacon, Gay Walker, Sandra Whitlock, Will Priestley, Janet Longstaff and Andrew Morton.

Julie Cowley 5 October 2023

#### **IMPORTANT: Confidentiality**

This is an edited version of the report without specific site information. Should you need to know further information please pass your request to Julie Cowley (email: <u>grahamandjuliecowley@gmail.com</u> or phone: 01694 722310), who will consider whether this is appropriate.



# Community Tree Planting

This project has always been about community involvement in tree planting and extending habitat for wildlife. The focus area has been Batch Valley, All Stretton, where in 2017 and 2018 approximately 1500 native tree species were planted, in two potentially ancient woodland sites, and one other site. Other activities under the project have included bug hotels, bird-box making days, pond dipping and an extensive amount of bracken bashing undertaken by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Longmynd Scouts.





Figure 1: Existing Plan

Figure 2: Established woodland 2021

Managing habitat requires engaging in an annual cycle of maintenance, and learning how to manage the threats to the habitat you are looking to create (e.g. sheep, deer, bracken). The woodland copses are now well-established. Maintenance is on-going and this summer the Scouts will be returning to undertake bracken bashing on the original sites and a new site that the project is turning its attention to, namely Open Coppice. This is also a National Trust site, and they will be undertaking to secure the fencing of this woodland. Batch Valley was recent cited as an area where there were signs of dormice activity and improving the biodiversity of this woodland, by fencing, bracken bashing and encouraging natural regeneration of native woodland species, ties in with the Stepping Stones 'Species Recovery' Project. In addition, surrounding landowners are being supported to look into the 'Farming in Protected Landscapes' funding programme, which offers grants to facilitate activities towards nature recovery and nature-friendly, sustainable farm businesses. The focus will be on restoring hedgerows and creating wildlife corridors to other known areas of dormice activity.

### **Project Leader and Photos: Dr Penny Bienz**



# Bat survey report

#### INTRODUCTION

There have been various surveys of bat populations within the Strettons valley, largely concentrating on nature reserves such as Rectory Wood and Field and other green spaces such as High Leasowes. However, no distribution study of the streetscape has been undertaken in the area. Bats are good environmental indicators because of their dependence upon insect prey, requirement for certain habitats, and sensitivity to the climate and land use changes (Bat Conservation Trust, 2022a). Nationally bat populations are reported generally as



stable or increasing, most likely due to the conservation measures in place to protect them (Bat Conservation Trust, 2022b), although there are limited data for some species. This project aims to establish a baseline of the bat species present in the locality of the Strettons. The initial survey has taken place in Church Stretton town and the results will be presented to the Church Stretton Town Council to inform decision making on such matters as the conservation of trees, buildings and meadowland, which bats are dependent upon as roosts and for hibernation, as well as for foraging.

Additional survey data collected in 2023 by Sue Rooney is also included in this report to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the bat populations in Church Stretton.

#### **METHOD**

For the streetscape surveys, sunset surveys were carried out mainly during August 2023. A bat scanner was used to identify the individual species. The scanner operates by automatically transforming the ultrasonic sounds into the audible range, without the need of a dial to move between frequencies.

For a period of one hour on calm weather evenings, a walk around Church Stretton was conducted, scanning for bats. Species were recorded as Present. Places where no bats were recorded were noted.

#### RESULTS

Common and Soprano Pipistrelle and Noctule bats were recorded throughout Church Stretton during the survey period (Figure 1). The exceptions where no bats were recorded were Lutwyche Road, Essex Road (the main part) and Central Avenue (although Common Pipistrelle were recorded in the green space that links with Stretton Farm Road, adjacent to the railway line).

The roads that were surveyed are listed in Table 1.





Figure 1. Distribution of bats across the town of Church Stretton indicated by the blue star, August 2023.

LOCATION	SPECIES	LOCATION	SPECIES
Cunnery Road	Common pipistrelle	High Street	Common pipistrelle
Church Street	Common pipistrelle	Sandford Avenue (west)	Common pipistrelle
Church Way	Common pipistrelle	Central Avenue	Non recorded
Longhills Road	Common pipistrelle	Stretton Farm Road	Common pipistrelle, noctule
Burway Road	Common pipistrelle	Ludlow Road (to cemetery)	Common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle
Cardingmill Valley	Common pipistrelle	Watling Street (S and N)	Common pipistrelle, noctule
Trevor Hill	Common pipistrelle	Hazler Crescent	Common pipistrelle, noctule
Madeira Walk	Common pipistrelle	Hazler Road	Common pipistrelle, noctule
Shrewsbury Road (junction with Churchill Road to Sandford Ave)	Common pipistrelle	Sandford Avenue (E)	Common pipistrelle
Churchill Road (incl cul de sacs and Ley Gardens)	Common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, noctule	Battlefield estate	Common pipistrelle, noctule
Essex Road (junction with Lutwyche Rd and Sandford Ave)	Common pipistrelle	Ragleth Road	Common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, noctule
Essex Road	Non recorded	Clive Avenue	Common pipistrelle
Lutwyche Road	Non recorded	Bridleways	Common pipistrelle

Table 1. Roads surve	yed and bat s	pecies recorded.
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#### **ADDITIONAL SURVEY DATA**

Survey data, recorded by Sue Rooney (various locations) are presented in Table 2. A summary of the 2023 survey by Sue Rooney is reported in the Appendix B.

LOCATION	SPECIES	RECORDER					
Madeira Walk garden	Common Pipistrelle	Sue Rooney					
Maderia Walk garden	Soprano Pipistrelle	Sue Rooney					
Madeira Walk garden	Noctule	Sue Rooney					
Madeira Walk garden	Brown Long-eared	Sue Rooney					
Madeira Walk garden	Myotis sp.	Sue Rooney					
Madeira Walk garden	Serotine (verified by County Recorder)	Sue Rooney					
Madeira Walk garden	Lesser Horseshoe (verified by BCT)	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Common Pipistrelle	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Soprano Pipistrelle	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Noctule	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Myotis sp. probably Daubenton's	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Brown Long-eared	Sue Rooney					
High Leasowes	Nathusius' Pipistrelle (probability 0.9)	Sue Rooney					
Playing fields	Common Pipistrelle	Sue Rooney					
Playing fields	Noctule	Sue Rooney					
Playing fields	Barbastelle (verified by BCT)	Sue Rooney					

#### Table 2. Additional bat surveys and species recorded in 2023.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Stretton bat population has a widespread distribution throughout the town. It is not possible to record actual numbers of individual bats (species richness) therefore population density cannot be calculated. Suffice it to say that the bats seen were singular and bats heard via the detector were again largely singular.

