

Healey Dell Breeding Bird Survey 2003 and 2004

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Section One Introduction

1.1 Summary

A breeding bird survey was undertaken over two springs, in 2003 and 2004. The combination of woodland, scrub and river revealed 41 breeding species, including specialists of each of those habitats and eight species classified nationally as being “of conservation concern.” Following an explanation of methods the results are set out by management/monitoring compartment and by species. The latter section includes extra management or population trend detail where appropriate. The results are then evaluated in relation to future actions.

1.2 Methodology

Eight visits were made to the site over two breeding seasons. The first visit (in 2003) was a site orientation visit, with only casual observations made. This four-hour visit in late May was important as it enabled routes to be found and compartments mapped out. The survey compartments coincided with those of the other ecological surveys on the site. The late start to the survey in 2003 was used as an opportunity: by surveying over two seasons the remaining seven visits could span an extended season running from June to the end of July in 2003 and March to June in 2004. The final visit included a pre-dawn session to assess nocturnal activity.

Survey visits dates, times and weather

2003

22 June 4 hour, 0500 – 0900

Weather Fine, slight cloud cover, no wind, visibility good

04 July 4 hour, 1130 - 1530

Weather Fine, broken cloud cover. Slight SW wind

30 July 3 hour, 0900- - 1200

Weather Fine start, later light rain (3rd hour). Slight easterly wind. Visibility fair in third hour, fourth hour not done due to decreased bird activity in drizzle.

2004

30 March 4 hours, 0600 – 1000

Weather Fine, broken cloud cover. Slight SW wind. Visibility good.

11 May 4 hours, 0800 – 1200

Weather Fine, broken cloud cover. No wind apparent. Visibility good.

02 June 4 hours 0500 – 0900

Weather Fine, no clouds, slight W wind. Visibility good.

16 June 5 hours 0300 – 0800

Weather Fine, slight cloud cover, no wind, Visibility good following nocturnal session.

Breeding Status

The criteria to determine whether birds were breeding or not were the same as in the The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988 – 1991; Gibbons, Reid and Chapman, 1993 and the recent Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Lancashire and North Merseyside 1997 – 2000; Pyefinch and Golborn, 2001. Thus a species (or individual, if this could be determined accurately) was considered breeding if any of the following activities were observed:

Bird apparently holding territory, courtship and display, adult visiting probable nest site, nest building (or hole excavation), distraction display or injury feigning, used nest found, recently fledged young, adult carrying faecal sac or food, nest occupation.

Additionally records of birds seen or heard which could be breeders but for which there was no further evidence, were classified as “seen”. Birds that were obviously late winterers or passage migrants were omitted from the breeding survey.

Section Two Survey Results

The results have been presented by compartment (the same compartments as used in the vegetation survey) and by species. The latter section includes additional records that have been extracted from the 2003 Greater Manchester Bird Report and includes reference to sightings that refer to species using the reserve but not breeding on it. Owing to the late start in 2003, most of the numerical data refers to 2004, or where compartments were visited in both years the highest number of breeding pairs/territories has been assumed, this was almost exclusively in 2004.

In both of the results sections the order of species is that adopted by the British Ornithologists Union in 2002. The number in parenthesis following the species name is the minimum number of pairs/territories. An asterisk (*) here indicates that breeding was confirmed but an accurate number could not be determined, this was usually because of the breeding biology of the species e.g. Dunnock for which the males and females often have multiple partners. Where appropriate information regarding further recording of management is included in the Results by Species section.

2.1 Results By Compartment

Compartment One

Wren (3)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (3)
Blackcap (1)
Garden Warbler (1)
Willow Warbler (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartment Two

Wood Pigeon (*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (2)
Dunnock (*)
Blackbird (1)
Mistle Thrush (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Long-tailed Tit (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Chaffinch (1)
Redpoll (1)

Compartment Three

Wood Pigeon (1)
Collared Dove (1)
Stock Dove (1)
Wren (1)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (3)
Song Thrush (1)
Mistle Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (1)
Carrion Crow (1)
Starling (1)
Redpoll (1)

Compartment Four

Tawny Owl (1)
Wood Pigeon (*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (4)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (3)
Blackbird (3)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Chiffchaff (2)

Willow Warbler (3)
Coal Tit (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Jay (1)
Carrion Crow (1)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartment Five

Wren (3)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (2)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Coal Tit (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (2)
Magpie (1)
Chaffinch (2)

Compartment Six

Wren (2)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Coal Tit (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (1)
Nuthatch (1)
Treecreeper (1)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartments Seven and Eight

Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Grey Wagtail (1)
Wren (3)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (3)
Blackcap (2)
Willow Warbler (2)
Blue Tit (3)
Great Tit (1)
Carrion Crow (1)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartment Nine

Wren (2)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (2)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (3)
Blue Tit (3)
Great Tit (2)
Chaffinch (2)

Compartment 10

Mallard (1)
Moorhen (1)
Mistle Thrush (1)
Willow Warbler (1)
Magpie (1)
Carrion Crow (1)
Starling (1)
Greenfinch (2)
Reed Bunting (2)

Compartment Eleven

Mallard (3)
Canada Goose (1)
Moorhen (1)
Wood Pigeon (*)
Collared Dove (1)
Wren (2)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (2)
Willow Warbler (2)
Coal Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Magpie (1)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartment Twelve

Sparrowhawk (1)
Wren (3)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (2)
Song Thrush (1)
Coal Tit (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (1)
Jay (1)
Carrion Crow (1)
Chaffinch (2)

Compartment Thirteen

Wren (3)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)

Compartment Fourteen

Wood Pigeon (*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (2)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Chaffinch (1)

Compartment Fifteen

Dipper (1)
Grey Wagtail (1)
Wren (4)
Blackbird (2)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)

Compartment Sixteen

Wood Pigeon (*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (2)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (3)
Blackcap (1)
Garden Warbler (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Jay (1)

Compartments Seventeen and Eighteen

Tawny Owl (1)
Wren (2)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (2)
Treecreeper (1)
Bullfinch (1)

Compartment Nineteen

Wren (1)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)

Compartment Twenty

Wood Pigeon (*)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (3)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (2)
Song Thrush (2)
Blackcap (2)
Willow Warbler (2)
Blue Tit (1)
Magpie (1)
Greenfinch (1)

Compartment Twenty One (Visitor Centre N/A)

Compartment Twenty Two

Wood Pigeon (*)
Wren (3)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)
Jay (1)

Compartment Twenty Three

Wren (1)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (1)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Blue Tit (1)
Jay (1)
Carrion Crow (1)

Compartment Twenty Four

Wren (3)
Robin (1)
Blackbird (1)
Great Tit (1)
Chaffinch (1)
Bullfinch (1)

Compartment Twenty Five

Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (2)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (2)
Blackbird (2)
Song Thrush (1)
Blackcap (1)
Blue Tit (1)
Great Tit (1)

Compartment Twenty Six

Tawny Owl (1)
Great Spotted Woodpecker (1)
Wren (5)
Dunnock (*)
Robin (4)
Blackbird (4)
Song Thrush (2)
Blackcap (1)
Willow Warbler (2)
Chiffchaff (1)
Coat Tit (1)
Blue Tit (2)
Great Tit (1)

Compartment Twenty Seven

Green Woodpecker (1)
Collared Dove (1)
Wren (4)
Robin (3)
Song Thrush (1)
Mistle Thrush (1)
Willow Warbler (1)
Long-tailed Tit (1)
Starling (1)
House Sparrow (1)
Greenfinch (1)

2.2 Results By Species

Canada Goose

Section 11, on the lake with young.

Mallard

Four pairs, one in Section 10, three pairs along the river (11).

Grey Heron

Seen in flight over Section 1 and not thought to be breeding. Suitable habitat in Sections 14 and 18 could potentially host breeding pairs, but there is little that can be done management-wise to promote this.

Sparrowhawk

One pair in Section 12. Suitable habitat elsewhere on the reserve, but all sightings were restricted to this section and the neighbouring compartment 13.

Moorhen

Two pairs. Single pairs in Sections 10 and 11; both on open water habitats. This species can hatch up to three broods a season and thus breeding evidence could be noted any time between February and September.

Lapwing *Amber List*

Breeding in fields adjacent to reserve, by Sections 2 and 3, and occasionally alighting in 3b. Although the nests were not on the reserve the importance of the habitats in these sections undoubtedly influences nest site selection.

Woodpigeon

An estimate of 10 to 20 pairs. Recorded in most of the woodland compartments and using the adjacent farmland. Woodpigeon can breed throughout the year and is multiple-brooded so any accurate census would require all year round surveying. The species is not under threat; in fact nationally the species is increasing so there would seem little gain in trying to get a better estimate of the population at this time in such a complex site.

Stock Dove *Amber List*

One pair. Recorded in 3a, but the nest may have been in compartment 4. Nationally the status of this woodland breeder is uncertain, with burgeoning numbers in some areas and declines, particularly where Jackdaws are common, in others. It may be worth monitoring this species each spring. The distinctive “song” makes this species’ territories easy to ascertain.

