

The Times They Are a Changin'

Over the years discussion among local birders have often broached on the subject of the status of various species in and around the BOG area. Many of these tales talk of huge declines and are full of doom and gloom. Yes it's true, some species have declined, some to the point of near-extinction but others have managed to go through what can only be referred to as population explosions.

Here is a brief outline of some of the population changes that have occurred inside the BOG area since the group began in 1987. It is not intended to go too in depth as to why these changes have happened as population fluctuations of some species would merit a whole scientific investigation of their own.

Quite a few species have declined heavily over the last 15-20 years. Take Tree Sparrow and Yellowhammer, for example. The former used to be widespread and could be encountered in reasonable sized flocks. Knotford Nook used to hold up to 30 birds in the late 1980s while the 1987 report mentions a flock of 30 at Farnley. Now this species is a real rarity in the area and is only known to breed at Knotford Nook. Yellowhammer too has virtually disappeared from the recording area. Again Knotford Nook regularly reported up to 30 birds when BOG first began recording there. Many areas of farmland and moorland edge/in-by land held birds and the song was commonplace around the fringes of Baildon and Rombald's Moor. Now the only places where this species is regularly seen are Lindley Green on the very eastern boundary of the area and Sconce Lane at Baildon, where a special feeding programme has been implemented to try and help the species' fortunes. Changes in farming practices have been blamed nationally for these declines but in some of BOG's former strongholds the habitat is no different than it was 20 years ago. Maybe the wintering sites have changed? As stated before, trying to ascertain the problems would be a scientific project in itself.

Marsh Tits were never common but there were some sites such as Dob Park Wood where you could go with some degree of confidence of connecting with one. Now Marsh Tit is a highly sought after species that didn't even make it onto the 2004 list. Willow Tit used to be seen at various localities. Esholt SW was a good place and nearly all the Washburn Valley woodlands could produce birds. Timble Ings was a regular site and the area around Lindley Wood Reservoir held what seemed to be a healthy population of them. If it weren't for two birds at a private site in the east of the recording area this species would not have made it into the 2004 report. Again, the habitat at most of these sites is no different now so where have the birds gone?

Yellow Wagtails used to flourish at Otley Gravel Pits and nearby Knotford Nook among other places. At the gravel pits now called Otley Wetlands there were a few pairs annually breeding with regular records of the blue-headed form. Fifteen years ago post breeding flocks exceeded 40 birds. Now the site does well if this species is recorded at all let alone breeds. The same has happened at Knotford and other sites such as Chelker Reservoir and the number of birds picked up on autumn migration has dwindled. Once again our habitat has not changed too much in a negative way so what's going on?

It has been mentioned that Ring Ouzel and Wood Warbler have nose-dived too. Maybe as a group we should be actively assessing their status over the next few years to see if a decline has set in. The same could be said of Whinchat and Wheatear. For example Burley Moor 20 years ago teemed with Wheatears and held a few pairs of Whinchats (and Yellowhammers for that matter) but not many now

frequent this moorland that looks pretty much the same as far as habitat goes. Has anyone else noted how few Cuckoos we now get in the summer?

There are always some species, which decline due to their ability to thrive in transient habitats. BOG used to get far more records of Glaucous and Iceland Gull but as we have no landfill sites the numbers have dropped. If the rubbish tips returned so would the white-winged gulls along with larger numbers of the commoner gulls. Working gravel pits such as the one at Otley Wetlands were great for waders while they were still being excavated and Little Ringed Plovers used to breed but now the site is maturing and the habitat is altering the LRPs have gone but other species will blossom in their place. Others such as Goosander have declined as well. Lindley Wood Reservoir used to have a roost sometimes exceeding 100 birds. Is it any surprise when certain people and organisations get legal permission to kill these birds because they eat fish? This is yet another example of how human intolerance can affect birds that have been present long before the people were.

