

Spring Birds at Sharphill Wood 2023

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 2023. Similar reports have been produced annually since 2018, although the 2020 report was limited because of Covid-19 restrictions.



Wren at Sharphill Wood, April 2023

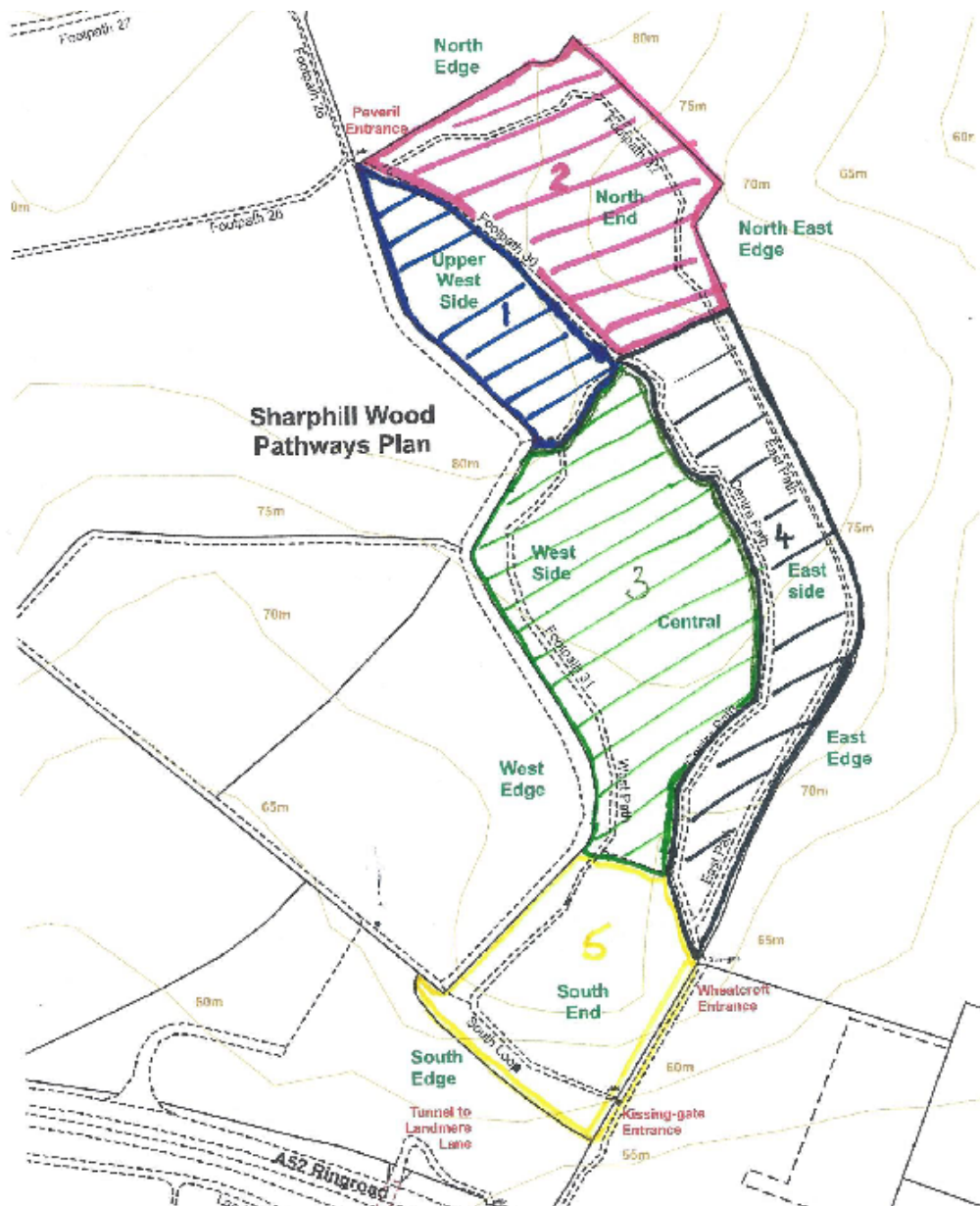
Methodology

Data is based on 6 visits to the Wood from late March to early June 2023 (27th March, 11th April, 26th April, 11th May, 25th May and 4th June). Each visit started at approximately 08.30 or 09.00 and lasted between 2 and 2.5 hours. I was assisted on most occasions by Chrissie (twice), Hilary, Jenni or Tim. Having extra pairs of eyes and ears and somebody to act as scribe on those occasions was very useful. The same transect was taken on each visit:

- hedgerow approaching northern (Pevenil) entrance;
- central path as far as junction with west path;
- west path down to southern (kissing-gate) entrance;
- southern entrance towards A52 and then back to south-eastern (Wheatcroft) entrance;
- central path back to junction with west path;
- east path from northern entrance southwards to the point where it starts to converge with the central path.