A few streets were missed out due to time constraints and weather, such as Swains Meadow, and it is hoped that in 2024 the survey will be extended and include both Little and All Stretton.

The three surveys combined produced a total of nine bat species recorded (Appendix A).

Tree canopy is an important habitat for foraging bats and garden trees and street-lined trees such as the lime trees in Sandford Avenue (town side) were being well utilised. McClintock Place, which has a row of birch trees alongside it, was an area that was well used as was Church Street, St Lawrence's churchyard, Longhills Road, Madeira Walk and Hazler Crescent, all of which had entertaining bat activity. Lutwyche Road, Essex Road and Central Avenue were three locations where bats were not recorded. All three roads have no, or few trees and this demonstrates the importance of tree habitat not only for roosting bats but for food availability too.

Mixed tree species appear to be valuable for insect productivity and bats showed no preference for deciduous over conifer trees, foraging around a variety of species. Along Ash Brook, Common Pipistrelle were recorded, the stream being a further probable source of emergent insects.



Meadowland, such as that found at High Leasowes is also important foraging habitat and is clearly important for variety of bat species.

#### LIMITATIONS

The streetscape survey data are not verified by Sonogram (graphs that identify the individual species) or acoustic signal classifiers. This limits the variety of species may be detected or verified as present.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Protect existing trees to ensure there is roosting and foraging habitat for bats. The lime trees in Sandford Avenue are of importance and the future of these trees requires consideration by the Town Council
- Plant trees along Lutwyche Road, Essex Road and Central Avenue to provide a feeding corridor for bats
- Meadowland is also an important habitat, as shown by the data recorded at High Leasowes. Insect productivity is higher in species rich habitat such as meadows and conserving and increasing the coverage of wildflower rich verges and other open spaces, as well as within gardens, will have a positive effect, not only on bats, but other wildlife that is also dependent upon a diversity of planting.

#### REFERENCES

Bat Conservation Trust, 2023a. Accessed 19 October 2023 at https://www.bats.org.uk/about-bats/why-batsmatter

Bat Conservation Trust, 2023b. Accessed 19 October 2023 at https://www.bats.org.uk/about-bats/threats-to-bats

Brown long-eared	Plecotus auritus
Daubenton's	Myotis daubentoniid (tbc)
Common Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pipistrellus
Soprano Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pygmaeus
Noctule	Nyctalus noctula
Serotine (verified by County Recorder)	Eptesicus serotinus
Lesser Horseshoe (verified by BCT)	Rhinolophus hipposideros
Nathusius' Pipistrelle (probability 0.9)	Pipistrellus nathusii
Barbastelle (verified by BCT)	Barbastella barbastellus

#### APPENDIX A

#### **APPENDIX B**

This year I have only been able to do bat surveys at 3 locations in Church Stretton but at least 9 species of bat have been detected. This includes relatively common species such as Common and Soprano Pipistrelles and Noctules, but also some rarer and very rare species.

Serotines have been recorded in Madeira Walk on several occasions in the last couple of years, including this year. According to the Bat Conservation Trust: "The Serotine is one of our less common species, occurring mainly south of a line drawn from The Wash to parts of South Wales." Finding them in Church Stretton is important as it adds to the knowledge about its range and suggests that it may be expanding northwards.



The Shropshire County Recorder for bats accepted a record of Serotine in Madeira Walk as correct in 2021 and has added it to the county database, the first one accepted since 2012.

Lesser Horseshoe bat has been recorded this year in October, again in Madeira Walk. This recording was verified by the Bat Conservation Trust. Their distribution is largely restricted to south-west England and Wales.

It was very exciting to record a Barbastelle near Contemplation Corner and the mature trees lining Ash Brook in the playing fields in June this year. Barbastelles are listed as Near Threatened on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Again, the recordings were verified by BCT. Barbastelles have been recorded and verified in other locations in Church Stretton (Madeira Walk, Cardingmill Valley Road) in the last few years.

These bat species were recorded using an Echometer Touch 2 bat detector, a Full Spectrum device which features GPS, sonogram recording and Auto ID. Although the Auto ID is useful it cannot be assumed to be correct and the sonograms should always be further analysed, using software such as the BTO Acoustic Pipeline and Kaleidoscope. The Pipeline is useful in identifying multiple bats in one recording and gives a probability for each species. In my report here I have only included bat species with a high probability of greater than 0.9. In the case of rare bats such as Barbastelle and Lesser Horseshoe, even though the probability was 0.99, I sent the sonograms to the Bat Conservation Trust for verification.

In respect of the Myotis species (such as Daubenton's, Whiskered, Natterers, Brandt's, Bechstein, Alcathoe), it is almost impossible to separate them from their calls as they are so similar, so I have only collectively identified Myotis sp. in most cases. This is agreed as best practice in the bat world. However, it is highly likely that the Myotis recorded at High Leasowes was a Daubenton's as there is a lake on adjoining land and these bats are strongly associated with water.

In terms of habitat, bats thrive where there are linear features (such as hedgerows and tree lines), mature trees and water. Linear features link roost sites and feeding grounds. As bats feed on insects, meadows with abundant flowering plants which attract night-time pollinators, are very important. Mature trees provide roost sites, as do old buildings for some species.

Studies have shown that it is important to survey for bats from just before sunset to at least a couple of hours afterwards as bats don't all emerge at the same time, for example Brown Long-eared bats emerge about an hour after sunset and remain active throughout the night. In this respect it would be useful to carry out a study with a static bat detector which can be left in the field for an extended period, in order to get a fuller picture.

