Spring Birds at Sharphill Wood 2019

# Introduction

Sharphill Wood is home to typical birds of deciduous woodland and margins. Resident species are supplemented by a handful of summer visitors. Although birds can be quite difficult to spot in woodland, particularly when trees are in leaf from late April onwards, spring is the time when birds are at their most vocal. Many species use song to establish and defend their territories for breeding. For this reason spring is the best time to survey birds at Sharphill, notwithstanding the fact that a few winter visitors (e.g., Redwing) will be missed. This report is a result of several visits to the Wood between late March and early June 2019. A similar report was produced in 2018.

# Methodology

Data is based on 6 visits to the Wood from late March to early June 2019 (31st March, 15th April, 28th April, 6th May, 20th May and 6th June). Each visit started at approximately 08.00 and lasted about 2 hours. I was assisted on most occasions by Chrissie and on one occasion also by Adele. The same transect was taken on each visit:

* hedgerow approaching northern entrance;
* main path as far as junction with western path;
* western path down to southern gate;
* southern gate towards A52 and then back to south-eastern gate;
* main path back to junction with western path;
* eastern path from northern entrance to south-eastern entrance.

During each visit, locations where avian species were heard or seen were noted on a map. Results from the 5 visits were then combined in an attempt to gain a more complete picture of which birds were present in different parts of the Wood, in particular in each of the 5 zones defined in the management plan. Birds within the Wood or in close proximity to the Wood were recorded.

The methodology is not precise. Some species have quieter or less distinct songs or calls than other species, and therefore some species are almost certainly under recorded. Also a single bird can move around, and it is a matter of judgement whether observations from two or more nearby locations represent the same bird or a different bird. Moreover, it is generally only the male that sings, and although females may call, calls are often less distinct or more subject to confusion than songs. For most species, the presence of a singing male is assumed to represent a breeding territory.

Because the transect was confined to paths, quieter species in areas well away from paths (in particular, the central part of zone 3) were likely to have been missed.

Allocation to zones is necessarily imprecise because of movement of birds. In particular, many birds were recorded along the central path on the long border between zones 3 and 4, and it is inevitable that those birds will frequently cross the path. Therefore allocation to zones in such cases is rather arbitrary.

Throughout the entire period of the survey, most bird species that use song were indeed singing, although singing tends to drop off slightly beyond the middle of May. For this reason it was not considered worthwhile continuing surveys beyond early June. The earlier surveys, in late March and early April, were perhaps too early for some summer visitors, although most of the species in the Wood had arrived by then and had started singing. Late arrivals such as Common Whitethroat will have been recorded during the later visits.

# Results by species.

The following is a list of species encountered during the survey visits, as well as other species encountered on site at other times and therefore perhaps noticeable by their absence. Species are listed in taxonomic order, in accordance with the British List published by the British Ornithologists' Union, which in turn is based on the taxonomy used by the International Ornithological Congress.

## Birds of Prey

**Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*).** Recorded only once during survey visits (over the central part of the wood), but fairly common in the area and frequently seen or heard over the site in the recent past. There is anecdotal evidence of a possible territory within the Wood.

## Pigeons and Doves

**Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*)**. Heard on each visit and seen on several visits, throughout the central part of the Wood (zones 3 and 4, plus the southern end of zone 2). Probably 2 or more breeding pairs, but difficult to estimate.

**Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*)**. Heard and seen regularly in various places throughout the Wood and surrounding areas. No estimate of numbers.

## Swifts

**Common Swift (*Apus apus*)**. Seen over fields to north of Wood on one visit.

## Woodpeckers

**Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*)**. Heard drumming towards the northern end of zone 3 and seen near the zone 1 / zone 3 border and near the main path in zone 3. Probably just a single pair.

**Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*)**. Heard calling on most visits, in most parts of the Wood except zones 1 and 5. On one occasion 2 birds were seen near the northern end of zone 4, and on another occasion a bird was seen on the ground near the business park to the south-east. It is unclear whether there is more than one pair.

