

Fir Farm



2021 breeding bird survey

TN Wildlife

October 2021

Index

2 – Background & Methodology

3 – Results

10 - Suggestions

10 - Conclusions

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Background & Methodology

Bird survey

The methodology used for the bird survey was to complete two visits; the first in late April/May followed by one in June/pre-harvest. The visits are at least three weeks apart and carried out as near to dawn as possible. The weather should be dry, with a wind speed of less than 10mph. The dates for the surveys were 3rd June and 25th July.

All red-listed (species of high conservation concern) and amber-listed (species of conservation concern) bird species are mapped, noting their behaviour. A list of all green-listed species (species of low conservation concern) and any other flora and fauna of interest was prepared.

The results of the two surveys were collated on a single map, using a different colour for each visit. Where there were two records of a species at, or very near the same spot in suitable breeding habitat it was treated as a confirmed territory. Where there was a single record of a species in suitable nesting habitat it was treated as a possible breeding territory. These were put onto a new map, using species codes provided by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Confirmed territories have a circle around the code.

The results from the summary map were then tableted. Each of the amber and red-listed species was discussed and finally, any additional work that could be completed to help a species was suggested.

A map of the survey results is sent separately to maximise the visibility rather than embedding in the report.



Skylark by Middle Ground

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Results

	Trend	Territories					
		2021			2020		
		Poss.	Conf.	Max	Poss.	Conf.	Max
Green-listed species							
Garden warbler (GW)	Down	1	-	1	2	-	2
Lesser whitethroat (LW)	Up	1	1	2	-	-	-
Little owl (LO)	Up	1	-	1	-	-	-
Amber-listed species							
Bullfinch (BF)	Up	5	2	7	2	1	3
Dunnock (D.)	Stable	10	3	13	12	2	14
Kestrel (K.)	Stable	1	-	1	-	1	1
Mallard (MA)	Stable	1	-	1	-	1	1
Redstart (RT)	Up	1	-	1	-	-	-
Reed bunting (RB)	Stable	1	1	2	3	-	3
Stock dove (SD)	Down	7	-	7	11	3	14
Tawny owl (TO)	Down	1	-	1	2	-	2
Willow warbler (WW)	Stable	2	5	7	3	3	6
Red-listed species							
Corn bunting (CB)	Down	1	1	2	2	2	4
House sparrow (HS)	Stable	-	1	1	-	1	1
Linnet (LI)	Up	9	9	18	13	2	15
Marsh tit (MT)	Stable	-	2	2	-	2	2
Mistle thrush (M.)	Down	-	1	1	2	1	3
Skylark (S.)	Stable	40	11	51	18	26	44
Song thrush (ST)	Stable	8	2	10	9	3	12
Spotted flycatcher (SF)	Stable	3	-	3	1	1	2
Whinchat (WC)	Stable	-	1	1	1	-	1
Yellowhammer (Y.)	Stable	6	7	13	7	8	15
Yellow wagtail (YW)	Up	2	-	2	-	-	-

In addition to the three green-listed, nine amber-listed and eleven red-listed species tableted above, the following green-listed species and non-breeding **amber-listed** were noted, any species in **bold** have not been previously recorded in the breeding season:

Other species recorded: Pheasant, red-legged partridge, **swift**, woodpigeon, collared dove, moorhen, **sparrowhawk**, red kite, buzzard, barn owl, great spotted woodpecker, green woodpecker, jay, magpie, jackdaw, rook, carrion crow, coal tit, blue tit, great tit, swallow, **house martin**, long-tailed tit, chiffchaff, blackcap, whitethroat, goldcrest, wren, nuthatch, treecreeper, blackbird, robin, pied wagtail, chaffinch, **greenfinch** and goldfinch.