Photo credit: Common Pipistrelle by Getty Authors: Julie Cowley and Sue Rooney Project Leader: Julie Cowley



# Butterfly report

# Situation Vacant!

We are looking for a new Project Leader to continue this important project.

Jenny Joy is happy to provide training and support! If you are interested please get in touch with Isabel Carter, Chair of SACWG.





# Strettons Meadows Group



# Eastern Ragleth Meadows Management Report for 2023.

Management of the eastern Ragleth Group of meadows has continued to provide wildlife 'stepping stones' in support of the objectives of the Marches Meadow Group, Marches Community Land Trust, SACWG, The National Trust and the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Area (previously called the AONB). These six meadows with surrounding hedges totalling almost 3 hectares include the County Wildlife Site SO49.4.1. They are managed especially for their wildlife which includes over 100 species of meadow plants, 22+ species of breeding butterflies, lots of moths, bumble bees, grasshoppers and reptiles; whilst not forgetting the meadows value as

open and scrub habitat for feeding, breeding and migrating birds.

Management in 2022/23 included:

- Periodic autumn, winter and early spring grazing by Badger Face sheep to get the grass really short by the spring so that from late April through to September the breeding insects can enjoy the flower nectar harvest.
- Rogueing of the scattered invasive agricultural grassland weeds in the spring and early summer prior to hay cutting (e.g. Creeping / Spear thistles, Docks, Nettles, Hogweed, Bracken).
- Taking of a hay crop in August on the level part of the NT's Meadow followed by spreading of harvested wild-flower seed (Burnet Saxifrage, Betony, Hard Heads, Hairbell, Cowslips) using the MMG's brush harvester in August and broadcast on the meadow in September.





- The temporary tree guards protecting the fifteen three-year old oak saplings on the steeper northern 'wood pasture' section of the NT's Ragleth Meadow were replaced with permanent guards in autumn 2023 and now provide improved protection from browsing by livestock and Roe Deer.
- Planting of new hedges along with hedge and fence maintenance around the meadows in winter months; along with periodic inspection and fence maintenance/repair around the adjacent NT's Ragleth (ungrazed) Woodland.





Contacts: East Ragleth Meadow Group John Bacon: <u>baconjohn48@gmail.com</u> MMG: <u>https://www.marchesmeadowgroup.com/</u> MMCLT: <u>https://middlemarchescommunitylandtrust</u> Shropshire Hills National Landscape: <u>www.shropshirehills-</u> <u>nl.org.uk</u> Stepping Stones Project charlie.bell@nationaltrust.org.uk





# Curlews, lapwings and other bird surveys

# Introduction



Lapwing and Curlew have both suffered a massive contraction in range and population decline in the last 20 years or so, nationally and locally. Curlew has been described as the UK's highest bird conservation priority, as we have an estimated 28% of the European breeding population, and 19 – 27% of the world population.

The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group agreed to begin conducting annual Lapwing and Curlew surveys in 2017, to complement similar surveys carried out by other Community Wildlife Groups in different parts of the Shropshire Hills. The Church Stretton branch of the Shropshire Ornithological Society also agreed to participate in the survey.

An area was selected where these species were found breeding in the 2008-13 Shropshire Bird Atlas, comprising

30 2x2 kilometre squares on the Ordnance Survey National Grid, known as "tetrads", shown here.

The aim was to locate the territories of breeding pairs, and record behaviour, to estimate the population. No attempt was made to locate nests. Although the survey concentrated on the two main target species, and

their habitats, surveyors were asked to also record on their maps any of 23 other target species seen, particularly Kestrel and Cuckoo, if they were confident that they could do so.

Surveyors were recruited for all of the 30 squares, and were asked to make three visits, around 1 April, 1 May and mid-June, at times convenient to them, with visits concentrating on habitats where the main target species might be found, and lasting around three hours each. The surveys were conducted from Public Rights of Way, unless individual surveyors

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SO49V	SO59A	SO59F	SO59K	SO59Q	N//In
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obtained landowners permission to leave them. Survey maps and recording instructions were supplied. A practical fieldwork training meeting was held for those that wanted one.

The survey was a success, and all 30 squares were covered. It has been repeated each year since 2018, using the same methodology and aiming to cover the same 30 squares, but coverage was limited in 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions.

Particular efforts have been made to record Curlews, as the Curlew situation is critical, with a 77% decline between 1990 and 2010, and a further decline since. There are probably only 120 pairs left in the whole of the County now, and there is not much time left to save them from local extinction. The Shropshire Curlew population is more than one-fifth of the estimated 500 pairs in England, south of a line from the Dee estuary to the Wash, so it is regionally and nationally important.

In 2022, two squares to the west, SO49J and P, were added to the survey area, and these were surveyed in 2023 as well.

In 2023

- Almost all squares were surveyed (27 out of 32)
- There were 44 participants.
- They put in over 330 hours of survey effort
- 10 new participants attended a practical outdoor training session

This is a similar level of coverage as 2021 and 2022.

# Curlew

Curlew is the "most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK" (Brown *et al*, *British Birds* 2015), because the UK has an estimated 28% of the European, and 19-27% of the world population and is on the national *Red List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern* 4 (Eaton *et al*, British Birds 2015), because of a decline of 62% in the UK between 1969 and 2014. It remained on the revised *Red List* published in 2021.

The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found a 49% decline in the UK, and a 30% decline in England, over the 26-year period 1995-2021 (the most recent figures available)..

In Shropshire, it declined from about 700 breeding pairs in 1990 to 160 in 2010 (a loss of 77%), and it disappeared from 62% of the Atlas survey squares (tetrads) between 1985-90 and 2008-13.



The decline has continued, and there were probably only around 110 pairs left in the whole of the County in 2023. At the current rate of decline, the County population will halve in about 12 years, and become virtually extinct in 25. Curlew is on the *Red List* of *Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire*, published by Shropshire Ornithological Society in 2019.

In the Strettons area, no Curlew nests or chicks have been found by the Bird survey, and it is believed that none fledged in the area in the three years 2021 - 23. In 2020, one pair had chicks, but there was no



evidence of any fledged young. There was no evidence that the Curlews produced any chicks, let alone fledged young in 2019, but there were at least two chicks (outcome unknown) in 2018.

