

WASHBURN BIRDING 1998 :

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

by Peter Riley

Introduction

1998 was my first complete year of 'standard' Washburn walks (a system of birding which I wrote about a year or so ago in *Lapwing*). As I'd hoped, this has (I believe) left me with a pretty good impression of the status of most birds in the Washburn valley, and the purpose of this article is both to summarise the position for the valley itself and to draw comparisons with national trends drawn from BTO surveys.

Although all species (seen by me) are covered, I have tried to avoid giving excessive detail, concentrating instead on highlighting the sightings, impressions and trends which I think will be of particular interest. In saying this I must emphasise that, although I have been birding in the Washburn valley area for many years, I have only been doing so intensively for the past 1½ years, so clearly I am not in a position to give any sort of definitive view, particularly regarding longer-term trends. However, I do feel that I've done enough to draw some reasonable conclusions. Even so, I would very much appreciate any feedback from other Washburn birders regarding the status of birds in the valley, including any views or conclusions which may differ from my own.

General Picture

I continue to hold the view that bird populations in the Washburn valley are relatively healthy compared to the national picture. There are certainly some exceptions to this, not least for those farmland species that winter in the lowlands beyond the Washburn and only return to the valley in order to breed. Nonetheless, one of the pleasures of birding in the Washburn valley is the variety and numbers of birds to be seen thanks to the different habitats throughout the valley; the only major habitat type not represented (as suggested above) being extensive lowlands like the Vale of York. I certainly feel that by and large I see in the Washburn valley all the species that I should reasonably expect to see given the habitats involved. This includes not only the occasional rarity that inevitably comes along during the course of the year, but also the 'common' species that never fail to delight, such as Curlew and Lapwing.

Having painted a relatively optimistic picture so far, I have to counter this with the view that 1998 was generally not a good year, due mainly to the weather (see below), which, in line with the national picture, certainly caused some problems both for me (too much wind and rain) and, more importantly, for the birds.

Weather

Apart from the odd cold snap, the unseasonably high temperatures for the first quarter of 1998 were reflected in birding developments in the valley, including Herons installed in the Heronry before the end of January and Curlew returning before the end of February. Most recent years have had a 'bad' month and this year it was April, with June again disappointing. This was reflected in nesting problems for species such as Great Tit and Pied Flycatcher, although most other species didn't seem to fare so badly. The general predominance of westerly winds was not helpful, although late summer was a little kinder. A period of lower rainfall and a spell of easterlies in the late season was a welcome change.

The mostly mild conditions towards the end of the year meant that birds lingered on the moors and valley sides perhaps longer than usual, but unusual bird movements were not a significant feature.

Overall I have no doubt that the weather conditions for 1998 did not produce a good birding year for the valley, both from the point of view of breeding success and the generally reduced opportunities for unusual events or sightings. Although I managed my best-ever species count of 123, this perhaps owed more to 1998 being my first full year of relatively intensive and regular observation rather than it being a fair reflection of the variety of species using the Washburn valley.

Species Trends and Sightings

Grebes

There were no sightings this year of any rare Grebes (at least for me), but both of the 'regular' species mentioned below seem to be holding their own.

Great Crested Grebes were again well represented, with a number of breeding attempts. However, as in previous years, success was limited (probably linked to fluctuating reservoir water levels), although an amazingly persistent pestering chick on Lindley Wood Reservoir provided plenty of entertainment for a number of weeks.

Little Grebe again nested successfully in their regular spot in the upper valley, managing at least two broods if not three.

Undoubtedly **Cormorant** are increasing in the valley, with occasional sightings of over twenty birds concentrated at Lindley Wood Reservoir (where there is a regular roost site), but the species is also often present at Swinsty and Fewston Reservoirs. This is a relatively recent trend of some significance.

Good numbers of **Grey Heron** were present throughout the year (especially around the Trout Farm, where twenty birds at a time could sometimes be seen), with breeding continuing at the Heronry - albeit I suspect in reduced numbers compared with some years ago (probably due to their relocation to another, preferred site). The national trend of increasing numbers in recent decades is undoubtedly mirrored in the Washburn valley, enhanced by the lack of any really harsh winters.

Swans

Most years produce a few sightings of **Mute Swan** on the main reservoirs (although 1998 produced only one - in January), but generally the species is absent from the Washburn valley apart from a presence on Farnley Lake.

I conclusively observed **Whooper Swans** on only one occasion - flying low over my head on a misty day in January below Swinsty Reservoir.

(Peter's article continues overleaf.)

