

Parish Birds --Seventy Years of Change—Yellowhammer

This delightful little bird is a member of the bunting family. Unusually among resident British male birds yellowhammers sport a *startlingly bright yellow head and breast*, so making them unmistakable.

I recall as a boy in the 1950s, on the Surrey/Kent border, my father often encouraged me to listen to a bird song which he described as “a little bit of bread and no cheese”, emitted from a smallish yellow bird sitting on top of a thorn hedgerow or a gorse bush. If the gorse was flowering this gave the male yellowhammer very good camouflage so it could be difficult for me to spot. (we had no binoculars in those days). Females are less colourful but both sexes have startling rusty rumps and greenish, black-streaked wings and are a little bigger than a chaffinch.

Growing up not questioning why this bird had such a peculiar name it was only in recent years that I discovered the reason; it must have been familiar to our ancestors, the ending deriving probably from Old English “amer” for a bunting. Indeed the modern German name for this stunning bird is “goldammer “(gold bunting). (There is another bunting breeding locally around the Old Airstrip simply called reed bunting).



yellowhammers do not migrate overseas in winter, but remain close to their breeding areas. In Spring and Summer they are found typically around dense gorse thickets or thorn bushes. The females lay their eggs on the ground in long grass nearby. In the winter they invariably “up sticks” and move to the nearest farmland with winter stubble where they search for weed seeds and grain, joining flocks of other finches and buntings .

When I interviewed Paul Marten (a local resident now in his early

80s) in 2022 he was concerned about the disappearance of this once-familiar bird from our parish. Male yellowhammers used to be a common sight here through the

1950s to the 1970s. He remembered them singing from the tops of wide thorn hedgerows at roadsides and dividing the fields. There was less use of herbicides in those days, leaving wide margins of weeds at field edges, a source of seed for the adults and insects for their young. In winter these buntings could feed on discarded seeds in winter stubble since the fields would not be ploughed and resown until Spring. Progressively since the late 1960s many of the old hedgerows have been removed and weeds and field margins all but removed, with herbicide and pesticides applied liberally. Those fields which were ploughed in spring are now ploughed in autumn leaving no winter stubble for our yellow bunting! It makes one sad.

Since I came into the north of our parish in 2006, I have very occasionally spotted a yellowhammer on gorse around the Old Airstrip, but they do not seem to stay there. Thankfully there remain a few pairs of yellowhammers in the far north-east around Millbrook just above Chelwood Vachery. Here they have ideal habitat with gorse bushes, long grass not treated with herbicides or pesticides and holly bushes from which the males can still sing “a little bit of bread and no cheese”!!

Clive Poole Retired Voluntary Ranger, Ashdown Forest