Seven breeding pairs (territories) were located in 2023 in the area surveyed since 2017, as shown on the Map. A further pair was located in SO49J, to the west of Leebotwood, one of the two squares added to the survey area in 2022.



Adult Curlews are generally site-faithful, so it is possible to compare results year on year. The Curlew results since 2017 have been assessed, and the results are shown on the following map. The initial apparent increase in the population is probably due to better coverage year on year, as surveyors got to know their squares better, then in 2020 as a result of people exercising from home.

Most pairs present in 2023 have been present each year since 2017, but it appears that two pairs were lost in 2019, a pair was gained in 2021, and another was lost in 2022. Two other pairs have been recorded in the area on a regular basis, but records received in 2023 indicate that these pairs nest outside the area, although the one north of SO59U nested in the area in 2021 only.

This analysis excludes the squares added to the area in 2022 (SO49J and P). A pair was found in each of these squares in 2022, but only in SO49J in 2023.





# Lapwing

Lapwing was added to the national *Red List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern* in 2009, and this status was confirmed in 2015 (Eaton *et al*, British Birds 2015), because of a decline in the UK of 63% between 1969 and 2014, and 57% over the previous 25 years. The BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 49% in the UK, 36% in England and 52% in the English West Midlands, over the 26-year period 1995-2021. © John Harding

In Shropshire, it declined from about 3,000 breeding

pairs in 1990 to 800 in 2010 (a loss of 73%), and it disappeared from 46% of the Atlas survey squares (tetrads) between 1985-90 and 2008-13. The decline has continued, certainly in the areas monitored by several Community Wildlife Groups. Lapwing is on the *Red List* of *Breeding Birds of Conservation Concern in Shropshire*. The decline is partly obscured by the much larger numbers seen in passage or winter flocks, which comprise birds escaping from the frozen ground in northern Europe in autumn, or returning there in spring.

Lapwing are not site faithful. They need very short vegetation or bare ground for a nest. The main reasons for the large population decline is the switch from spring-planted to autumn-planted cereal crops, which are already too high for Lapwing to nest in by the beginning of April, together with the disappearance of mixed farms (both arable and pasture) They therefore need to find spring crops, which may mean following the farm rotation on arable farms, or moving somewhere entirely different where arable crops have disappeared. They also need to be able to find invertebrate food, for the nesting adults, and later for the



chicks to feed themselves. Insect-rich damp ground helps. Land drainage and pesticides do not. There is very little suitable habitat in the Strettons area now.

One pair was located near East Wall (SO59G), and another near Shipton (SO59Q), both in possibly-suitable breeding habitat in early April, but neither pair was located subsequently, in spite of further searching. There was no evidence of confirmed breeding, or chicks



# **Other Target species**

Curlew and Lapwing were the main target species for the survey, but participants were also asked to record other target species if

possible, and most did so.

### Kestrel

Participants were requested to make a particular effort to record Kestrels, as they too have declined considerably in recent years, and a nest box scheme and colourringing project is being undertaken across Shropshire to try and find out why. The records suggest 4 – 5 pairs, compared to at least 6 pairs in 2022, only four





pairs in 2021, 7-9 pairs in 2020, 4 – 5 pairs in 2019 (another very poor year for them), and up to 10 pairs in 2018, perhaps a few more than the 6 – 8 estimated in 2017.

The apparent population varies from year to year, depending on prey abundance, mainly voles, but Kestrels are much more likely to be observed in good breeding seasons, when they have to spend more time hunting for food for chicks, and travelling to and from the nest.

#### Cuckoo

Cuckoo has also become increasingly rare – the BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 36% in the UK, 71% in England, and 81% in the English West Midlands region, between 1995 and 2021. It was added to the *Red List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern* in the UK in 2009, a status confirmed in 2015 and 2021.

In Shropshire, comparison of the 1985-90 and 2008-13 Atlas distribution maps showed it had disappeared from 56% of the tetrads occupied in the earlier period. The population estimate for the later period published in *The Birds of Shropshire* was 90–95 pairs, less than half that estimated in the earlier Atlas.

There were only four records in 2023, calling males around Hope Bowdler and Caer Caradoc (three records, probably all the same individual), and one east of Plaish.

Members were advised in 2020 that there were more Cuckoo records than usual, but "it's not clear whether there are more Cuckoos about, or we're better able to hear them in the peace and quiet of staying at home [due to coronavirus restrictions]". The population estimate of 7 territorial males in 2020 was substantially more than recorded in previous years, and slightly more than the 6-7 in 2022, and 5 in 2021.



In 2019, up to three males were recorded, and probably only one in 2018 and 2017.

#### **Red Kite**

The first successful breeding of Red Kite in Shropshire for 130 years occurred as recently as 2006, but 60 nests, and another six breeding pairs, were found in the County in 2023, mainly in the south-west hills, but there have been nests north of Shrewsbury each year since 2017, and the most easterly nest to date was reported in 2019 from near the Staffordshire border.



In the Strettons area too, Red Kites have increased rapidly. The first nest east of the A49 road was found in 2012, but, in 2023, only two nests were found, compared with five in 2022. Both were successful, fledging at least three young.

In 2022, the female at one of the failed nests near Church Stretton was wing-tagged Yellow X3 in north Dorset, 186km distant, two years previously. This is the only known example of a Kite from outside of the



Wales/Shropshire/Herefordshire tagging scheme breeding in Shropshire. She has been seen in the area several times since, including after the 2023 breeding season, so she probably nested again in 2023, but was not found.

There are likely to be other pairs nesting at unknown locations, as wing-tagged birds that are old enough to breed have been photographed in the area.

The number of Kites seen on the Bird survey, and the number of tetrads in which they have been seen, has steadily increased year on year since it started in 2017, reflecting the population increase and spread of this species.

# **Remaining Target Species**

Apart from the five main Target Species listed above, members were asked to record observations of 19 Other Target species: Barn Owl, Bullfinch, Dipper, Dunnock, Grey Partridge, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Red Kite, Reed Bunting, Skylark, Snipe, Spotted Flycatcher, Stonechat, Swift (nest sites only), Tree Sparrow, Wheatear, Whinchat, Yellow Wagtail and Yellowhammer.

