

Below is the first in a new series of articles from Clive Poole aided by birding memories of Paul Marten (of church clock and flag raising fame). Not much has passed overhead in the last 16 years or so in this parish without being seen by eagle-eyed Clive, but Paul has memories of local wildlife going back nearly 70 years, which supplement the more recent changes that Clive has recorded. These articles are an important historical record and will be deposited in the Historical Society Archive.

Parish birds; Seventy Years of Change

There have been notable changes in the bird species breeding in and overwintering in the Parish since the 1950s. This series of articles attempts to focus on them.

What might have caused these changes? There have been a combination of factors, in particular those in the parish and in Sussex more generally including climate change, continued intensification of agricultural practices including the increasing use of herbicides and pesticides on farmland and in gardens. This reduces the abundance of natural wildflowers and plants and the insects which depend on them for pollination, feeding and egg-laying. To these local factors can be added a loss of habitat in the sub-Saharan wintering areas of those birds which migrate from the parish, together with deterioration in habitat in stop-over areas for resting along the migration route, particularly desertification and fires in Spain.

Woodlark

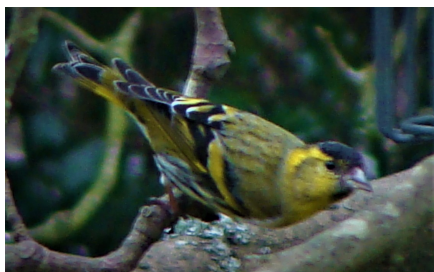


Southern Britain is the northern limit of its range since it prefers dry, warm, sunny habitats for breeding and feeding. Numbers in Britain plummeted in the cold winter of 1962/63, down to only around 350 pairs nationally. It was probably extinct as a

breeding bird in Sussex during most of the 1970s. Woodlarks recolonised Ashdown Forest from around 1998 and can now be found on open areas of heathland with scattered trees anywhere north of the Millbrook, Chelwood Gate and the old Airstrip being strongholds. Listen out for the

fluty song of the males overhead any time from February to August, before they leave the Parish to winter mainly on the coast or across the Channel.

SISKIN



This small finch, a relative of the Goldfinch, was traditionally found in Northern Britain, especially in the Scottish Highlands, where it bred in natural Scots pines. There was a massive expansion in its distribution from the mid 20th century as it colonised conifer plantations further south in England. The Siskin has relatively recently started to breed in Sussex from 1989.

Since my arrival in the parish in 2006 I have noticed with delight the males twittering display flight in spring in Chelwood Gate. These birds are quite catholic in their choice of breeding trees, being happy with the abundance of non-native conifers as well as mature Scots pines, not only in mature gardens but also Ashdown Forest's abundant stands of Scots pines north of the Millbrook and around Chelwood Vachery.

(Northern) Lapwing

This is a relatively large wading bird, a member of the Plover family. Its old country name, Peewit, indicates that it was a familiar farmland bird. It traditionally bred on low-intensity ploughed farmland and also moorland with bogs. British Lapwings do not migrate but move to coastal mudflats and estuaries after breeding. Lapwing numbers have declined sharply in recent decades, mainly due to intensification of farming practices including high use of herbicides and pesticides. A second negative factor has been a switch in recent decades from traditional ploughing/sowing of crops in spring to earlier ploughing/sowing in the previous autumn. This results in growth of crops too tall by the start of the Lapwing's breeding season to suit their need to peer above vegetation to spot danger near the nest-site. Numbers crashed in West and East Sussex through the 1990s to just 500 pairs by 2014 and none in our parish.



Fortunately the Lapwing is an opportunist breeder. Following an out-of-control fire in 2019 which spread across the Old Airstrip north of Chelwood Gate, burning around 100 acres of gorse, birch scrub and copses, the resultant habitat proved ideal for Lapwing, exposing boggy wet heath, dry heath and bare ground, and

patches of purple moor grass. A pair colonised soon after the fire and two pairs have subsequently returned to breed here. In 2021, 3 chicks were fledged and two pairs have returned to breed in spring 2022, their loud eerie calls emitted as they give butterfly-like display flights over our heath, raising the spirits of local walkers.

Clive Poole, Volunteer Ranger Ashdown Forest since 2009