

Parish Birds, Seventy Years of Change, the Linnet



Our focus this month is on the LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*). This finch was very familiar to the Victorians and the Edwardians, males being commonly kept in their sitting rooms and drawing rooms where they could indulge their great passion for keeping songbirds on show in elaborate metal or wooden cages. From these prisons they hopped from perch to perch singing forlornly, their notes entertaining their owners and guests. This fashion was adopted by the poorer classes in an albeit more modest way. The Edwardian cockney

Music Hall song “Don’t dilly dally on the Way”, written in 1919 and immortalised by Marie Lloyd (about a “moonlight flit”) has the chorus :-

“My old man said foller the van, and don’t dilly dally on the way,

*Off went the van with me ‘ome packed in it, I walked behind wiv me old cock
Linnet.....”*

This habit of keeping pet cage birds lingered on into the 1960s, centred on the East End of London, sourced from the partly illegal trading done around Club Row market. My father kept birds in cages, a hobby passed down from his father (my grandfather, a Victorian from Tottenham) . I remember visiting with my father “seedy “pubs around that Sunday market in the 1960s, where men in corner seats guarded cages covered in towels containing mainly songbirds. They could be approached to purchase from them an illegally trapped **Linnet**, Goldfinch, Bullfinch etc. This trapping and keeping of colourful songbirds led to a dramatic decline in their numbers until fashions gradually changed and laws were put in place progressively during the twentieth century. Unfortunately soon after trapping declined, agricultural practices intensified to the detriment of **Linnets** in common with other native birds. **Linnets** prefer gorse thickets on heathland and also hawthorn scrub (on what we have dismissively called “wasteland”) in which they can build their nests safe from natural predators such as Sparrowhawks. Where these waste areas do not exist they will



alternatively nest in hawthorn hedgerows if these are extensive. These dense gorse and hawthorn thickets also provide safe overnight roosting places often for dozens of **Linnets**. They are mainly resident birds “sticking -out” our winters. Whilst in summer they can find sufficient weed seeds on our commons and heaths, food here is scarce in winter. Hence they are then forced to fly off daily to find seed sources elsewhere, such as on farmland

with winter stubble.

Paul Marten recalls that this was a very familiar bird on farmland in the Danehill area between the 1950s and 1970s. He has come to notice since that time that **Linnets** appear to have disappeared from farmland in the parish .This absence is almost certainly due to a combination of intensified agricultural practices since then; an increase in the size of fields leading to the removal of many hawthorn hedgerows, an increased use of herbicides leading to the demise of seed producing wild plants on which Linnets feed and the ploughing of winter stubble to sow winter crops.

I have noticed, since coming to Chelwood Gate in 2006, that Linnets are still common here in their *preferred* habitat. They are still present in good numbers north of Whim Lane and the Mill Brook on the heathland of Ashdown Forest from Lee’s seat north to Long car park. Here, where the Conservators manage the land for nature, gorse is maintained by rotational cutting once it becomes straggly so keeping areas of thick young healthy gorse. Before dawn, especially around the “Bear Pit “ the twittering of **Linnet** flocks can be heard from deep inside the gorse thickets, from which they emerge before sunrise, in winter propelling themselves out with vigour in a south-westerly direction towards low-intensity farmland which still provides the seeds they need. In summer the male Lnnets sport a beautiful pink flushed breast and red forehead . Then you can see them singing their hearts out from the tops of gorse thickets around the old Airstrip.

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