The list of other target species was drawn up in 2014, when farmers had to take them into account when making agri-environment scheme applications. The agri-environment scheme regulations have changed several times since, and the list is no longer useful. New arrangements are being made for the Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) scheme opening for applications in 2024, but they are not yet available.

However, the proportion of CWG bird surveyors that undertake the surveys who record the other target species varies considerably from group to group, so there is no consistency in the quality of data collected. More importantly, the surveys are carried out from Public Rights of Way (PRWs), and targeted at habitat where Lapwing and Curlew might be found, so the few surveyors who record all the other target species only note a very small proportion of those in their squares.

No analysis of the records for 2023 has been made. It is hoped they will all be input into BTOs national recording system, BirdTrack. Arrangements for recording Other Target Species from 2024 onwards will be decided at the Bird Group meeting in March.

There is a separate Swift project, and details can be found elsewhere in the Community Wildlife Group's Annual Report.

### Save our Curlews Campaign Nest Finding and Protection Project

The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) has been carrying out research with other Community Wildlife Groups to find nests, put an electric fence around them to protect the eggs from predators, and then fix radio-tags to the chicks and track them to see how they use the landscape, and what happens to them. Not enough young birds fledge to replace the older birds dying off. We need to know why.

This innovative research was extended to the Strettons area in 2021, with land-owners help. The project is expensive, and has been funded by Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS), the Strettons area Curlew Appeal (featured in several Stretton Focus articles), and





several grants, including substantial ones from the Stepping Stones project and the Stretton Focus Community Awards Scheme. The Green Recovery Challenge Fund financed the whole project in 2022, via a grant from the Stepping Stones project.

Almost all the landowners we approached were pleased to have Curlews on their land, supported our efforts to protect them, and gave permission for us to look for, and fence, the nests. We are grateful for their support.

In the Strettons area, four nests were found. One was predated before the clutch was complete, one was predated after fencing, and the third was abandoned (the fence was functioning normally, and had not been breached). The pair with the predated fenced nest re-laid, but that nest too was predated. Eggshell fragments were found inside the fence on both occasions, indicating they were eaten by crows, but it is possible that the nest was abandoned before the eggs were eaten. Abandoned nests are believed to be caused by foxes patrolling the perimeter of the fence, scaring the sitting bird away. The nest finders looked for relay nests for all pairs, but there is no evidence that the other two attempted to relay. Another pair was located and monitored, but no evidence was observed that this pair laid any eggs, although it is possible that in this case too a partial clutch was predated.

There is a full description of the project on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/. This describes the results in detail, our future plans, and the overwhelming evidence that predation by foxes and other predators is the main cause of Curlew's continuing decline. It is clear that the annual release of millions of pheasants for shooting, only a third of which are actually shot, results in an over-abundant food supply which maintains the numbers of the Curlew's main predators well above naturally sustainable levels.

The project is continuing in 2024, partly funded by the Strettons area Save our Curlews appeal. You can find more information, including details of how to make donations and where to send them, on our website www.shropscwgs.org.uk/all-events/save-our-curlews-strettons-area-2024-appeal/

The campaign is also encouraging a network of 10 Community Wildlife Groups across Shropshire, including ours, to monitor Curlews. The Groups cover 137 tetrads where the vast majority of the County's Curlew population was found in the recent 2008-13 Bird Atlas project. A map showing the area covered by each group, overlain on the Curlew distribution map, can be found on the SOS website. Though numbers vary each year, around 300 people participate annually, and put in around 2,300 hours, a clear indication of the commitment of local people to saving our Curlews.

In 2018, CWG surveys found 94 – 115 breeding pairs of Curlew. In 2021, the number had fallen to 88-106, 90-110 in 2022, and to 88-98 in 2023. These numbers include the pairs whose nests were found by the SOS project.

There were a total of 8 known fledged young in 2023 from all 88-98 pairs.

# **Participants**

Thanks to the following people, who undertook the survey work and / or supplied records:-

Jonathan Allan, Sue Barker, Steve Butler, Phil Constable, Belinda Cousens, Julie Cowley, Gill Davies, Pat & Ruth Dennis-Jones, Alistair Edie, Jane Edwards, Helen & Andrew Fenton, Rob & Beth Furlong, Joe Gomme, June Holloway, Melanie & Peter Houlder, Kate & Robin Hudson, Jim Jarrett, David John, Tony Jones, Chris & Carol King, Angela Kitson, Sarah Lane, David Lee, David Matthews, Shirley McNichol, Diana Nuttall, Ron Parnell, Adrian Pickles, Ian & Jill Plumridge, Will Priestley, Ray Slack, Dee Snape, Ann Taylor, Jon Taylor, Carol Thickens, Dick Ward and Dan Watkins.



Thanks also to:-

- Gill Davies, for making several additional survey visits to monitor the Curlews, and helping with the training of new participants.
- Terry Moore, for supplying photos
- Lorna Taylor, for making contact with landowners with breeding Curlews, to seek permission for nest finding.

# Acknowledgements

The *Save our Curlews* Nest Finding and Protection project received grants from the Shropshire Hills AONB and from Stretton Focus Community Awards. Thank you.

# **Plans for the Future**

The survey will be repeated in future years, so we can get a better picture of the population and distribution of Lapwing and Curlew. In 2024, we will also continue to work with the SOS Save our Curlews campaign, which, in co-operation with farmers, will continue to promote conservation, and organise nest protection for Curlews.

New participants are needed for the survey in 2024. It's easy and enjoyable and simple instructions will be provided.

A joint meeting of the Strettons area Community Wildlife Group and the Church Stretton SOS branch will be held at 7.30pm on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> March, at the Methodist Church Hall, Watling St., Church Stretton, for a presentation of the 2023 results, and to plan the 2024 survey. New members, and anyone interested in birds, will be very welcome.

For those that want to come, there will be a practical training session, explaining how to go about the survey, and record what you see, around the end of March.

