

A Cautionary Tale.

Typically, young Woodlark *Lullula arborea*, leave the nest long before they can fly and spend a period of 8 – 10 days following the parent's lead in finding suitable feeding areas. During this period, the young birds are capable of covering distances of at least 100m from the nest with an increasing ability to make short, fluttering flights. At the approach of a potential predator, the young birds flatten themselves on the ground and rely on their cryptic camouflage to escape detection and while this survival strategy is usually successful, it can lead to the young Woodlark's demise if an unwary large mammal puts a foot in the wrong place.

Several days after colour-ringing a brood of Woodlark in the nest on Kelling Heath earlier this year, I received a report from a local birder who had found the corpse of one of the brood beside one of the main paths on the Heath with detailed information as to the location. Accompanied by my colleague John Wagstaff, I lost no time in following up this report and soon located the corpse exactly as instructed. On examination, the corpse showed no external sign of injury, was well-nourished and considered to be of normal growth rate for age though my colleague did remark that the body appeared to be flattened. The significance of this remark was only realised on hearing a few days after the corpse was found, that the news of the ease with which this family party could be found and enjoyed soon spread in the birding community and for several days, these birds were the star attraction on the Heath. It was reported that during this period, a group of birders were standing on the path watching the pair of adult Woodlark feeding one of the remaining young blissfully unaware that a second young Woodlark had concealed itself just off the path only a few steps behind them. While on this occasion none of the birders strayed off the path and this young Woodlark's survival strategy succeeded, maybe its sibling had not been so lucky on a previous occasion.

While the true cause of the young Woodlark's demise may never be established, it would be disingenuous to rule out a carelessly placed human foot. Each year during the breeding season, the Trustees of Kelling Heath put up notices requesting that visitors keep to the paths in order to protect nesting birds of conservation concern and each year with depressing regularity, the notices are ignored and vandalised.

Noel Elms.

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