

The breeding birds of Kelling Heath 2006

This has been a rather enigmatic year for breeding birds on the heath and it would be easy to dismiss it as a poor year if we look at the overall picture of the many species which normally breed there. If however we think in terms of the more specialised "heathland species" we can I believe, draw a more positive conclusion.

Tree Pipit. For the first time (to my knowledge) in 3 years a pair nested and both were seen taking food to the nest area although I saw no fledged young. The parents were wary of revealing the whereabouts of their youngsters and would perch on tree tops, bills full of food, until people walking nearby had moved away.

Stonechat. A species very much associated with heathland. I believe none bred last year but this year 2 pairs each produced a brood. 1 pair had 3 young and the other pair had 2. There may have been second broods but I saw no evidence of this. I am sure the heath is large enough and the habitat suitable to sustain more than 2 pairs. Hopefully some of the birds will return to breed. I presume most of the stonechats seen on the coastal marshes during winter are local birds.

Woodlark. In last year's article I estimated 5 or 6 pairs bred but this year I must be a little more cautious. On 5th Feb I saw my first birds of the year - 3 in song flight. 4 were seen and heard on 15th Feb but then very few sightings until 23rd March when I found 3 pairs on territories. In late April/early May I found 4 pairs with fully fledged young in diverse parts of the heath. I had very few further sightings until on 10th Aug I found a pair feeding 2 young on the edge of the car park. After that date the odd one or two were seen infrequently but then 3 were seen one morning during the last week of October.

The number of young Woodlark fledged this year may be less than in previous years but as the habitat appears to be still suitable then perhaps the weather can be blamed. Were they adversely affected by the cold windy early summer and then by the very hot dry spell later? Perhaps fewer were seen because they had to spend more time on the ground seeking food or maybe they left the heath and searched adjoining farmland.

Nightjar. My first was seen and heard on 23rd May, 11 days later than last year. The maximum number heard churring simultaneously was 5 on 5th July with 4 being heard together on 16th July. As with last year I can only estimate the number of breeding pairs and, again, 5 would seem a reasonable figure.

Not a bad situation for the "heathland species" but not so good for the others which normally breed well on the heath. If woodlarks did less well this year, then what about the Turtle Dove? Last year I saw 4 pairs in May and June but subsequently saw no young. This year I had very few sightings of single birds and on only 2 occasions did I see 2 birds together. The beautiful purring song was, regretfully, heard very rarely and I conclude that this year was a "write off" for this species on the heath.

With regard to small passerines the situation was better but not as good as the previous few years. In late spring/early summer I saw and heard 3 Garden Warblers, a good number of willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs, at least 6 Whitethroats, 2 Lesser Whitethroats and 3 Blackcaps. Dunnocks, Linnets, Chaffinches and Yellowhammers were also seen in good numbers. Subsequently some of these and some of the warblers disappeared and the numbers remained well below normal. Let us hope they bred elsewhere.

I found no breeding Redpolls this year and only 1 pair of Bullfinches with fledged young. The numbers of Robins, Tits, Goldcrests and Wrens did, however, appear to be the same as usual. I was hoping last year's pair of Nightingales would return but they didn't.

So some bird species did well, others did not. As a consolation the Silver-studded Blue butterflies spread to new areas and on one of my visits I counted over 200 for the first time. I was also lucky to find a very small colony of White-letter Hairstreaks on the edge of the heath. And the heather and gorse blooming together made such a glorious sight that I forgot about the lack of birds!

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