Therefore, giving a total of 37 green-listed, eleven amber-listed and eleven red-listed species during the breeding season, a grand total of 59 and a running total of 70 bird species recorded by me on the farm to date. This is excellent given the available habitat in my opinion. I will now discuss the tableted species, looking at the habitat available to them and the numbers currently present.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Significant green-listed species

Garden warbler – up to one territory (down)

A species of scrubby areas, they have found the new plantings to their liking, a male was again in the area in Slate Pits.

There does not seem a lot to do, numbers will always ebb and flow a little, they will enjoy the scrubby areas developing across the farm at present.

Lesser whitethroat – up to two territories (new)

A species of mature hedgerows, it is perhaps not a surprise to find two potential territories on the Rectory Farm area. They will enjoy the hedges being well managed to make them thicker and more to a deterrent to predators.

Little owl – up to one territory (new)

I'm suspecting this is a species I have missed in the past, they seem to be able to evade me when surveying. This one was in the trees in Sewer Beds, a great place for little owls as long as the trees are there, they do like a pollarded tree as a nest site.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Amber-listed species

Bullfinch – up to seven territories (up)

A significant increase, suggesting an actual increase. The maturing scrub areas are very much to their liking. Very much a scrub species, they have been doing better since the changes in the general management of hedgerows. In particular, cutting them as late as possible gives them ample opportunity to eat the fruit that has been produced on the outside of the hedges.

Please always try to cut half the hedges only each year and aim for a mix in each field, something like north-south ones on odd years and east-west ones on even years.

Dunnock – up to 13 territories (stable)

A decent result again for this scrub-loving species, showing the population is relatively stable. They too benefit from the new planted areas to forage for insects throughout the year. This species is amber-listed because the UK holds a significant amount of the Global population so we have a duty of care to keep an eye on their fortunes. They are fine, nothing to worry about here.

Kestrel – at least one territory

A pair possibly nested in the trees on Rectory Farm. A pair were displaying in March but were not seen again, so recorded as possibly breeding.

The habitat seems decent enough for kestrel, I wonder if they are lacking some nesting sites due to competition from species like stock dove and jackdaw. It is worth considering putting up a couple of nest boxes for them. Somewhere safely away from the faster roads to encourage them into safe areas of the farm. The move to Organic farming should provide additional foraging chances, this will be countered by Ash Dieback in the long-term removing nesting sites, so definitely worth putting up a couple of nest boxes.

Mallard – at least one territory (stable)

A single male mallard was seen, perhaps this year's surveys were a little too late to pick up this species breeding. The winter survey in March had a total of seven males and four females, it therefore seem very likely at least some stayed to breed.

Redstart – up to one territory (new)

A single bird was encountered on the last summer survey. By this time, this might have been a migrating bird so treated as a possible breeding encounter. The Cotswolds are a stronghold for

Redstart and this a species I had hoped, almost expected to find.

There will be sufficient nesting opportunities for the hole-nesting redstart, so I don't see there is any thing extra to be done.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Reed bunting – up to two territories (stable)

The possible number of territories did drop by one but as we have confirmed breeding with juveniles encountered on the edge of Middle Ground, it seems reasonable to consider this a stable population.

Reed bunting's fortunes have improved as habitats have improved as areas just like herbal leys and rough margins, wildbird covers etc have become more readily available. There were decent numbers using some of the wild bird covers too during the winter, in particular the one in Drive. Nothing to panic about for reed bunting at this stage.

Stock dove – up to seven territories (down)

In the same way as dunnock, the UK has stock dove on the amber-list as we hold a significant part of the Global population. Their numbers were greatly impacted by the introduction of Organochlorine seed dressing in the 1960s, however with these being banned, their numbers have recovered.

The main issue for stock dove might come from an increasing jackdaw population outcompeting them for nest sites, especially as Ash Dieback has a full effect and trees are either removed or fall down. I don't see this drop as anything to be concerned about at this stage, another year of surveys will give us a better view.

Tawny owl – at least one territory (down)

Always a tricky species to survey as their peak time of breeding activity is the evenings in September. A male was calling in March, in the main wood. With the variety of areas of mature woodland available to this species on the farm and in the wider area, as well as the planted areas that will come available in the future, I do not see any issues for tawny owl at present on Fir Farm or the Swell valley.