Geese

The only unusual Goose was a **Pinkfoot** at Fewston Reservoir, which lingered for some weeks in the late summer. Otherwise there were plenty of both **Canada** and **Greylag** geese, with nesting occurring throughout the valley. Of particular note is the huge increase in **Greylag** geese in the valley over the last decade or more, again mirroring the national trend.

Ducks

Again short on rarities, but the usual species were well represented. **Mallard** and **Tufted Duck** continue to do well, although I am uncertain of the breeding status of the latter in the valley. **Wigeon** were (as usual) observed only rarely, but **Teal** could often be seen during the breeding season and in good numbers in late summer on the muddy reservoir margins - they certainly breed in suitable habitat on the valley sides and tops.

Pochard showed well early in the year, feeding and roosting on Lindley Wood Reservoir, but there were only odd sightings later in the year. The species does not breed in the Washburn valley, there being none of its preferred lowland habitat.

Goldeneye certainly like the generally fuller reservoir levels of the last year or two, and counts at Lindley Wood Reservoir numbered over twenty birds for both the first and latter parts of the year. Goldeneye usually depart for their breeding grounds by late April and return from late October onwards (all ducks are attractive, but these have to be among my favourites - with the males' bottle-green heads and their amazing display behaviour at the back-end of winter).

Finally, the only rarity for me was a female **Shoveler** on Beaverdyke Reservoir in July/August. (N.B.: The less geographically-challenged among you may realise that Beaverdyke Reservoir is not technically in the Washburn valley, being on the wrong side of the watershed by a few feet. However it is such a lovely spot, and has great birding interest, that I have incorporated it into one of my walks and so, for my purposes, it counts as part of the Washburn.)

Sawbills

Good numbers of **Goosander** were present outside the breeding season, mostly on Lindley Wood Reservoir. My best count was of thirty-two birds, but I understand that even more were seen by other birders. This does appear to be a regular and important roosting site.

A Washburn 'first' for me was a male **Red-breasted Merganser** on Lindley Wood Reservoir in January; a female bird was also observed around the same time on Fewston Reservoir.

Stiff-tails

Ruddy Duck were present at Beaverdyke Reservoir in June, and, on a regular basis, at Lindley Wood Reservoir in August (a male and a female in the latter instance). They probably breed at Farnley Lake.

Raptors

Osprey showed well this year, my own sightings numbering three - including a fishing bird on Swinsty Reservoir and, in early October, a bird carrying a fish flying up the valley from Lindley Wood Reservoir.

It was my best year for **Hen Harrier** in the valley, with a total of four seen on the moors: **Sparrowhawk** and **Kestrel** were both common throughout the year, and I believe the valley to be a stronghold for these species.

My sightings of **Common Buzzard** numbered seven - certainly more than previous years. Judging by how easy they are to see in Nidderdale nowadays, an ongoing southerly/easterly spread must be a distinct possibility (gamekeepers permitting).



A good year for **Peregrine**, with four sightings, (surprisingly) mostly around the Lindley Wood/Dob Bridge area.

No **Merlin** sightings though, which was a big disappointment compared to previous years but surely reflects the national picture of a poor breeding season - largely thanks to the dreadful weather in April. **Hobby**, **Red Kite** and **Goshawk** all remain elusive for me - I have yet to observe any of them in the Washburn valley.

Game Birds

Red Grouse are easy to see in the usual habitats, and some shooting was probably an indication that the species can't be doing too badly compared with the national picture. **Pheasant** are plentiful outside the shooting season, but it is pleasing to note that good coveys of **Grey Partridge** are also to be seen in late-winter/spring period, which suggests that they may be hanging on in the valley relatively well. Similarly, **Red-legged Partridge** are not difficult to see, but this will of course be largely due to 'releases'.

Coot and **Moorhen** are both common in the Washburn valley, although the former species certainly suffers in its breeding attempts due to fluctuating water levels. Whilst Moorhen likes to stay through the winter if the weather permits, Coot desert the valley for lowland areas. It is pleasing to note that Moorhen numbers have increased significantly in recent years following local attempts to reduce the mink population.

Waders

Not a vintage year, but nesting **Ringed** and **Little Ringed Plovers** in the upper valley were good news. Several **Greenshank** were present during the late summer for long periods, as was a **Green Sandpiper** at Lindley Wood Reservoir. **Common Sandpiper** was again present and breeding in good numbers. **Common Snipe** and **Redshank** probably bred in the vicinity of Swinsty Reservoir, this possibly being a 'first' for the latter site in recent times (due I think to the unusually wet conditions at the critical time).

(Peter's article continues on the next three pages.)

