

The breeding birds of Kelling Heath

When the editor told me he wanted articles about breeding birds in the Cley square and then asked me to write about Kelling Heath I agreed without hesitation. Easy, I thought, because only about a quarter of the heath lies within the square! But no, it seems I can't get away with that and must deal with the entire heath. I have however excluded the commercialised area known as Kelling Heath Holiday Park.

The heath, which is a SSSI, covers more than 200 acres consisting mainly of a mosaic of heather, gorse, bracken and wavy hair-grass. There are clumps of birch and pine, a good many single trees, and about one and a half miles of dense roadside hedges and boundary hedges, mainly of blackthorn & hawthorn. Thus we find breeding species typical of heathland, small woodland and hedgerow. For most of the species I cannot give precise numbers because of the size of the heath and the fact that I keep to the main paths and do not go searching for nests.

The more notable species

Woodlark. 4 males seen and heard in song flight on 21st Feb. Subsequently singing males and pairs were seen in different areas until on 13th May I found 2 adults feeding 2 young. On 18th May 2 adults were feeding 3 young in a totally different place. A pair with 2 young on 6th July and a pair with 3 young on 22nd July had presumably raised second broods. Because they are ground feeders and difficult to locate other than by accident I can only estimate that 5 or 6 pairs bred and may have produced at least 2 broods each.

Stonechat. Despite seeing individual birds from 16th Jan onwards and 2 males and 2 females in a group on 18th March I have seen no evidence of breeding this year. A big disappointment.

Tree Pipit. None seen on the heath this year (or indeed last year) Another disappointment.

Turtle Dove. 4 pairs seen in May and June but no subsequent sightings of young birds. I can't believe they didn't produce any and I assume the young kept well hidden for a while and then left the heath.

Nightjar. First bird seen and heard on 12th May. 5 males were churring simultaneously on 7th June and in the absence of more precise information perhaps an estimate of 5 breeding pairs is not far wrong.

Nightingale. A male first seen and heard singing in the roadside hedge at the top of Holgate Hill during the 2nd week of April moved along the road as far as the car park. On 25th April I was lucky indeed to witness this male displaying to a female on the ground at the edge of the car park. The fanning out of the tail and the dancing display was an unforgettable sight. The male was last heard in song on 29th May and I assume the pair bred successfully but I have no proof. This is my first sighting of potential breeding by this species in the 7 years I have visited the heath

Garden Warbler. 3 singing males held territory in the hedgerows during late April and throughout May but no evidence of breeding seen.

Bullfinch. 3 pairs were seen between March and June. 2 pairs were in dense areas of hedge and 1 pair in the blackthorn thicket beside the car park. 2 pairs were later seen with young.

Redpoll. A pair bred in a large birch tree near the railway crossing and was seen with 2 young on the overhead power cables.

Hobby. A bird was seen in and around the same trees on several occasions during late May and throughout June. It was seen hunting nearby but I cannot confirm breeding

Other Species

Like a good many birders I am guilty of not giving enough attention to the more common species. I believe, however, that up to 10 pairs of each of Linnet, Chaffinch, Whitethroat, Yellowhammer, Dunnock and Wren may have bred within the heath boundary. Certainly I saw a lot of adults and young of the first 4 species. Good numbers of Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler were singing in spring and several were later seen collecting and carrying food which indicates that a few pairs bred successfully.

Both Coal Tits and Goldcrests were busy in the conifer plantation on the southern boundary and in single conifers elsewhere. I assume breeding took place. Robins and Blackcaps, perhaps 2 or 3 pairs of each, nested in the hedgerows and thickets and several young were seen. I found only 1 pair of Lesser Whitethroat and they were seen collecting food. One species not as common as I expected was Meadow Pipit. No more than 3 were seen in song flight and there were no signs of breeding.

So that's my report for 2005. What of the future? My crystal ball is somewhat hazy but I foresee no immediate major changes if the correct management of the heath continues. The trustees of both Kelling Heath and Salthouse Heath are sympathetic to the conservation cause. (It is not widely known that a large proportion of Kelling Heath comes under the jurisdiction of the Salthouse Heath Trustees).

Finally, allow me to end with a plea. Let's have a few more birders making regular visits to this heath, not just for 'year ticks' or the occasional rarity, but to help build-up a more accurate picture of a superb habitat

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