

Strid Wood & its Breeding Birds - A Personal View

Geoff Todd

The second in a series where local birdwatchers write about one of their favourite local patches.

For much of the year Strid Wood seems almost empty of birds, but for three glorious months it becomes vibrant with the hustle and bustle of scores of breeding birds. To walk through the Wood on a sunny day early in May is always magic for me; bluebells at their peak racing to beat the opening leaf canopy; the excitement of seeing and hearing Redstart, Blackcap, Wood Warbler and Pied Flycatcher - whose arrival coincides wondrously with the opening of the canopy; down on the river Common Sandpiper, also just back, shrilly sorting out territories - and each other; Grey Wagtail incubating in their well-hidden nest near the Strid, whilst Dippers are busy feeding young nearby.

The many magic moments I've had in Strid Wood over the years include being shown a Mallard sitting on a nest 30' up a tree. I still can't quite believe it! I've seen photos of Mallard on nests in pollarded willow trees 7' or 8' above water, but 30' is ridiculous! Last year I saw my first ever 'cluster' of newly fledged Tree Creepers - six of them, all bunched up clinging to the trunk of the tree and peeling off one by one to be fed by their parents and then immediately nudging back into the cluster. This was a tremendous thrill, the more so because deep in my memory I knew I had seen it somewhere, and, sure enough there it was, beautifully captured by artist A.W. Seaby in Kirkman and Jourdain's classic book 'British Birds'.

I always feel that having such a 'birders' paradise' so near and so accessible is a tremendous privilege. Such is the beauty of the Wood that, for me, each visit brings even more pleasure than the previous one, as well as the excitement and challenge of possible new insights into its bird life.

More mundanely, Strid Wood is in fact two quite narrow 'strips' of broadleaved woodland, separated by the River Wharfe, with a total area of 58.91 hectares (or, if you prefer it, 146 acres). The Wood starts from the Cavendish Pavilion and stretches for approximately a mile in a NW direction. This orientation, together with the steep slopes on which the Wood stands, has the effect of making the NE 'strip' much the sunnier side, with, I believe, important implications for breeding birds. The whole Wood was designated an SSSI in December, 1985, as the largest acidic oak woodland in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. In fact only 2.75% of the trees on the SW side and 12.5% of those on the NE side are

oak. The NE side is thus sunnier and 'oakier' than the SW side - both important factors for breeding birds in terms of ground cover for nests and food supply.

Strid Wood is part of the Bolton Abbey Estate, and its management has three strands: firstly, it is managed as an amenity for the pleasure of thousands of visitors who flock there each year (John Cumberland, who is in charge of the management of Strid Wood, reckons that around 100,000 people will walk in the Wood this year - not all at once!); secondly, it is very much a working wood expected to contribute to the revenue of the Estate. Thirdly its SSSI status places obligations and constraints on the management in that only a very limited number of operations are permitted. Long term and detailed monitoring of the broadleaved tree stock ensures that the Wood as a whole maintains a normal profile in terms of variety and age of tree species - clearly of great importance to the breeding birds, particularly the hole nesters.

Pride of place in the hole-nesting 'brigade' goes, I suppose, to the Pied Flycatcher and Redstart, although Blue Tit, Great Tit and Nuthatch all compete for the smaller holes, whilst the larger birds like Tawny Owl, Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Jackdaw and Starling are well represented. Pied Flycatchers take very readily to nest boxes, and we owe a lot to Peter Wright, (the National Park Warden who talked to the Group in February '92 on Moorlands and Merlins), who put up 30 nest boxes in the NE wood five years ago. Unfortunately this number has dwindled to ten through various causes, but, even so, Peter rings about 50 Pied Flycatcher nestlings each year. Other species which occasionally use the boxes are Redstart, Blue Tit and Great Tit, with one record of a Nuthatch which plastered the entrance of a box one year, but never actually nested in it! Incidentally, six of the original boxes were 'open-fronted' to encourage Spotted Flycatcher, but not one has ever been used. You might like to speculate why.

