

PARISH BIRDS-SEVENTY YEARS OF CHANGE: NIGHTINGALE

This is the second in a series of articles drawing on the recollections of Paul Marten, a life-long local resident, augmented by those of Clive Poole, who moved into the parish in 2006, and Mrs. Hylda Rawlings.

NIGHTINGALE: This name is very familiar to us all. Its name conjures up beautiful sweet song which has been praised in our history and poetry from



Shakespeare to Keats and Coleridge. Although never common in England until the late nineteenth century male birds could be frequently heard at dawn and dusk in spring and early summer pumping out their powerful song from the safety of dense bushes in rural areas.

Contrary to the assumption of an urban existence explicit in

the popular 1940 song “A Nightingale sang in Berkeley Square” that was poetic licence”; it was very unlikely to have been holding a territory in central London in the 20th century.!! Why not? Because this small migrant songbird from Africa is very fussy as to where it inhabits. Its favoured habitat is dense blackthorn or hawthorn thickets and brambles in scrubland often close to water. Birds singing in suburban/urban towns and villages in the dark are found to be Robins, who often sing as a result of stimulus from artificial light.

Paul Marten saw and heard Nightingales and watched them fledge their young in Cowstocks Wood off Freshfield Lane in 2015. This was an area of blackthorn and brambles and low scrub approx.240 feet above sea level. He has not heard them here since then. Another long-time resident of the parish, Mrs. Hylda Rawlings, born in South Croydon in 1918, also has vivid recollections of Nightingales singing in spring in Danehill. She had first become acquainted with their unmistakable strident song after she moved, at the age of seven, with her family to Kingskirswell, Devon. There, the annual arrival of up to six singing male Nightingales to the local common was an event which the whole village came out to hear. So when she came, in adult life, in 1962 with her

husband, Derek, to Danewood she was both surprised and enchanted to have a male Nightingale serenade her from the scrub woodland behind their house. Singing in the evening in April and May she could hear the bird from the bathroom window as she lay in luxury in her bath. It would still be singing in the middle of the night when all other birds had gone silent. Hylda remembers clearly how it started the dawn chorus, encouraging the other birds. This was in the period from 1962 up to the 1980s. A second Nightingale, she recalls, had a territory across the Lewes Road at the bottom of Church Lane but after a falling tree there destroyed its habitat it never returned. Hylda was good friends with John and Margaret Butler, who in those early days already owned nearby Heaven Farm. They had a pair of Nightingales which came each spring to a coppice woodland on their land in a valley at the edge of their farm. John used to take Hilda to listen to them: the birds last came one spring around 30 years ago, so about 1992.

Nightingales, a member of the thrush family, come from tropical Africa to England in April and leave again in August/ September. They do so in ever-declining numbers: around 5,000 males only (compare this with our millions of Robins) concentrated in Sussex, Kent and Suffolk where the climate is warm. Nightingales are rarely found in England more than 300 feet above sea level.

Their favourite habitat is dense impenetrable blackthorn thickets and hedges where the males can sing noisily but safe from attack by Sparrowhawks etc. In recent decades when blackthorn scrub and thorn hedges and brambles have been cleared for efficient agriculture the Nightingales have declined and those left forced to breed in less optimal habitats such as coppiced woodland. An encouraging hope for the future is the lead taken at Knepp estate near Horsham . Here the farmland has been allowed to revert to its natural state. The result has been a growth of blackthorn thickets and spring colonisation by returning Nightingales !

Clive Poole