Curlew appear to have had a good season, but I suspect that **Lapwing** numbers are reducing in accordance with the national trends. I know of one specific example in the last two years, where a Lapwing breeding area near Kex Gill was drained and is now a perfect green sward stuffed full of sheep - and thus effectively useless for Lapwing.

Golden Plover are present on the tops in the breeding season, and good-sized flocks can be seen either side of the winter period, although here again I suspect the overall trend is downwards. A Golden Plover in display remains for me one of the wonders of the birding world, however.

Apart from two sightings of **Dunlin** in July/August, I saw no rarer species, even though the mud exposure at both Lindley Wood and Beaverdyke reservoirs was near-perfect throughout August/September. The lack of easterly winds didn't help.

Gulls

No unusual species for me this year, but all the 'usual' ones were well-represented, although **Herring Gulls** remain scarce in this locality and **Greater Black-backed Gulls** are far from common. **Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls** breed on the moors insofar as the gamekeepers allow. A few **Common Gulls** (mostly immatures) were present virtually throughout the summer.

Pigeons and Doves

Wood Pigeon continue to thrive, with a noticeable movement down the valley in winter which occasionally produces flocks of hundreds of birds around Lindley Wood/Leathley. **Stock Doves** are also doing well, the Washburn valley undoubtedly being a stronghold through the breeding season. The expansion of **Collared Doves** seems to have had little impact on the valley, although breeding pairs are present at both Timble and Leathley.

Cuckoo appeared thin on the ground this year, thus probably mirroring the national downward trend observed in recent years. A half-hour close view of a juvenile Cuckoo being fed by Meadow Pipits near Snowden Crags must rank as one of my highlights of the year, though.

Owls

Tawny and Little Owls are well-established breeders in the Washburn valley, with regular sightings of the latter at a variety of locations. **Short-eared Owls** were present in appropriate habitats through the summer, and it was good to see **Long-eared Owls** enjoying breeding success in the Timble area.

No luck for me with **Nightjar**, but the big national increase, the ongoing development of suitable habitat around Timble Ings and another bird being heard there in early summer by a **BOG** member, are all hopeful signs for the future.

There were plenty of sightings of **Swift** through the summer, with a marked emphasis on feeding low over the reservoirs this year (no doubt this was linked to the poor weather). The Dam end of Lindley Wood Reservoir is an excellent place to see large numbers of birds on passage. No evidence of breeding in the valley though, so far as I am aware.

1998 was an excellent year for **Kingfisher** in the Lower and Middle Washburn, with certainly one and possibly two breeding pairs. One walk in August produced sightings of at least eight separate birds. This relative abundance is linked to the run of mild winters and, I suspect, the need for surplus birds to spread out into hitherto-little-used potential breeding areas.

Woodpeckers

Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers are well-represented in the valley, although I've no evidence that numbers of the latter have increased as they have done at a national level. **BOG** members were generally well aware of the breeding site for **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** near Dob Bridge. This bird is not always difficult to find in the Washburn valley in spring/early summer, and it is to be hoped that it continues to hold on given an overall national decline.

Larks

Skylark are well-represented on the valley sides, although numbers are probably down on previous levels given the sorry national picture. A December record, on the valley side above Lindley Wood Reservoir, of a bird almost trying to sing, was something of a surprise. Given the ongoing northerly spread of Woodlark (now breeding in South Yorkshire), wouldn't it be a marvellous addition if they spread to **BOG** territory?

Hirundines

Sand and House Martins and **Swallows** were all easy to see, and all bred in the valley at appropriate sites. However, Sand Martins, so far as I am aware, were limited to one site in a sandy cliff at Thruscross Reservoir, where one pair certainly attempted to breed. It's hard to say whether this year's alarm about the number of returning House Martins was reflected in the Washburn valley, although numbers did appear to be down at one site.

Pipits and Wagtails

1998 was the first time for a number of years that I've come across **Tree Pipit** in the valley - two singing birds at separate sites on the valley side not far from Swinsty Reservoir. **Meadow Pipit** are of course common on the upper valley sides and moorland, with high numbers in post-breeding flocks at Kex Gill and Swinsty Dam.

Pied and Grey Wagtail appear to be doing well in the valley, the latter often being easy to see at all the various dam walls outside the breeding season. Alas, I saw no **Yellow Wagtail** last year in the valley, despite reports of an improvement at national level.

