

The breeding birds of Kelling Heath 2010

A good year considering the severity of the winter and unsettled weather in the spring.

Woodlark. Although up to 4 at a time were seen from 31st January onwards there was no sign of breeding on the heath until late May. A pair appeared to be nest-building, probably for a second brood, and after discreetly watching progress Noel Elms and I found a nest. On 21st June 4 nestlings were ringed with metal rings and are believed to have successfully fledged. On 18th July I saw 2 adults feeding 4 fully grown, unringed, young but I am reasonably sure this pair did not breed on the heath.

Tree Pipit. I saw 2 males possibly disputing potential territory on 30th April but then had no further sightings of this species.

Dartford Warbler. How marvellous it was to see males and females on the heath during, and after, the cold winter and to then see and hear 3 males in song on 30th March. No signs of breeding however until a big surprise on 13th June when I saw a pair which I suspected was feeding young deep in the heather. This was confirmed on 22nd June when I had the wonderful sight of the parents and 3 young all perched close to each other in a small oak sapling.

The morning of 13th July proved auspicious when Noel and I were watching a pair of stonechats for signs of breeding and a male Dartford flew close by, a couple of times, carrying food. Later that day, with help from Paul Adams and myself, Noel found the nest containing 5 youngsters. These were colour-ringed on 15th July and eventually they all fledged. During the following months 3 of these young could be seen on the heath. The other 2 may have been predated, moved off the heath, or they simply kept out of sight.

Turtle Dove. It is difficult to be certain but I believe we had more males on territory this year compared to last year, maybe 5 or 6. I had very few sightings of pairs and the only evidence of breeding was provided by a pair seen mating on top of a burnt pine tree near the railway. There was a couple of reports of birds believed to be young but I saw none.

Stonechats. After last year's impressive total of 5 pairs which raised and fledged at least 44 young, this year 3 pairs have fledged only 16. The cold weather caused a shortage of food and some young died in the nest. Predation, possibly by adders, accounted for further losses of eggs and young. Also it seems 1 pair had only 2 broods and not 3 as did the other 2 pairs. An adult male which was colour-ringed on the heath in 2009 and stayed to breed before moving away for the winter was re-found on the heath on 4th March this year. It bred again in the same area as last year!



Nightjars. As in past years I can only estimate a figure for breeding pairs based on the number of churring males I heard which could have been holding territory. A total of 7 or 8 pairs seems reasonable on this basis. On one evening visit I saw 3 females, each one in separate parts of the heath, and they seemed to be somewhat distressed by my presence. A bird which I believe was a juvenile flew up from the footpath in front of me at 3.20pm on 2nd August and at 10.20am on 5th August a similar thing happened to me some 500 metres further north!

The most common breeding species was Linnet with maybe more than 20 pairs. A few nests were found by Paul Adams and his hard work was rewarded by 17 nestlings being ringed with metal rings. Common Whitethroats and Yellowhammers did well with probably 10-12 pairs each. Paul also found 3 Blue Tits nests with a total of 29 chicks which were ringed and of which 28 fledged. A few more pairs of Blue, Great, Coal and Long-tailed Tits were seen with young.

At least half a dozen pairs each of Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Chaffinch and Greenfinch were seen with varying numbers of young. I saw no evidence of breeding by Garden Warblers or Lesser Whitethroats even though 3 or 4 singing males were present in early summer. Wrens and Dunnocks survived the winter and, I have no doubt, were able to breed successfully.

Having read this report (Compulsory reading for all members!) you may have noticed that most of the time spent observing breeding related to a few 'Typical heathland species'. This was a deliberate policy to obtain information regarding the condition of the heath for breeding and the habitat preferences for these species. Hopefully this type of information will be helpful in formulating future management plans.



Please check all Dartford Warblers and Stonechats for colour rings and advise Noel at noelelmsl@mypostoffice.co.uk who will then let you know the history of the bird. A total of 26 Stonechats was colour ringed - 22 nestlings of which 15 fledged and 4 adult birds.

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