

## Bird Census Grotto Plantation, Abbey Park 1990 and now

In days of yore, I was privileged to be at Turvey for a nine month 'sabbatical' and used the opportunity to undertake a partial Common Bird Census in Grotto Plantation which borders the eastern edge of Abbey Park. That was in 1990, and this year I found myself inadvertently wandering along the same footpaths at the same time of year as 26 years ago and thought a brief census now would make an interesting comparison. Most of the core species are still present but it's hard to say whether commoner or less so for most. There are, however, several noticeable absentees and several entirely new species. Among the absentees are Willow Warbler, Cuckoo, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Starling and Greenfinch, and possibly Marsh Tit. All of these are suffering dramatic declines nationally, but it's sad to find this confirmed on a local scale. Greenfinch are still regular breeders elsewhere in Abbey Park or in the village, but since 2005 have suffered greatly from the disease trichomonosis as well as agricultural intensification. Our local Starlings seem to have deserted woodlands and are mostly found now, as breeders, in towns and villages, and even here only in certain core areas. Their decline has been attributed, at least partly, to a lack of insect food for the young. Marsh Tits still occur in our garden in both winter and summer but are becoming scarcer generally, perhaps because of habitat degradation, with woods becoming more fragmented and with a less complex understorey, that is, with fewer bushes and brambles, especially as the deer get to work. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are easily missed because of their small size and tendency to remain high in the tree canopy but they are definitely scarcer now than in 1990, possibly because of competition with Great Spotted Woodpeckers but also again because of woodland degradation and loss of food for the young. Cuckoos are becoming increasingly birds of passage rather than local breeders. This is probably due to several factors including impoverishment of their wintering habitat in Africa and the loss of hairy moth caterpillars here. And lastly, to conclude this catalogue of loss, there were two or three pairs of Willow Warbler in Grotto Plantation in 1990 and none detected this year. This too reflects a national decline which has seen a retreat of the Willow Warbler from the south and east but an expansion in the north and west. Climate Change immediately comes to mind as well as habitat degradation and loss of insect food.

On a more uplifting note, several new species were recorded and are probably breeding in, or very near, to Grotto Plantation. The most notable of these are Buzzard, Red Kite and Nuthatch. The last was a surprise absentee for me in 1990 because they are so common further south, but a survey of Bedfordshire birds in the mid-seventies shows them as confined to the Greensand Ridge and to the woods on Clay with flints. This is another species gradually expanding to the north and west. Red Kites have, of course, been re-introduced to England since 1990 and are doing dramatically well, with several pairs now in the immediate vicinity. Buzzards have reappeared as part of a natural expansion and are now more readily seen than either Sparrowhawk or Kestrel. In conclusion, the losses outweigh the gains with some 32 species recorded as possible breeders in 1990 and some 27 today. Some species may well have been overlooked this year because the survey was so brief but the decline I think is real. As for the reason that the wood is known as Grotto Plantation, the story goes that the Longuet Higgins family, which owned the site in the early nineteenth century, wanted a resident 'hermit' to add character to the landscape and employed a man from the village to do just that. Unfortunately, he spent longer in the local hostelry than in the wood and had eventually to be dismissed.

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