Duncock, Chats and Thrushes

Duncock were common throughout the valley, as of course were **Robin** away from the high valley sides. **Whinchat** bred as usual on the moor edges, and appear to have had reasonable success. No sign whatever of **Stonechat**, which I have yet to see in the Washburn valley. **Redstart** are holding their own, and are easy to see at the many suitable sites in the valley. There were some excellent **Wheatear** sightings, of both breeding and passage birds, including some 15 birds at one site on the edge of Farnley Moor.

Believe it or not, there are times in the autumn when **Blackbird** can be quite difficult to see, but the first cold weather always sees a big increase, presumably from over-wintering continental birds. **Ring Ouzel** breed regularly at one site in the upper valley.

Whilst comparisons can be difficult for such 'mobile' birds, I share the general view expressed at *BOG* meetings that numbers of both **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** appeared to be down last winter; however, there did appear to be some good-sized flocks later in the year.

Notwithstanding the national reports of large declines over the country, **Song Thrush** is very common in the Washburn valley in the breeding season when many singing birds can be heard, particularly in the area up from Lindley Wood. The same can also be said of **Mistle Thrush**, which seem to be thriving.

Warblers

Garden Warbler, **Blackcap**, **Willow Warbler** and **Chiffchaff** are all plentiful, the latter still being present (albeit probably passage birds) into October. All these birds are currently increasing nationally, and the Washburn valley would appear to be sharing in this trend.

I have heard singing **Sedge Warbler** for two years running now on the south-west shore of Fewston Reservoir, but I have found no real indication of breeding. One **Whitethroat** at Beaverdyke Reservoir in August was my first sighting of this species in the Washburn valley for many a year but, sadly there were no **Lesser Whitethroat**, despite there having been at least one breeding pair the previous year between Lindley Wood and Fewston reservoirs. The national picture is reporting a sharp 40% decline.

Wood Warbler are regular breeders in the valley at a variety of locations, but I had a feeling that numbers were down this year (only time will tell on this one).

Goldcrest are currently thriving in the valley, and have no doubt benefitted from the spread of conifers and the mild winters.

Notwithstanding the large national decline, **Spotted Flycatcher** seemed to have quite a good breeding year, and I was pleasantly surprised at the number of different locations at which I found them. There were good numbers to be seen on passage in the late season with over 20 birds on one walk in August (including around ten birds in just one holly bush!).

Pied Flycatcher, however, seemed to have a relatively poor year, although I was able to observe a handful of family parties feeding.

Tits

Long-tailed Tits and **Coal Tits** appear to be thriving again, no doubt due to the mild winters. The poor weather at the vital time did seem to cause problems for both breeding **Blue** and **Great Tits** though - particularly the latter, which in autumn/early winter became quite difficult to see during a long walk; I am sure they were hit hard. A confiding pair of **Willow Tit** near Timble in September was an excellent record - the only one for the whole year.

Nuthatch and Treecreeper

There is no doubt that **Nuthatch** remain an enigma. After many years of seeing them regularly, and despite a large national increase, mirrored it would seem by good numbers in Wharfedale, they appear to have largely disappeared from the Washburn valley - there being only four sightings during the whole year.

Treecreeper, however, are obviously thriving - some of you may have noticed the pair nesting in a tree just behind the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker's nest near Dob Bridge last year.

Dipper is not common in the Washburn valley, but does breed in the upper and lower portions of the river.

Corvids

Jackdaw, **Carriion Crow** and **Rook** are abundant. **Maggie** are usually easy to see, but the number of breeding pairs is low.



Raven, however, were restricted to just one sighting, on Lippersley Pike - but what a view, as the bird came within thirty yards to get a good look at me as I sat in the shelter of the cairn! This same trip in October produced a Common Buzzard which was being mobbed by Crows as it flew overhead, as well as a male and ringtail Hen Harriers - one of my better days!

Starling and Sparrows

Starling were present throughout the year, and breed in the valley. From memory I would think that winter flock numbers are down (in accordance with the marked national trend), but this is hard to verify.

House Sparrow are largely absent, but there are at least two farms where they seem to be hanging on. Unfortunately, it is not hard to imagine their complete absence in several years' time.

(Peter's article concludes on the next page.)

WASHBURN BIRDING 1998 (CONCLUSION)

Finches

Brambling were quite plentiful at the start of the year, but I did not observe any at the end of the year. No such problem with **Chaffinch**, though, which appear to be doing well and are present throughout the year.

Although the recent national trend for **Lesser Redpoll** is upward, the species appears to have had a very poor year in the valley. No large pre- or post-breeding flocks were seen, and precious few were heard singing. This species is a cause for concern. **Siskin** were seen in good-sized winter flocks and may even breed, but I am unable to confirm this.