Collared Dove

Recorded in 3, 11 and 27, where suitable breeding habitat occurs, however actual nests may have been in adjacent suburban gardens.

Tawny Owl

Territories were held in the woody areas of Sections 17/18 and in 26. The provision of maintained, monitored nest boxes would aid recording, but Grey Squirrel exclusion would need to be addressed.

Kingfisher

Although not recorded on any of the monitoring visits, this is a potential breeder and should be added to the target species for any subsequent surveys. This is on the Amber List.

Green Woodpecker *Amber List*

One held territory in Section 27 during both survey seasons. This is a specialist bird, preferring mature trees in an open grassland setting. Other potential breeding habitat occurs further north around compartments 9+10. Regular reporting of this distinctive bird would be advised, given its status of decline elsewhere in Europe.

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Eight breeding pairs were recorded. Located usually in the oldest woodland areas. Never more than one territory was found per compartment.

Grey Wagtail *Amber List*

Single pairs bred along the river in both years, in Compartments 8 and 15. River quality, woodland invertebrate populations and river engineering have all been implicated in this birds decline over the last 25 years. Monitoring would be advised.

Dipper

One was carrying food along the river, in section 15, in 2003. In 2004 it was suspected that it had moved slightly downstream to breed, in the middle section, just out of the reserve. Although not of conservation concern this river specialist is certainly a bird characteristic of the habitats of Healey Dell and reports from the public should be encouraged and noted.

Wren

59 territories were identified from singing males. The richest compartments were 26 (five territories) and 27 (four). Recorded in all but two compartments. This total will be a minimum. Territories are best determined by mapping singing males. The only time when all territorial males sing tends to be thirty-minute period around sunrise on warm spring mornings. Given the terrain and large area of the reserve it would require daily counts for several consecutive dawn days from a team of surveyors to get a true picture. However the total above is a reasonable estimate for a species not thought to be under particular threat. The dense undergrowth of the peak compartments certainly coincides with their favoured habitat.

Dunnock *Amber List*

Widespread breeder, present in more than half the compartments. This species is notoriously difficult to survey and regular monitoring on this reserve would probably not reward the effort required to gain a clear picture. Although on the Amber List, monitoring of this species locally is probably better left to less complex sites than Healey Dell.

Robin

Thirty-eight territorial males were recorded. The peak number was four in Section 26.

Blackbird

A useful baseline figure of forty-one territorial males was ascertained. Section 26 proved the most prolific, hosting four territories in both years. Recorded in all but two compartments.

Song Thrush***Red List***

An impressive seventeen territories were noted in 2004, with fourteen in 2003. Only two compartments hosted multiple territories (20 and 26). Breeding-population monitoring is recommended as nationally this species has declined more than fifty per cent in the last twenty-five years. Counting singing birds in spring is a reasonably accurate method, although in mild winters some birds can set up territories early and not sing in spring.

Mistle Thrush***Amber List***

Four breeding pairs: their early breeding season may have meant a slight under recording. Several pairs enjoyed successful second broods. Concerns over declines nationally are not as obvious in the northwest.

Blackcap

A maximum of nineteen singing males on territory were recorded for this summer visitor. All but two compartments hosted just single territories. Although most of the surveying was done in May when this migrant should have settled to breed, the total may include a very small number of unattached males or late passage.

Garden Warbler

Two territories were recorded in total, in Compartments 1 and 16. This was a slightly disappointing total, as there is considerable area of suitable habitat.

Wood Warbler

A former breeder and usually an annual spring passage migrant. There were no records during the survey visits and none reported in the Birds of Greater Manchester County Report 2003. There is certainly suitable habitat for this woodland warbler and the potential of re-colonisation should not be dismissed.

Chiffchaff

Three pairs, two in Section Four and one in 26. The presence of mature trees and lush undergrowth in these compartments was ideal. This warbler is an increasingly common breeder in the region and it will be interesting to see if this species is more frequent on the Reserve in the future.

Willow Warbler***Amber List***

Twenty-eight territories were identified, in 15 compartments. This species is declining from many lowland habitats but appears to be relatively stable in the hillier eastern NW. This survey will have provided a useful baseline for the future, although numbers do fluctuate annually and the comments regarding slight over-estimation referred to for Blackcap relate here too.

Long-tailed Tit

Family parties were recorded from Sections 1 and 27.

Coal Tit

Typically this species was often found nesting in tree holes, close to the ground. Seven pairs or family parties were recorded.

Blue Tit

Thirty-one pairs were recorded, but without a nestbox scheme on the reserve, or surveying of nestbox use on abutting land, this figure was only an approximation.

Great Tit

Twenty-one pairs. As with Blue Tit, this figure is only a guide.

