

PARISH BIRDS-SEVENTY YEARS OF CHANGE----LITTLE OWL

This is another of the series of articles drawing upon the depth of knowledge of our parish's birdlife spanning 70 years of the recollections of Paul Marten, a lifetime local resident, together with observations of Clive Poole, a life-long birdlover who came to live in Chelwood Gate in 2006.

This time we turn the spotlight on the diminutive LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*). Little Owls are not in fact native to Great Britain but were introduced by several rich landowners in the nineteenth century since when they rapidly colonised southern England in suitable habitats.

They are one of the few owl species present in England which can be reliably seen in the daytime. How could anyone who has been lucky enough to spot one not be enchanted by their comic performance, on being discovered, typically on a favoured fence-post. They will bob their little head up and down and from side to side as they sway on their perch, all the time fixing their big staring, yellow-ringed eyes on you the intruder. Then they fly off, batting white-speckled brown wings, into the safety of cover.

LITTLE OWLS mainly feed on insects and prior to their introduction into the wild in our southern counties, had sometimes been imported as pets for their



prowess in catching cockroaches! They can be observed in the daytime dropping from a fence post down to the ground to catch an invertebrate or to dig for worms, also taking earwigs, crane fly eggs, beetles, grasshoppers, small reptiles and mammals: indeed anything little which moves on the ground.

Paul Marten recalls how he and his wife Jenny used commonly to see, in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, the unmistakable tubby, comical figures of Little Owls perched on top of telegraph poles and fence posts on

agricultural land stretching widely from Masketts to Danehill and on to Broadhurst Manor. Paul said he remembers well how Little Owls used to nest regularly here in holes in old apple trees in the local orchards into the 1960s. After these old orchards were grubbed-out and the apple trees removed he and Jenny no longer had the delight of encountering them on their walks.

Clive's first memory of this squat owl was at his childhood home on the edge of New Addington in the early 1950s when his father kept a Little Owl with an injured wing in the outhouse at the rear of their maisonette. Sadly no Little Owls have been seen in the parish by him since his arrival in 2006. It seems the nearest breeding territories in 2018 were south of Newick. There remains little or no suitable habitat left in the parish. They favour as roosting and nesting sites, old rotten apple trees with plenty of holes, riparian willow trees with holes or pollarded oaks with hole cavities. Clive recalls seeing them emerging from the latter, on a protected nature reserve, and screeching a very unwelcome warning to him to 'back off'. These birds also depend on a mosaic of nearby small fields, with no insecticides applied and featuring fence posts and hedgerows providing both feeding and hiding opportunities.

The loss of rodent and insect-rich habitats has clearly reduced the suitability of our arable land so its future return will depend on a change in our high-intensity agriculture practices. Let's give this "cracking little bird" the chance to entertain us again!!

Clive Poole—retired Voluntary Ranger, Ashdown Forest