During each visit, locations where avian species were heard or seen were plotted on a map. Results from the 6 visits were then combined, in an attempt to gain a more complete picture of which birds

were present in different parts of the site, in particular in each of the 5 zones defined in the management plan and shown in the map below. Birds within or over the Wood or in close proximity to the Wood were recorded.



Site map showing zones 1,2,3,4 and 5 and the official paths

The methodology is not precise. Some species have quieter or less distinct songs or calls than other species. Some species are less likely to be seen because they are more secretive in their behaviour or spend a lot of time high in the canopy, and therefore there is a greater dependence on hearing and identifying the call or song. 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 or a cluster of sightings 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 too early for some summer visitors, although most of the species had arrived on site by then and were in full song. Late arrivals such as Common Whitethroat will have been recorded during the later visits.

Because there were no night-time or evening visits, owls were not detected.

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 during survey visits. Species are listed in taxonomic order and grouped by family, in accordance with the British List published by the British Ornithologists' Union (<https://bou.org.uk/the-british-list/>), which in turn is based on the taxonomy used by the International Ornithological Congress (<https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/classification/family-index-2/>).

Species that are on the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (December 2021) Red List or Amber List (https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/birds-conservation-concern?dm_i=IG4%2C3WSRE%2CJPFV4R%2CE3H05%2C1) are marked as such.

Note that fly-pasts of species clearly not associated with the woodland and its immediate surroundings are not included in the species accounts.

Pheasants, Partridges and Quails (*Phasianidae*)

Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*). Not recorded this year.

Swifts (*Apodidae*)

Common Swift (*Apus apus*) – RED LIST. Not recorded this year.

Cuckoos (*Cuculidae*)

Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) – RED LIST. Not recorded this year.

Pigeons and Doves (*Columbidae*)

Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*) – AMBER LIST. Heard and seen on each visit, in each part of the Wood except zones 1 and 5. Probably several breeding pairs, but difficult to estimate.

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) – AMBER LIST. Heard and seen regularly in various places throughout the Wood and surrounding areas. No attempt was made to map their locations and numbers were not estimated.

Birds of Prey (*Accipitridae*)

Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) – AMBER LIST. Although probably reasonably common in the area and likely to be present in the Wood from time to time, this species is seldom encountered. It was not observed this year.

Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*). Although increasingly seen in the general area, it was not observed during survey visits.

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*). Seen over the Wood, either singly or in pairs, on four visits.

Owls (*Strigidae*)

Because there were no night-time or evening visits, owls were unlikely to be recorded, and indeed they were not. It is probable that **Tawny Owl (*Strix Aluco*) – AMBER LIST** is present.

Woodpeckers (*Picidae*)

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*). Seen or heard drumming, tapping or calling on all visits. Although observations covered most parts of the Wood, they were mainly in the central part. Based on sightings on a couple of casual visits in mid-May, a possible nest site was located towards the northern end of zone 4. Probably just a single pair.

Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*). This species is usually quite vocal, and although heard calling on the first three visits (and seen on the 3rd visit), it was then not observed until the final visit, when a bird was seen flying into zone 1 from the direction of Wilford Hill. Probably just a single pair, and probably mobile between the various pockets of woodland in the area and any grassland suitable for ground-feeding.

Falcons (*Falconidae*)

Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) – AMBER LIST. Not recorded this spring, and based on casual sightings appears to have become less common in the wider area during the last couple of years.

Crows (*Corvidae*)

Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*). Individuals were seen on only 2 survey visits, although there have been occasional casual sightings over recent months. It tends to favour the northern half of the Wood.

Magpie (*Pica pica*). Seen or heard in or near the Wood on all visits and known to be plentiful in the general area. No attempt has been made to estimate numbers.

Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*). Seen or heard in various parts of the Wood on all visits. No attempt has been made to estimate numbers.

Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) – AMBER LIST. Not recorded this year.