Leo Smith February 2024



# **Dipper Habitat**

Dippers inhabit fast flowing streams with rapids, small waterfalls and gravelly beds, and the Shropshire Hills, particularly in the Teme catchment, is the County stronghold. They feed largely on larvae collected on the stream bed (they do not take invertebrates from bankside vegetation, like Grey Wagtails do), and, to a lesser extent, on small fish.

They take readily to carefully-sited nest boxes over water. Several other Community Wildlife Groups have put up boxes, and shown that they help increase the population, partly by providing new nest sites on suitable stretches of stream which otherwise lack them, and partly by protecting the eggs and chicks from predators, so the average number of fledged young per nest increases.

# **SACWG Project**

The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group started its own Dipper Project in 2020, covering the Cound Brook north to Longnor, and the Quinney Brook south to Marshbrook, and their tributaries.

In 2020, the population in the area was estimated at 9 – 11 pairs. The population fluctuates, according to breeding success in the previous year, and water levels and flow rates in the streams, which affects overwinter survival. In 2021, the population was estimated at 8 pairs. Only four young are known to have fledged, considerably fewer than in 2020. Water levels were high at the start of the season, and the weather was cold, probably resulting in less invertebrate food in the streams, perhaps accounting for the unoccupied sites and the fewer breeding pairs. In 2022, Seven nests were found. Two sites occupied in 2021 were not occupied, and there is no evidence that any other pairs nested. Water levels in the streams were very low because of prolonged very dry weather, so it is likely that breeding success and survival rates were poor.

Several specially designed nest boxes were already installed in the area before the start of the SACWG project, which has installed several more.

# 2023

Members were again asked to report sightings, and another appeal for information appeared in Stretton Focus. Most sites occupied last year, or known to have been occupied previously, were revisited.

Seven nests were found, one site was not revisited, and two sites occupied in 2021 were not occupied for the second year. There is no evidence that any other pairs nested. Five of the seven were probably successful, but the number of fledged young is unknown. One nest definitely failed, and another lost two broods before fledging. Only one fledged young was seen, from a late nest in Carding Mill Valley (CMV).

### **Rings**

Ringing has been going on for many years across the whole of the Teme Catchment, but also on the Cound Brook around Leebotwood and Longnor, but the colour-rings to identify individual birds in the field were only introduced in 2014.

In 2023, seven chicks in two nests south of Church Stretton were ringed in the nest, and probably fledged, but four nests north of Church Stretton all failed twice (i.e. a second clutch was laid after the first nest failed). The first nest in CMV also failed.



A colour-ring on the left leg is shown in the first photo. The letter and two numbers on each ring are unique, so if the ring can be read it will add to what is known of the life history of the bird. The smaller ring looks silver, and in silhouette it looks like a small wellington boot (the leg appears thicker at the bottom than the top).

The Dipper in both photos has a small metal (BTO) ring on the right leg. Members were asked to report colour-rings and the smaller metal rings, and an attempt was made to read the former, by photography with a long lens, or a telescope.

The Dipper in the first photo (U21) was caught and colour-ringed in the winter of 2018-19 in CMV, and



nested nearby from 2019 until 2022. She was last seen in autumn 2022, inactive, and is believed to have succumbed to the drought.



No colour-ringed birds were seen for a year in CMV, then 26N was photographed there at the end of November 2023, the day after it was ringed.

Both adults in the breeding pair at Little Stretton were caught and colour-ringed there in 2022, and were both present there again in 2023.

By carrying on with the project in future years, it will be possible to build up an understanding of how long Dippers live, how far they move between fledging, roosting and nesting, and fidelity.

# **Regular nest sites**

There has been a nest at eight sites every year since 2020. Three other sites have been used at least once, but not more than twice.

# Acknowledgements

Thanks for records and information about Dippers in 2023 to:-

Pauline Adcock, John Arnfield, Steve Butler, Beverley Carey, Julie Cowley, Bernard Ford, Greg and Sue Forster, Sarah Freeman, John and Anne Hanley, David Lee, Andrew Morton, Dave Pearce, Sue and Steve Rooney, Carol Swales, Roger Thorpe, Dan Watkins, Sandra Whitlock and Karen Wright, together with several readers of Stretton Focus.

# Plans for 2024

The Dipper project will continue. If you see a Dipper, please try and see if it has a ring and colour-ring, and report it, with the location, to Leo Smith (01694 720296 leo@leosmith.org.uk).

Leo Smith, Project Coordinator February 2024



# Red Grouse Counts on the Long Mynd



Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group and the Long Mynd Breeding Bird Project, supported by the National Trust and Church Stretton Branch of the Shropshire Ornithological Society, have organised a Red Grouse count each year since 2011.

Red Grouse are restricted to heathland, and the Long Mynd (and Stiperstones) hold the only population in England between Dartmoor and the Peak District. Nationally, the population is falling, and it is on the *Amber List* of *Birds of Conservation Concern*. The results

help the National Trust's management of the heathland to provide suitable habitat.

Good results were obtained in most years up until 2019. Unfortunately subsequent counts up to and including 2022 have not produced reasonable estimates. Previous experience has shown that there is no point in holding counts if the weather is very cold, rainy, or the wind-speed is greater than 10mph. If the weather forecast predicts that these conditions will prevail when a count is due, it is cancelled and rearranged.

- All 2020 planned counts had to be cancelled because of the Government's coronavirus restrictions.
- In 2021, the whole survey period was dominated by cold, windy weather, and four of the seven planned counts were cancelled because of poor weather forecasts. Two additional counts were arranged on the very late dates of 18 and 27 May. Several attempts were made to arrange counts on other dates, but these too had to be abandoned because of the weather. The weather conditions meant that there was little grouse activity on any of the five counts that were held, and most observers recorded no grouse on all five dates.
- In 2022, 49 volunteers were recruited for seven planned counts around sunset on Thursday evenings between 31 March and 12 May. Again, three of these counts had to be cancelled and rearranged, but the weather was not much better when counts were actually held. Seven counts were held, but 60 survey returns (out of 176 received 34%) reported no Grouse seen or heard. The methodology requires concurrent observations of displaying males, to mark territory boundaries, but there were virtually none of these in 2022, so again it was not possible to produce a population estimate.

