

Parish Birds : Seventy Years of Change, Red-Backed Shrike

The Red-backed Shrike was a familiar, though never common, inhabitant of heathland and adjacent farm areas with thorn hedgerows in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Known by its country name the Butcher Bird was so-called for its habit of impaling its prey on gorse or thorn bushes as a food-store (called a “larder “) ready for a time of inclement weather when a cold snap made flying prey difficult to find.

The Red-backed Shrike is a summer visitor to Britain, now a rarity, arriving from tropical Africa in May and leaving in early Autumn. Its principal prey consists of large flying insects especially grasshoppers, bees, wasps, hornets, but also small lizards, mice and occasionally small birds.

In the early 1950s Paul Marten saw his first Red-backed Shrike when his Grandad and Gran Marten lived along Laundry Lane, Chelwood Gate . Paul and his father Alfred, during visits to Paul’s grandparents, used to trek over the nearby heathland east of what is now the National Cats Centre.



Paul watched that first Red-backed Shrike south of the Old Airstrip on heathland with gorse bushes north of Whim Lane. It was a gorgeous cock bird, Paul recalls vividly. His father Alfred, being more familiar with what he referred to as “Butcher Birds”, searched out and showed Paul the bird’s “larder” on a thorn bush, consisting Paul remembers, of grasshoppers, lizards and large insects.

Over later years Paul saw one or two Red-backed Shrikes in

adjacent gorsy areas around the Old Airstrip until around 1961 (centred on TQ423 302).

Another lifelong resident of the parish, Simon Carter, of September Cottage, Beaconsfield Road, recalls elderly relatives speaking of seeing Red-backed Shrikes in the 1950s and early 1960s on gorse & thorn bushes along the old footpath from Laundry Lane towards the Red Lion pub .

The demise of the Butcher Bird in the parish may be mainly due to climate change primarily since these birds require warm ,dry summers which encourage the proliferation of large insects .(our summers have become increasingly mild and wet in England in recent decades).

Human disturbance by a public (particularly “twitchers”) eager to see this very rare bird, and in the recent past egg-collectors), have hastened the extinction of this beautiful African visitor as a breeding bird in the south-east . A ray of hope has been the re-colonisation by a few pairs in recent summers of the wildernesses of Dartmoor.

Clive Poole ,Voluntary Ranger ,Ashdown Forest 2009 to 2022