Nuthatch

One pair in both years in Section 6. The range of this species is expanding and so monitoring and encouragement of recording all sightings may prove interesting.

Treecreeper

Two pairs of this woodland specialist were recorded, in both years, each time in Compartments 6 and 17/18.

Jay

Three pairs were identified, in sections 12, 16 and 22. It was surprising that none were recorded as breeding further north than section 12, where much suitable habitat occurs.

Magpie

Four pairs. Surrounding suburban habitat may also account for sighting of this crow in the reserve.

Rook

The Healey Dell Rookery is counted annually and numbers published in the Birds of Greater Manchester County Report. In 2003 a typical twenty-seven nests were recorded in the annual census.

Carrion Crow

An estimate of six pairs was made.

Starling

Red List

Three pairs on the reserve, with many more using the reserve's habitats from off-site territories.

House Sparrow

Red List

One pair in Compartment 27. The largely woodland and riverine habitats are not ideal for this sparrow. Many were heard from the housing estates abutting the reserve. A programme of bird feeding throughout the year near the centre may encourage nesting on the reserve that could then be monitored.

Chaffinch

At least 14 pairs were recorded. This species is often under recorded in breeding surveys owing to its rather random choice of singing times through the day.

Greenfinch

Four pairs bred, usually in compartments close to habitation.

Redpoll

Two pairs, one each assigned to Sections 2 and 3, favouring the deciduous scrub.

Bullfinch***Red List***

Two pairs. Each preferring the scrub and edge habitat on the reserve, thus appearing in Compartments 17/18 and 24. Records of this charming bird should be encouraged.

Reed Bunting***Red List***

Two pairs were recorded, both in Section 10, by the lake/stream there. Although individuals visiting feeders in the winter are largely composed of migrants, the population may be more easily monitored if a regularly monitored year-round bird feeding-station regime was in place.

Species recorded on Adjacent Farmland/housing only

Ruddy Shelduck (escape 22/6/03), Pheasant, Kestrel, Black-headed Gull, Swift, Swallow, House Martin, Meadow Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Jackdaw, Goldfinch, Linnet.

Section Three Evaluation

The wood, scrub and riverine mosaic of Healey Dell Nature Reserve, bounded by farmland and housing, hosted 53 species, with 41 breeding and an additional two (Kingfisher and Wood Warbler) not recorded but referred to in Section 2.2.

Species-level evaluation (where appropriate) is given in Section 2.2. The importance of a survey like this is to get a baseline to which future surveys can refer. Given the terrain and area to cover, it is unlikely that widespread species such as Wren, Robin and Blackbird would get surveyed regularly. However from this survey certain priorities can be set. The occurrence of several birds listed under the Red and Amber Lists of Birds of Conservation Concern (2002-2007), habitat specialists and those species under-going range expansion inform the following priorities.

Where resources allow it is strongly advised that records of the following species are kept: Kingfisher (all year), Stock Dove (March-June), Green Woodpecker (all year), Grey Wagtail (all year), Dipper (all year), Song Thrush (all singing birds/territories), Nuthatch (all year), Bullfinch (all year) and Reed Bunting (all year). Hopefully this could be expanded in some years to include breeding Willow Warbler and Mistle Thrush.

Year round (secure) feeders close to the Centre are recommended. This will encourage interaction between the public and the site's birdlife and provide a valuable

seasonal resource for Red List species: Starling, House Sparrow, Bullfinch and Reed Bunting, as well as many other species.

The erection of nest boxes could be considered. The main beneficiaries of these would be Blue Tit and Great Tit. Although neither of these species is officially “of concern” presently, their reliance on insects during the nestling stage means that their eventual productivity can give a reasonable indication as to the success of other insect feeding breeders. However such an undertaking would require considerable monitoring and maintenance effort and the services of an A-licensed bird ringer to check the boxes and to monitor winter recruitment and survival as part of the package. Given the good population of Great Spotted Woodpecker in the Reserve the boxes would also require the addition of protective guards around the holes.

Similarly the best way to monitor Tawny Owls in woodlands is through the use of boxes. Again, the ringing group would need to be involved to check the boxes. On the Centre itself the siting of sparrow and tit boxes could be considered.

Regarding habitat management there is nothing besides reasonable good practice that needs to be recommended. The open scrubby habitats need to remain that way for the benefit of the Green Woodpeckers, Redpolls and neighbouring Lapwings; the woodland edges should remain important in their own right for Bullfinches and the wetter areas need to be kept pollution free and remain open (where they are presently), if they are to host the specialists: Reed Bunting, Dipper, Grey Wagtail and possibly Kingfisher.

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