In 2023, every planned count had to be cancelled due to a poor weather forecast, but counts were rearranged on seven dates between 4 April and 18 May. Some of these counts would not have been held if the weather forecast had accurately predicted how poor the weather was going to be. A total of 132 survey returns were received, but 71 recorded no Grouse seen or heard: there were a total of 164 records of Grouse.

Initially it was considered that no result could be achieved by analysing such sparce record sheets, but there is a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence that the grouse population has actually declined considerably, and it is unlikely that the weather in 2021-23 was much worse than all the years 2011-19, so an analysis of the 2023 survey results was undertaken.

Again, weather wasn't ideal, so the results may have been influenced by poor weather, and they are probably less robust than those up to 2019, because there is less need for grouse to display to defend their



territories if densities are lower, but analysis suggested 32-33 territorial males (half the maximum estimates of 5-10 years ago).

The notional territories found by the analysis are shown on the left-hand map below. On the right-hand map, the territories are overlaid on the heather management map. It will be seen that most territories are associated with areas of managed heather.



Note that the "territories map" does not show the area actually occupied by each territorial male, and the sizes of the territories vary

considerably – the survey methodology is based on there being a territory boundary somewhere between each of the locations of grouse seen or heard concurrently, but it is not known where precisely the boundaries are.

# Possible reasons for a decline

There are several possible reasons for a decline,

Heather beetle and heather die-back, which were very prevalent in 2018 and 2019, were followed by a drought in 2020. It estimated that the drought year saw a 40% apparent die-back of heather. Subsequently about half of this has come back to life, but in the meantime this heather has shed foliage, removing food and shelter for the grouse, so their habitat quality was reduced for a year or two. Although it has come back to life, some of it is topiared – an indication of poor condition (Peter Carty, *pers.comm.*). The heather is generally still in poorer condition than it was in 2018, with less foliage (Andy Perry, *pers.comm.*).



- The management plan aims to cut or burn about 40% of the heather on a 15-year rotation, and not intervene in the other 60%. However, the management is now a long way behind this plan, due to poor weather, staff capacity and general workload of the ranger team, resulting in more old mature heather and less young shorter heather for grouse to feed on.
- Localise high grazing levels in the south eastern sections of the plateau have reduced the amount of flowering heather, and grazing generally has slowed down the recovery of the areas of heather that has been managed..
- Bracken is encroaching onto the heathland plateau. Much less purple heather is visible this year than was apparent 5-10 years ago. The reduction may be due to the heather disappearing, or being hidden by an increase in bracken.
- There is a regular cyclical population growth and decline of grouse populations (see BTO BBS report 2022, p.21), which might have played a part in the decline here. Disease plays a part in the cycle, but there is no evidence that the ticks on sheep have spread to Grouse on Long Mynd (see <a href="https://www.gwctknowledge.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/diseasecontrol.pdf">https://www.gwctknowledge.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/diseasecontrol.pdf</a>)
- GWCT are also flagging now that the growing Red Kite population is a threat to chicks of groundnesting birds, based on their hunting technique, an own-goal as Kites have spread across Shropshire in a very short period, thanks to carrion from dead Pheasants being available to them in vast quantities across the County..

# **Participants**

Thanks are due to the following participants

Carolyn Anstey, Adrian Bell, Charlie Bell, Sam Bishop, Jenny Bourner, Richard Bourner, Rachel Bromley, Emma Bullard, Rebecca & Harriet Burrell, Chris Cooke, Gill Davies, Alastair Edie, Raelene Edwards, Jane Edwards, Roger Evans, Greg Forster, Sue Forster, Rob Furlong, Beth Furlong, Joe Gomme, Adam Gornall, Robin Hudson, Kate Hudson, David John, Sarah Lane, Anna McCann, Angus McGregor, Rachel McGregor, Andrew Middleton, John Munro-Derry, Adrian Pickles, Steve Rooney, Sue Rooney, Christine Shipman, Simon Sholl, Ray Slack, Leo Smith, David Stafford, Geoff Taylor, Lizzie & Theo Taylor, Lorna Taylor, Roger Thorpe, Caroline Uff and Louise White.

# Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Joe Gomme, for organising all the counts and training.

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Population Estimate	60 - 63	63 - 66	52 - 54	56 - 58	57 - 59	42+	49+	64 - 66	54

### **Results from previous years**

Year	2020	2021 2022		2023
Population Estimate	No count (Covid-19)	Insuff observ	icient ⁄ations	32 - 33

# Full report 2023

A more detailed report will be sent to project participants, and the National Trust.



### Plans for 2024

The count is being repeated this year. Counts will be held around sunset on seven Thursday evenings 4<sup>th</sup> April to 16 May. We want as many helpers as possible, please.

A project briefing meeting for new participants will be held at 7.30pm on Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> March at the National Trust tea rooms in Cardingmill Valley.

For further information, including reports from previous years, see the Community Wildlife Groups website <u>www.shropscwgs.org.uk/strettons-area-wildlife-group/long-mynd-red-grouse-project/</u>, or contact Joe Gomme (email: <u>joegommegrouse@gmail.com</u>, phone 07779 664394)

Leo Smith Project organiser



# **Botanical surveys**

The Botanical Group visited 4 survey sites during the summer months of 2023. The group is about ten in number. Our botanical skills are only moderate; we enjoy learning from each other, working through keys to identify not-so-easy species, cheating sometimes by using a phone plant-ID app. For each site we simply compile a list of vascular plant species found, noting especially any Shropshire axiophytes – notable (not necessarily rare) species 'worthy of protection' which are typically only found in a particular habitat. Lists are passed to the owner, perhaps with comments and management suggestions. We are also trying to submit lists to iRecord, though this is not proving straightforward; we have a backlog of records to submit.

# **Bushmoor Coppice SO 429879**

Bushmoor Coppice Nature Reserve is an 'orphan'. It used to belong to Shropshire Wildlife Trust but several years ago, we understand, it was handed over to the Shropshire Ornithological Society. Pied Flycatcher



Figure 2: Wood anemone

and Dormice have been recorded there in the past. Little management appears to have happened recently; paths are overgrown, stiles are broken, and log bridges over brooks and wet patches have rotted.