Willow warbler – up to seven territories (stable)

This is an excellent result, its very rare for this species to be sustaining its numbers in Southern England. Willow warbler have been in a period of long-term decline, especially in Southern England. The period 1995 – 2018 in England shows a 45% decline and the Southwest region, which includes Gloucestershire shows a 63% decline over the same period. This would put it in the red-listed bracket for the Southwest region, if these things were done at a more local level.

Willow warbler nest on the ground in areas of rank grassland, making tunnels into a tussock where they make a domed nest. They too are making the most of the rough areas of grassland around the newly planted trees. It's so important just to leave this key habitat to evolve with the trees rather than trimming it. The main area was the trees planted on the western edge of Slatt Pits where three males were again holding at least two territories.

Going forward, once the trees have matured and blocked out the light causing the grass to die back having margins to give a soft edge to these areas should provide long term habitat for this species.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Red-listed species

Corn bunting – up to two territories (down)

One for us to discuss at the meeting, I think. We have now a very good idea where the corn bunting prefer to breed. All these fields are in herbal leys, we can discuss how the rotation will play out over the next few years and how we can get some areas left ungrazed in the leys.

House Sparrow – at least one population (stable)

The population around the Rectory Farm buildings seems to be doing fine still. The type of buildings there will suit house sparrow who nest in behind girders, in holes in stonework and under slates. There will be plenty of food for adults around the buildings and plenty of great areas to forage for insects to feed chicks now that the surrounding areas are Organic. I note there are also nest boxes around the yard if the entrance hole is 32mm wide the house sparrows will also use these.

The important time to think about the impact on house sparrows will be during any building works, if in doubt please include some nestboxes with 32mm entrance holes.

Linnet – up to 18 territories (up)

Due to the significant increase in confirmed territories, I have suggested this is an increase in the population. Another species of scrub and hedgerows. Linnet feed the vast majority of the time on small seeds, just supplementing their chicks with some insects in their early life. Their numbers declined when farms became cleaner, having less weeds growing in stubbles and along track edges as well as less hedgerows. In general, the latter has been reversed, but there still needs to be greener stubbles and more margins by the hedgerows to give reduced foraging distances for the adults.

The change to Organic at Fir Farm will tick all of the boxes for linnet. The variety of wild bird covers by Hill Barn especially suit linnet and there were good numbers utilising this area during the winter months. Therefore, its steady as we go at Fir Farm for Linnet. Things should improve. We will perhaps look at the eastern half of the farm to see if there is anything else to be done, I will cover this in more detail under yellowhammer.

They do need areas to feed in the winter, so it's important to ensure there are wildbird covers if there are not too many weedy stubbles.

Marsh tit – at least two territories (stable)

Juveniles were picked up in the same areas as last year – just south of Duck Pond and in the main woodland block on the southeast side of the farm, south of Rectory Farm. Marsh tit require a well-structured woodland with an upper storey for foraging and providing mature trees that in turn die and become standing deadwood where they excavate their nest holes. They also look for woodland a middle storey of scrub, particularly hazel and a lower storey of bramble and other ground flora. Therefore, a pretty standard, well-managed woodland.

We need to keep a watching brief on what work is done for Ash Dieback, an opportunity to promote species like birch that soon grow to the right size for species like marsh tit to utilise.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Mistle thrush – at least one territory (down)

A pair nested again in the main woodland, where the confirmed pair were last year. Mistle thrush nest in trees, unlike the scrub-loving song thrush. They also differ in their foraging areas, preferring short-grazed grassland away from the field edges. They like areas where horses are kept or there are formal lawns.

I'm fairly relaxed by this, the fields around Rectory Farm will always tend to be well grazed, offering foraging areas of short grassland near the woodland where mistle thrush will nest. Similarly on the eastern grassland, any mistle thrush looking to nest here will have a choice of areas to forage. We have the maturing woodlands here too that will bring additional breeding sites online in the next few years.