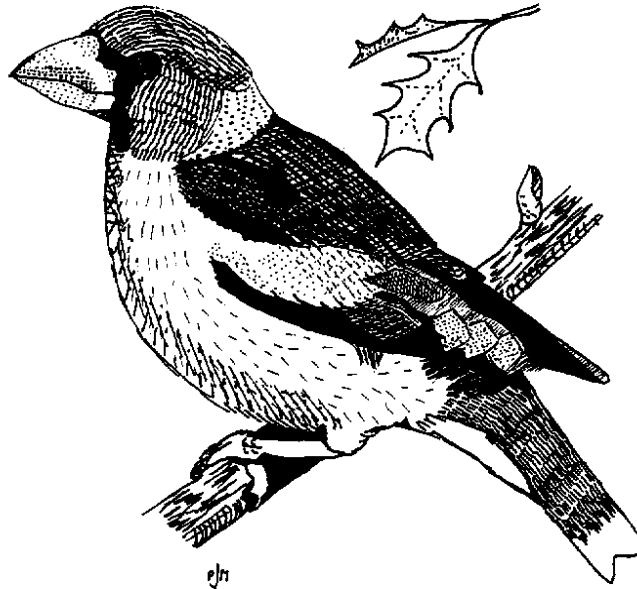
My personal list of the breeding birds of Strid Wood is:

Mallard; Sparrowhawk; Pheasant; Woodcock; Woodpigeon; Tawny Owl; Green Woodpecker; Great Spotted Woodpecker; Wren; Dunnock; Robin; Redstart; Blackbird; Song Thrush; Mistle Thrush; Garden Warbler; Blackcap; Wood Warbler; Chiffchaff; Willow Warbler; Goldcrest; Spotted Flycatcher; Pied Flycatcher; Long-tailed Tit; Coal Tit; Blue Tit; Great Tit; Nuthatch; Treecreeper; Jay; Jackdaw; Starling; Chaffinch.

These 33 species certainly breed in the Wood. If we add those which nest by the river - Goosander; Moorhen; Common Sandpiper; Grey Wagtail; Dipper - the total is 38.

Personal lists of breeding birds rarely include them all, and I would like to add the following species which might well breed in the Wood although I have no proof that they do: Kestrel; Lesser Spotted Woodpecker; Whitethroat; Marsh Tit; Carrion Crow; Siskin.

I would like to end this personal view of Strid Wood with an account of an attempt I made in 1986 to carry out a census of Wood Warbler breeding on the NE side of the Wood. In early May this side of the Wood seems to be full of singing males (Wood Warblers, that is, although, come to think of it, some male bird



There remains one other intriguing possibility - Hawfinch. There are old records of Hawfinch breeding at Bolton Abbey, but more interestingly there is a recent - albeit unconfirmed - report of a sighting. In the summer of 1990 the RSPB ran a recruitment campaign from a hut erected beside the Cavendish Pavilion. The main attractions were the birdwatching walks through the Wood led by an RSPB expert. He met someone who claimed to have seen a Hawfinch at the caravan site at the top end of the Wood. Unfortunately he did not see it himself, and as the scheme was not repeated in 1991, the question remains unresolved. Certainly I have never seen Hawfinch in or around Strid Wood.

Probably the most exciting time for birdwatching is just after the young of the year have fledged, and certainly it is a time of hectic activity for the adults. In Strid Wood this is the time when the families of Redstarts are very much in evidence at the woodland edge: Blackcap, Garden, Willow and Wood Warblers are all flitting around feeding their dispersed offspring. However, not so visible are the Pied Flycatcher families which seem to melt away after fledging, not to be seen again. On the other hand Spotted Flycatcher, like Redstart, are high profile at this time. All too soon, however, they are all gone, and breeding is over for another year - and it always seems such an awful long time before they return.

watchers also get very territorial!), and I have often been intrigued by the question: 'How many of these singers actually breed?' Easy, just count them and you've cracked it! But what if these males don't all get a mate? Or what if some mate with more than one female? How do you know that you're not counting the same male twice? Hmmm! Count the females! Good idea, but have you ever tried? It leaves the same sort of problem. Not such a good idea.

In British Trust for Ornithology surveys, there are certain criteria for evidence of breeding, and from these I selected the 'finding of occupied nests' as the one I would use. After a lot of sitting around and innumerable flasks of tea I managed to find nine such nests and reckoned that I did not find at least a further two or three, so around 12 breeding pairs on the NE side. As the RSPB worker I mentioned above reckoned that there were also around 12 pairs nesting on the other (SW) side of the river, you don't have to be a brilliant mathematician to see that there are plenty of Wood Warblers which not only survive their long and arduous migration, but, along with all the other breeding birds, grace my favourite wood with their beautiful presence each season. Long may it be so!

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Illustration by Phil Matthews