## Falcons

**Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus)**. 1 sighting over the western side of zone 5. Not recorded on 2018 survey visits.

## Crows

**Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*).** Seen on two visits, in zone 1 and zone 3.

**Magpie (*Pica pica*)**. Seen on several visits in various parts of the Wood.

**Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*).** Seen on a couple of visits towards the southern end of zone 3, and on one visit flying from the southern end of zone 5.

**Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*).** Heard and seen regularly in various places throughout the Wood and surrounding areas. No estimate of numbers.

## Tits

**Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*)**. Seen only on the first visit, in zone 1. Likewise, in 2018 it was seen only on early visits, so it is not clear that this species remains on site to breed, possibly preferring locations with more conifers.

**Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)**. Widespread. Observations (including observations from nest box monitoring) suggest about 8 pairs distributed throughout the Wood, but this density (less than 1 pair per hectare) is lower than might be expected in deciduous woodland with a reasonable supply of food and nesting sites. Song and call are not particularly loud, so birds away from paths or high up in the canopy might not be heard. Some calls are similar to those of Great Tit, so calls that could not be attributed to a particular species were disregarded. Also, being a resident, this species establishes nests in April and singing diminishes after that.

Nest box inspections revealed 2 successful nests in zone 4 and 2 in zone 5, plus several failed or abandoned nests. Note that inspectable nest boxes were in zone 5 and the southern end of zones 3 and 4 only. Of the older non-inspectable nest boxes further north, a family of Blue Tit were seen using one at the northern end of zone 4, and it is possible others were used too.

**Great Tit (*Parus major*)**. Widespread. Observations (including observations from nest box monitoring) suggested about 10 pairs distributed throughout the Wood, but this density (1 pair per hectare) is lower than might be expected in deciduous woodland with a reasonable supply of food and nesting sites. Reasons why this species might be under-recorded are similar to those for Blue Tit (except that the song is more distinct).

Nest box inspections revealed only 2 successful nests (in zones 3 and 4) and very few fledglings. Note that inspectable nest boxes were in zone 5 and the southern end of zones 3 and 4 only, and it is possible older nest boxes further north were used too.

## Larks

**Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)**. A singing male over the fields just to the north of the Wood on most survey visits and two singing males on one occasion.

## Swallows and Martins

**Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)**. Not seen in vicinity during any of the survey visits, although occasionally seen over the surrounding fields in the past.

## Long-tailed Tits

**Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*)**. Recorded 4 times: by the hedgerow to the north of the wood, by the south-western corner of zone 5, and twice on the eastern edge in zone 4. Although the species is present, there is no evidence of where it breeds (song is very quiet and rarely heard).

## Warblers

**Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*)**. Observations suggest 4 singing males in zone 3 and a fourth in zone 5.

**Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)**. Singing males heard in all zones except zone 1. Probably 6 or more pairs.

**Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*)**. Not recorded this spring, but has been observed in the past.

**Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*)**. Singing male heard in the hedgerow along the south-eastern boundary (adjacent to zone 5) on most visits from mid-April. A second male held territory for a couple of weeks on the hedgerow north of the wood, but wasn't observed from mid-May onwards.

**Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*)**. Not recorded during the survey, but most previous observations have been during autumn and winter.

## Wrens

**Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)**. Abundant and widespread. Probably about 20 pairs evenly distributed, and therefore probably the most numerous species on site.

## Nuthatches

**Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*)**. Seen and heard in zone 2, and also in vicinity of main path at the southern end of zones 3 and 4. This species had not been observed during 2018 survey visits, but had been seen or heard fairly regularly before that. Possibly 2 pairs.

## Treecreepers

**Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*)**. Seen in zone 1 on the first two visits. Although the quiet call and song of this species makes it very difficult to hear and can lead to under-recording, it is unlikely that the site supports more than 1 or 2 pairs.

## Thrushes

**Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)**. Seen or heard throughout the Wood, although observations would suggest not a great density – perhaps 5 or 6 pairs.

**Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*)**. Seen and/or heard singing in zone 2, the northern and central parts of zone 3 and the southern end of zone 4. Also seen with food along the hedgerow on the south-eastern side of zone 5. However, the song carries a long way, and therefore pin-pointing source is imprecise. It is doubtful these locations all contain separate territories, and there might be as few as 2 pairs, one in the north and one in the south.

**Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*)**. Two individuals seen near main path between zones 1 and 2, and two individuals seen by the main path between zones 3 and 4, plus one heard calling in zone 2. Singing was not heard. Not recorded during 2018 survey visits.

## Chats

**Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)**. Frequent sightings and singing throughout the Wood. Probably of the order of 10 pairs distributed across all zones.

## Accentors

**Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)**. Only 5 observations, but this compares with only 1 observation during 2018 visits. Heard singing and/or seen at the north of zone 2, the northern ends of zones 3 and 4, near the western path towards the south of zone 3 and near the south-eastern entrance in zone 5. Possibly under-recorded, although song is fairly obvious.

## Finches

**Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)**. Common and widespread. Probably 12 or more pairs across all zones, although few observations in zone 1.

**Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)**. Not recorded. This species was recorded only once during 2018 visits.

**Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*)**. Two sightings towards the northern end of zones 3 and 4 and two sightings plus a singing male towards the southern end of zone 4. It is unclear whether there is breeding on site. Note that this species was observed only once during 2018 visits.

**Linnet (*Linaria cannabina*)**. A singing male, and sometimes also a female, seen south of the southern gate on three visits (often on the power lines).

**Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis)**. Several sightings along western path in zone 4 on one visit. Probably a foraging party and not indicative of breeding.

## Buntings

**Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citronella*)**. Seen on one occasion, by south-eastern entrance. Note that this species was not observed during 2018 visits, but has been seen/heard on the past along the hedgerow below that entrance.

# Conclusions

This was the second year that such a survey has been conducted. It gives a broad picture of birds present at the site during the breeding season, although any estimates of numbers of pairs are just estimates and could differ significantly from reality.

The most common small birds for which estimates of breeding pairs can be made were Wren, Chaffinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Blackbird and Robin, with a few Stock Dove, Magpie, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Song Thrush and Dunnock. No attempt was made to count Carrion Crows or Woodpigeons, which were mobile and in all zones.

Some other species were recorded in low numbers, probably indicative of breeding in most cases, including Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Jay, Skylark (outside the Wood), Long-tailed tit, Common Whitethroat (just outside the Wood), Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Mistle Thrush, Greenfinch , Linnet (just outside the Wood) and Yellowhammer (on the southern corner of the Wood). Other birds seen around or over the Wood but probably not breeding there included Common Buzzard, Swift, Kestrel, Jackdaw, Coal Tit and Goldfinch.

Birds were spread fairly evenly over the 5 zones, although zone 1 perhaps had a lower density of birds.

Kestrel, Jackdaw, Nuthatch, Mistle Thrush, Goldfinch and Yellowhammer were recorded this year but not in 2018, whereas Bullfinch was recorded (only once) in 2018 but not this year. The table below shows which species were recorded each year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Species** | **2018** | **2019** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Common Buzzard |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Stock Dove |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Woodpigeon |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Common Swift |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Green Woodpecker |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Kestrel |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Eurasian Jay |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Magpie |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Jackdaw |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Carrion Crow |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Coal Tit |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Blue Tit |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Great Tit |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Skylark |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Swallow |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Long-tailed Tit |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Chiffchaff |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Blackcap |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Garden Warbler |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Whitethroat |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Goldcrest |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Wren |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Nuthatch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Treecreeper |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Blackbird |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Song Thrush |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mistle Thrush |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Robin |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dunnock |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Chaffinch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bullfinch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Greenfinch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Linnet |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Goldfinch |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Yellowhammer |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Total species** | **27** | **32** |  |  |  |  |  |

A species seen in the past but not recorded this spring (or in 2018) was Garden Warbler.

I plan to run a similar survey in 2020, beginning at the end of March.

John Elwell, on behalf of Friends of Sharphill Wood, June 2019