This beautiful reserve is about 2¼ ha of mixed woodland of mainly ash, cherry and oak, with shaded streams with wet margins of alder and goat willow. Supposedly it is a remnant of what the valley might have looked like after the last ice-age, but before Neolithic farming. Aspen, Guelder Rose and Wych Elm are frequent in places. The ground flora is species-rich. We recorded 72 plant species including 11 axiophytes: Wood Anemone, Wood Sedge, Golden-scaled Male Fern, Marsh Willowherb, Sweet Woodruff, Bluebell, Yellow Archangel, Wood Melick, Sanicle, Marsh Valerian and Wood Speedwell. Other 'nice-to-find's were abundant Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage, Pignut, Three-nerved Sandwort, and Greater Stitchwort.



Figure 2: Toothwort

# Helmeth Wood SO469938

This ancient semi-natural woodland of 24 hectares is a gem on our doorstep, well known locally for its spectacular bluebell display and its rich ground flora. The majority of the wood is of coppiced Sessile Oak last coppiced perhaps during WW1, but some of the multi-stem trees show evidence of multiple coppicing going back several hundred years. Birch, Ash and Alder dominate the steep northern/north eastern slopes. The Ash in particular succumbed to a storm a few years ago with many tall trees uprooted. This may be no bad thing in the long run because the wood as a whole is uniformly mature with little regeneration. Where trees have fallen, the broken canopy will hopefully result in more diversified ground flora and tree regeneration. A less fortunate effect of the storm is that the circular path is now blocked and the north side is inaccessible.

We recorded 84 species including 9 axiophytes: Ramsons (Wood Garlic), Golden-scaled Male-fern, Bluebell, Yellow Archangel, Toothwort, Wood Melick, Wood-sorrel, Grey Willow and Wood Speedwell. The Toothwort was a particularly interesting find; the non-



green plant parasitises the roots of various species; in Helmeth wood it was found under Ash and Hazel.

Small-leaved Lime is present in Helmeth Wood. We couldn't find it; perhaps it is on the NE side, now inaccessible to the public. We also hunted unsuccessfully for Moschatel known to be present at the NW end; we were too late in the season. We found Crosswort at the edge of the wood, a species which according to the Shropshire Flora is in rapid decline – perhaps because it is usually a road verges plant.



Coppice Leasowes Nature Reserve West SO459940

Figure 3: Coppice Leasowes West - North end

Common Sedge and Creeping Forget-me-not. We found Ragged Robin and Purple Loosestrife which hadn't been recorded there previously. The Reserve is vulnerable to a number of invasive aliens. Indian Balsam is present; it spreads in from the railway embankment and requires annual roguing. Monkey Flower and Pink Purslane are present but are probably not too much of a problem. Japanese Knotweed and American Skunk Cabbage are present in the adjacent Town Park but have so far been kept out of the Reserve. The wetlands side of this Town Council owned reserve collects waters from Ash Brook coming from Carding Mill Valley. The brook bends north forming the headwaters of the Cound. In Spring 2022 the Council received a slow-the-flow grant from the Severn Rivers Trust to re-dig old and dig new scrapes and ponds. Our visit was to see how the site had re-vegetated. Much of the bare soil was colonised by pioneer species like the annual Waterpepper, but in later years these no doubt will give way to slower-toestablish annuals and perennials.

We recorded 90 vascular plant species including 2 axiophytes;



Figure 4: Ragged Robin



# Cudwell Meadow SO459940

This 0.9ha wetland meadow has been surveyed annually over the last 3 years resulting in a cumulative list of 168 vascular plant species. In a couple of hours we recorded 102 species including 4 axiophytes: Bluebell, Changing Forget-menot, Creeping Forget-me-not and Yellow Rattle.

The flora appears to be changing, probably due to two factors; the change from grazed pasture to grazing plus haylage making, and in the last couple of years the period of inundation has been longer.



Figure 5: Cudwell Meadow and scrape - west end

# **Finally**

We plan to continue meeting in 2024. If

you are interested in joining us, and / or if you've suggestions of sites to visit, please get in touch.

**Thanks** to: Sue Rooney, Frances and Frank Hay, Vivienne and Peter Thorpe, Di Long, Kate Hudson, Janet Martin, Margaret Westhead, Gill Silk and Gay Walker.

Mike Carter Botanical Group Leader email: <u>misawa47@gmail.com</u>



# Treasurer's Report

# **ANNUAL BALANCE SHEET**

# Year ending 31 December 2023

INCOME		EXPENDITURE	
Carry forward from 31.12.22	1,367.50	Website domain fee	10.00
APM March 23 raffle	103.00	Green Recovery grant	
Green Recovery grant		Bird Survey balance	375.00
Nature in the Strettons	360.00	Mailchimp training	150.00
		• Nature in the Strettons costs:	
		<ul> <li>My Picture photos</li> </ul>	273.70
		<ul> <li>Printing and miscellaneous</li> </ul>	119.60
		<ul> <li>Refreshments</li> </ul>	23.21
		<ul> <li>Domain reg (Arnfield)</li> </ul>	47.94
		<ul> <li>Library hire</li> </ul>	20.00
Mid Counties Co-op grant	500.00	Bimbeck Insurance	184.12
		Meth. Hall hire for bird surveys (half)	12.00
		All Stretton hall hire for 27.02.24	35.00
		BALANCE IN BANK 31.12.23	1,079.93
TOTAL	£2,330.50	TOTAL	£2,330.50

MONIES HELD AS FOLLOWS	31.12.23	31.12.22
Wetlands	62.28	62.28
Tree Planting Project	206.80	206.80
Green Recovery Challenge	-	531.92
Mid Counties Co-op grant	500.00	-
Undesignated funds	310.85	566.50
TOTAL	£1,079.93	£1,367.50

L W Priestley, Treasurer January 2023



# Acknowledgements

In 2023 SACWG received substantial financial support from two sources, for which we are very grateful:

- **o** the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, via the Stepping Stones Project
- the Midcounties Co-operative Community Fund.

# **Green Recovery Challenge Fund**

200 Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

The National Lottery Heritage Fund









# The **Midcounties Co-operative** Community Fund