Linnets seem to be holding their own, with many breeding sites identified and some post-breeding flocks numbering in excess of fifty birds.

Goldfinch do breed in the Washburn valley, and are usually easy to see except in the depths of winter when they presumably move to the lowlands. **Greenfinch** breed at a number of sites, but are nevertheless far from plentiful. It would seem that they will stay in winter where food is provided (e.g., at Timble). There is concern about a national decline in **Bullfinch** numbers, but I have to say that I found it a splendid year for sightings from January right through to the post-breeding moult period at a wide variety of locations.

The aftermath of last year's **Crossbill** irruption was evident, with a number of sightings at the start of the year, but by late spring these had inevitably dried-up, there being no sightings during the second half of the year.

Buntings

Yellowhammer retain a toehold north-west of Leathley (only just inside the *BOG* area), where two breeding pairs were suspected. It is to be hoped that the ongoing national decline in this species bottoms-out soon. **Reed Bunting** breed on at least three sites in the Washburn valley, but remain scarce generally. Interestingly, a female has recently teamed up with one of the few groups of House Sparrows near Beaverdyke Reservoir, and it will be fascinating to see if she stays the course of the winter.

Summary

The above species summaries demonstrate the range of birds to be found in the Washburn valley, many of them breeding/overwintering successfully in habitats which remain less affected than most by changes in agricultural practices in recent decades. Many resident populations of small birds appear to be doing very well, but a harsh winter could quickly change the picture. However, such an occurrence will at least provide an opportunity to really test the health of species' populations and their habitats, through an assessment of how quickly any recovery takes place.

The poor weather at critical times over the last two breeding seasons does appear to have had some impact, but it is reasonable to hope that this is no more than a temporary 'blip'.

So, although 1998 was not exactly a vintage birding year, I have many good memories of a healthy variety of sightings in the Washburn valley, some of which I've mentioned above.

Please don't hesitate to let me have your views on any of the opinions expressed in this article, not least to help me to continue to develop my knowledge of the Washburn birding scene.

A TALE OF TWO BUNTINGS

by Derek Parkin

The article which follows is based on a letter which I submitted to *Birdwatch* magazine some time ago, and which *Lapwing's* readers may find of interest.

This is an account of sightings of two rare buntings at the same site, which, in the absence of any corroboration, only I can be convinced of their authenticity!

On 27th March 1996 I called in at Knotford Nook. It was midweek, so I was surprised to find three other birdwatchers there. One of them, David Curran, whom I knew, told me that he might have seen a Little Bunting the previous afternoon. He had only seen the bird briefly, but had noted a strong facial pattern as well as its small size when compared to a Meadow Pipit also present.

I returned to the site that afternoon, and found an unusual bunting in the spot described. At twenty yards' distance I viewed the bird feeding alone on grassy ground adjacent to the larger of the two lakes there. I immediately noticed that the bird had orange cheeks and a clear cream supercilium. The bird flew off within a few seconds, and the only other detail I was able to note was a darkish crown, brown on the side of its neck, greyish primary wing coverts, streaked back and the absence of black on the throat. There were no other birds in the immediate vicinity against which to judge size, although a male and two female Reed Buntings were in nearby bushes. Although I must have seen hundreds of female Reed Buntings, and should have known instantly that this was not one, I nevertheless still believed that it must be an unusual female Reed Bunting. It was only on checking various field-guides later that I became convinced that it was indeed a Little Bunting.

Now we come to the remarkable coincidence of this sighting. On 7th March 1992, I had visited the same site. At the time there was a regular feeding-station there. Some distance from this, I viewed a bird on the ground at ten yards for about five seconds. The following details were noted: generally pale appearance; clean, neat-looking; chestnut marks on flanks, otherwise unmarked pale underparts; pale grey head with lighter stripes (characteristic of female Buntings); chestnut upperparts, with a distinct lighter shade of brownish-red on lower back or rump; shorter than Reed Bunting. But the clincher for me was the fact that the bird's crest was raised before it flew off. The bird was solitary, although during an unsuccessful search with *BOG's* Tony Gough and Nigel Jones, who arrived by chance, single male and female Reed Buntings were found nearby. I considered this bird to be a Rustic Bunting.

This latter record was submitted on a BBRC record form to the Recorders of Leeds Birdwatchers' Club, but nothing further was heard. It was also reported to Birdline.

So, my experiences serve to show how important it is to take in as much detail as possible immediately on observing a possible rarity. (One should not dismiss birds such as these on the basis that they are commoner species, even though it should have been obvious to a relatively inexperienced watcher such as myself that they are not.)