Skylark – up to 51 territories (stable)

Despite the number of territories appearing to have increased. We have a lot of possible territories as birds had largely left the area by the second visit due to a lack of nesting sites. They were interested in the herbal leys which were virtually all grazed/cut at that point. The heritage wheat is of some interest but being a lot taller than modern varieties the birds don't seem to like it a great deal, I think they find it tricky to land into as it sways so much.

I think the answer is to get some variety into the rotation in the bigger fields by Hill Barn. We can discuss what's planned when I see you, it will form part of the same discussion as the one for corn bunting.

We are in a strong position of having a decent population to work with and by ensuring we have a reasonable amount of habitat in cereals or leys left longer like Arch Hollow we can ensure a stable, albeit possibly smaller population can be sustained.

Song thrush – up to ten territories (stable)

Nothing really to add, the population seems fairly stable, hopefully the next survey will show the same number or slightly higher number so back up the notion of stability.

Another species of scrub and areas of cover, song thrush are usually found feeding in cover or very near to the edge of it. They have benefitted from the areas of tree and scrub planting as well as the mature hedgerows. They also feed in the bases of the various areas of cover and find the damper bases of Organic crops to their liking.

Their numbers suffered due to the use of second-generation slug pellets that song thrush either pick up off the surface or ingest through eating slugs. This is not really an issue on Organic farms and there is a move toward burying the pellets with crop to target subterranean slugs that are the real issue for cereals. As this all happens below the ground, song thrush are fine. I think there is nothing more to be done at this stage for song thrush.

Spotted flycatcher – up to three territories (stable)

Perhaps the fastest declining breeding bird species in the UK. They bred in the main woodland by Fir Farm, with two males present this year and another by Duck Pond. This is a decent result and I don't see any problems on site. Their issues seem to be with their migration to and from their sub-Saharan wintering grounds. As long as we have a variety of trees, some with cover on. Like ivy where they can find a flat spot to build a nest, we are doing all we can for spotted flycatcher.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Whinchat – at least one territory (stable)

Having had a male holding territory in 2020, to find a family group in Arch Hollow in 2021 was one of my survey highlights for the year. It appears they nests in the small strip between the wall and the newly installed fence.



Family group of whinchat at Arch Hollow

Whinchat are an upland species that seem to be being impacted by Climate Change, its effectively forcing them up the hillsides to find suitable habitat and it appears they reached the limit of the available habitat some 23 years ago in Gloucestershire as they have not been recorded as breeding since 1997. The strip of grass left is exactly the sort of place whinchat breed on Salisbury Plain.

If there is an opportunity to do more strips like this, that would be excellent

Yellowhammer – up to 13 territories (stable)

Very similar numbers to 2020. This is another species of scrub and perhaps more of a liking for hedgerows than bullfinch, linnets and song thrush. There were again no birds confirmed breeding on the eastern side of the farm. They will need a thick hedgerow with a lot of thorn in to be able to stay safe from species like magpie and also need areas of grassland to forage for arthropods like spiders to feed their chicks.

Another one we can discuss to see what, if anything we can do that fits in with the new farming system.

Fir Farm – 2021 breeding bird survey

Suggestions and Conclusions

As with most farms, there are some ups and downs however, there are a number of stable populations. This survey gives an excellent, albeit high baseline to work forward from. This is perhaps due to the rotation being relatively stable, things will shift when the herbal leys start to rotate.

Its important to have some wildbird covers left for the seed to grow for key species like linnet, yellowhammer and corn bunting. It might be the pigs were busy removing the old cover ready for the next to be planted when I surveyed.

The key discussions will be around how the rotation will develop and the levels of summer grazing, especially the sheep. There are a number of fields that are not priorities for ground nesting species, it's important we get a few of these available each year and not all in cereals at the same time.

We can see what extra can be down to get some variety into the cattle-grazed areas too.



Skylark