But while all these species have been gradually fading from the local birding scene and the conversations have got more depressing certain species have been quietly building in numbers. Back in 1988 a Stonechat lingered on Hawksworth Moor and was 'twitched' by a number of local breeders. Now in 2005 we are struggling to assess how many pairs are breeding and get masses of records from areas right across the area in all month of the year. Cormorants are doing well so its no surprise that people are calling for them to go the same way as the Goosanders. Love them or hate them no one can deny that they are becoming highly successful at exploiting inland waterways.

One of the most dramatic increases has been that of the Common Buzzard. In 1989 I was in a bird race with Tony Gough and two other birders when we screeched to a halt when a Buzzard flew over our car near Thruscross Reservoir. The bird was one of the best birds seen on the day and another around that time at Sunnydale was heavily 'twitched'. In 2004 we probably had upwards of a dozen pairs with records coming from all over the area. Why has this species increased? A cessation in direct persecution seems to be the common census of opinion. Maybe this is right; maybe it's a higher rabbit population or better use of pesticides. Again that is for someone else to work out somewhere else. All that needs to be said here is that long may it continue.

Another success story is that of the Raven. Although not as obvious and dramatic as that of the Buzzard this bird has gone from a rarity requiring a description to a bird seen in most months of the year and in many different parts of the area. Pairs have also been noted breeding successfully at more than one location. Another real plus point for local birding is the continued increase in Red Kite sightings in the area. 2004 gave us our first breeding record along with displaying birds at a few other sites. This elegant raptor brightens up any day's bird watching.

Another reason not to be too down in the mouth about local birds is Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Although national surveys show a marked decline there are still a good selection of records from a wide scattering of sites. Birders do, simply not visit some of the sites where this species was very regular, such as Bull Coppy Wood near Bingley, anymore. The area around Lindley Trout Farm is still productive and St Ives and Shipley Glen have also produced recent records. Should anyone have a real go at censusing this species it is certain that many more will be unearthed. Some species such as Long-eared Owl may not have actually increased but more concerted efforts in locating them have been implemented, but Mandarins have shot up in numbers without a doubt bringing a touch of the exotic to Strid Woods. Back

to Otley Wetlands and while some people might be moping about the loss of breeding LRP, others are celebrating Common Tern and Reed Warbler venturing onto the breeding list.

So its not all bad, not all good either, but what can we expect in the future? With the amount of Barn Owl boxes situated in suitable habitat in and around the BOG area it is only a matter of time before we get breeding Barn Owl. Hobby may already breed as the population spreads northwards, but its secretive nature may cancel this out to some extent. Osprey is a contender as birds pass through our suitable breeding sites year after year. There is no reason why we cant have breeding Honey Buzzard and there is always the chance that Montagu's or Hen Harrier could settle to breed. It has long been said that our area should have quite a few pairs of the latter but while the English population is kept low this is unlikely in the short term. It is hoped that Buzzards and Red Kites continue to expand and fulfil their potential

If forest management continues the way it has then we should gain a reasonable population of Nightjar, while Woodlark could breed in our area now it has established itself in Yorkshire. Other species such as Cetti's Warbler or Little Egret may continue the spread north and eventually breed and continued habitat work at sites such as Otley Wetlands will hopefully bulge the populations of scarce local species such as Reed Warbler. Other schemes by conservationists will always be good for wildlife. An example of this is Pied Flycatcher. If all the suitable woods in the area had a properly run nest box scheme then this species could be classed as a common breeder.

Now there are more incentives to farmers and landowners to manage the land sympathetically towards wildlife it is envisaged that some of the declining species such as Grey Partridge, Tree Sparrow and Yellowhammer will turn the corner and make a comeback in the area. If there were vast improvements to our agricultural land would breeding Corn Bunting or Turtle Dove be out of the question? Who knows? But one thing is for sure the next 20 years will see some species decline and others increase and it will be interesting or local birders to see how this unfolds.