

Parish Birds -Seventy Years of Change—Dartford Warbler

This is another of our series of articles recording around seventy-odd years of change between the 1950s and 2023 in the fortunes of some of the more notable resident or visiting birds of Danehill and Chelwood Gate.



The **Dartford Warbler's** recent history in our parish is one of good news despite occasional setbacks. This tiny bird, with a body not much larger than a Wren but with a very long tail out of proportion, is one of only two of England's thirteen species of warblers whose population does not migrate to warmer climes to escape our winter. Instead this warbler has evolved a survival strategy of sticking out our cold weather by retreating into thick gorse on heathland, keeping warm from windy drafts and

finding scores of spiders to feed on daily inside its prickly shelter. This strategy is a gamble; it allows it to avoid the arduous, long and perilous two-way migration journey which the other warblers take south to winter in Africa, but exposes it to risk of death if an English winter has a prolonged cold snap.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries **Dartford Warblers** bred in Sussex on heathland, but as a high proportion of the land was increasingly converted to intensive agriculture their habitat was lost, so their numbers dwindled, a matter made worse by successions of hard winters with persistent snow cover. As a result they became extinct in Sussex by 1947, recolonised again, but became extinct here yet again in 1981. But this tenacious little bird does not know when to give up and will have two or even three broods, each of around five chicks, annually. Fecund "**Dartfords**" from Hampshire and West Sussex heaths moved into the gaps in East Sussex, principally Ashdown Forest in 1989. The unbroken extent of heathland here allowed rotational cutting of large areas of gorse and heather so that there is always a "*goldilocks*" situation on some areas of

Ashdown where the heath is “*just right*” for Dartfords, namely heather (for nesting) around, 30 cms tall and gorse between 1 and 1.5 metres high (for feeding and shelter) and no application of pesticides which would kill the arachnids and insects on which they depend. Global warming will favour this bird.

In Danehill, the areas of heathland have been converted to farmland over many decades leaving no suitable areas of heather and gorse for this diminutive avian rarity.

The good news is that north of Chelwood Gate the woodland gives way to open heath and the unsprayed gorse and heather extends up to the A22 and east to Millbrook Hill. Several pairs of **Dartford Warblers** have been breeding here almost annually since around 1996/97. Even after the cold period in early 2023 with lingering snow cover, my heart was warmed seeing on the third of March a female flitting low over heather near the Old Airstrip. She was a dull brown colour but the males are quite “showy” with wine-coloured breasts, a red-eye ring and slate-grey backs. Look out for them on a sunny morning in April when the a male may sing from the top of a flowering gorse bush, throwing caution to the wind to attract a mate.

CLIVE POOLE ... retired Voluntary Ranger ,Ashdown Forest