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*). Heard and seen regularly in various places throughout the Wood and surrounding areas, in particular on the fields to the north and west. No attempt has been made to estimate numbers.

Raven (*Corvus corax*). Not recorded this year.

Tits (*Paridae*)

Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*). Not recorded this year.

Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*). Widespread, and easily overlooked, particularly when well away from paths. Observations during survey visits suggested they were present throughout the Wood, perhaps at least a dozen pairs.

In addition, nest box monitoring found 9 boxes used by this species, all resulting in fledgelings. Since there must also have been natural nest sites (and also some older nest boxes that we are unable to monitor), it is likely there were more pairs on site than was apparent from the survey visits.

Great Tit (*Parus major*). Observed throughout the Wood on all visits, although tailing off on later visits when singing had diminished. This species is easily overlooked when not singing or when well away from paths, and therefore may be under-recorded. Observations suggest about 10 pairs.

In addition, nest box monitoring found 5 boxes used by this species, all resulting in fledgelings. Given that there must also have been natural nests sites (and also some older nest boxes that we are unable to monitor), the above estimate of about 10 pairs is not unreasonable.

Larks (*Alaudidae*)

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) – RED LIST. There was a singing male over the fields just to the north and west of the Wood on most survey visits.

Swallows and Martins (*Hirundinidae*)

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

House Martin (*Delichon urbicum*) – RED LIST. Not recorded this year and not regularly recorded in the past.

Long-tailed Tits (*Aegithalidae*)

Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*). Observed on only a single occasion (26th April) in a couple of places in zone 3. It is likely they were just passing through.

Leaf Warblers (*Phylloscopidae*)

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – AMBER LIST. Not recorded this year and not regularly recorded in the past.

Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*). Heard singing (and occasionally seen) on all survey visits, throughout the Wood with the exception of zones 1 and 2. There were probably about 9 singing males.

Sylviid Warblers (*Sylviidae*)

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*). During the April, May and June visits (the March visit was slightly too early), singing males were heard, and occasionally seen, throughout the Wood, except in zone 1. The largest concentration was towards the southern end of zones 3 and 4 and the northern end of zone 5, with a smaller concentration on the western side of zone 3. A few were heard further north and east, but only on later visits. It is difficult to estimate the number of singing males, but it was perhaps slightly fewer than last year's estimate of 10.

Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*). Not recorded since before these annual surveys began.

Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) – AMBER LIST. This species tends not to arrive until late April, but this year it was not seen or heard at its usual location in the scrub below the southern entrance until the final visit (4th June), when there was a pair seemingly making alarm calls in a bush adjacent to the path. This behaviour suggested the presence of a nest and necessitated an immediate withdrawal by the author! In addition, a bird was heard singing from the hedgerow below the northern entrance on the 4th visit (11th May) and on a couple of non-survey visits, suggesting the continued presence of a male (or a pair) in the vicinity of the hedgerow and the fenced-off area.

Goldcrests (*Regulidae*)

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*). Not seen this spring. This species tends to be present in the autumn and winter, moving to conifer habitat during the breeding season and therefore unlikely to be present beyond about early April.

Wrens (*Troglodytidae*)

Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – AMBER LIST. Abundant and widespread throughout the Wood. Probably about 15+ pairs evenly distributed, and therefore probably the most numerous species on site.

Nuthatches (*Sittidae*)

Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*). Heard on the first three survey visits (and also seen on the second visit), always in the northern half of the Wood (zone 2 and the northern end of zones 3 and 4). Probably only a single pair.

Treecreepers (*Certhiidae*)

Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*). On 11th April, two were seen by the path at the northern end of the Wood (zone 2), and one was seen at the southern tip of zone 4. One was seen towards the southern end of zone 3 on 25th May, and there were a couple of casual sightings (outside survey visits) this spring. This rather quiet species was most likely around throughout the season, either a single pair or possibly two pairs.

Starlings (*Sturnidae*)

Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – RED LIST. Although common in the local residential area, this species is not normally observed on site in spring, and that was the case this year.

Thrushes (*Turdidae*)

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*). Heard singing and seen throughout the Wood. Observations were surprisingly few for such an easy bird, although they increased during the last three visits. Probably about 5 to 7 pairs.

Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) – AMBER LIST. Heard singing and/or seen on most visits. The song carries a long way and it was often difficult to pinpoint the source, but there was clearly a territory being held in the region of the southern entrance, and there was a cluster of observations in the central part of zone 3. Other sightings/hearings were scattered around (although none in the far north). Perhaps only 2 pairs.

Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) – RED LIST. As is often the case, this species was heard singing on several casual visits in late winter / early spring, but was observed only on the 1st and 3rd survey visits, in the central part of zone 4 and the northern end of zone 3 respectively. Probably a single pair.

Chats (*Muscicapidae*)

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

Sparrows (*Passeridae*)

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) – RED LIST. Although present in the nearby residential area, this was recorded on site only once, in the hedgerow north of the Wood.

Accentors (*Prunellidae*)

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) – AMBER LIST. This was heard singing only on the first 3 visits, twice along the north-eastern edge (zones 2 and 4) and twice in zone 5 / south-eastern edge. As the song does not carry as far as that of some species, it is possible some were missed away from paths. Nevertheless, there were probably only a few pairs present.

Finches (*Fringillidae*)

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*). This species was heard more on later visits, showing it to be fairly common throughout the Wood. Possibly as many about 8 to 10 pairs.

Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – AMBER LIST. This species has not been recorded since the 2018 survey.

Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*) – RED LIST. This was heard singing on most visits either side of the central path towards the southern end of zones 3 and 4, occasionally further north, and on one occasion below the southern entrance. Probably a single pair.

Linnet (*Linaria cannabina*) – RED LIST. Present in scrub below the southern entrance on all visits from 11th April onwards. On that first occasion a flock of about 7 was seen at that location, but it appeared that two pairs remained on subsequent visits.



Linnet in scrub south of Sharphill Wood, May 2023

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*). Observed only on 25th April in zone 4.

Buntings (*Emberizidae*)

Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citronella*) – RED LIST. Not recorded since 2019, and almost certainly lost from the hedgerow below the south-eastern entrance now that housing is so close.

Conclusions

This was the sixth year that such a survey has been conducted, although the 2020 survey was less detailed. 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 numerous small birds for which estimates of breeding pairs have been made were Wren, Chaffinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Robin and Blackbird. There were also small numbers of Stock Dove, Song Thrush and Dunnock. No attempt was made to count Magpies, Carrion Crows, Jackdaws or Woodpigeons, which were mobile and in all zones and the surrounding area.

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), Common Whitethroat (just outside the Wood), Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Mistle Thrush, Greenfinch and Linnet (just outside the Wood). Other birds seen or heard in, around or over the Wood but probably not breeding there included Common Buzzard, Long-tailed tit, House Sparrow and Goldfinch.

Birds were spread fairly evenly over the 5 zones, although zone 1 perhaps had a lower density of birds. Species that are more at home in scrub or hedgerow habitat, including Whitethroat and Linnet, were found to the north and south of the Wood.

The quantity and diversity of birds recorded this year was not significantly different from recent years. Although several species recorded in the past were not recorded this year, every species recorded annually since 2018 was recorded again this year. The table below shows which species were recorded each year since these surveys began.

Species	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
Pheasant			√				
Common Swift	√	√			√		
Common Cuckoo				√*			
Stock Dove	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Woodpigeon	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Red Kite					√		
Common Buzzard	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Green Woodpecker	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Kestrel		√	√	√			
Eurasian Jay	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Magpie	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Jackdaw		√	√	√	√	√	
Rook				√			
Carrion Crow	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Coal Tit	√	√					
Blue Tit	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Great Tit	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Skylark	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Swallow							
House Martin			√				
Long-tailed Tit	√	√		√	√	√	
Willow Warbler			√				
Chiffchaff	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Blackcap	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Garden Warbler							
Whitethroat	√	√	√	√	√	√	

Goldcrest					√		
Wren	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Nuthatch		√	√	√	√	√	
Treecreeper	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Blackbird	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Song Thrush	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Mistle Thrush		√	√		√	√	
Robin	√	√	√	√	√	√	
House Sparrow			√		√	√	
Dunnock	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Chaffinch	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Bullfinch	√						
Greenfinch	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Linnet	√	√		√	√	√	
Goldfinch		√		√		√	
Yellowhammer		√					
Total species	27	32	31	30	31	29	

* Heard on one occasion, but not during a survey visit.

Thanks to Chrissie, Hilary, Jenni and Tim for helping with some of the visits. I plan to run a similar survey in 2024, beginning at the end of March.

John Elwell, on behalf of Friends of Sharphill Wood, June 2023